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Scheduling and tracking with project software are two key steps in any project. You need to build a schedule quickly and update it in minutes a week. You should also match the project software to the scale of the projects you manage.

Selecting Project Management Software

Project management software comes in many different levels of sophistication with prices ranging from free to $50, $500, $25,000 or more. Software itself does not make project managers more effective; it just makes them more efficient

There are hundreds of project software packages available but finding the right one is not easy because you have to filter through all the marketing buzz to get the tool that is right for your situation and your career.

Type of projects do you do	Software Category
Program with multiple sub-projects a large team and complex task dependencies.	#4
Strategic project: affects multiple departments or organization with a large budget and a larger team, outside vendors and contractors with many stakeholders.	#3 or #4
Customer/client project: team of 3-8 people with a project budget and an important deadline and more complex sequencing of team members, contractors and materials	#2 or #3
Small user project: performed for another department or an outside customer. Team of 2-5 people, no budget and a due date that is important	#1 or #2
Ad hoc projects: Performed within a department with a team of 2-3 including the project manager and lasts less than a month with no budget and flexible due date	#1

Note: If you intend to pursue project management as career step, learn category #3 software, that is what the pros use.

Categories of Project Software

The available software fits into four categories with big differences in price as we move up the ladder.

1. Web or cloud based software that stores project information with very limited scheduling and allows distribution of information, issue tracking and collaboration/ messaging between team members. If you don't need to track progress closely or make status reports, this software is fine. Examples in this under $75 category are: Apolo, Dotproject

2. Cloud or installed software that provides scheduling based on you entering the start and finish dates for each task. When things change, you have to enter new start and finish dates. If you are not spending much money on the project and if it is of lesser importance this software will let you track where you are and report progress for a small team. Examples in this $100-500 range are: iManageProject, Quickbase

3. Cloud or installed software that has algorithms for optimizing a schedule and building the project budget. You enter the tasks, their work/duration, precedence and the resource availability. The software calculates a schedule & budget for you and provides extensive tools for spotting problems and modeling solutions. Category 3 is the software that where people who regularly manage projects. Examples of this over $500 category are: Microsoft Project and Oracle

4. Server software for managing hundreds of projects, large numbers of project staff and portfolios of projects. Enterprise project management cost many thousands of dollars. Examples are from Microsoft Project and Oracle which each have portfolio version that are quite expensive.

The first two categories are suitable for smaller projects. The capabilities are limited but so is the learning curve. Their inefficiency and lack of capability is a small inconvenience because the project has only a few people and a short duration. This software's cost is quite low, but these are not suitable tools for professionals regularly managing projects.

The biggest step is the jump from category #2 to #3. At that point, software leaps from simple static start and finish date scheduling. The scheduling in category #3 three is dynamic, resource-driven scheduling. The schedule updates itself automatically whenever you add remove resources or the sequence of tasks. These capabilities save project managers a great deal of time in creating, optimizing and status reporting. Rather the enter start and finish dates which have to be individually updated, these packages calculate duration using work estimates, predecessors (i.e. finish to start) and dynamic scheduling algorithms that do all the calculations & work. The learning curve is much steeper and time investment is worthwhile only if the project is critical for the

organization and management wants early problem identification/correction and is willing to onvest more time in project management and over $500 in software.