

Project management is made up of people, processes and tools. There's been a lot of emphasis lately on the first two – but are project managers getting the best out of their IT and management software? **James Simons** reports.

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THE path to technological enlightenment does not always run smoothly. Take the popular BBC sci-fi series, *Dr Who*, for instance. Newly released files reveal that if some of the show's early producers had had their way the now familiar police box would have looked more like a plastic bubble. Described in fairly loose terms, the original idea for the Tardis was that viewers should see not a machine – only “a shape of nothingness”. But senior figures were less than impressed, arguing that the device would be associated with “all the low-grade spicification of a cartoon strip and soap opera”. So the idea was binned and the rest, as they say, is history.

In much the same way, producers of project management solutions are working hard to escape the ‘bubble of invisibility’ that has blighted their progress towards greater integration. Investment in technology is often seen as a luxury that a company can get by without or worse still, something that takes up more time and benefits than the benefits it provides.

The problem is not so much that technology is being overlooked, rather misunderstood, as many in the project management profession continue to make-do with standard office software that is not specifically designed to do the job. This, in turn, has led to a preponderance of outdated and ill-suited IT tools that add little value to the overall process.

“Historically the tools available to project managers have been relatively inflexible resulting in an explosion of personal solutions, often spreadsheet based, or in a collection of disconnected ‘point’ solutions,” says Malcolm Fox, senior manager, product marketing, Epicor. “This leads to duplicated effort, a tendency for error and the loss of a global view.”

Over time, the use of spreadsheet packages, in particular, have slowly engrained themselves on the

project manager's psyche – a situation that Martyn Horne, product development manager, AEC Software likens to a child starting off with wax crayons and then never moving onto to using real pens.

“Excel and other spreadsheet programs seem attractive because they present a flexible grid format into which dates and text can be added and the cells coloured. But let's be honest here, Excel is not a project management tool and has some big limitations in its use of planning. For example, it actually takes longer to set up dates and colour cells than it would in a correctly designed project management tool. The inefficiencies of using Excel in this way, multiply as soon as you need to make changes, especially when such changes have ripple effect on all other tasks in the plan.”

Far better, says Martyn, is to use a dedicated project management system that links one task to another, so as soon as a change is made the implications can be seen over the whole plan. This type of intelligent feature also allows the project manager to see what the original plan was, what the revised plan is, and also where they are in the plan at present.

A view shared by Paul Major, managing director of Program Framework, who says solutions such as collaborative resources, reporting and visibility are designed to make it easier for everyone involved to interact formally and informally in what is often a rigorous and difficult process. “Times have changed. A few years ago, a typical software vendor was demonstrating a fancy piece of software that may have looked great but didn't really deliver – a complex tool that nobody fully understood. As a result, project managers have often steered clear of technology, seeing it as an admin overhead, one that doesn't help them in their day-to-day job.

“But over the last five years, not only has the technology moved on significantly, so has the role of

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project management. Managing a single project in isolation has become a rarity. Organisations are more likely to be running several different projects that need a joined up, enterprise-wide approach," says Paul.

However, the quest for technological equilibrium must be carefully managed so as to not alienate or sideline other core skills, namely people and processes. "There are many companies that believe technology is the answer to everything and forget about the real need to ensure the business model is set up to make use of any investment made," Paul Bamforth, sales and marketing director at Asta Development observes. "How many of us get wide eyed when we see the latest television with all the

involved in the project are kept informed of any plans to use a PPM system and are involved in the selection and subsequent implementation."

Equally important is involvement of the software supplier in order to find the right level of product, training and support. This has taken on greater significance given the current downturn where the need to maximise employee time and productivity is paramount. Quality project management solutions not only drive real business benefits in an ever-more complex environment but, more importantly, they allow "organisations to do more with less", says Paul Major, Program Framework – a vital factor that any Time and Relative Dimensions in Space (TARDIS) aficionado would acknowledge.

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gimmicks forgetting the essence of what we really need it for."

The trick, therefore, is to strike the right balance and utilise IT tools that assist, not delay or over-complicate, delivery. But this often requires a mindset change that goes to the very heart of the project. "The biggest obstacles to acceptance are usability and relevance," explains Epicor's Malcolm Fox. "I've not come across a project manager who is not interested in tools that can make their life better – the problem is that the usability of tools has, in some cases, been forced on them and has proven to be more of a hindrance than a help."

Such experiences can easily cloud the judgements of those driving the project, but often fault lies with the organisation, not the tool itself. According to Paul Bamforth, many companies invest in a project and portfolio management (PPM) solution but are not prepared to change their existing process with the project manager. As a result, the efficiencies and benefits of project management technology is never fully realised. "Whilst it does not make sense to throw away things that have worked in the past, the latest PPM solutions allow these processes to be questioned and in many instances improved," he says.

To create the right environment, buy-in from all levels is essential. Closely guarded project plans may minimise the risk of outside interference, but do little to smooth the integration of project management tools in the company at large. Furthermore, without a central database of projects to capture and apply progress data from project team members across the organisation, pictorial representations such as the Gantt chart hold very little real value.

"It should not be forgotten that if the project is not managed correctly and delivered in accordance to the original plan, then there can be serious consequences," adds Paul. "This is why it is essential that all people