

# Sharpening your project tools

By James Butler, Program Framework

While tools are enormously configurable, flexible and powerful, enabling skilled users and consultants to map organizational processes and ways of working, the focus on those who adopt and use them has been missing. In the last few years, project management tools have matured significantly with the development of far more integrated technology that extends beyond pure scheduling to cross the enterprise, providing resource management, portfolio analysis, automated reporting, dashboarding, and workflow management to name but a few areas of development.

They have brought significant benefits to organizations, but development won't stop and there are still problems that need to be addressed:

1. The lack of ability to work across organizations and bring customers inside the process
2. The data centric approach, leaving people not wanting to engage effectively
3. Lack of integration with other tools, especially good communications technologies

## Working across organizations

Partnership working has grown massively in recent years, driven partially by the recession and the fact that no one organization can attract and retain all of the specialist knowledge and capability required to deliver on all of its commitments. Future tools need to enable and facilitate working across organizational boundaries.

How can this be achieved when organizations are unlikely to allow one another to access their internal networks? The answer is by harnessing cloud computing.

Future tools are likely to be hosted predominantly in the cloud. This benefits organizations in many ways, not just by providing the ability to break down the barriers that exist between partners, but also the barriers that exist in their own organisations – such as home workers and multi-national sites.

It's also being driven by the 'pay per use' model that often accompanies cloud-based offerings. This allows costs and sizing to be tailored to the needs of a project, thus reflecting the actual use of the technology. This has and will lead to massively reduced costs for organizations adopting it.

Add to this the positive environmental impact that cloud-based services offer and organizations will be flocking to use them as they mature.

## The data-centric approach

Tools have neglected the people element. While enormous efforts have gone in to creating tools that slice and dice data and present clean reports to executives, it has left the majority of us that have held leadership roles somewhat cold. There has been no sense that that the technology has brought people together to collaborate and commit to the delivery of projects. Is it too high an aspiration to assume technology could ever achieve this? No, I don't think it is, but I do think it is an area that we will see more of in the project management space.

The Internet has proved to be a powerful way of bringing people together through social networking. Facebook and MySpace, have millions of users. They fulfil a basic human need to be part of something and collaborate with others.

Can't we take the lessons from social networking into our future project management tools by making solutions simple and intuitive, allowing people to collaborate and broadcast their success and advertise when they need support? It would give a project team the ability to work together effectively, whether around the office, around the country, or around the globe. Facebook can be updated or viewed from most modern phones, so why can't I see progress on my projects so simply?

## Lack of integration with other tools

Tools that allow people to connect and communicate rapidly and effectively are missing from the PM technology stack. I may be able to use 'Presence' to see if someone is available and, if I've invested in other technology, I may even be able to have a teleconference. Yet it is still a struggle. Holding an effective on-line meeting, where you can clearly see the body language of participants and can share ideas, isn't an easy experience.

The technology exists and could be easily integrated with project management tools. Assuming you have sufficient bandwidth, the experience can actually be adequate. It's not, however, designed for collaborative project working meetings. In time we should be able

to share an online meeting with several other participants, brainstorming risks that allows a shared risk register to be updated and instantly shared with the other participants without using a number of different applications.

Again, a key enabler here is cloud-based computing. The cloud can help those of us coping with low bandwidth connections by centralising and compressing video and other data feeds to enable good quality imaging and data.

Project tools will be primarily driven by how they can assist organizations in delivering project success. This goes well beyond older style tools focused on scheduling; it will be about collaborative working, shared objectives, problems solving and team working.

When did anyone last question the schedule used for the Sydney Opera House? Yes, it may have been late and over budget but it was a fantastic achievement because the team understood the shared objectives and benefits that would be achieved. It puts the importance of relating a better scheduling algorithm to project success into perspective.

Finding ways to support people's commitment and collaboration has to be the number one priority for future project management tools.

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