

Inexpensive Project Management Tools by Andy McDonald

If you sit down to plan a project, you're really just trying to find the answers to some pretty simple questions:

- "How long will this project take to complete?"
- "Which tasks need to happen and when?"
- "Who needs to work on the various tasks, and how much of their time will I need?"
- "How much do I need to ask for as a budget?"

Of course, once your projects up and running, you need to re-ask yourself some of these same questions:

- "Will my project still take x weeks to complete?"
- "Am I likely to need more money to complete this project?"

To help us ponder these questions when we're planning and monitoring our projects, we can make use of any number of project management software programs. Most of them can answer these questions, with one of the most popular being Microsoft Project (MS Project). MS Project can do all of the basics mentioned above, plus a whole lot more. The question is, "How many of us actually use the 'whole lot more' that MS Project and similar programs offer at a premium price?" Well, usually those involved in medium/large IT or construction projects, but for every one person working on these medium to large projects, there are plenty working on smaller projects (say less than 100 tasks). For this latter group, it can be pretty annoying knowing that you've bought a Rolls Royce, when all you really needed was a Mini Cooper.

A number of software vendors have stepped in to fill this gap for those managers with small projects – and small pockets - but one of the newest entrants, **Project-xl**, has found a particularly simple and elegant solution. It offers all the features you're likely to need at a fraction of the price of some of the bigger brand software.

Project-xl is an Excel workbook that contains a Gantt chart view, a budget summary view, a project 'dashboard' view and a resource pool view. That's pretty much all you need at the end of the day. The layout is very intuitive, and data entry is greatly assisted by a simple set of forms. As you enter task information (name, duration, predecessors, resource name, resource usage), the Gantt chart and budget summary are automatically completed. Within minutes you therefore have a Gantt chart schedule (formatted to show the critical path) and budget to show to your boss/client. Once your timeline and budget has been approved, you can baseline the plan and starting tracking actual progress against planned. Again, this is done in a fairly simple manner, with a form prompting you to fill in when each task actually started and finished, and how much effort was actually put in. That's all you need to enter, and Project-xl will then summarise the projects' performance to date using Earned Value Analysis. This is all done in the project 'dashboard' view, which incorporates a Progress Report template. The weekly progress reporting chore therefore becomes a lot easier.

Some of the other useful features include an export facility to MS Project, filtering of schedule views to show only tasks for a specific resource (useful when handing out task assignments), choice of working or non-working time at weekends, and a comprehensive User Manual (written in plain English!).

More information on Project-xl is available at www.project-xl.com.

About the Author



Andy McDonald, BEng, MSc, MBA

Andy McDonald is a Project Manager with 8 years experience working on multi-disciplinary engineering projects in Southern Africa. More recently he has worked for the X-Pert Group as a Project Management lecturer and consultant on a variety of projects. He has recently developed Project-xl – an Excel planning and monitoring tool.

andy@project-xl.com

www.project-xl.com