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How To Better Use the Project Schedule as a Communication Tool

The integrated project schedule is an essential tool for piloting the project, and it also needs to be used to coordinate contributions. In our project reviews we observe that project schedules are too often not communicated systematically to project team members, which misses the point.
In this White Paper, we explore why schedules are not actively communicated and what solutions can be put in place to achieve this objective.

Introduction

Projects invest a lot of resources and effort in schedule management. Proper maintenance and forecasting using the integrated project schedule and more detailed schedules is essential for proper project piloting and taking decisions. (refer to White Paper 2015-14 'How to Build a Proper Project Schedule Hierarchy' and White Paper 2015-18 'How to Produce an Adequate Integrated Project Schedule').

One of the objectives of schedule management is also to ensure schedule data is communicated to all contributors. This is an essential action for actual synchronisation of all contributions and will also provide feedback that is useful for maintaining a realistic schedule. However, irrespective of possible weaknesses in the field of updating and reforecasting the integrated project schedule, we too often observe that the schedule is not systematically communicated to project team members. How can they then know what is expected from them and when?

Too many projects expend significant effort on scheduling while exploiting little of its potential benefits.

Hurdles to schedule management

The following hurdles are most frequently mentioned when this issue is uncovered:

- Schedules are developed in a specialised and expensive software (for example Primavera) that is not available to the wider project team, making it impossible for anyone else than the planner to drill down in the schedule,
- Pdf printouts of the project schedule are too heavy and cumbersome as well as lacking essential information for the users, making them difficult to use,
- Project contributors lack familiarity with schedules and associated processes, making it difficult to exploit the information contained therein.
- Integrated project schedules are too often developed to meet a client requirement for reporting progress without considering the projects' needs

As a result, it is quite frequent that we meet key project contributors that have not had a glimpse at the project schedule for weeks or even months, which obviously defeats the purpose of the tool.

Possible solutions that projects can implement to improve widespread communication of project schedules

To overcome the usual hurdles of integrated project schedule communication, the following solutions are implemented in projects:

- A properly coded integrated schedule can be filtered or presented differently for different contributors, thereby providing them with the view they need (for example by discipline across packages, or by package across disciplines, short term or longer-term look-ahead…). The planner then systematically prints-out a set of views from a single schedule, adapted to the users,

- Less expensive software exist that allow to read native schedules produced in expensive software and thereby making it possible to delve into the logic (they usually cover read-only and physical progress input functions); being relatively inexpensive, this software can be purchased more widely for the team, providing key contributors with a way to dig into the schedule and its logic in an easier manner, exploiting much more of the native file data,

- Visual management approaches and Oobeya (war-rooms) are implemented where the schedule is posted on the wall, or at least some version of it (short term 3 months look-ahead, overall project convergence plan or high-level schedule and key milestones, etc) – the importance here is to make sure that the schedules posted are effectively updated and reprinted at least monthly,

- Scheduling awareness sessions are conducted to make sure all contributors can properly read and interpret the integrated project schedule.

- Planners spend time with all key contributors (discipline, package managers) on a regular basis, not just gathering progress data, but detailing how the schedule is built and what its status is.

Advanced schedule utilisation and visualisation

In addition to those relatively conventional schedule sharing approaches, some advanced techniques can also be used based on the observation of the slippages between the few last schedule updates.

It is quite amazing that although projects expend significant effort and resources on schedule management, they tend to use only a limited value from the full dataset thus created. By exploiting historical variations between each schedule update and observing how key dates and floats evolve with respect to key project convergence points, a lot of insight can be gained on the actual trends of project execution (refer to White Paper 2016-06 "How to Use Float Monitoring Techniques").

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This allows to identify definite trends and take action even before activities become obviously critical for the project. To achieve best impact, planners should also prepare some visualisations showing how key dates change over time and how key floats diminish progressively.

Summary

Too many projects expend significant effort on scheduling while exploiting little of its potential benefits. It is essential to ensure that integrated project schedule updates are widely communicated to make sure all contributors know what is expected and thus can coordinate their actions. Various approaches can easily be deployed to achieve a much-improved communication. In addition, advanced visualisations like float and key milestones monitoring over several successive schedule updates can also provide deep insights into project trends.

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