

Tools – The Answer to Project Management?

Most project managers believe tools are all that's needed to make a project successful. However, for tools to be most effective, they have to be used as compliments to the project manager's knowledge and experience. Project management is a process that is used to successfully oversee the completion of a project. The complexity and sheer size of modern projects demands tools that assist project managers. "Despite such proliferation of tools, most projects are still delivered over budget, behind schedule, and are of poor quality. It is ironic that the profession still has not learned the obvious: tools act only as catalysts." (Pg 7 Kapur) Project managers who understand this concept come to work equipped with a "tool belt" of sorts. This tool belt includes different software packages, processes, and custom templates. Much like a construction worker has a hammer to help him build a house and break his thumb; a project manager needs tools to help him manage a project. Kapur is correct in stating that tools are not what make the project successful, but it is the correct use of them that facilitates success. Identified in the following paragraphs are several of the tools that are being used to help make not only projects, but project managers successful.

One tool that almost all project managers use is MS Project, which allows you to track the tasks, resources, and progress of a project. Through MS Project you can set baselines of sponsor approved schedules and track any changes to the project which would cause delays. Another efficient feature of MS Project is its ability to help identify the critical path including late start and slack time. If a task does not start by the late start date then the project will inevitably be delayed. Equipped with this information, a project manager can more aptly track individual tasks and performance. Having this information clearly organized and presented allows the project to be more manageable.

Currently BYU uses Mariner, a project management software package made by Pacific Edge. This system allows and requires all resources to track their time and attach it to a task or project. The time that has been charged to the project that is not attached to a task on the plan becomes an emergent task. This information has to be approved and added to the plan by the project manager. It has been said that metrics drive behavior, and that what you measure is what you get. Mariner allows you to measure various aspects of a project. In addition, project managers use this product to manage available resources, ensuring they are not over allocated on his project or on someone else's. This information gives project managers the heads up to a projects progress, its problems, and current status. This information is also a preemptive strike to status reporting because if people enter their hours and tasks completed, then no additional status collecting will be needed.

Projects, like people, are always evolving and changing. To help control this ongoing change an IT governance process map has been created. This tool has been designed to help divide the responsibility of a project from its beginning phase as an idea through to the project's completion and maintenance. This governance map, which has fittingly been dubbed the "World's Greatest Model," lays out the functional areas that need to be implemented in order to ensure all IT endeavors are properly managed.

Status meetings are another tool that project managers can use to help them ensure a project will meet all three criteria they are responsible for: scope, schedule, and cost. These meetings also help them foresee any delays or problems in the project. This tool can be very effective, but “status reporting can [also] be a road block.” Imagine that you are in charge of eight projects and that you need to collect status for all of them. This collecting is very time consuming and cumbersome. To help alleviate this problem, Mariner is used to log all progress of the project. This leaves just a report to be run before the meeting. If there are no problems to discuss then the meeting should be cancelled. Is there anything better than having a meeting canceled? Status meetings do help to flush out any problems with the project to help prevent future and alleviate current problems.

Another tool used by project managers is the constraint/flexibility matrix. This tool is a great way to see at a glance which of the three areas holds the most constraint or flexibility. By using this matrix, project managers can quickly decide what aspect of the project they can cut or add to. Although this matrix does change over time, it provides project managers a clear picture of project constraints.

One of the greatest tools that a project manager can have in his “tool belt” is a process model. This model is a template, which provides for verification that the objectives of the sponsor are met. Without this process map there would be little direction during the execution of the plan. By having a documented process map everyone will know what phase a project is in and can direct any questions or concerns based on that. This map ensures every project gets a fair chance to succeed because all projects are following the same process that has been proven to work in the past.

Depending on the organization a project manager works for and as he gains more experience there will be certain forms that are used time and again. These forms can be turned into templates that will be ready for his use any time that he needs it. The templates are a great tool because they help reduce time spent duplicating a document that is used all the time. Using these templates also ensures consistency among documents and through all of the projects.

Project managers have many things to deal with while managing various projects. Through trial and error there have been tools created to help in providing assistance to those in the project management field. Tools include different software packages, processes, and custom templates. Even though these tools exist, the use of them does not guarantee the completion of a successful project. The equation of a successful project includes using the right tools, with the right people, with the right project manager. Having all three does not guarantee that the project will finish on-time, with-in budget and fully functional with-in scope, but it does help the odds.