

Selecting the most suitable project management software – tips from a vendor

Googling project management software lists a dazzling array of software tools. In just the first few pages, entries range from heavy duty project management software for major defence contracts, to free desktop tools for individual use.

Poor project performance costs organizations dear, not only financially, but in damaged reputation. Yet consistently delivering projects to time, cost and quality is no easy matter; good visibility of pending delay and resource conflicts, etc, requires reliable project management data. This is where your choice of project management software is crucial, because you will rely on every project and resource manager doing their bit, if the project data is to become consistent, current and complete.

This White Paper gives pointers on how project oriented organizations should go about selecting their project management software tools. It describes a proven procurement process and system implementation methodology and lists the typical risks involved. Finally, criteria for ensuring success are identified. These sections are based on more than 30 years experience with project management software vendors, from support consultant to managing director. Poacher turned gamekeeper, if you like.

1 ***Project management software categories***

Project management software falls into a number of categories.

- **Managing a major project**

Major projects have one clear thing going for them; they warrant a dedicated project team, so that resource conflict with other projects is generally avoided. Project management software in this category must provide sophisticated project planning and progress reporting capabilities and cost, time & resource management at work package level. Often the client organization will insist that contractors use their preferred project management software. Vendors such as Oracle Primavera and Deltek compete in this space.

- **Enterprise level, multi-project organizations**

Large, project oriented organizations need to ensure that their expensive, skilled resources are fully utilized, whilst retaining focus on individual project delivery. This warrants extensive investment to improve project management practice and culture, so that comprehensive project management business processes will work. These are prerequisites for implementing enterprise level project management software. However, implementation can be lengthy and as expensive as the software license fees, if not more so, so successful system implementation is risky and not guaranteed. Too many enterprise level project management software implementations end up 'just doing timesheets' and failing their more ambitious objectives. Vendors that compete in this space include Planview and Microsoft Project Server.

- **Departmental & SME workload – a mix of project & business as usual work.**

Small to medium enterprises (SME) and project oriented departments, such as IT and R&D, can face the same requirements as larger project oriented enterprises, but without having the same maturity in project management culture. Project management processes are less comprehensive and generally much less well

adhered too. Tools in place are often desktop based versions of Microsoft Project and spreadsheets. These factors make the adoption of enterprise level software too large a step, and more simple software with speedy implementation times should be sought. Vendors that compete in this space include my own company, Innate.

- **Individual, simple projects**

For an individual or small group of people (up to 20) that manage relatively simple tasks, all of the above are sledgehammers to crack a nut. For most, simple spreadsheets will do, or desktop only project management tools costing a few hundred dollars or pounds. Where the client demands the use of a serious piece of project management software for his project(s), Microsoft Project on the desktop will generally suffice.

2 A recommended Procurement process

This section describes a proven procurement process for selecting project management software. As software vendors, we at Innate see too many prospective clients that are ill prepared for this process; our 17 years experience shows that following these steps will substantially reduce their risk of poor system selection.

Before we get into the details, a word about dealing with project management software vendors. Whilst we might have a reputation close to the level of MPs, we would not remain in business if we failed to listen effectively to prospective clients and honestly represent our software's capabilities. Established vendors have to be professional in their approach and certainly at Innate, we bow out early if there is not a good match with the prospect's requirements. The process is harder work for you as the buyer than for individual vendors, so get us on side early, with clear communication as to what you are looking for and how you will decide.

2.1 Prerequisites – what needs to be in place before you start.

The clearer that you can define and communicate your requirements, the better will be the outcome. A number of items must be in place, or at least identified as shortcomings to be addressed in the system implementation. These include:

- Management information requirements must be clearly understood, with report examples available.
- The key business steps of the project management process should be defined and agreed. Simple process flow diagrams aid communication.
- Roles & responsibilities of key stakeholders should be defined & agreed. These should include the relationship/boundaries between project and resource managers, particularly in a matrix organization.

2.2 Selecting the right project management software

It is important to appreciate where you are starting from and to understand the gap that you intend to close with the new project management software. The following pointers will help.

- Define the current situation and anticipated future in terms of numbers and types of projects and resources that you will be managing.
- Re-asses your current tools and identify their shortcomings. Describe in detail the gap that the new project management software will need to close, in terms of functionality, ease of use, and environmental requirements, etc.

- Do an honest assessment of your current project management maturity level, and get agreement on the improvements that you are aiming for. The new project management software can facilitate these improvements, by effectively supporting the proposed changes to the business process.
- Appreciate that good project managers are essentially anarchists. After all, you hire them to get things done and overcome the hurdles within your organization. This does not make them meek and mild when it comes to adhering to detailed business process steps. They need to be involved and take ownership of the process improvements that you have in mind.

Before you can start the project management software selection process, you will need two detailed documents:

- The System Requirements document. This should be a comprehensive list and description of the key requirements. Classify these by:
 - Software function or capability.
 - Ease of Use – give specific requirements, e.g. just one click from saving project data to opening a view of the plan.
 - Environmental. Most software will not operate in every environment, e.g. on both Macs and PCs, Unix or Microsoft, etc.
 - Any specific pricing models or contract terms that you require.
- Product evaluation criteria. So that you can consistently score each product and objectively assess the best option.

The Requirements doc should be sent to likely vendors, with an invitation to tender. This should request a detailed, point by point response to each requirement listed, with pricing and implementation proposals. Be prepared to meet with vendors at this stage, as the more information they have, the more relevant their proposal will be.

Applying the evaluation criteria should lead to a short list of vendors to be invited in for a lengthy demonstration and Q&A session, with a number of your colleagues.

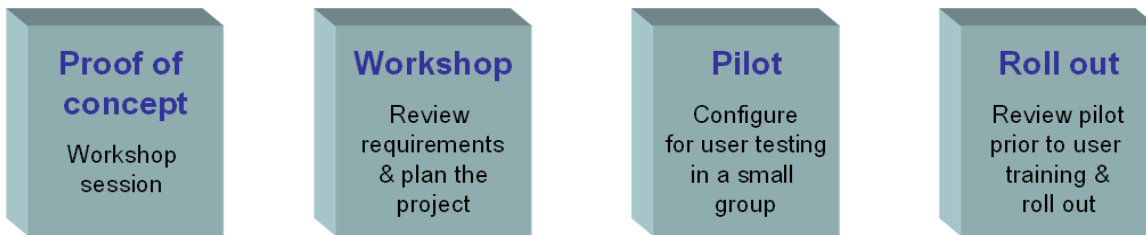
As the list of likely contenders narrows, you can ask the candidates for further information, in terms of:

- Arranging a client reference visit or phone call. The vendor should be able to find a relevant client and have enough confidence not to attend your visit himself.
- A Proof of Concept Workshop. Ask the likely candidates to configure their products to represent aspects of your process steps, using data that you supply. This will enable you to see how readily their out of the box offering can match your requirements. Good vendors will offer a further evaluation period, provided that you accept some product training and hand holding.

As a result of this process a clear preference should emerge, for final negotiation and agreement.

3 **Implementation**

Over the years we have learnt the best ways of working to ensure a rapid and low risk implementation. The key steps are:



1. **Proof of concept**

These workshop sessions enable you to explore with the vendor how best to configure the project management software to meet your particular requirements. They are essential preparation for the Implementation Workshop, where the system design and configuration will be developed.

2. **Implementation Workshop**

The vendor will want to understand requirements and the framework of your roles and responsibilities and business process in which the system must operate. The workshop scopes the implementation project and prepares the plan.

3. **Pilot**

The supplier will configure the software to best suit your requirements and train users for testing and feedback, generally within a small group.

4. **Roll Out**

This stage refines the system configuration based on feedback from the pilot, prior to user training and roll out.

You can download a PDF file that describes our implementation methodology in more detail at <http://www.innate.co.uk/docs/ImplementingInnateSoftware.pdf>

4 **Risks**

There are a number of common risks when selecting and implementing project management software.

- Mismatch of expectations. Most vendors strive to get a detailed understanding of the system requirements and encourage prospective clients to document their requirements in considerable detail. The Proof of Concept workshop helps to clarify how the system can work in the client's environment, but if the system requirements remain vague there is considerable risk of expectations not being met.
- Timescale risks due to non-availability of client resource when it is required.
- System adoption risk due to insufficient user training. Normally the vendor trains the key users and these then train the other users, but this transition can be a risk.

- System fails to meet requirements due to inconsistent use. Consistent adoption of the system during roll out requires an empowered project office and an engaged project sponsor, to ensure that the system is adopted consistently by all of the users.

And finally, Implementation timescales are crucial. The risk of an unsuccessful implementation grows exponentially as the project timescales lengthen.

5 *Ensuring Success*

There are a number of criteria that help to ensure the success of implementing project management software.

Implementation is a project

For some organizations with simple needs and process, the effort to implement new project management software will be small. Whatever the size, implementing such systems should be treated as a serious project, with potential risks being identified and appropriate project disciplines applied. The client should appoint a project manager as soon as possible, ideally before the order is placed. They need to identify the key project deliverables, risks and issues and ensure that there are regular reviews of these with the supplier.

Sponsor and Steering Group

It is essential to have a sponsor, at the appropriate level within the organization, to champion the system and ensure that the required internal resources are accessible. If the implementation covers more than a single department it is important to have a steering group to make the decisions that will affect multiple areas and to facilitate the inter-working of the various groups involved.

Communication

Effective communication with all parties is vital for a successful implementation. All resources involved, whether plan owners, resource owners or the resources being managed, need to know and understand the processes involved and why the system is being implemented. There needs to be appropriate communications at all stages of the implementation. We recommend issuing a document to all staff saying what's being done, the reasons why and details of any information that they will be required to provide and sign off.

About the Author

Barry Muir is Managing Director of Innate Management Systems Ltd, a project management systems author that has been trading for more than 17 years. You can see more details of the Innate products and implementation approach at www.innate.co.uk