

# Real-world programme management

by Geoff Reiss

Most project management tools are based on an old model developed by the construction and heavy engineering industries to focus on individual projects that are not linked together and do not consider the asset and resources utilisation within the organisation. But the world of programme management makes very different demands on its tools.

Every tool should make our lives easier – that is the point of a tool. Tools should make everyday processes easier and simpler. Many do not.

This is not just theoretical – Skanska have achieved a 10% efficiency gain using the proven Hydra approach.

In 1994 I had the pleasure of leading a team examining the whole problem of managing a programme of projects starting with a clean sheet of paper. We were all experts in the area – the team previously built Pertmaster, in its day a very popular project management tool.

Here are just four examples of functions that we believed were ignored by many tools and that we built into our design.

## Distribution of the work

In programmes, work is passed down from person to person, team to team. I will use the term ‘delegate’ to represent this passing of work.

Programme managers delegate projects to project managers, project managers delegate phases to phase managers and work packages to teams. This is a simple process used by nearly all organisations, but one that is completely ignored by most project management tools.

The programme managers delegate the projects to the project managers. Where there are interdependencies within projects, the programme manager usually ‘owns’ these links and needs to have visibility and control over them.

The programme manager sits above everybody, having visibility and ability

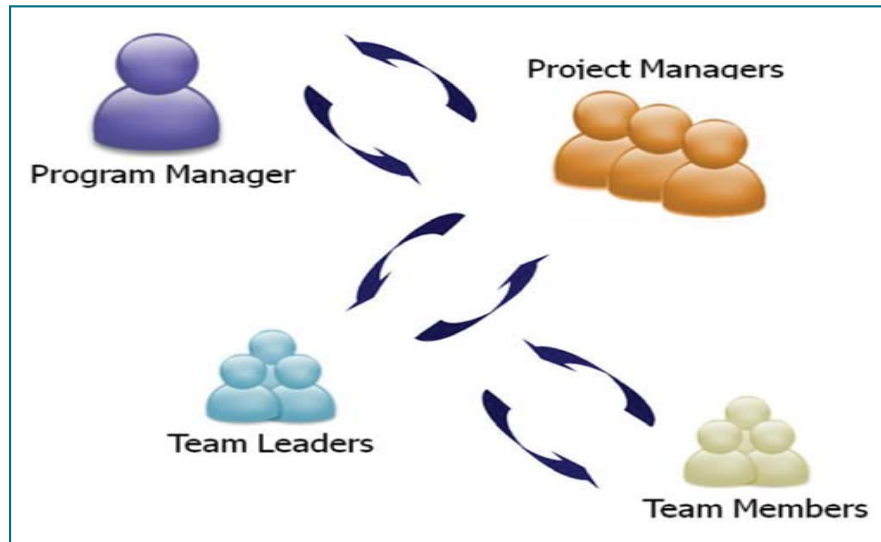


Figure 1

to prioritise. This means that he or she is responsible and should be accountable. Project managers can delegate phases, activities or simply a milestone to each other to show interdependencies. They can also delegate work to functional teams.

While the delegation process may be simple, it may be used very frequently so that a complete picture of the distribution of work through the organisation may appear very complex. Most users of project management software tools are working within this environment.

What happens if the software tool supports this process?

A manager at any level simply selects an activity (normally a bar on the bar chart) and clicks on ‘delegate’. The manager must select the person or team who will be asked to perform this work and may set other items like timing, associated documents and budgetary information.

A message is sent asking the selected person to take on this work. They may accept the work, reject the request, submit an alternative proposal with different timing or put the request on hold for consideration. Eventually these delegation requests are usually agreed. Something like a million delegation agreements have been set up using Hydra.

This simple process delivers a wide range of benefits:

- Everyone knows that they are doing the right project, at the right time and with the right resource.
- There is total clarity of who is doing what work for whom.
- The system automatically updates all delegated tasks using sensible protocols and very little effort.
- The ability to propose and accept changes to each delegation provides a simple and effective change-control process. (See Figure 1.)

## Realistic resource allocation

I don’t want to know why I can’t do what I want to do, I want to know the best I can do with the teams I have.

With the normal system you guess how many people to assign to a task against time and the software adds up all the different types of people and tells you why you don’t have enough people at the right time to do the work you want to do.

The histogram tells you the problems; you have to find a way out. Resource levelling is not a solution, as it simply delays tasks according to simplistic rules and creates extremely long plans. (See Figure 2.)

The Hydra system shows you when each person can fit the job into their

plan – full time or part time, background work, other projects – you then choose from a list of people and times. You either ask when a specific person can fit this work into their current workload or ask for anyone with a specific skill to fit this work into their current workload. If you select a specific person, you are presented with the earliest opportunity that person has to do the work, noting current prioritisation.

If you select a skill you are presented with a list of people that can perform the task and for each the earliest opportunity that person has to do the work, noting current prioritisation. This will allow for part-time and full-time working, holidays and other non-project commitments and all higher-priority work. No one is accidentally overloaded at any time.

You simply select the person of your choice, confident that you have selected the best person for the job. Therefore each task is optimised as it is added and work fills up. There is no need to inspect histograms showing overloads as accidental overloads are impossible.

Everyone has a reasonable workload and a high level of productivity. Plans are totally realistic and usually very efficient.

## Progress monitoring through a tightly integrated timesheet/ personal plan

The traditional approach to progress measurement is to estimate a percentage complete based on a count of bricks, welds, miles of road or other physical measure.

We cannot normally measure how much work has been done through a physical inspection of our projects. They are much more cerebral than physical.

So, we need a tightly integrated timesheet system that records time, people’s own plans and feeds directly into the planning process.

The timesheet system within Hydra works like this:

- The Personal Plan collects work from one or many projects and presents this to each user.

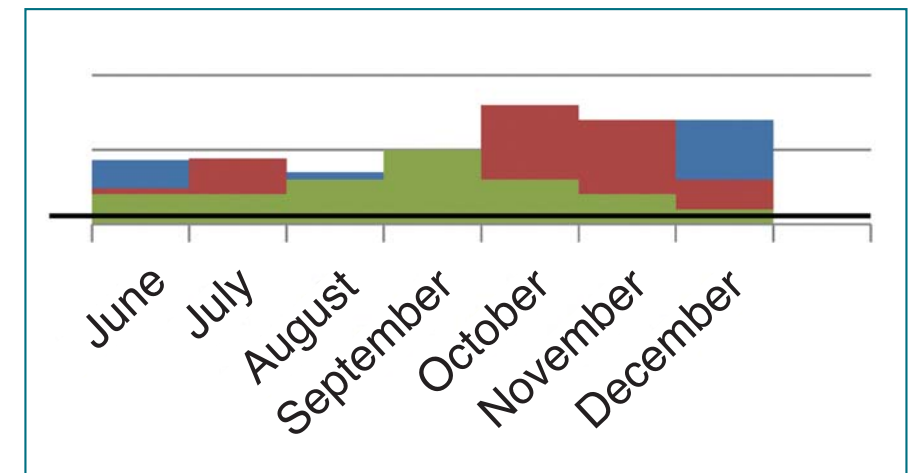


Figure 2

- A very easy to use calendar/timesheet allows simple time recording.
- Each user records work done and their thought on remaining effort.
- Each user can raise task issues.
- It is simple to record non-scheduled work (holidays, illness...)
- A ‘Submit’ button triggers the update process. This sends the timesheet to relevant managers for approval. Approved timesheets automatically update the project plans using actual work done and estimates to complete. It is simple but brilliant.

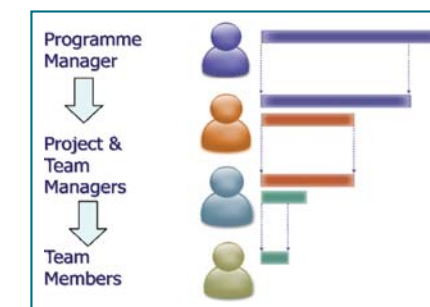


Figure 3

## Regular, automated reporting

As long as each project is properly planned, reporting should be automatic so the project managers can spend most of their time looking forwards, not looking backwards and generating reports.

Sadly, many tools actually make extra work for a majority of people – especially project managers – for the benefit of senior management’s visibility.

Many project managers merely feed the tool and receive no benefit for themselves – they feed the tool and their senior management reap the benefit of visibility.

A common complaint from project managers relates to the time they spend reporting on progress for the benefit of their senior managers. They often regard this workload as fruitless in terms of progressing their projects, but an inevitable part of the job.

This need not be so. Time spent examining and reporting on the past reduces the time available to consider and plan the future.

The vast majority of reporting should be automatic, requiring little or no human input.

A strong tool should only expect the project manager to maintain his or her own schedule in an up-to-date form. Based on this updated schedule, the Hydra tool can automatically generate reports and directly update relevant people. Therefore, vanishing little unproductive time is consumed, the tool is used by the project managers to perform their normal project management duties, and reporting follows automatically from that point.

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