

Project management professionals are under constant pressure to deliver new, innovative ideas while operating within a wide range of constraints. Fortunately, there is a wealth of software providers at hand to provide them with the technological tools that they need to succeed in their work. In the fast-moving world of technology, no solution provider stays still for long and 2014 was a year in which products continued to evolve and new entrants came to market. Here, we explore three of the most important trends in project management software over the past 12 months – collaboration, phasing and transparency.

COLLABORATION

It almost goes without saying that collaboration is a critical component of successful project management. Therefore remote access is a must, says Stephen Brown, CEO of consultancy Polarisoft. “Planning and set-up still happen on the desktop and are typically not collaborative in that one person owns the entry of the plan. But once projects are in progress, we are seeing a great shift for people to use mobile devices to track updates, collaborate and even complete status reports.”

On-premise solutions tend to be favoured by companies that have restrictions on hosting data in the cloud, explains Andrew Filev, CEO of project management application service provider Wrike.

“What we are increasingly seeing is that individual teams are self-selecting cloud-based collaborative task and project management tools, which they roll out to their team. Over time, these tools spread to other teams and eventually, when they reach a certain scale, the IT team gets involved in

helping to roll them out across the enterprise.”

While project management teams are adopting platforms that enable real-time collaboration and are updated continuously, team members have more specific requirements for what they want to be able to do on their mobile devices compared with laptops and desktops, says Filev.

“People use mobile mostly for discussing work, searching for information, reviewing files and capturing ideas or tasks. The more in-depth project planning and scheduling tends to still be done in desktop environments, so a complete project management solution needs to have apps that support these mobile use cases,” he says.

Anders Pollas, co-founder and product manager of collaboration tool Citrix Podio, says cloud-based project management solutions are accessible because users recognise interface patterns and quickly start sharing and communicating. “But for any tool to really make an impact, some overall guidelines are useful,” he notes. “It is as much about how to work together and how to get the best out of using tools or working remotely as it is about the tool itself. So in bigger organisations we are seeing people starting with a limited number of projects, getting experience of what is possible, and sharing this with the rest of the organisation.”

PHASING

Phasing has been an important trend in the implementation of project management software in 2014. Donal Cahalane, vice president of growth and marketing at online project management software provider Teamwork, says new systems are typically implemented on a phased basis where individual project teams or departments sign up initially



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and then, over time, other teams sign up their own accounts.

This view is shared by Chris Redrich, director of product at collaboration software company Central Desktop, who refers to the phased approach as vital to encouraging user adoption and engagement. He suggests starting small with the core features that meet the biggest pain point and/or solve the most important problem that the organisation is facing.

“Keep it simple. Making quick wins with a new system will help win over users. As people get more comfortable with the system, you can begin introducing more – and more advanced – features, adjusting it along the way as you receive feedback.”

Redrich goes on to outline how newer tools encourage collaborative working. “Project management applications used to be primarily for the project manager, who would use it as a guideline for driving the various teams who played a role in the project. There were tasks and milestones, but no visibility into any of the underlying work and decisions. Project management and collaboration tools now provide much more transparency – for the whole team, not just the project

manager – into the status of the project and the progress of specific tasks.”

The upshot of this is that if a team is going off the rails or simply not getting the work done, project managers don’t need to wait for the next status meeting to find out how work is progressing.

TRANSPARENCY

In 2014, transparency has been a popular trend in both business and project management since it reduces the risks of unexpected problems suddenly presenting themselves. According to Dan Radigan, senior agile evangelist at enterprise software company Atlassian, the key to managing project risk is understanding which are the critical elements of the project and making those elements visible across the team. “When the project status is out in the open, it facilitates discussions across the team about what is next. Methodologies such as agile help teams to use change as an asset rather than an impediment.”

Ray Grainger, CEO and co-founder of project management software provider Mavenlink, states that project management applications reduce risk by increasing transparency and communication on a new project.

ADOPTION ISSUES

A report on the global project and portfolio management software market published by technology research and advisory company TechNavio in August predicted that the market would record a compound annual growth rate of 11.25 per cent over the next four years.

One major emerging trend identified in the report was the shift towards agile project management, where small portions of the deliverables are completed in each delivery cycle or iteration.

Newer methodologies such as agile encourage everyone to contribute to the progress of the project, explains Atlassian’s Dan Radigan. Rather than having a project manager update everyone’s individual status, team members can update their own progress directly.



Nevertheless, the adoption process is a hurdle for any new tool, notes Ray Grainger of Mavenlink. “That is why it is so important to choose a product that not only includes the features you need, but also feels intuitive and familiar.”

While there is inevitably much excitement around cloud-based solutions, Stephen Brown of Polarisoft, cautions that Excel is still the most commonly used tool in project management and that vendors have not yet come up with a ‘one-size-fits-all’ cloud solution.

On the issue of implementation, he accepts that a phased approach is favoured at enterprise level, but adds: “This can be a double-edged sword. Once everyone realises how hard change is, future phases often don’t happen.”

“Features such as an instant Gantt chart, task status and work-in-progress reports help to identify issues such as deliverable delays, budgeting concerns and unavailable resources in real time before a project’s scope is negatively impacted. For service providers, having real-time insight into how the team is being used is crucial to managing client expectations and ensuring resources and personnel are allocated properly.”

Cahalane observes that where organisations incorporate a risk register

into their project management software, this enables individual team members to list potential risks for consideration. In contrast, an in-person conversation on the topic might lead some individuals to mistake caution for doubt or for a lack of loyalty towards the project.

According to Filev, approximately two-thirds of new product development work is re-work, largely because requirements from downstream teams such as manufacturing, sales or marketing were not properly captured in the initial planning process.

“Project management applications mitigate execution risk by enabling better upfront planning and resource allocation, more collaborative input into requirements and clear monitoring of progress during execution,” he says.

LOOKING AHEAD

The project management profession will undoubtedly need to rise to fresh challenges in 2015. But, alongside this, they will also have an even broader range of project management software available to them to help them get projects over the line, within deadline and within budget. That has to be good news. ■

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THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

Technology is an important component of any project manager’s tool-kit. So which key trends drove software developments in 2014? **Paul Golden** reports



SOFTWARE UPDATE

With project management software, it is important to distinguish between new and updated applications. For example, Teambox was rebranded Redbooth earlier this year.

Perhaps the most significant launch of the last 12-18 months was Comindware Project, which comes with mobile apps for iPhone, iPad and Android-based mobile devices. The software provides reporting capabilities for both project groups and user groups. Project-based reports show task completion and remaining effort dynamics, while user group reports show what projects people were busy with and their overall workload.

For Microsoft application users, Comindware Project is compatible with MS Outlook and projects and tasks can be imported from MS Project.