

# Don't try to manage it alone

## Need to organize a big project? Management software can be a huge help / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

**I**F YOU'VE NEVER HAD the opportunity to use project-management software, you might be tempted to file today's column away under the heading: more expensive software that you don't really need.

On the other hand, if you are also managing a team of employees or contractors, if you are working on a project that will take more than a month to finish, or if you are concerned about keeping your projects on time and under budget, you might want to give project-management software a try - and possibly download a free working demo.

As the name implies, project-management software helps people manage projects. These programs are a kind of fusion of spreadsheets, databases, and calendars. The software keeps track of all of your project's tasks and the people who perform various duties and how much they are paid. The programs then print pretty graphs and reports that predict when everything will be finished and how much it will cost.

For example, say you are a contractor who's using PM software to help you manage building a house. You type in a variety of tasks: doing electrical work, installing insulation, putting up sheetrock. The PM software will then help you make an accurate

schedule - months in advance - of when each contractor needs to show up.

But where PM software really shines is when something goes wrong. Say your electrician is sick for a week. You can type this information into the program and recalculate the expected completion date. If the delay ends up throwing off the painters for a month, you can factor that in as well. You can even calculate how much money you would save - or waste - if you pulled people from other jobs to finish this project.

PM software has a long history at NASA and the larger defense contractors. When you have thousands of people trying to launch a space probe or build a missile system, it's all but impossible to keep a project on target without some kind of computerized assistance.

Over the past decade, the personal computer explosion has made project-management software available to large and medium-sized companies. But few small companies are using PM software, which has a reputation of being a bit unwieldy and somewhat difficult to use. Instead, most small firms manage projects with word processors and white boards.

The three leaders in PM software are now trying to push into

that small-business market. Over the past two years they've worked hard to make their software easier to use by beefing up the help systems, building in features that guide the manager step by step, and generally improving the user interface.

Microsoft Project 98 is probably the best-known project-management software, thanks to Microsoft's name. But after using Microsoft Project 98, I was somewhat disappointed.

Compared with the other Microsoft Office products, Project 98 has a weak user interface. It lacks strong tools for recalculating the cost of a project. Most disappointing is the documentation. There is not a single screen shot in the Project 98 user's manual.

Instead, there are a lot of developer little drawings that were made by a professional artist. It's almost as if Microsoft finished the manual before it finished the program - not a very good example of project management.

SureTrak Project Manager 2.0, from Primavera Systems, is a better choice for managers and companies that are new to project management. It has a neat wizard called Project KickStart, which guides you through the somewhat difficult task of

creating a project-management file from scratch. Other wizards help out with pivoting a table (to see a different view of your project) and combining multiple projects into a single group.

Unfortunately, SureTrak is a 16-bit application. It runs very well under Windows 3.1, but can't take advantage of many Windows 95 features.

Project Scheduler 7, from Scitor Corp., has the best user interface of the crop. Like Excel (but unlike Microsoft Project 98), there is in-place editing of the tables, allowing you to change any value by double-clicking on the appropriate cell. It's easy for experienced users to customize the user interface.

I like the reports best. Unlike SureTrak, which can do little more than send a report to the printer, Project Scheduler lets you work with reports on screen.

Although Microsoft Primavera, and Scitor all have limited features for making project information available on a corporate

intranet, these companies' Web efforts should be seen as a work in progress. All of the programs will export PERT graphs and reports to HTML files, but it's up to the user to get these files onto the corporate Web server.

Better than simple reporting is Primavera's Webster, which uses Activex technology to let project team members review a project over the Web and update their assignments.

What these programs won't do is help a single professional prioritize a number of tasks and projects. And while these programs all maintain detailed calendars, none of them will integrate with handheld computers such as the 3Com Pilot or Windows CE devices.

If project management sounds interesting, check out these companies' Web sites. Both Microsoft and Scitor have full, working versions of their programs free for download:

**Microsoft Project 98:** \$450; go to Microsoft's Web site at <http://www.microsoft.com/project/>.

**SureTrak Project Manager 2.0:** \$350; Webster: \$1,500 for six simultaneous users. Primavera Systems' Web site is at <http://www.primavera.com/>.

**Project Scheduler 7:** \$650; go to Scitor's Web site at <http://www.scitor.com/>.

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Scitor's Project Scheduler 7 has best user interface of project-management software products reviewed.