

Scheduling Made Easy

by Craig Savage

Most small builders need project scheduling software that is simple to use and easy to update. Microsoft Project 4.0 fits the bill with a package that provides plenty of scheduling muscle for advanced users, but keeps complex operations hidden from novices until they are needed.

Simple Problem-Solving

MS Project is a good example of software designed to solve real problems. Instead of stuffing the package with everything but the kitchen sink, Microsoft Corp. listened to users and gave them what they wanted. A

Microsoft study discovered, for instance, that over half of the people they surveyed had never used project-management software before. The result was Cue Cards — wonderfully useful guides that ask you what you want to do and then provide instructions on how to do it.

Another study showed that the critical path method (CPM) of scheduling was more than the average user understood — or wanted to understand. So MS Project hides the critical path (it's still calculated, and you can access it easily), and focuses instead on a Gantt chart, a bar chart that most people understand intuitively. To

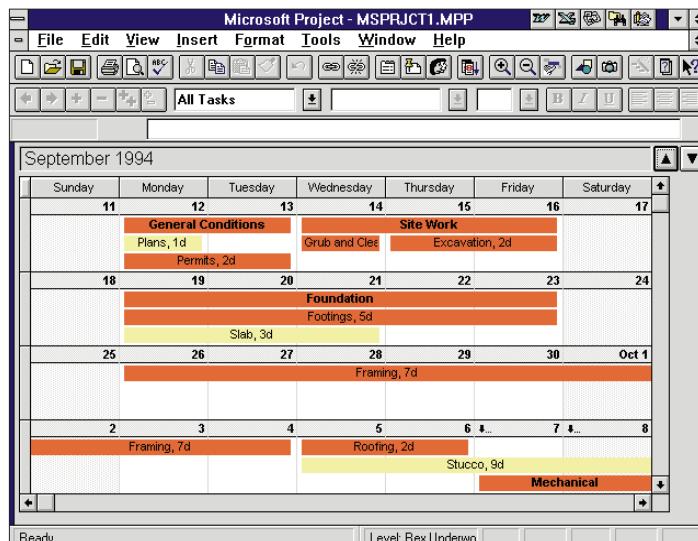


Figure 1. A Gantt chart superimposed over a standard monthly calendar presents schedule information in a form everyone can understand.

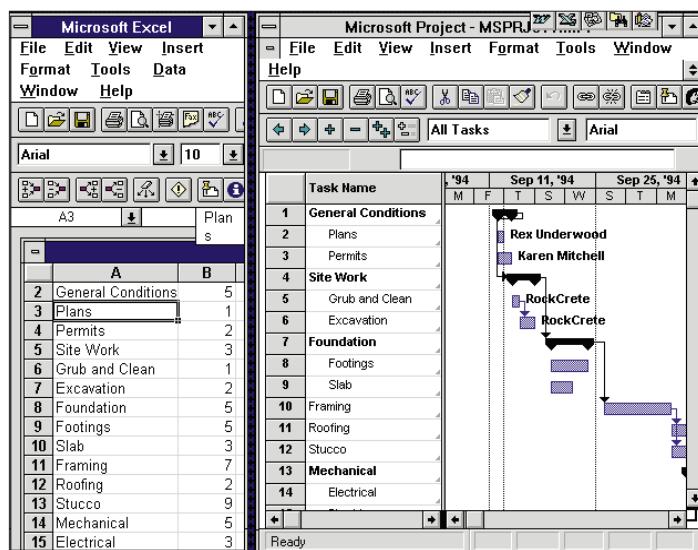


Figure 2. An estimate performed in Excel or other programs can be linked to the schedule by simply cutting and pasting the estimate data into MS Project. Multiple subcategories (such as Footings and Slab) are indented in easy-to-read outline fashion.

make the format even more recognizable, MS Project can superimpose the Gantt chart over a standard monthly calendar (Figure 1).

Schedule as You Estimate

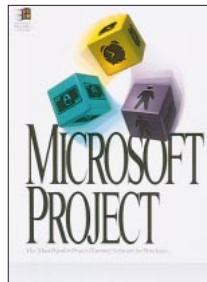
Without realizing it, most contractors create a schedule as they do an estimate. Since an estimate contains a list of tasks and an associated amount of time to complete them, translating an estimate into a schedule is easy using MS Project's Outlining features and OLE links. OLE (Object Linking and Embedding) is a tool to link estimate data from compatible programs, like Excel or Lotus 1-2-3, to MS Project using simple cut-and-paste or drag-and-drop actions (Figure 2). Data from some Windows estimating programs, such as WinEst and Quantum Leap, can also be cut and pasted into MS Project.

Of course, you don't have to create OLE links. You can build your schedule by hand simply by typing in a list of the tasks, along with start dates and duration figures, and MS Project will create a Gantt chart for you. Using a variety of "filters," you can expand the task outline to see detail on subtasks, or collapse the schedule into a more manageable view of summary tasks.

Group Scheduling

Projects are seldom performed alone, but until recently most software was written for one person to use. MS Project makes it easy for groups to collaborate on a schedule by providing a 12-button Workgroup toolbar. For instance, one click on the Send Task Request button transmits planned schedule commitments to other people on the network. Replies are returned via e-mail, and MS Project automatically adjusts the schedule.

Most important, MS Project recognizes that it's easier to create a schedule than to keep track of it. The Request Task Updates button automatically squares the schedule with reality by sending e-mail messages to everyone on the network who's involved with the project. The electronic form asks questions — What



Minimum requirements for Microsoft Project version 4.0 (\$469; direct upgrade is \$149) are Windows v3.1 (or Windows for WorkGroups or Windows NT v3.1), 4 MB RAM, and a VGA monitor. Version 4.0 for Macintosh will be available soon. For information, contact Microsoft Corp., One Microsoft Way, Redmond, WA 98052; 800/426-9400.

tasks are done? How much work remains? How much did the work cost? — that otherwise keep project managers chained to the phone in the site trailer. When the replies are returned, MS Project automatically incorporates the data into the schedule. With a modem, you can even send update requests to subs and get a current picture of your project every morning. You can also use the Timesheet option to track the project according to the hours put in by everybody working on the job, instead of by tasks.

For the small, one-computer contractor who does all the estimating, scheduling, and accounting, the ease of use and compelling graphics are the best reasons to use MS Project. And the workgroup features are very powerful for networked companies. But I have just scratched the surface of this program. If your company needs more sophisticated scheduling power, you'll find it in MS Project. I have genuine respect for Microsoft's effort to make the program truly usable, understandable, and still powerful — and to take it in directions that users asked for. ■

Craig Savage, a longtime builder and computer user, owns Savage Co., in Carpinteria, Calif., and publishes the Macintosh Construction Forum and Window On Construction newsletters.

If you have a question about computing in construction, address it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, JLC, RR 2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.