

## A Guide to Simple Project Planning

Planning is essential for all projects, regardless of type or size of project. Planning provides information on what is required, how it will be achieved and by whom, using what resources and when it will take place.

*"if you fail to plan, you are planning to fail"*

Often planning seems less interesting than getting on with things, but not to set time aside to plan is a potentially fatal mistake.

How to prepare a project plan:

- **Identify what outputs/deliverables are needed to deliver the project**

Starting with the final outcome of the project, work backwards and identify each deliverable and/ or output that will be required to deliver the project. You might find it useful to present the breakdown in a flow diagram; at the top of the diagram is the final end output, which is then broken down into its constituent parts at each level until the Project Manager has reached the level of detail required to produce the project plan.

- **Describe those outputs and any criteria that must be met**

Provide brief descriptions of each output, to include: what it is, what its contribution/ relationship is with the final project outcomes, what criteria need to be met who will be responsible for its delivery.

- **Determine the sequence in which each output should be produced, and identify any dependencies between activities**

The duration of the project is not the duration of the longest task. It is important to identify those activities or products that can only start once another is complete, or those that cannot start until another has started, these are known as dependencies.

Several activities may be sequenced to happen simultaneously, although available resource will dictate whether this is physically practical.

- **Describe the activities/ tasks that will be necessary to deliver the outputs**

Once all of the outputs have been identified, you will need to identify the activities or tasks that will need to be undertaken to produce the outputs (i.e. what needs to be done?).

- **Estimate how much effort (time and resource) each activity will consume.**

When you are estimating time it may be useful to use 'working days' as the unit of measurement, this will help with allocating resources. If the person doing the work is only able to provide 20% of their time to the work, and you have allocated 2 'working days' for the work to be done, remember it will actually take 10 days to complete the task (10 days at 20% is equivalent to 2 full day's work).

You will also need to be aware of likely delays to activities starting, for example awaiting a decision that prevents activities starting or progressing.

- **Decide when the activities should be done, and by whom, create a schedule.**

You now have the information (activities/ tasks, durations, and dependencies) required to create a schedule. Microsoft Project is a tool designed specifically to hold this information, present it in graphical format (including the popular Gantt chart) and also allow you to model changes.

For simple situations, you might choose to use Word or Excel to present your schedule. It is important that you have gone through the processes outlined above before creating the schedule, so it contains all of the information you need.

- **Add or highlight the Key Milestones in the project** (as identified in the Project Business Plan)

- **Allocate Resources**

The schedule is not a plan on its own. It shows how the project might happen. It means nothing until the required resources are secured and allocated to the plan.

As you agree and allocate resources, the schedule might change. For example:

- If an activity is estimated to take 2 months on the basis of 2 people working full-time on it, but only one is made available, the duration of that task will stretch to 4 months
- If the schedule shows the project ending 6 months late, you might choose to model changes by allocating more resources in certain areas
- If an un-skilled person is allocated, where the plan assumed a skilled resource, training and development activities may need to be added to the plan

Using Microsoft Project allows this type of modelling to be done easily.

- **Assess the Risks**

You need to make an assessment of the risks and issues that might affect the plan. The planning process itself will lead to the identification of risks and issues.

All risks and issues need to be presented as part of the project plan; some might be expressed as assumptions or dependencies.

- **Write the Plan Narrative**

The schedule you have now produced is the body of your Project Plan, you should add a brief description of the project and any other relevant information that will help the reader to understand the project plan and its context.