Tools vs. solutions:

Why companies benefit from holistic project management software

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The advantages of the solution

When searching for the right project management solution companies are often asking themselves: should we use several stand-alone solutions that each focus on a specific problem? Or would we rather rely on a holistic platform that takes into account all aspects of an efficient project? This white paper shows why comprehensive project management solutions are often the better alternative compared to stand-alone solutions.

With the triumph of cloud computing and mobile apps in the last years, numerous light online services for companies have been launched on the market, each focusing on a specific problem. The motto is that the tool should focus on its core competency and solve customer problems efficiently and cost-effectively. So, functions that aren't included in the solution as a core feature, will be offered through add-ons, plug-ins and third-party integrations.

This isn't only the case for business collaboration software, it's also particularly evident in the area of project management software as well. Whereas in the past integrated software suites dominated the market, you will find many cloud services nowadays, which are characterized by a minimalist feature set and are mostly used in only one department of a company. Features that were only one part of a wide functionality set in an enterprise solution in the past, are now independent categories – think about time and expense tracking and invoicing, for instance. Project Management covers numerous aspects and areas of tasks, such as effective collaboration, planning and communication, which can be now

covered by either an enterprise solution or several stand-alone solutions, also known as "best-of-breed" systems.

itself, but in the strategic process supported by the solution that will lead to productivity gains and/or cost savings.

Tools and solutions are not the same

Project Management systems are roughly divided in two groups: simple and light tools for small businesses and holistic enterprise solutions for mid-size companies and global organizations. The tools from the first group are light, easy to implement and learn, as well as cost effective.

If you opt for such a tool, you don't have to meet with a sales person or sign an enterprise contract. If you would like to discuss special requirements you'll often be directed to email support, because the startups that generally offer such tools have no sales or consulting teams in place.

Enterprise solutions however, are more than just a software. Personal, competent advice and support services, as well as customized system adjustments and employee trainings are usually included in the price of such platforms. The software manufacturer acts not only as a single software vendor, but as a long-term business partner. In this distribution model, the value added is not only in the software

Why lean tools

From a functional perspective, the best-of-breed approach is about finding the best available product of its kind for a particular purpose. Companies that follow this approach, do not rely on a standard product, but always try to implement the best software for each problem. All-in-one platforms however, offer a complete toolset from the same provider. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, that companies should consider when they're looking for an efficient project management solution.

Best-of-breed tools offer more than an integrated suite of mediocre solutions in theory. An advocate of this approach, is the help desk software provider Zendesk. They often present the following analogy to illustrate the benefits of best-of-breed tools:

A craftsman chooses the best tools for his tool belt and he's indifferent to whether the hammer comes from the same manufacturer as the screwdriver, or not. His only concern is having the best tools to optimally perform his duties.

At first glance, this argument may seem plausible, but between craftsmen tools and project management solutions, there are significant differences which make this kind of comparison impossible. A project manager needs tools in his 'tool belt', that are inherently much more complex than the tools of the craftsman. On the other hand, the craft industry was uniformed a long time ago and reached a degree of standardization, which is still nothing but a dream

in the IT world. Craftsmen can easily combine tools from different manufacturers. When it comes to compatibility, unfortunately, it still looks very different in the software market.

Integration remains difficult in practice

The fact that most of the modern best-of-breed services today are offered via programming interface (application programming interface - API) and allow many possibilities of integration with other business applications, does not mean that you would have full flexibility as a customer. On the contrary. Too often, two separate solutions that you would like to bring together will be incompatible. With the APIs of the respective services offered, you will have to implement the integration yourself in such a case.

But for this you must have the appropriate technical

knowledge and the necessary resources. The expenses of your own integration project should not be underestimated - such projects rarely go according to plan. And even if an integration has been successfully implemented, during the various corporate activities in project management with specialized solutions, records must be repeatedly captured and transferred, to ensure their availability in other applications or business departments. This will inevitably lead to data redundancy and inconsistent information; because not all the records during an update can be synchronized directly.

Consistent user experience, better user acceptance

Each project manager has his or her own personal leadership style and specific preferences regarding working principles and methods. Even though many project management solutions look quite similar at first glance, there are actually no two products on the market that are exactly the same. There is a clear market leader in image processing, known to everyone as Photoshop. In customer management segment , it is all about Salesforce. In terms of Office productivity, Microsoft Office sets the tone. In the area of project management nowadays, no solution is so successful that it can present itself as the leader. Microsoft Project, Basecamp, or more modern alternatives such as Trello or Asana are used by millions of people. These software can only dream of having the market shares of Photoshop or Salesforce.

"We have large gaps in the understanding of digital solutions in the professional environment."

This is mainly because every team is very different and every project is unique. What's seen in the eyes of one project manager as being a "killer feature" can be completely irrelevant for others. The way developers or IT administrators work together is also

fundamentally different than the habits of marketing teams, for every team. In practice, the very least that buyers look at when selecting the right project management system is around usability, user experience, and customization options. While they may seem like small details, these often determine the success or failure of a project management solution, because of how they affect system adoption.

Usability is the key

As experts of the usability competence center for middle-size companies at the Technical University of Chemnitz explain, usability has a high impact on labor productivity: "Usability refers not only to the ergonomic presentation of information, but starts with the system architecture", says the expert. Therefore user-friendly software reduces training times and operating errors, increases labor productivity and accelerates work processes. Because software products increasingly affect our everyday work, the user experience of these systems becomes a decisive economic factor, according to the Chemnitz Institute.

And this is where holistic project management systems, with their consistently positive user experience, have an advantage.

We have large gaps in the understanding of digital solutions in the professional environment. While some employees would be thrilled to have a project management solution and would be able to get started with it right away, others are unfamiliar with these procedures and forms of communication, and can be very hesitant. Complicated and unclear features, interfaces and behaviors of different specialized solutions would cause hesitant employees to give up.

Inter department processes illustrations

Another advantage of all-in-one platforms involves efficient process mapping. The topics of collaboration and project management are so wide that all business areas are affected and can hardly be covered by individual tools. Instead of having separate solutions for each department integrate with one another, the medium-sized and large companies prefer to choose a global solution. They not only offer uniformity, consistency and high standards when using them - for all employees, no matter which department they work in - but they can also be consolidated and support complex business processes better than lighter tools.

Efficient support

In this context, the issue of customer support plays a particularly important role. Because project management solutions are not only used across departments, but they're also critical for the company as a whole. Efficient and reliable customer support is crucial in this context. If the system is not running properly or has a problem, it must be fixed as quickly as possible. If the processes are governed with various best-of-breed tools, there are several sources of error that need to be examined and several manufacturers that must be contacted if necessary. Fixing a bug can take significantly more work than with an all-in one
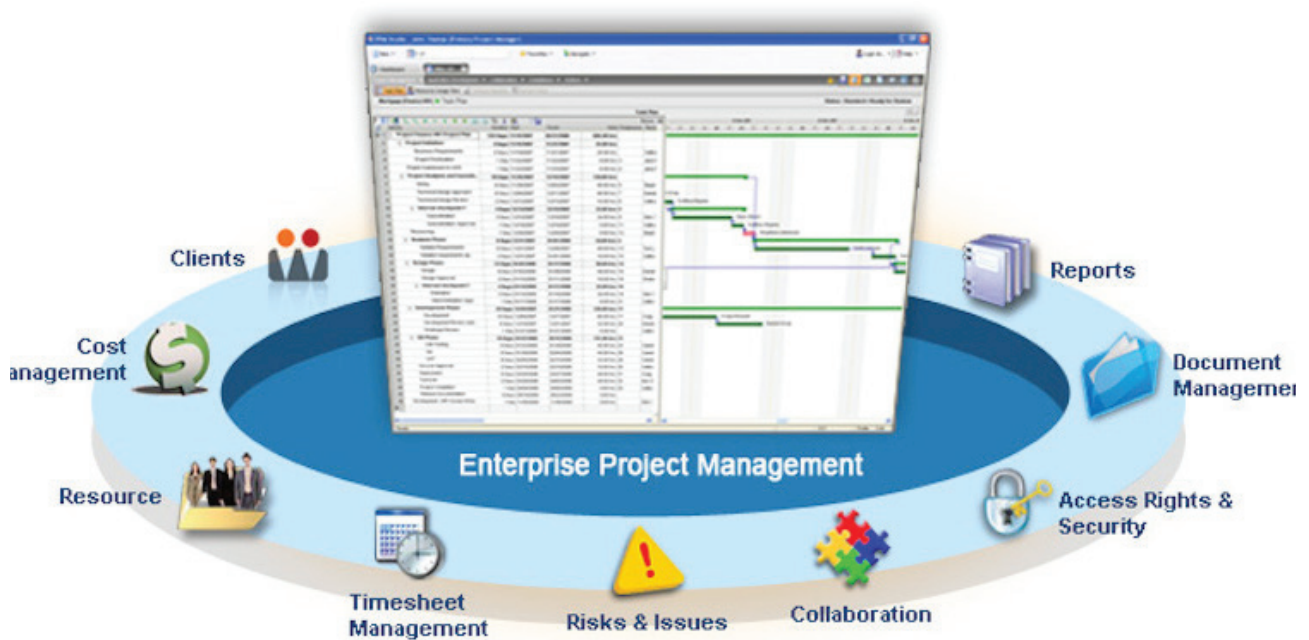
solution. If there is a compatibility problem between two different tools, it gets even more difficult: who should I contact? Which provider is responsible for the problem? If you use an all-in one platform from a single solution partner, such questions are irrelevant.

Basic infrastructure and in-house operations

There are many companies which cannot host their applications and data on public cloud solutions because of regulations or other reasons, and have to host their business applications and data on their own servers. In this case the operation in house of separate applications can quickly become a problem. Various software tools require different demands on the technical infrastructure of the company, which must be maintained by the IT Department. The result is a complex system landscape, which is necessary to the operations of all programs based on different technology stakes. Moreover, backups, updates, and the normal maintenance of the system are time consuming and expensive, because each system has separate requirements for IT administrators. Not only do the users of the separate small solutions in the various company departments need to be trained continuously for each tool, but the technical staff too.

Enterprise Project Management

Conclusion

While light business tools are strong on the rise in the current cloud era, all-in one platforms for business collaboration and project management still remain very much in demand. In principle, you can see the logic for highly specialized tools and the best-of-breed approach. Because in many areas, they help smaller companies to replace Word, Excel, and emails with more efficient applications and help them to increase their productivity. However, in most cases, project management is so extensive that all business areas are affected. Therefore, medium-sized and larger companies that need to support more complex business processes, depend on a solution to bring the consistency and the highest standards for usability, and if needed, support strategic process changes. Eventually, as companies grow, they will opt for a project management solution, which brings higher chances of success. This can be mainly attributed to the higher system adoption and therefore, more achievable strategic results. With a certain degree of complexity that needs to be achieved, only the use of a comprehensive all-in one solution can help.

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