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## Project Management Software Or Excel - An Evaluation

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"I just couldn't do without Excel!" This is something heard all over again when running project management software courses for account managers. Spreadsheets are used for calculating budgets, recording costs and income, calculating profitability by comparing both and much more. Even client facing documents, such as quotations and sales invoices are often prepared in spreadsheets rather than word processing applications putting up with reduced dtp functions in favor of the added mathematical features.

A spreadsheet has its uncontested benefits:

- one can work on it without being connected to a database or server
- it can easily be converted or integrated into word processing, presentation or internet files
- it is easy to link external files into it
- xls-formats are widely compatible, even to open source applications
- the user has complete flexibility to add functions, text and graphics into it

Exactly those points appear to be lacking from an integrated project management system:

- you need to be connected to a data base
- other applications cannot easily insert information from the data base
- there is no flexible linking of other applications into the data base
- the data base compatibility is restricted to the use of the same application or application language
- changes by the user to how the program itself works are restricted

When organisations introduce an integrated project management software one of the major hurdles to take in gaining user acceptance is therefore convincing users that this software cannot be compared to a spreadsheet program, it's a completely different kettle of fish.

However the apparent weak areas of project management systems are in fact their biggest strengths:

- as all users work in one data base, there is no time delay in sharing information and this information is always up-to-date. This addresses the challenge described by attendees of training courses of finding the latest figures and knowing if those figures are still correct when spreadsheets sit on local hard drives or in different server folders.
- because integrated project management systems have to produce forms and reports that meet auditing standards, these reports are tamper-proof documents ready and secure to be sent out to clients or suppliers. (On the job reporting side there are usually simple ways to get data out into spreadsheet readable formats that can then be processed further.)
- as data has to be entered into the project management software rather than automatically linked into it from external files, there is an extra level of data verification.
- From an auditing point of view the lack of backdoors into the data base using other applications than the integrated software increases the data security for the company
- Because calculations are part of the program, there is no danger of user mistakes. (On several occasions, when as part of training courses budgets or invoices were entered into a project management system to mirror information hitherto generated and held in a spreadsheet, totals didn't agree and the first suspect was of course the new software. Only when using a calculator double-checking the information it turned out to be right and the original documents or xls files had faulty formulas or broken links, which nobody had noticed before.)

The biggest advantage is of course that there is no further step required to get data into a financial system if integrated project management software is used.

So the résumé to the title has to not be "Project Management Software or Excel" but "Project Management Software for Project Management purposes and Excel for Spreadsheet purposes", where each is best in.

\* Or an equivalent spreadsheet system such as "Calc".

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