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Project Mentor

Fiona Powell has spent many years teaching people to use project management tools. She has been wary of computer-based training in the past but in Project Mentor she says she has found 'the best computer-based learning package I have ever used'.



Recently I spent just one day training a newly promoted project manager to use Microsoft Project. He was setting up a one-year project which we conservatively estimated to have labour costs of just over £200,000 and his company was being paid £250,000 with the possibility of penalties totting up to £1,000 per day in the later stages without careful monitoring. And there were overheads. And material costs.

He was looking a bit thoughtful by the end of the day. He was going to be working abroad on this project for a few months so my usual offer of follow-up training was not an option.

After being able to ask me all sorts of questions during the day about his plan, tasks and resources, progress, reports and showing off his psychedelic spreadsheet to my coos of admiration, he's now on his own, somewhere in Bratislava. Having had the 'warm body' training experience, where can he look for intelligent support?

Learning any new software needs application, motivation and perseverance in the face of its abstruse idiosyncrasies. Microsoft Project is not the most intuitive of products when you look under the bonnet, so ways of remembering how to use it consistently in order to avoid what we laughingly call 'unexpected results' are vital.

Microsoft Project does not forgive mistreatment graciously. People frequently complain to me that it's difficult or impossible to unravel your mistakes. It's best, I think, to have some informed guidance instead of working it out yourself or learning at Nellie's elbow.

I've been thinking about what you need from training: practice, repetition, reinforcement and reward. And it can be lonely, especially when you're sitting in a yurt on the Bratislavan tundra.

Time no object

The nice thing about online learning, or computer-based training, or whatever you choose to call it, is the fact that you can log on and follow it at your own pace and in your own time. It becomes a familiar virtual classroom. But good training packages are hard to come by and, if it hadn't come from such a creditable foundry, I'd be reluctant to review another 'Teach Yourself' cd. Past efforts from other producers I've found to be shallow, confusing and sometimes plain wrong.

Refreshingly, Project Mentor is none of the above: it's the best computer-based learning package I've ever used. Anyone who wants to learn to use Microsoft Project for managing projects in the real world should have a compulsory licence to use it. It should be good, it's from Andy Jessop and Diane Gosling, formerly known as Jessop Gosling Associates and now Project Learning Ltd, who are based in Yorkshire, where they know their onions.

Project Mentor is a cd, plus a licensed log-on to an internet site. Once you have received your log-on and password, of course you need a PC with a connection to the Internet, and either speakers or headphones to hear the audio clips while you watch the short training videos. You can see the running time and file size of each audio-visual clip before you commit to viewing it if you are short of time.

It can be tailored to your own learning needs so it knows what you already understand and what your areas of weakness are. Clever packages deliver what you want, when you want it, in digestible spoonfuls. Project Mentor first establishes what you already know with mercifully short tests and then cunningly suggests that you follow the





learning modules for the areas where you scored low. You can review your answers at any time and take another examination after you've run through each learning module. You will score higher if you take the time to read the questions and the multiple-choice answers carefully, speaking from humbling, personal experience. I know it sounds painless but, as I discovered, reading the instructions before charging headfirst into the system saves time and the embarrassment of negated hubris.

Ready, steady, go

Here's how to start:

- Get a cup of coffee and sit down at a PC in a quiet place.
- Light a virtual aromatherapy candle in your mind.
- Relax.
- Log on.
- Start at the beginning.
- Run the audio-visual introduction.
- Be mentally soothed by Diane's patient voice.

Project Mentor has a professional look and feel – as you'd expect from Project Learning Ltd. Its ammonite logo implies that it's been around awhile. Its ten learning modules aren't too many to be daunting to the new user, and yet give confidence that everything you need is there. The voice-overs sound clear and pleasingly authoritative without being bossy. You might think Diane speaks a bit slowly but you really will learn better if you take time to absorb what she says. Her vocabulary is clear and intelligent and I doubt you'll get confused. You can always pause the clip and look up terms and definitions before you re-start if you've forgotten something. You get the feeling that she really does want you to learn the modules and do well in the multiple-choice tests which form your personal learning plan or PLP.

I'd like to see a few more definitions and reminders but perhaps my short-term memory was being a bit goldfishy during my first test drive. There's a comforting yellow button that you can click from all 30 lessons to see detailed background information relating to your current lesson. Lessons and references highlight keywords in blue, enabling you to hyperlink to a very comprehensive and clearly written glossary of terms at any time, and hyperlinks from words and phrases in the lessons will also take you there. It's easy to get back to your original place – just click on a green button to return to a lesson or on the yellow button to go back to a reference.

Colour coding helps you to find your way around the system. Blue is for a module heading or main topic. Green indicates a lesson within the module; yellow is for background references and pink means terminology definitions or background project management principles.

Naturally, I anticipated scoring 100% for everything, but inattention to the exact detail of a question allowed me to choose the wrong answer from the multiple-choice set and I was dumped into the second-best score bracket, thankfully without Diane emitting a hollow laugh. Yes, she knows her stuff and there's no cheating, but you can take the module again and repeat the test until your score improves.

Quality control

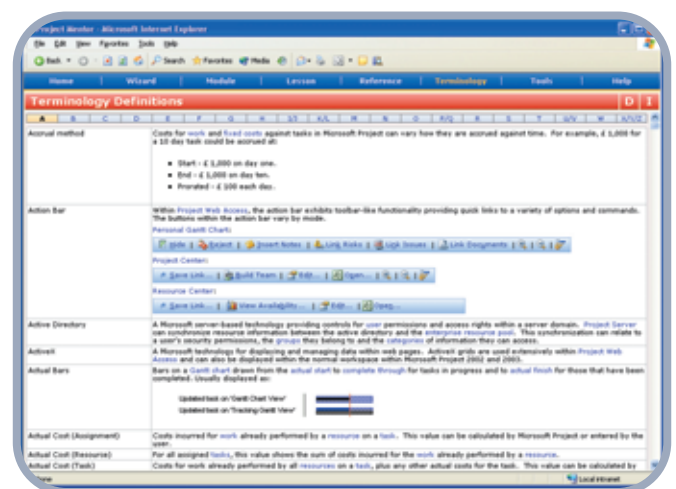
Attention is given to the tiniest detail and I'm impressed by the amount of information. Yes, working times are stored in minutes – a fact that not many people care to know. What's the relevance of this? Well, one point is that showing the date as well as the time of the start and finish of a task enables you to check for difficult-to-track-down scheduling errors more easily. Mismatches between day length and the shift pattern of your working-time calendar can occur if you aren't careful and the perils of this are well explained.

Some people like to present their 'boring old' Gantt charts with attention-grabbing features to impress the boss and, one hopes, get the desired action or decision. When your boss wants a Red-Amber-Green report, follow the instructions in the most recent Project Learning newsletter (as I write) and you can have Smiley green buttons in a column in the Gantt chart table against tasks on target and red glum faces against tasks which are slipping. Probably because I am impatient and, naturally, think I know it all, I'm not the most careful user, but once I'd made myself read the instructions and completed a pre-learning test and a module or two, I felt a little spark of pleasure when I gave the correct answers.

The tone adopted by Project Mentor is gently encouraging. It's neither patronising nor is it over-enthusiastic: it gets on with presenting you with what you need to learn in bite-size chunks and in a logical order. You can follow the modules from the beginning or you can dive in when and where you wish.

You are not alone

It's good to have support after you've been on a training course. You won't remember everything your trainer said. If you lack the opportunity to attend a course, then Project Mentor can set you on the right path without the tedious re-inventing of the wheel that usually frustrates new users. Learning is an ongoing process, after all, and as you get deeper into using the product your demands are likely to become higher. It saddens me that so few users of Microsoft Project know simple and fairly essential planning features such as assigning and updating resources, so anything that deepens people's understanding is a Good Thing.



Project Learning Ltd continue to offer support and encouragement in the form of online newsletters. Articles are in touch with what readers are likely to want to know, clearly written, and illustrated and easily digestible. Previous newsletters are available on the site and these add considerably to the body of knowledge.

My personal grading system allocates five big gold stars to this package. It's an excellent learning support tool and it's there 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year: phew – I'm exhausted at the thought. If you need any more convincing about the quality of this package, Andy Jessop developed the Office Specialist Comprehensive examination for Microsoft. Project Mentor has ten modules with 30 lessons, with 100 reference pages and 550 terminology definitions and over five and a half hours of audio and video demonstrations. It's good value.

Right to reply

Our thanks to Fiona for describing Project Mentor as the 'best computer-based learning package I have ever used'. Like Fiona, we were surprised and disappointed by the standard 'Teach Yourself' products available on the market. As such, we decided that we could produce something significantly better ourselves, to teach Microsoft Project users how the system actually worked and how it could help people manage real projects more effectively.

That original design goal became Project Mentor version 1, which we launched in late 2002. Version 2 (reviewed here) enhanced upon our original design, providing the voice-overs that Fiona found to be 'clear and pleasingly authoritative', together with the Personal Learning Plan helping people learn in 'digestible spoonfuls'.

We're also pleased that Fiona was impressed by the attention given to

detail. As fellow trainers (and practising project managers), we understand that there's often much more to Microsoft Project than meets the eye and, when used properly, it is a much more effective tool than many people give it credit. As such, we were delighted when Microsoft chose Project Mentor content as part of their Project Management toolkit. Now Fiona, about that compulsory licence you mentioned...

Andy Jessop, Project Learning Ltd

What does it cost?

UK users: 1–15 users list price £195 + VAT per user, credit card price £169 + VAT per user. European Union: 1–15 users list price 295 + VAT per user, credit card price 249 + VAT per user – convert to dollars for US customers. There are discounts for credit card purchase and for greater numbers of users. There's an upgrade assurance package. The system can be installed on a stand-alone PC or on an intranet. See www.projectlearning.net for the latest information.

Microsoft have launched a Project Management Toolkit cd which includes, among many other items, 'Project Mentor Lite'. The resource management and re-scheduling live project modules were hand-picked by Microsoft to appear on this disk as a taste of Project Mentor which can be installed either for use with Internet Explorer or with Microsoft Project. You can upgrade to the full package. A limited number of toolkit disks are available from Project Learning Ltd, tel: 01943 466464.

Fiona Powell is an independent Microsoft Project trainer.
www.inherent.co.uk Tel: 01473 735732

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