

Article for MPA ezine – October 2, 2008
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Subject: Sometimes self taught is not a good idea.

Mike from Dallas asks: Our Company is starting to use MS Project Server and they want to send me to class. If I have been using MS Project desktop for a long time, why do I need to attend a class?

Answer: The quick answer is to make sure you are using the software correctly. I have had students in my classes over the years that have told me they didn't need to be there. Most have been self taught or had inadequate classes years ago. After 2 hours they are telling me that I am showing them aspects of the software that they didn't know existed. I also hear a lot "Oh, that is what that is supposed to do".

Some frequent errors of the self taught are:

- Not setting options and assuming the defaults. Not understanding options.
- Not setting up the calendar and the calendar options before entering the first task
- Plugging start or finish dates on every task
- Creating a WBS that can't be used to manage a project
- Assigning only 1 resource to a task because it changes the length of the task if more than 1 resource is assigned.
- Making assignments without seeing number of hours that are being assigned which results in inflated hours and cost
- Planning the project and not managing the project
- Using data from the project to create another project just to report to management
- Updating the baseline weekly (he actually told me "every Friday")
- Never re-scheduling uncompleted work
- Being frustrated because they plug a value in the calculated field and it gets recalculated after resources are assigned and not knowing why
- Deleting out the actual work and duration fields and reusing the schedule for the next project

Just because you have used it for many years doesn't mean you are using the software the way that your installation will require you to use the software. It also doesn't mean that you are using MS Project to its full potential or correctly either. I find that most users are using the software more like Excel and not a project management tool. The software is very powerful and most users are losing a lot of functionality which would make their jobs so much easier. More adequate training could help solve this situation.

Self taught isn't as easy as it looks. This product is very different from the other MS Office products. I feel that there is a misperception that because MS Project is under the MS Office umbrella that MS Project can be learned as easily as the other MS Office products. MS Project has a flow to the software that follows Project Management Institute Project Life Cycle. What makes this product so much different than the other Office modules is that when you start using it you must:

1. Follow a set of rules
2. Understand the project management concepts behind the software
3. Know what you need to accomplish
4. Know what you want the schedule to tell you and do for you
5. And design the input to give you the results you require as output.

Many people just "make the software do what they want it to do". Multiply this problem by the number of MS Project Professional users in an MS Project Server installation and you get what I like to call Driving in Italy.