Simple Planning Tool

There are projects that require 'big tools' to help you manage them. These projects typically have a fair few tasks, quite a number of people working on them etc etc.

Then there are simpler projects that have only a few well defined tasks, delivered over a relatively short time. To use the 'big tools' would be overkill. You'd end up spending more time fighting the tools than managing the project.

This is where the simple planning tool comes in. The attached spreadsheets contain enough for you to plan and budget for a small project.

There is one worksheet, with 5 interlinked pages. The pages are

1. The Plan
2. Resource costs
3. Item costs
4. Income sources
5. Summary sheet

Each sheet has space for the project name, the date of the report, and an issue number - all vital pieces of information so you know you have the latest version.

The Plan

This sheet has space for 16 time slots. In the sheet they're labelled week 1, week 2 etc, but it's dead easy to change them to days, months or even put the actual dates in. And thanks to the magic of Excel, if you change it on the first page, it's automatically changed on the other pages.

Down the left hand side there is space for 16 tasks. (There's nothing special about the number 16 – when I put this together I figured people might start by filling the form in by hand, and with 16 rows the height is about right)

The idea is that you write the tasks down the left hand side, and then place those tasks in the appropriate weeks. It's useful to colour the cells to show a visual indicator of what's happening when.

The rightmost column has space for you to show who will be doing this task, and you can put more than one person in this space.

Resource costs

Resources come in two flavours – human and non-human. This page is just for people. In this system I've called non-human resources 'item costs' and they have their own page, the next one.

On this sheet, each person has two rows – the coloured row is for how much work they're doing and when, and the clear column shows their costs.

In the left column, in the coloured cells, fill in the names of the people working on your project. The clear cell below is for the cost.

Go across the row and put in the amount of time that each resource will be working, taking your information from the first sheet. If you're using weeks across the top, then put in the number of days per week your resource is working, and for the cost use the daily rate. This way, Excel will work out the weekly cost based on number of days and the daily rate.

If you're using a different time period, you'll have to adjust things accordingly.

Don't forget to add a line for yourself as project manager. You're likely to spend a while each week just keeping an eye on the project, and there will be meetings to attend. They need to be included. I've also included a default resource at the bottom called admin. It's easy to delete if you don't need it.

When you come to put in the rate for your resource, it should be the full cost of this person, including all their overheads. How to do this is the subject of another article.

Once you have the people in, and have allocated the amount of time they're working on your project, Excel will do its magic thing and multiply up the costs, and add them all up to complete the bottom row, and right-most column. You can now see the total cost to the project of each resource, the total cost of all the resource for the project. You can also see when the money will be spent, period by period. You're getting an idea of the cashflow of this project.

Item costs

Now for the non-human costs. This is where money flows out of your organisation. Here you should include anything you pay for – travel, use of external consultants, agencies etc etc.

Once again, put the costs in the appropriate time slot, and Excel will work its magic to show you the cashflow and total.

Income sources

Presumably you have some income for this project, and this sheet is where you put it. Down the left hand side fill in your sources of income, and use the time slots to put your estimate of when you will receive the money.

Excel will do its thing and show you totals, as before.

Summary

If Excel has behaved itself, the summary sheet will pull together all the numbers and display them on this sheet. (This sheet is the one you need to take to your management to show them the budget for the project)

The income is shown at the top, and the expenditure further down.

Normally, you'd see a line showing excess of income and expenditure, and on this sheet, the cumulative cashflow does this job. But there's a slight twist – it does it on a period by period basis, and takes into account how much you already have. So you can see the cashflow for the project spelled out across the sheet, and at the far right there's the familiar number of total income minus total expenditure. Let's hope it's positive!

So there we have it – the simple planning tool. It's fairly straightforward to use, and it gives you lots of good information right at the start of the project.

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The other spreadsheet is a worked example. It might help to work through it

Example.

It makes a lot more sense if you look at the example.

Here we have a project to gather some information about successful local projects and produce templates that will allow other organisations to run similar projects. The project is funded mainly by a local authority, together with a grant from a trust.

The plan
We've done all the right things and come up with a two phase plan as shown on the first page.

We will do some research to find out how the schemes work, interview workers, funders, clients etc, then pick out the best practice and write a report. The report will be the basis for a set of templates which we will put together, have them produced professionally, and then distribute widely.

We reckon it will take Andy and Barbara 4 weeks to do all the necessary research. As part of the research we'll need about 3 weeks to conduct the interviews and we'll pull Charlie in to help with this task.

At the end of this, we need 2 weeks to produce the report, and Deborah is the right person for this task.

At the end of the first stage we'll present the report, and if it's accepted, move on to the second stage.

The second stage is about producing the template for other organisations to run. This is another task for Deborah, as is producing the final product. The final tweaking will take a week of her time after the review meeting.

We're using an outside agency called 'DesignCo' to produce the materials that we'll send out. They have a week to do the draft, then there's a week to proof read it, and we've allowed another week to produce the final version, a week to print it, and then a frantic, hectic final week for our Admin resource to send it out.

The right hand column shows the resource I've allocated to each task.

The bottom row shows the weeks that there will be meetings in this project, either project reviews, or meetings to review reports, materials etc

I have our plan, and it looks good.

Resource costs
In the left hand column of page 2 I've listed all the resource, and added a line for myself as project manager. Each resource has a daily rate under their name – this number has been conjured up by the finance gurus in my organisation and represents the total cost of each resource to the organisation.

Across the page I've put in how many days per week my resource is working. So, for example, Andy and Barbara are both working on the research task, but neither is putting in a full week. Charlie is working more or less full time for a couple of weeks but only 2 days in week 4.

I reckon I'll be working about 1 day a week on the project for most of the time, with extra days around the crunch points of the project. I've allocated a couple of extra days near the beginning to get the project kicked off.

Excel has worked out that the total cost to my organisation of its own resource is about £21k (bottom right cell). The bottom row shows when this money will be spent throughout the 16 week duration of the project.

Item costs
DesignCo is an item cost, because real money flows out of the organisation to them. Most of it is towards the end of the project which is what you'd expect. Other item costs are travel expenses during the research and interview phases, and a big chunk to cover posting out the packs at the end.

Now I can see that the total cost of the project is £21k for people, and about £11k for things – about £31k altogether.

Income sources
As I said earlier, most of the funding for this project is coming from a local authority grant of £20k grant in 4 bites, so I put in 4 lots of £5k in the weeks that I've agreed with the funder. We've also got a grant from a trust which luckily we can get right at the start so that goes in week 1.

I know already that we will need extra funding, so around about week 8 I've asked our fundraising team to put on a 'bit of a do' to generate some income. We're thinking of an awareness raising event, perhaps with some sponsorship. Our fundraisers are confident that they can bring in a net £3k, so I've put that in my spreadsheet. (I make a note to add this to my risk register)

Once again Excel does its thing and we see that our income should be about £31k, and again the bottom line shows the timing.

Summary sheet
Finally, the summary sheet pulls all this together. Straight away I am faced with bad news. Even with fundraising doing their bit, the total income is £30,500 and the total expenditure is £31,520, so the project will lose £1,020.

However, the cashflow shows that throughout its life, the project's bank balance is in credit, so it never has to use the organisation's resources to support it – until the last week.

Conclusions
This is not a happy ending, but there are two really good things that have come out of this fairly simple exercise.

1. I know the problem right now, before I've committed to doing anything, and I know the extent of the problem, and I know when I'm going to run into it, i.e. at the end of the project.
2. Because I know this now, I have the opportunity to do something about it. Can I organise another launch event at the end of the project? Could I charge for the template? I reckon on producing 200 templates, and if I could charge £7.50 each for them, I will bring in £1,500 which covers the deficit and leaves a little left over.

At this stage it's dangerous to say things like "Oh well, we'll have to do the research in 3 weeks". Haven't I just spent time and thought working out how long it will take to do the research? Why would I arbitrarily cut a week off that time? In any case, experience shows that 'stuff takes longer than estimated' so the start of a project is not a good time to be making cuts just to squeeze time or budget to make it fit. If anything, you need a little slack at this stage. If I were to cut the research time back now, it will probably still take 4 weeks and I will overspend anyway, so the project will be no better off, and I'll look daft.

Some other thoughts.
I can use the spreadsheet to do some what-ifs. Suppose Grant B doesn't arrive until week 5. By moving the numbers around I can see that I'd have negative cashflow of up to £5.5k for a couple of weeks near the start of the project. Because I know this, I can ask my finance people intelligent questions, like "can the organisation afford for my project to be overdrawn by £5.5 for a couple of weeks in June?'.

And finally.....

This tool will not solve all your problems, but I've found it useful and I hope you will too. It does the job for me. And the huge benefit is that it doesn't take too long, and shows where the problem areas are right at the start of the process, which gives me the opportunity to do something about them, or if it all gets too difficult, to reluctantly can the project before I've spent too much time and/or money on it.

It's in Excel, so it's easy to modify for your own requirements. Have fun.