Consolidating Digitalization with Multi-Project Management

Interview with Jochen Geißer, key account management & sales Germany/Austria at PLANTA Projektmanagement-Systeme GmbH

Especially in the course of a pandemic which keeps dragging on, many medium-sized top decision makers have come to realize that the implementation of software, and the digitalization process which goes along with it, is going to be one of the greatest challenges of the next months and years. After deciding for the appropriate software modules, which are supposed to change or enhance potential business models, IT executives will face the massive undertaking of restructuring process flows and ensuring the integration in other systems in order to attain the objective of successful technology implementation.

It is part of PLANTA's longstanding know-how to organize such an undertaking transparently and reliably. Since 1980, their IT-professionals have been developing highly innovative multi-project management software. The core product of the software, PLANTA project, was developed in the course of a BMFT research project at the Karlsruhe University and has continuously been extended by new components. Today, the Karlsruhe-based software company works with 600 customers from all economic sectors and has about 60.000 users. Today we will talk to Jochen Geißer, expert for PM and PM software implementation, on current aspects like project management 4.0, the future of the business world, decentralized working, project teams, home office, or new work. Dealt with in a clever way, these aspects can speed-up the process of digitalization in small and medium-sized companies.

DIGITAL FUTUREmag: Even prior to the Corona Crisis, project management has been a challenge for many companies. . How have you perceived the evolution of this topic during the pandemic so far?

Jochen Geißer: Processes and structures of companies are increasingly becoming more complex, processes are becoming more rigorous and companies must react more quickly to changes in the market - often with declining staffing levels. Project management has become an indispensable tool for coping with these requirements, because it provides a crucial basis for decision making, allowing for a decision for the right projects and their respective prioritization as well as the goal-oriented deployment of available resources and budgets.

Even prior to the pandemic, many companies have identified the need to implement and establish methods, processes, and tools that suit these purposes. The sheer amount of projects and tasks has often been the primary driving force here. However, in phases where economic activity is in full swing, there simply is not enough time to deal with such internal problems with the priority they deserve. In times of crisis, like the current Corona Crisis, many companies realize that they are not yet as well positioned as they could be and that existing processes and workflows must be optimized or that new enhanced processes are required. Many companies now have the time to approach process optimizations which have been planned or postponed for a long time.

DIGITAL FUTUREmag: In the current collective crisis one can observe that in various economic sectors many developments have been accelerated considerably. This has especially benefited digitalization measures in companies. What fields will be retained in the future, especially in terms of the process stage of project management?

Jochen Geißer: There is no doubt that the Corona Pandemic will change professional life drastically and sustainably. Besides digitalization, e.g. to facilitate work in dispersed teams, this will also touch the topic of leadership, be it with regard to directives or its role in the project. Besides other tasks of a project manager, the subject of coordination and leadership in project teams will yet gain in importance and continue to transform from „leadership by control" to „leadership by trust".

The two key points here are, in my view: Communication between project manager and team as well as among the team members, and transparency in order to keep all persons involved in the project up-to-date and to document decisions made in a transparent way.

Digitalization in project management and integration of new planning methods lead to optimized processes in terms of planning, decision-making, and information in the company, providing the management board with transparency on the status of company projects and giving more liberties to project teams while also requiring team members to assume more responsibility. If all project team members support the new methods, they will work and lead to more efficiency and project success.

DIGITAL FUTUREmag: You are referring to hybrid project management here. What exactly does that mean and what are the advantages that come with your solution?

Jochen Geißer: Hybrid project management combines the characteristics of classical PM on planning and decision level and of agile PM on operative level.
In classical PM, a project is planned in detail in schedules with milestones based on phases according to default process models. Certain parts of the project, which are well suited for this purpose, e.g. during project implementation, are swapped out in an agile project management process. The tasks to be completed in this phase can be better controlled and completed in flexible teamwork. On one hand, hybrid PM hence provides project teams with an ideal framework for flexible and goal-driven project work, on the other hand it provides decision makers with known and established tools for budget, cost, and resource controlling, providing them with a reliable basis for decision-making.

The advantage of our solution is that all relevant data exist in a system and each employee has an eye on the topics relevant for him/her. With PLANTA project, we thus offer a tool for the management board for planning and tracking dates, budgets, and resource utilization on one hand; as far as the persons involved in a project, PLANTA pulse allows for flexible task management, detailed structuring, recording of effort, etc. Via web services, all information is automatically and continuously synchronized and updated. However, one must bear in mind that such a procedure cannot be implemented over night. „One does not do agile – one becomes agile" and the demands hybrid PM poses in terms of leadership and business culture are just as high as in purely agile or purely classical project management.

DIGITAL FUTUREmag: Many German medium-sized companies now make preparations in order to be optimally positioned also beyond COVID-19. For this purpose, they implement new software. The challenge for project management could arguably not be any more difficult. How exactly does your software assist individual dispersed project teams the members of which are often working at home.

Jochen Geißer: That is right, according to a bitcom survey conducted in March 2020, 50% of the respondents already worked, at least partially, in home office when the pandemic began. Many small and medium-sized companies, however, still struggle with technical issues and other problems that their employees experience. In order to make dispersed work, as is increasingly entailed by New Work, become a success and to allow dispersed customer projects to be processed more productively, with better motivation and quality, companies inevitably have to implement suitable tools and bring in the right mindset. Dispersed teams call for a software solution, which perfectly supports teamwork, i.e. a so-called collaboration tool like the already introduced PLANTA pulse system. Based on Kanban boards, where one task is recorded per card, all team members can keep track of new workloads and of their own dates. Every team member is always up-to-date. Who is work-

ing on what? What is the status? Further important functions are the management of commonly used documents, chat function, calendar feed and integration in Outlook, time recording, checklists with degree of completion.

On the other hand, reliable predictions on dates, costs, and resources are of pivotal importance for the management board as well. Our hybrid PM model, which comprises PLANTA project and PLANTA pulse, perfectly assists project teams and the management board in this task.

DIGITAL FUTUREmag: When it comes to digitalization, the Digitalization Index 2020 issued by the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology (BMWi) clearly shows that especially small companies, also partly in rural areas, still have a great deal of work ahead of them - however they still lag slightly behind. They often still use rudimentary project management tools such as simple Excel spreadsheets. What are your suggestions for such companies that are keen to implement a professional project management software that allows them to work faster and more successfully in the near future?

Jochen Geißer: We often experience that the implementation of our software particularly serves to substitute such simple tools. Sure, Excel is considered an all-rounder among software tools ("the Swiss Army knife of office software"), however it is not a decent tool for planning. Companies see themselves confronted with sector and area specific tasks for the management of which default applications for text creation or table and presentation editing often prove to be insufficient.

They lack, e.g., substantial functions like assignment of work packets, dependencies, time recording, project reporting, etc., which can only be realized by means of quite complex individual adjustments in Excel. And as soon as changes are made to the project, they will require manual adaption which is often time consuming and prone to error. Moreover, the more numerous or complex the projects are, the more difficult it becomes to stay on top of things, especially when the same resources are planned in different projects.

If the maintenance of projects becomes the main task and the identification of key figures and information causes a lot of effort, then a professional project management solution becomes indispensable. Like tools or machines, PM software is a means of production that contributes to the company's success.

A substantial factor of success in software implementation is to choose a suitable PM solution. It must fit in with established processes and support them. On this basis, a list of requirements can be issued which the available PM solutions can be checked against. In order to get quick results, I often advice against waiting for a 100% solution. It is better to make prioritizations and start with the most important processes and functions in order to be able to expand on this basis later. It may therefore be reasonable to work with a prioritized project list or with schedules with workloads and resource assignments first before implementing a dedicated status reporting. A prerequisite for successful implementation is that the adopted processes and tools are backed and adhered to by the management board and responsible decision makers.

DIGITAL FUTUREmag: Project management, as is well known, has a lot to do with the motivation of the individuals involved in a project. What assistance does PLANTA project provide to the employees involved in a project to keep them going in a steady and committed way?

Jochen Geißer: Important motivational factors in project management are, e.g., a shared perception of what the project objectives are and how they benefit the company, transparency in current projects but also with regard to the greater project landscape. What is also important is to assign adequate tasks to competent individual employees and to be available for questions and feedback. Showing appreciation for accomplished work is also a great motivational factor.
PLANTA project can contribute to the accomplishment of all these factors.
The project objectives and the resulting benefit are recorded or evaluated and made transparent; all persons involved in the project have a consistent information status and a common overview of the project. All project members are always up-to-date in terms of project progress, simultaneously running projects, and possibly planned projects, even if they are in home office. Via the recording of hours worked, individual employees have a direct influence on the project status and in the case of additional effort, they can report the reasons for this. All this information is included in the status reporting. Last but not least, PLANTA pulse allows project teams to organize themselves, to discuss arising questions directly on the card of a task, and to assign adequate tasks to each team member.

DIGITAL FUTUREmag: Especially big players or corporations use project management technology to improve their own software operation. Could you cite a prominent best practice example here?

Jochen Geißer: PLANTA software contributes to the business success and the preservation of competitive advantages of numerous companies from various economic sectors, especially in machine and plant construction, in research and development projects, and in IT, organizational, and service projects. Among our customers are well-known medium-sized companies as well as globally operating corporations with several thousand users. You can find many examples and case studies on our website https://www.planta.de/en/references/

A good example to cite would be the case of Deutsche Rentenversicherungen Baden Württemberg (pension insurance). They have been planning and controlling their IT and organizational projects with PLANTA project for many years now. Prior to the implementation of PLANTA project, DRV BW used to plan their projects with non-standardized and inconsistent planning and controlling methods. The monthly project lists came along with considerable manual effort. Furthermore, reliable information on effort, costs, dates, and resource utilization was missing at the time of project approval and during its implementation.

At the end of the software implementation process, the project manager in charge stated: „The implementation of PLANTA project enabled our project managers for the first time to plan a project from start to finish in a professional and stable manner, and to constantly evaluate and prioritize it." Moreover, the new system has generated a positive side effect: it raised awareness for the importance of project work among all project members. Project-

related activities reflect the increased commitment - both among project team members and among employees in the greater project environment.

Direct insurer ERGO direkt has been using PLANTA project and PLANTA portfolio in the divisions of IT, IT coordination, and actuarity for almost 10 years now. After implementation, they attested similar benefits: „Since the implementation of PLANTA project we dispose of a common data base for all projects, planning, and recording of hours worked which is updated on a daily basis. This is of great importance for us and facilitates the collaboration of all roles involved."

DIGITAL FUTUREmag: Thank you very much for giving us insight into your progressive approach.

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