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Five free Microsoft Project alternatives

By Susan Harkins in Five Apps, July 31, 2013, 8:29 PM

If you're supporting a small organization with an even smaller budget, consider one of these free software management solutions.

Poor planning is the root of most project failures and interestingly, the smaller the project, the less scrutiny the plan gets! If you're managing projects, execution will benefit from tight tracking. Unfortunately, proprietary software is usually expensive or ransomed via subscription fees.

If you're supporting a small organization with an even smaller budget, consider one of these free software management solutions. At the end, you'll find a short list of feature comparisons (Table A). All five are desktop applications for Windows, although some are compatible with Mac OS and Linux. Be sure to read all licensing agreements to make sure you meet all requirements.

This article is also available as [TechRepublic Screenshot Gallery](http://www.techrepublic.com/pictures/five-apps-free-project-management-alternatives/). (<http://www.techrepublic.com/pictures/five-apps-free-project-management-alternatives/>)

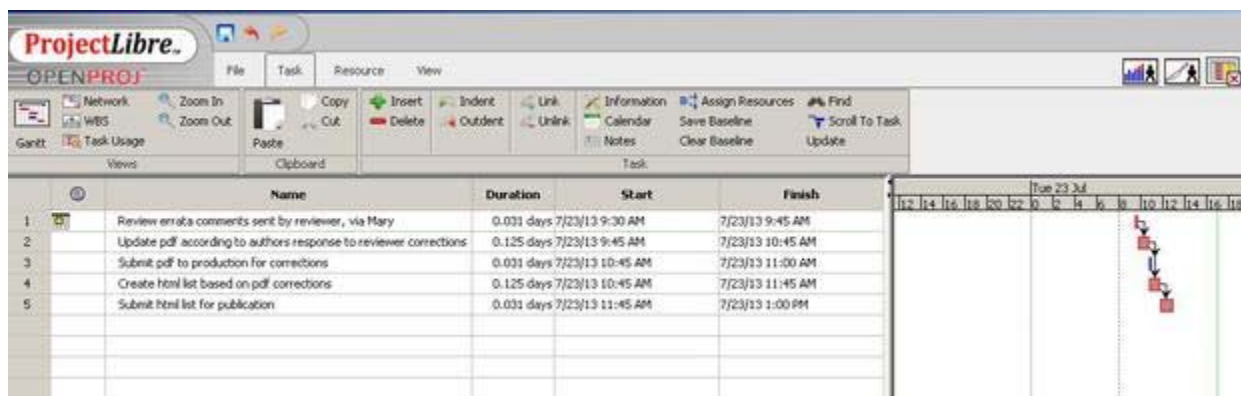
Five Apps

1: ProjectLibre

[ProjectLibre](http://www.projectlibre.org/) (<http://www.projectlibre.org/>) (previously known as OpenProj) is open source project management software that openly bills itself as a replacement for MS Project. (Cheeky!) It's compatible with MS Project 2003, 2007, and 2010, and Linux, MacOS, and Windows, so it covers almost everybody. It also supports several languages.

Figure A shows its similarities to MS Project. Creating dependencies and resources is easy and intuitive (mostly). Whether you're input or interface oriented, you'll find projects easy to set up and maintain. Gantt view calculates and displays your project's path visually by default. Durations and task dependencies work as expected and for the most part, finding the options you use most will be easy.

Figure A

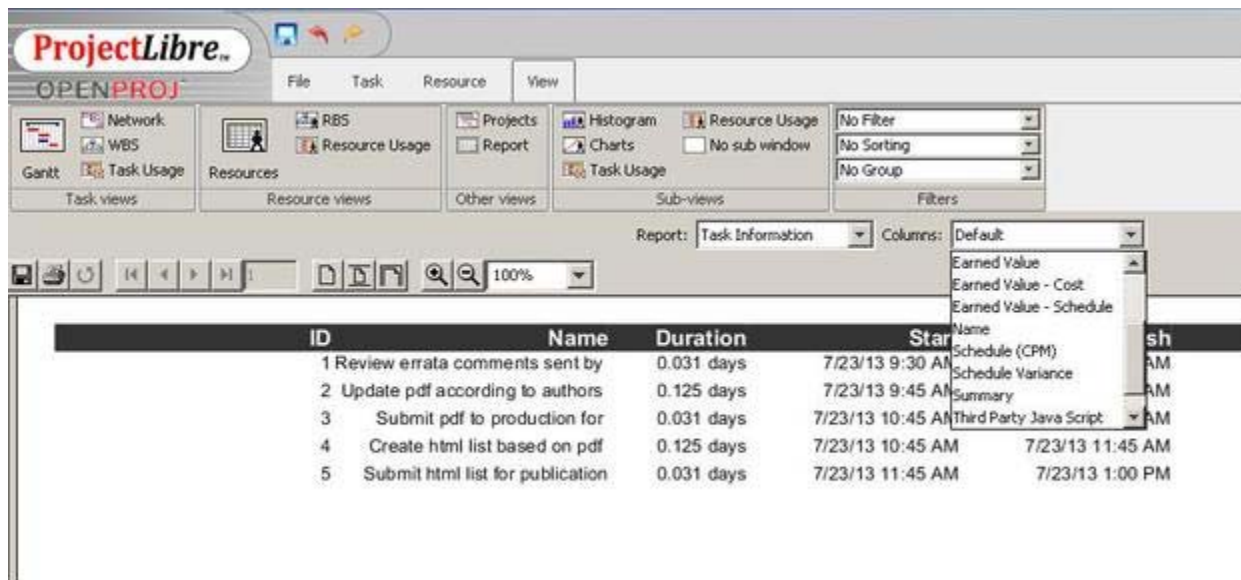




Enter a project's tasks in WBS view.

You can easily print or preview this window and you can print to a PDF file, but you'll probably rely more on Reports view, shown in Figure B. The defaults are reasonable and easily customized. The result is low-frills reporting that you can use to document your project or share with others.

Figure B



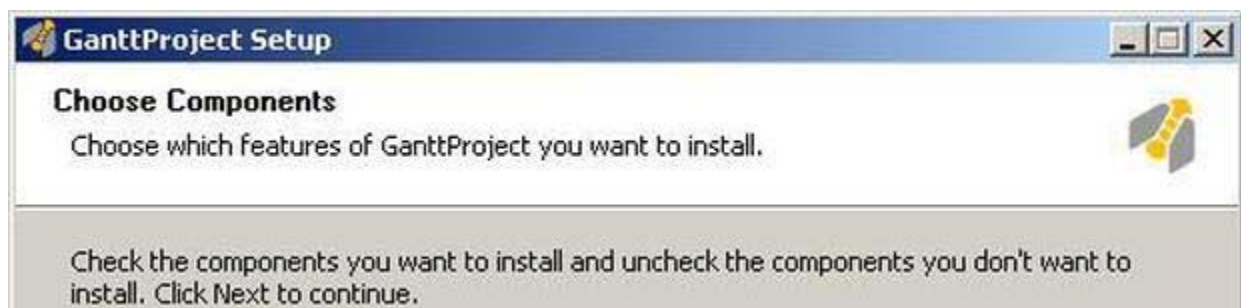
Simple reports are easy to customize.

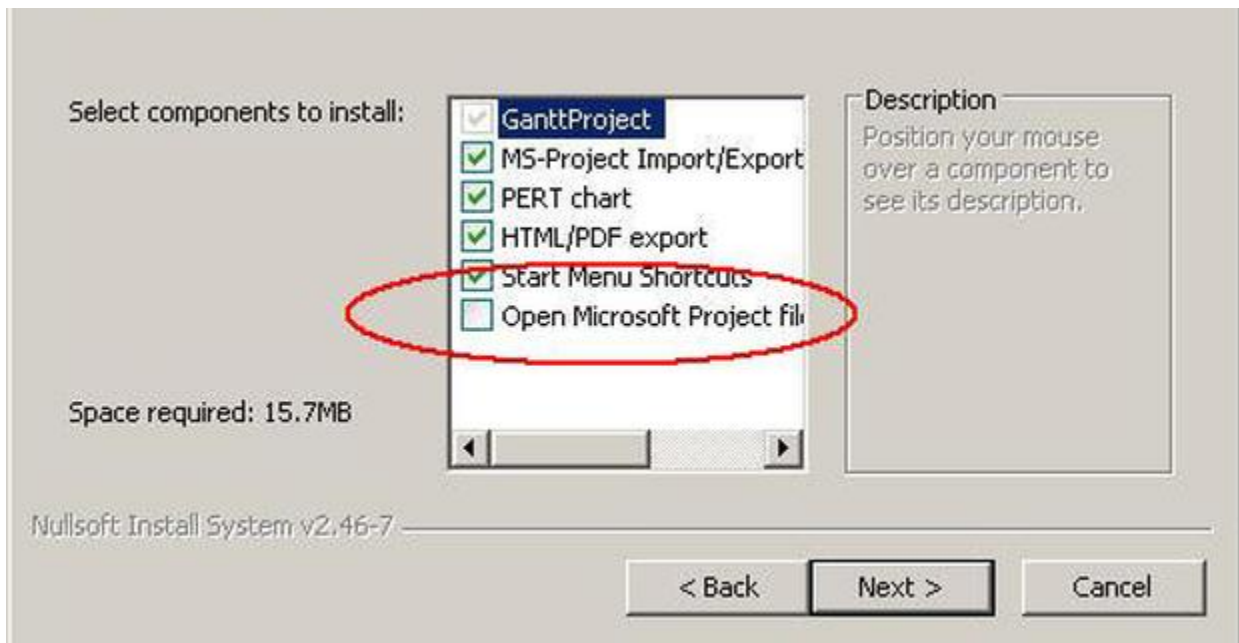
This program lives up to its hype. Its only negative is its lack of user documentation, but it does have an active online community.

2: GanttProject

[GanttProject's](http://www.ganttproject.biz/download) (<http://www.ganttproject.biz/download>) claim to fame is simplicity and if you specify during installation, as shown in Figure C, it will open MS Project files. It's free and supports versions for Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux. Customizing Gantt view, shown in Figure D isn't as easy as it could be, but it's easy enough. Dependencies are easy to create and display, similar to MS Project and ProjectLibre. Its reporting options are impressive, but it doesn't support costing features.

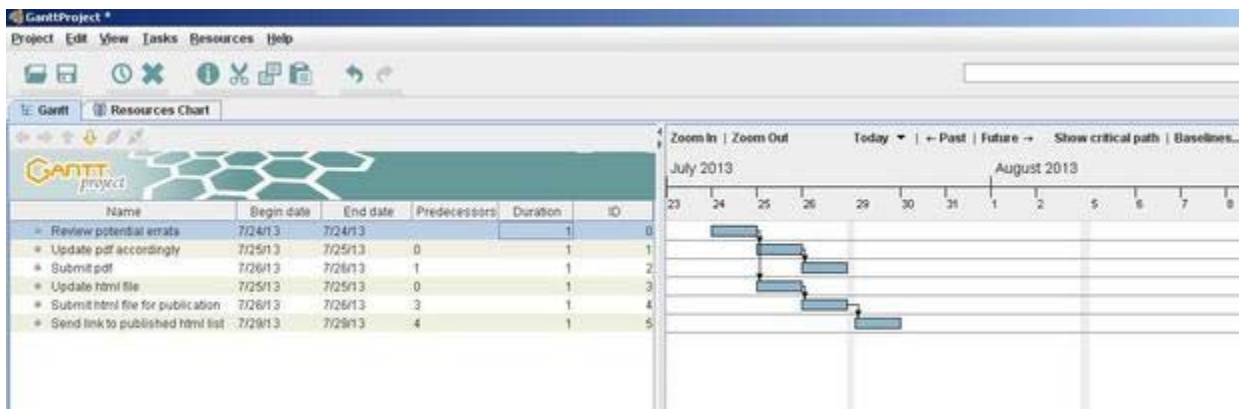
Figure C





Open MS Project files with GanttProject.

Figure D

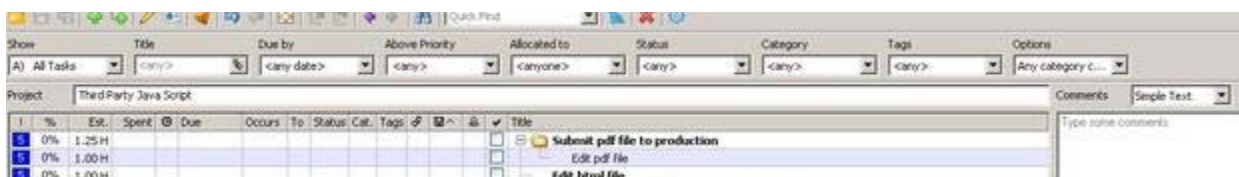


Gantt view displays a list of tasks and their details.

3: ToDoList

For simplified and flexible task management, [ToDoList](http://www.abstractspoon.com/tld_resources.html) (http://www.abstractspoon.com/tld_resources.html) can't be beat. It's not a full-blown project management application, but it's perfect for keeping smaller projects on task. Figure E shows the main window where you'll enter tasks. You can add and delete options, to suit your working needs. Calendar view, shown in Figure F offers a day-by-day accounting. Using XML style sheets, you can customize reports. Online documentation isn't comprehensive, but it's a reasonable start.

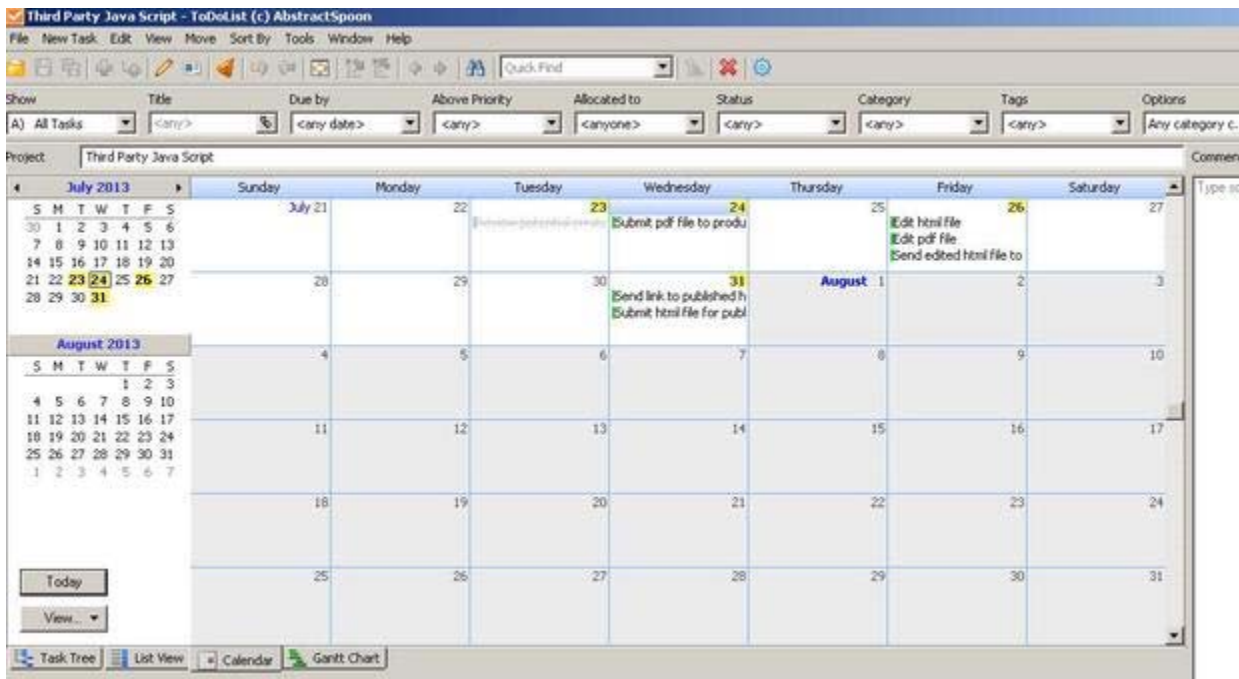
Figure E





Enter tasks in the main window.

Figure F



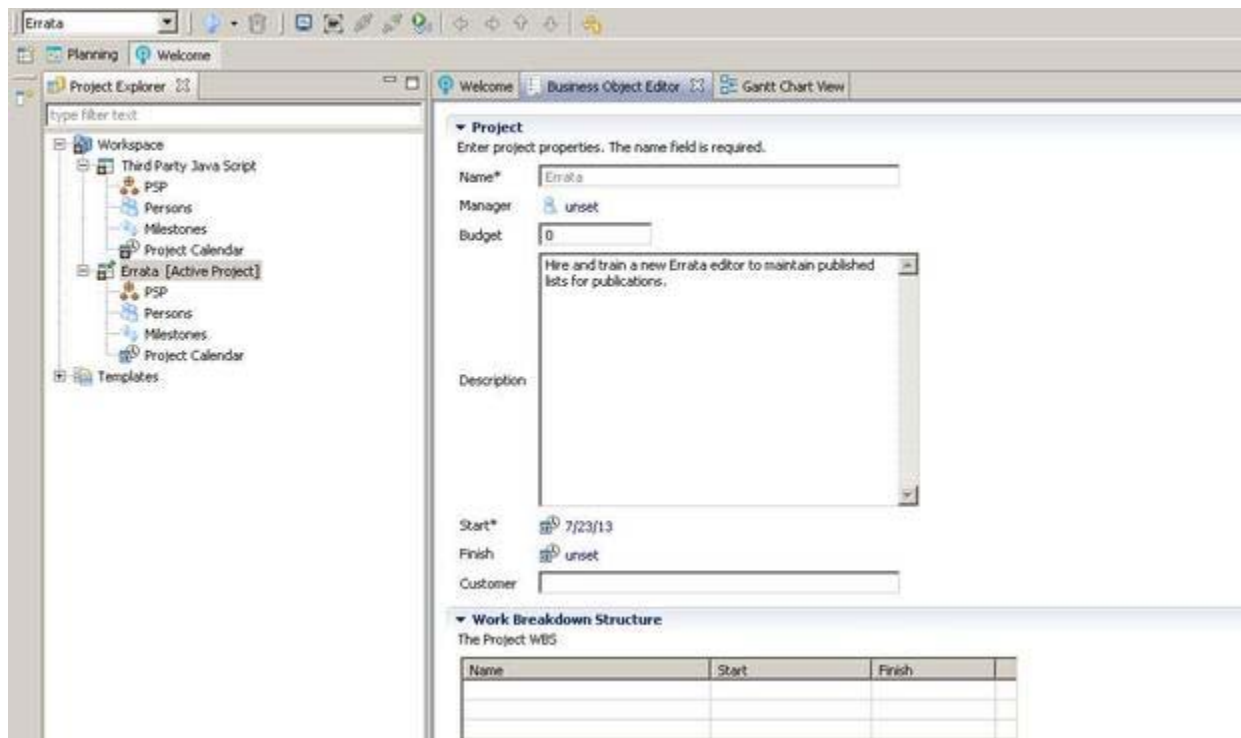
View tasks in Calendar view.

4: 2-plan Project Management Software

Everything that ToDoList isn't, [2-plan Project Management Software](http://2-plan.com/) (<http://2-plan.com/>) is. It's the enterprise version you might need if your organization is larger and you juggle several projects at once. Figure G shows two projects with 2-plan's high-end perspective. It comes with a serious learning curve. Consider 2-plan for enterprise-level project management. Figure H shows the addition of a new milestone.

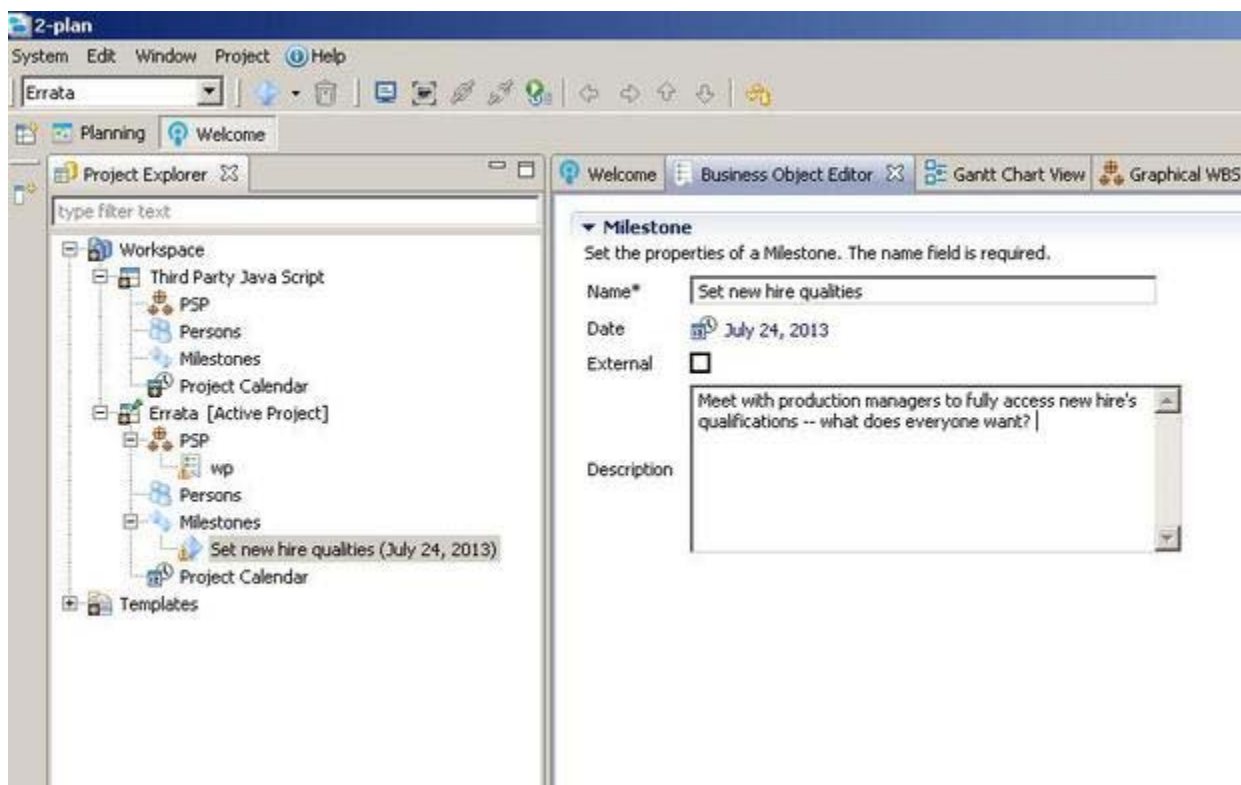
Figure G





2-plan supports multiple projects.

Figure H



Use milestones to manage high-end tasks.

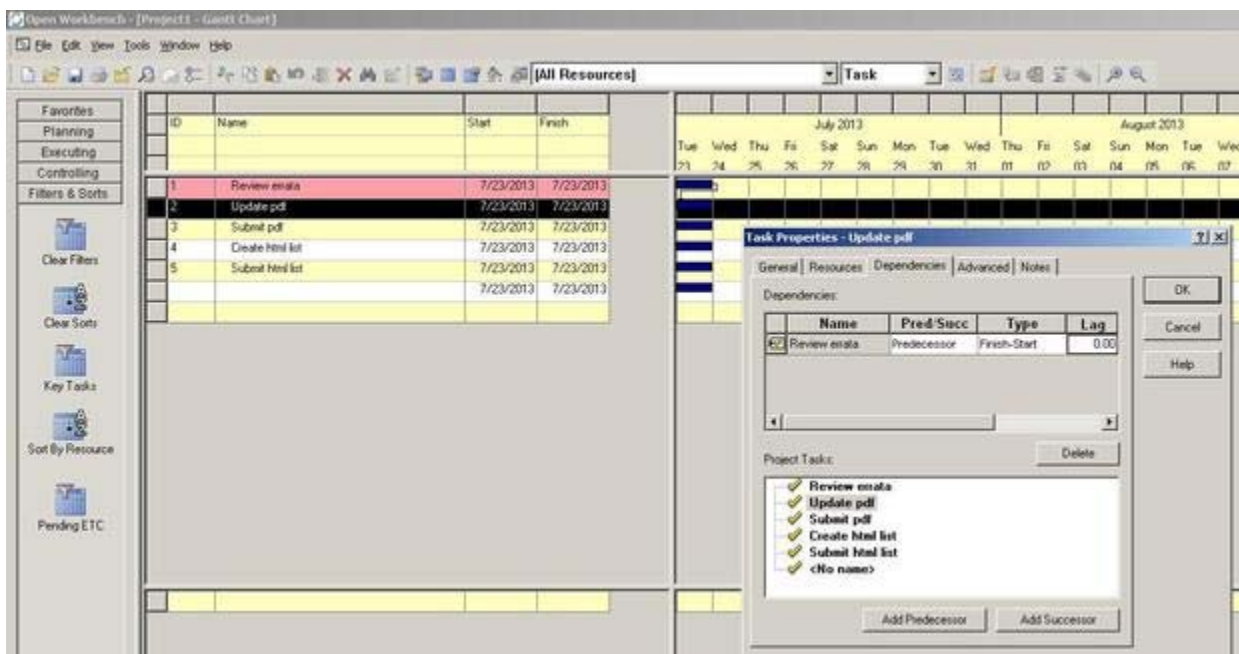
You can download a desktop version for Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux. Windows systems also need a Java Runtime Environment. 2-plan supports English and German versions. If team members need mobile access, consider 2-plan Team,

which you can use to access projects via a mobile phone.

5: Open Workbench

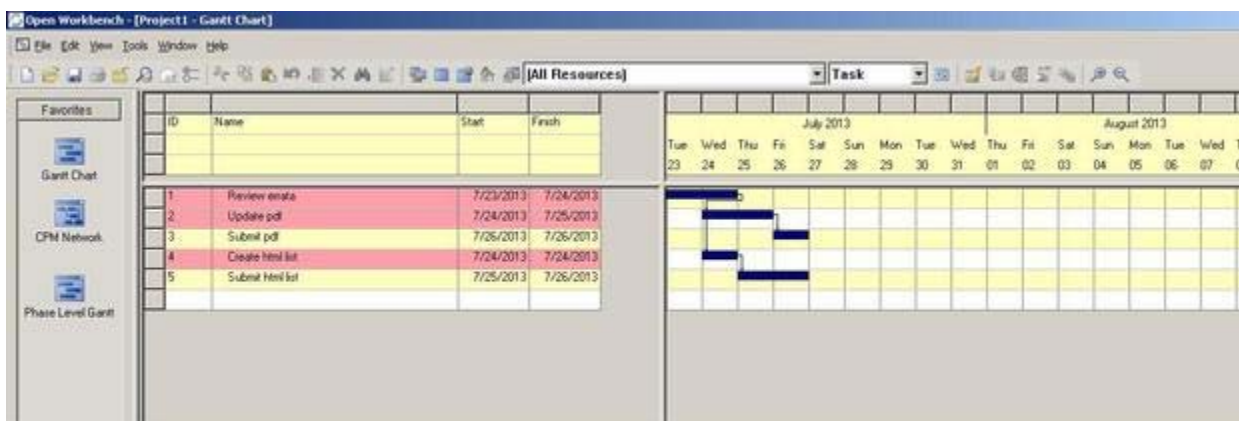
Open Workbench (<http://sourceforge.net/projects/openworkbench/>) isn't as intuitive right out of the box as other offerings in this list and it's strictly a Windows app. You can create milestones, and assign tasks, resources, and dependencies. You can also track and compare budgetary allowances. It all works, but the learning curve is steeper than the others. The interface isn't friendly or as intuitive as most of us have come to expect. For instance, adding a dependency takes a bit of discovery, as you can see in Figure I. Fortunately, the interface is interactive, so you can avoid most of the menu hunting and right-clicking. You'll probably spend most of your time in Gantt Chart view, shown in Figure J.

Figure I



Adding a dependency requires a new dialog box.

Figure J



Enter tasks and assign dependencies using Gantt Chart view.

Another difference (or advantage depending on your perspective) is its emphasis on resources rather than duration. This behavior might be just what you need. Once you're familiar with the interface, you'll find a robust set of tools. Because of the learning curve, it's best suited for larger projects, but it does offer a lot, for free.

	ProjectLibre	GanttProject	ToDoList	2-plan	Open Workbench
Tasks	3	2	2	2	3
Scheduling	3	3	2	2	3
Resources	3	3	NA	2	2
Reports	2	2	2	2	2
Costs	2	NA	1	2	3
RBS	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes
WBS	Yes	Yes	Plug-in	Yes	Yes
MS Project compatibility	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes



About Susan Harkins

Susan Sales Harkins is an IT consultant, specializing in desktop solutions. Previously, she was editor in chief for The Cobb Group, the world's largest publisher of technical journals.

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