

The Weather Channel

The Weather Channel needed to move into a larger facility without interrupting 24-hour broadcasting operations. Microsoft® Project enabled the cable television network to plan a seamless move that was invisible to viewers.

Vital Statistics: The Weather Channel Atlanta, GA Mark McKeen, Senior Vice President of Operations

Industry: 24-hour Cable Television Weather Information Network

Employees: 350

Software Programs: Microsoft Windows® 95 Microsoft Project Microsoft Schedule+ Microsoft Word Microsoft Excel Microsoft Publisher Microsoft PowerPoint®

Hardware: Compaq Pentium PCs

Results of Using Project: "We would not have been able to meet our goals without using Microsoft Project to show critical paths and identify dependencies."

The Weather Channel is a 24-hour, seven-day cable television network devoted entirely to weather which is seen by a national audience of 64 million households. The network had outgrown its existing facilities in Atlanta, GA, and continuing growth demands prompted a decision to relocate into a larger building. The moving process required that all operations of the 24-hour cable television network continue without interruption.

The Weather Channel needed a scheduling tool to plan a seamless move into a remodeled eight-story building. This process had to be transparent to viewers, eliminating the possibility of temporarily shutting down operations in order to move into the new facility.

The Weather Channel's parent company, Landmark Communications Inc., approved the move in March, 1996, with a targeted completion date of December 2, 1996. This ambitious schedule placed strict time constraints on planning the move.

The Weather Channel examined several different project management programs before deciding to use Microsoft Project to create a master scheduling plan that would coordinate all aspects of the move. Senior Vice President of Operations, Mark McKeen, explained that the network selected Microsoft Project because it was easy to use yet powerful enough to meet all of the project management requirements involved in such a complex endeavor.

Easily Shared Information

Many vendors supplying products or services for The Weather Channel's move also used Microsoft Project, which allowed for easy exchange of information files. Choosing Microsoft Project as the common platform for The Weather Channel planners and vendors allowed for a consistent and systematic approach in planning the move.

Multiple subprojects can easily be incorporated into a master project schedule using Microsoft Project. Vendors can create individual schedules for their specific tasks, which are easily added to The Weather Channel's master file by exchanging files on disks. Because vendors are using Microsoft Project, The Weather Channel planners do not have to translate or recreate this data, which saves both time and labor.

The Weather Channel planners can use Microsoft Project to quickly see how new tasks or changes to existing tasks will impact the overall moving operation. Microsoft Project identifies all tasks that affect the final completion date, known as the critical path. This allows planners to identify what impact changes to critical path tasks will have on The Weather Channel's master schedule.

Powerful Features

Microsoft Project can quickly consolidate information from many subprojects into a single master schedule. This allows The Weather Channel planners to see all levels of detail for every project related to the move. It also enables planners to distribute their workload among different parties to accomplish the overall project.

Mark McKeen explains that scheduling responsibilities are assigned to departments at the network that have the most appropriate technical expertise. The modular structure of Microsoft Project schedules allows planners to manage large projects by dividing responsibilities among different departments.

The Weather Channel department managers identified 49 different systems involved in the move that required individual transition plans. Each plan was contained in an independent Microsoft Project file that was easily consolidated into the network's master schedule. For example, the Information Systems Department was responsible for creating the Microsoft Project schedule that coordinated the installation of a telephone system for the new building.

The telephone system schedule includes all tasks and milestones necessary to complete the installation of equipment in the new building. This schedule functions independently of the other schedules but can easily be integrated into the master moving schedule.

Master schedule planners at The Weather Channel can easily upload new Microsoft Project telephone system files into the master schedule to quickly determine whether any single component affects the critical path and might delay the targeted moving date. This process helps avoid a situation where employees move into new offices before the telephone system has been installed.

Each week, all department managers at The Weather Channel meet for an hour and a half to review their individual system schedules and to upload files to the master moving schedule. Microsoft Project quickly updates changes from every system schedule to assess the impact on the overall moving plan.

Microsoft Project has proved to be powerful enough to accommodate all of The Weather Channel's current needs and more. The network plans to use Microsoft Project in the future to launch a new localization strategy in the U.S. This strategy involves upgrading 6,000 devices around the country that provide local display capability for regional cable television stations. Microsoft Project will also be used to launch new Weather Channel networks around the world.

Easy to Learn

Mark McKeen noted that the decision to use project management software would require department managers to learn how to use the program quickly. A short learning curve was an important requirement in The Weather Channel's selection process for project management software.

Microsoft Project was selected over other project management software because it was easier to learn and has an interface shared by other Microsoft products, which helped to speed up the learning process. Mark added that Microsoft Project is a widely distributed off-the-shelf software product with plentiful training and support resources available.

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