

SOFTWARE REVIEW

BY DAVID E. ESSEX

In response to the wealth of products entering the market and as a service to readers, *PM Network* is proud to publish a quarterly software review. Each column discusses the latest tools that affect the way managers approach projects. These reviews, while systematic and thorough, are one person's opinion and do not constitute an endorsement or necessarily reflect the views of PMI or *PM Network*.

Say It in Pictures

SmartDraw is a friendlier, yet still powerful, diagramming alternative to Visio. Here's how the two programs compare.

Though it is common to output Gantt charts from project management software and distribute simple Excel graphics in PowerPoint presentations or printouts, most projects can benefit from a richer and more extensive use of visuals. Clear, concise, powerful images help communicate the project plan and illustrate the workings of the desired product or service. Flowcharts, technical diagrams, bar graphs, floor plans and organizational charts augment your graphic toolkit.

Few project managers can be effective without good diagramming skills. Diagramming proficiency means using a dedicated drawing program, and only a handful of programs specialize in this function. Sometimes these programs are called drawing tools to appeal to a broader market, but they are much more than glorified versions of Microsoft Paint, the simple drawing tool. Diagramming programs put logic behind the objects in a diagram, linking them to project data and real-world items, such as software projects that are under development, buildings that are under construction and electronic gadgets that are still on the engineer's drafting table.

Some products, such as iGrafx Flowcharter 2005 (a descendant of Corel's ABC FlowCharter) have evolved into more expensive, specialized tools for modeling and diagramming business processes such as Six Sigma. I tried the two best-known, general-purpose packages—Microsoft Corp.'s venerable Visio, which underwent a major upgrade in fall 2003

along with Microsoft Project and its Office suitemates, and SmartDraw, a lower-cost, purportedly easier-to-use competitor. While the products offer business-process chart types and thousands of specialized symbols and templates, they both are broad and flexible enough to deserve a place in any project manager's software toolbox.

Visio: Better Integration and Collaboration

Visio Professional 2003 (\$499) brings a number of new features that should appeal to project managers, such as business-process templates, brainstorming tools, support for team collaboration through Microsoft's SharePoint server and stronger links to Microsoft Project and the other Office apps, including the ability to create diagrams directly in PowerPoint.

With support for Microsoft's Visual Basic tools, Visio's programmability beats SmartDraw's by a mile, but most users won't use this advanced feature. For the amateur programmers among us, a macro recorder lets you see the program code needed to execute Visio actions and plug the code into a program. Developers also might like Visio's drop-down menu, toolbar

and dialogue box objects useful for prototyping screens for Windows applications.

Visio offers more support than SmartDraw for outputting drawing data to other Office programs. You can import Excel data or Project tasks and milestones with a special timeline wizard and use Outlook schedules to create calendars.

QUICK FACTS

Visio Professional 2003

Price: \$499, also \$199 Standard Edition that lacks support for technical disciplines such as engineering, networking and software development.

Requires: Minimum 233-MHz or greater Pentium equivalent, Microsoft Windows 2000 with Service Pack 3 or XP, Internet Explorer 5.5, 128MB RAM, 210MB hard disk space, CD-ROM or DVD drive.

Microsoft Corp., 1 Microsoft Way, Redmond, Wash., USA, 98052-6399, +1-425-882-8080.

AT-A-GLANCE REVIEW (5 ★s is best)

Ease of Use: ★★ ★

Feature Richness: ★★ ★★

Project Management Support: ★★ ★★

Performance: ★★ ★★

Overall Value: ★★ ★★

And while Visio has just a few thousand templates and symbols compared to SmartDraw's 60,000-plus (a number that's boosted with consumer-ish clip art and other images geared to home publishing), it includes the ones you'll need for serious business work.

SmartDraw: Powerful Simplicity

SmartDraw Version 7, which shipped last October, boasts many major improvements, especially to its user interface. The drawing area grows on demand as your diagram expands in size and the print-preview feature toggles back and forth to your original screen rather than the print dialogue, which is a real time-saver. Another neat feature is the ability to output to PDF format without owning Adobe Acrobat, which worked flawlessly in my test.

Thousands of new symbols and templates were added and now you can “dock” and “tile” up to 32 symbol libraries on screen, keeping them close at hand. Thirty new wizards for building common diagrams, such as flowcharts and Gantt charts, are linked, so you're rarely without guidance for any step in the process. Some wizards, though, are too generic. For example, it wasn't helpful for the table wizard to pop up when I wanted to learn about setting up tables for criteria and decision-making. By contrast, Visio has context-sensitive help panels.

You can buy SmartDraw in 148 versions that differ based on the symbols, templates and wizards provided for five different specialties: flow charts, organizational charts, Gantt charts and calendars, floor plans and technical. The \$197 suite version I tested had all five.

Drawing Out the Data

Besides the quality of the drawing tools and its canned symbols and templates, the third most important feature of a drawing program is its ability to interact with other software. Project managers and team members frequently need to turn Excel spreadsheets into graphs, or print or e-mail drawings for others to see. This requires SmartDraw and Visio to have ample support for interoperability software and third-party file formats.

Both programs shine in this regard, but they're not perfect. Both SmartDraw and Visio include viewer utilities that let people who don't own the full programs view diagrams. SmartDraw employs the same object-linking and embedding (OLE) technology Microsoft uses for its cut and paste functionality and other interoperability functions among members of the Office suite. SmartDraw is great at sending its objects

QUICK FACTS

SmartDraw 7 Suite Edition

Price: \$209.95 (\$197 if downloaded), \$160.95 Gantt Chart & Calendar Edition (\$148 if downloaded.)

Requires: Minimum Pentium II equivalent, Windows 98, ME, 2000, or XP, 128MB RAM, 100MB hard disk space.

SmartDraw.com, 9909 Mira Mesa Blvd., Suite 300, San Diego, Calif., USA, 92131, +1-858-225-3300.

AT-A-GLANCE REVIEW (5 ★ s is best)

Ease of Use: ★ ★ ★ ★

Feature Richness: ★ ★ ★ ★

Project Management Support: ★ ★

Performance: ★ ★ ★ ★

Overall Value: ★ ★ ★ ★

to PowerPoint, but is poor at importing Microsoft Excel (.XLS) or Project (.MPP) files (the program did not even respond when I tried the latter), and it displayed Visio files as mere bitmaps—digital pictures of Visio originals that aren't very smart at all.

Visio is better, but I was disappointed when I imported a Project 2003 Gantt chart and ended up with the usual, absurdly tiny image in the diagramming window. The project tasks were not shown as they were previously but in a small window when you hover over the bar—still unacceptable.

Conclusion

Drawing tools still aren't as easy to use as you might expect. Their user interfaces, especially Visio's, demand pretty steep learning curves; it took me several days to get comfortable moving around in each. Both default to extremely tiny renderings of drawings in progress, requiring you to choose a zoom option to see anything remotely readable. They're also a bit stiff and unyielding, making it hard to back out of mistakes or unproductive paths, despite having “undo” buttons—many times I wished either program had a simple, Web browser-like back-arrow.

SmartDraw makes much of the training that most people need to use Visio effectively. SmartDraw, admittedly, demands less, but the learning process becomes rewarding as you realize you're not just creating images for communication but also thinking more logically and systematically. The underlying logic of these programs makes them function almost like simulation and systems-analysis tools: Once you get the hang of them, the expression “back to the drawing board” takes on a whole new meaning. **PM**

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