

Do **collaboration** tools improve the **effectiveness** of management in organisations?

We review Dooster, a project management and collaboration tool developed in the UK, and which its developers claim is as relevant to the home and small business as it is to the larger enterprise.



Describing any software solution as being ‘simple’ can be a double-edged sword. Does it justify the label because there are no problems in running the application and achieving the desired result, or is the product so limited in its scope that it offers no challenges to the user; a product without real merit? The sector described generally as ‘project management and collaboration tools’ is a case in point. Most of these systems save time on organising repeated tasks, but do they offer any other major advantage over writing lists on paper or making entries in the To Do section of Microsoft Outlook?

As they increase in sophistication, they have a tendency to become over-weighted with ‘new’ management control pages – dashboards - which are often more akin to the instrumentation panel of a light aircraft than a product designed to help simplify the administration of tasks.

Any such a product which is going to add value has to provide additional functionality without the user having to run up an intellectual sweat to control it. And it must be priced competitively.

Checking out Dooster

The question was prompted recently when the magazine came across a tool which the vendors claim is intended to avoid users being “. . . overwhelmed by tasks, appointments and emails while keeping important data, like contacts, schedules, emails and documents always close to hand and under one roof.”

Dooster, which was developed in the UK, has been evolving since the middle of 2008. The eponymous vendor cites ‘ease of use’ as one of the product’s major selling points. How far the developers had achieved the functionality listed in the product spec while making Dooster simple to employ was clearly worth closer examination.

Array of project tools on market

There is no shortage of tools to help ‘manage projects’ – a broad-brush term involving the co-ordination of any series of related tasks or activities. Some are checklist tools which are part of more encompassing business solutions such as accounting systems.

Others, like Dooster, are designed to be standalone though they can be integrated with utilities such as Google Docs and Calendar, and Outlook itself. An increasing range of task managers is

A collaboration and project management tool which is going to add value should provide real benefits in terms of co-ordination, without requiring extensive user training. And it must be priced competitively.

Underlying all task management tools is the process of listing and then prioritising tasks which are involved in a project. Many of the offerings in the market allow each task to be defined in terms of the resources required to complete it, whether these are other people or the other resources involved in its completion.

now available as phone Apps, where elaborations of the 'To Do' list manager can be downloaded. No less important, many of them are free of charge.

While targeted primarily at a business audience, these applications – both for mobile and more conventional PC platforms - can be used equally well to organise a personal project or coordinate family activities. Dooster is no exception.

The sophistication of Dooster's access and permission levels would indicate that it could become a powerful collaboration tool of relevance to the type of organisations across the spectrum of the Informed Executive readership. Reference is made to this access structure later when discussing multiple users.

Principles of project tools

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At the top end of the range, project managers are able to determine the cost of employing the resources consumed in a project; tracking them against budgets and assessing the impact on project completion of applying additional labour and materials to ensure that deadlines are met, for example.

Vitally important is that these systems should track the relationship or 'dependencies' *between* tasks (which ones must finish before another can start, for example) and highlight potential bottlenecks along the path to a successful and timely conclusion. These are the true project management tools which generate complex flow charts and are a world away from the breed of list generators.



Dooster clearly fits somewhere along that continuum. But where, precisely? That is what we set out to investigate.

The developers of Dooster have not positioned the product at the more rarefied end of the market. And while development of Dooster is ongoing, it is clear that it will not migrate into that space.

Defining position in the market

The company markets the application as a 'project management and online collaboration tool'; a description that positions it far away from the electronic notepads of this world while avoiding the GANTT charts and PERT analyses associated with tools like Microsoft Project and Project Commander from the Project Management Software Centre.

For the creators of Dooster to develop a system to rival these major project management tools would involve a level of investment which could not reasonably be justified.

Get it right, and the company would be in debilitating competition with the historic market leaders: fall short of the accepted standard, and the consequences would be severe.

The company has made the correct decision about positioning Dooster as a collaborative tool without overstressing its development capabilities.

Broad audience target

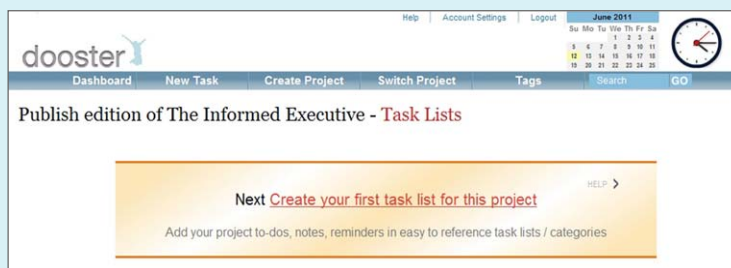
If the list of potential customer categories is any indication, Dooster should be the panacæa for the administrative ills of users at all points from freelancers to start-ups, and groups of friends to homemakers - and not forgetting enterprise level users.

The contents of the Yellow Pages would be another way of describing that catchment: a huge potential market if the vendors are right



Taking Dooster to Task

If every **Dooster project** consists of a potentially infinite number of **tasks**, what control does the user have over **defining** each of them?



Breaking projects into tasks

The starting point is to define the project, which is analogous to a folder in a filing system and comprises an unspecified number of task lists; effectively sub-folders to marshal perhaps hundreds of individual tasks into more logical groups or categories.

Each task is an activity for which the user can specify a number of features including the completion date and time, and the person to whom the task has been assigned.

In addition to the brief name of the task which appears in lists, there is provision for a more detailed description: this is essential if the task is to be undertaken by other members of the user's team.

A very minor criticism of this facility is that it perhaps does not accept hyperlinks which would enable other users to access other resources with a single click, allowing document files and web sites to be opened from within the task.

Defining task parameters

Staying with the task definition, an optional parameter to be set is the relative importance of each task within the total project: the selection is from high, medium or not (important).

Urgency is another factor in describing a task, which similarly can be defined as being high, medium or not urgent, which is the default.

Dooster will track the tasks in each list against any completion dates that have been set for them. It collates this array of information to provide views through its database of all the tasks which make up each project.

One view is of the task lists: these can be expanded to show all the tasks involved. Another perspective is on the deadlines which have been set, with the most urgent tasks shown first irrespective of their list.

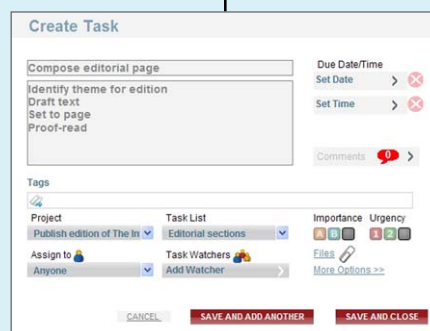
Need to track costs

It could be argued that, in attempting to keep the product simple, the developers have omitted one very worthwhile facility which would not have over-complicated the applications. When a task is being defined, the user should have the option of specifying a unit of cost or value.

That would enable managers to track the cost of a project at any point towards its completion. While the projected time to complete a task can be added, there is a case for recording financial costs.

The number of discrete projects that can be managed on a single Dooster account is set by the type of account that the user has chosen to purchase. The same is true of the amount of on-line storage provided on the vendor's network.

The price bands, which we will consider in the panel overleaf, cover the range from 5 projects supported by 4 GB



of space through to 100 projects and 73 GB.

While these volumes might appear excessive for what might only be lists of tasks with narrative descriptions and completion dates, users might be attracted to the system for its ability to hold centrally all of the files which relate to each of the tasks within each project.

As the vendor notes, users "... will be able to find in seconds all emails, documents and notes for each project; and be able to view all scheduled events, tasks and deadlines at a click of a button."

Storing documents centrally

The contention is that the moment an administrative task evolves, it becomes increasingly likely that a crucial email, document or other file essential to the project will be mislaid.

When the task involves multiple users, that possibility becomes a certainty. Locating the resources online within Dooster's cloud network reduces the risk of loss. §

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Most projects involve working with other people

How does Dooster handle collaboration?

about the functionality - and pricing - of Dooster. So how would Dooster help these users become better organised?

While Dooster clearly has applications in the home user and sole trader environment, its benefits as a collaborative tool will increase with the number of users able to access it and work on projects simultaneously.

There is no inherent restriction on the number of users who can be brought in a participants within any or all of the projects being managed.

Probably the simplest way to involve other users is for the 'lead' user – the project manager (account owner) - to click on the People tab in the main menu. The options there are to invite new users to sign in, or draw in named individuals who are already involved in other projects.

Sharing or as part of a team

In the team environment, the basic access rights allow the Account Owner to see everything. The access rights of the team members below them can be set at any point between full project manager status and allowing a user to read a document but not amend it.

Significantly, the permissions granted to Team Members are set on a project-by-project basis so that the account owner can assign different access rights to the same user in respect of each of the projects in which they were participating.

Account Owners (and their teams) can also share projects with other AOs and see them on their respective accounts.

Automatic reminders by email

In addition to the users who have been brought into a project as collaborators or team members, updates on the completion of tasks can be sent to any other Dooster 'member' or indeed to anyone else automatically by email. These facilities taken together give project managers complete flexibility over the extent to which colleagues can become involved.

Within large enterprises, Dooster would have a role as a *departmental* collaboration tool even if it were not corporate policy to introduce it as a standard across the whole organisation. The Dooster team cites the Office of Residential Life of UCLA as one which has adopted the system on that basis.

As Dooster is being marketed as a hosted solution at this stage, there is a case for it to be taken up for applications which span organisations' borders.

There is a trend in local government for councils to share management resources (Finance and HR departments, for example). Dooster could prove a very valuable medium for co-ordinating shared tasks and responsibilities.

There are potential cost implications of involving other people in projects either in a sharing capacity or as team members. Colleagues drawn into a project will qualify for free usage unless the new projects takes them over the qualifying threshold (see above) or into the next higher band if they are already subscribers.

Potential applications

There are, of course more pressing requirements for otherwise autonomous organisations to improve the quality of task management.

Reports on the the Baby Peter case, for example, criticised the lack of coordination between the various agencies. A specially designed inter-agency implementation of Dooster would allow staff out in the field to update records immediately; alerting relevant members of the 'network' where there were issues to be resolved.

It would avoid staff using taking notes on their Blackberrys during site visits, only to transcribe the same material to office computers on their return.

Archiving historical projects

If details of every project that has been managed through Dooster in a user's installation were to be retained on the system, an unnecessary mass of historical project data would accumulate.

There is a trend in local government for councils to share management resources. Dooster could have an important role in co-ordinating shared tasks and responsibilities between authorities.

worth the investment?

Can Dooster add real value to an organisation's activities? Certainly there are many aspects of a business which need to be managed effectively, but does the product specification go far enough? Accepting that features such as critical path analysis belong only in the sophisticated project management tools, does Dooster provide the resources to help a broad array of users?

Any number of current projects may therefore be archived: the data is retained, but disappears from the lists of current projects whose tasks are monitored by Dooster.

Projects are archived and restored with a single keystroke.

Backing up Dooster projects

While the Dooster organisation backs up its client project data every day, users are able to take their own backups at any time.

An Excel workbook with separate worksheets for lists, tasks, people and deadlines, for example, will be downloaded to the project manager's local PC. Documents and other files which have been assigned to tasks within the project would not be back-uped in this routine, however.

As the process of creating a project and defining its tasks is largely intuitive, documentation for Dooster is almost superfluous. At every relevant point where help might potentially be required, there is an information flag on the screen page which opens a new page when clicked.

Combined with the contents of the Help section of the main menu, this facility provides sufficient support for a user to get started.

Implications of being hosted

As Dooster is a hosted application, there is no installation procedure; only a user

Pricing Dooster

The pricing of Dooster is based on the number of projects for which the user has taken a licence.

Projects	Cost per month
1 to 4	Free
5 to 15	£9
16 to 50	£23
51 to 100	£42
101 to 200	£60

All paid options provide for thirty days free use of the system.

registration stage. It is therefore easy to try Dooster without first having to install the software, and the company provides a project-restricted but fully functional version without charge for this purpose.

For each of the paid-for options, there is a 30-day free trial. At a time when every expense has to be fully justified, potential users could be wary of purchasing a project management system without first establishing the practical benefits and potential costs, and the incentive of a free trial period should help ensure that a greater number of users test-drives the system in practice.

Adding material value?

Price considerations apart, does Dooster add material value to an organisation's activities? Certainly there are many business activities undertaken which need to be managed effectively: the benefits of a collaboration system increase further when projects involve progressively greater numbers of other users.

Does the product specification go far enough? Accepting that features such as critical path analysis belong only in the sophisticated project management tools, then Dooster does provide the resources to help a broad array of users to manage task lists, deadlines etc.

The product really is simple to use and would certainly provide useful information. Is it worth the price being charged? Compared with a selection of the collaboration tools now on the market, Dooster compares very favourably.

Project Backup

Send to selected people every day

Save

- Lists
- Tasks
- Emails
- Deadlines
- Documents
- Users

Create Backup

There is a 30-day free trial with all paid-for options. As every expense has to be fully justified, the incentive of a free trial should ensure that a greater number of users test-drives the system in practice.