Gantt Charts: Why They Are Essential

Communication: Team members can see the whole project and where their parts fit in, with real dates. Keep it on the wall for all to see.

Fixed events: Events like holidays, key meetings, deadlines, and milestones can be seen relative to the project plan and the project's actual position.

Float: Because you can see the critical path and, below it, the floating tasks, you know what to focus on and how much the noncritical tasks can slip without affecting the delivery date.

Resource planning: By looking vertically, you can make sure that you can cope with any tasks that are going to happen at the same time, whether it is just you doing the project or a number of people. You can even combine Gantt charts to see whether a department can cope with multiple projects at once. (And if it can't, then you have proof that you need either more people or more time.)

Monitoring progress: If the project manager or the subcontractors color in what they have completed, you can immediately see whether they are keeping up with the "now line." A Gantt chart is the quickest way to see if a project is going okay or not. In fact, it is probably the only way.

Recovery: The Gantt chart allows you to see what can be done if you are running late. How many tasks are left, which ones are on the critical path, and which ones can be sped up?

Finance 1: Gantt charts enable you to draw up expected spend rates (cash flow forecasts), since they show what you'll be spending when—whether it's on people or purchases.

Finance 2: Gantt charts also help you to make sense of financial information each month. (For example, are we underspent or just running late?)

Customers: Gantt charts show them why they have to wait as long as they do, why the project costs what it does, when they have to do their bits, and what happens if they run late.

But what's wrong with a list of tasks, each one having a start and a finish date? Well, first, where will you get this list? From a Gantt chart. And with the list, data is much less visible. The list won't give you a proper feel for the issues: how late are we, what's still to come, which tasks are longest, and how much float is there on some of them?

Complexity: If you have more than 30 tasks, you may want a high-level overview Gantt chart—and the people who are doing the details within each work package can have their own detail plan. All you need is the instant big picture.