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What Are Milestones in Project Management?

By Jason Westland | Jun 2, 2021

A project milestone is a management tool that is used to delineate a point in a project schedule. These points can note the start and finish of a project, and mark the completion of a major phase of work. Milestones can be used to symbolize anything that has started or finished, though it's primarily used as a scheduling tool.

If a milestone focuses on major progress points in a project, you can see how it is useful in scheduling. Just as tasks break a larger project into manageable parts, milestones break off project phases to help project managers plan, schedule and execute them.

Scheduling with Milestones

Milestones provide a way to more accurately estimate the time it will take to complete your project by marking important dates and events, making them essential for precise project planning and scheduling. Because of their versatility, they're an important element of project documents such as the project schedule, project charter and project plan.

They are also used in scheduling methodologies, such as the Critical Path Method, or project management tools like Gantt charts, which can determine major scheduling periods. With milestones, you can better calculate the slack in your project by segmenting the project timeline

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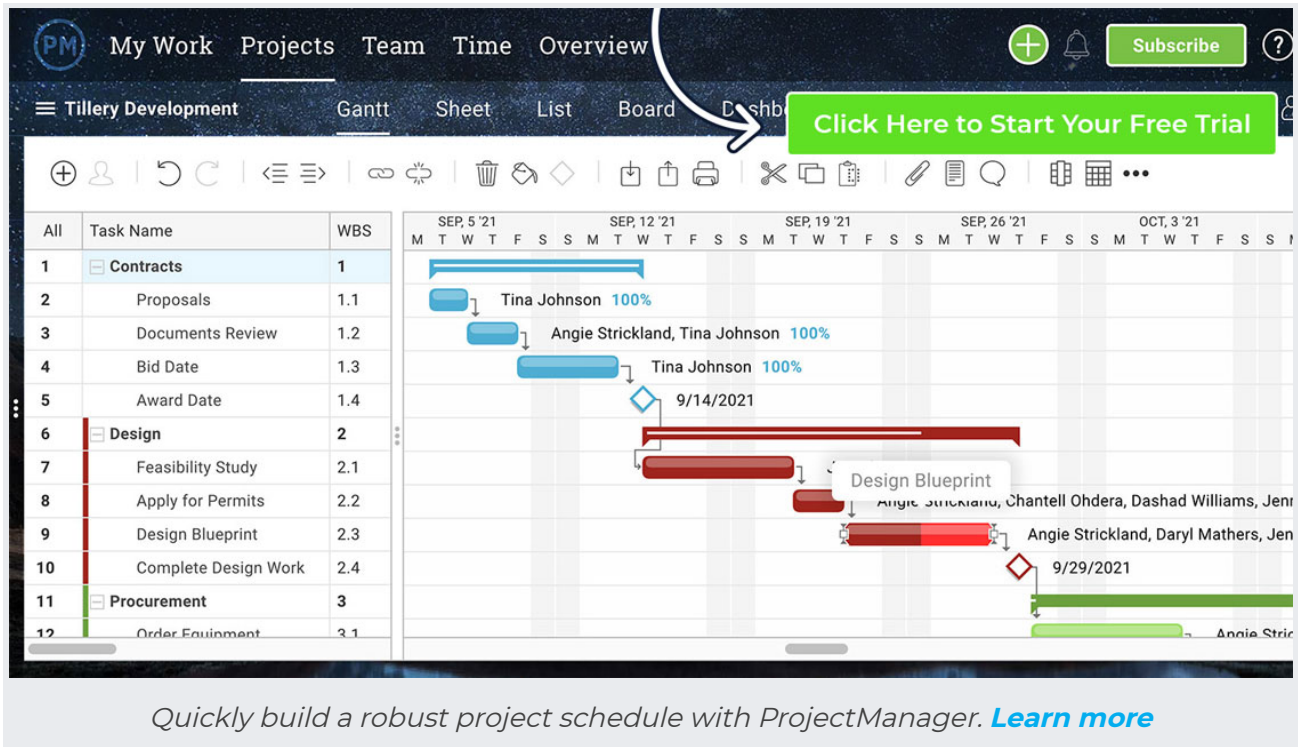
Linking Milestones

Milestones, like tasks, can be linked. That is when the phase of one milestone cannot begin until the completion of the phase before it. That way you're not blocking team members by having them wait or by not allowing them what they need to move forward with their tasks.

Now that we have a better idea of the role of project milestones in planning and scheduling, let's define a common project management concept, a milestone schedule.

What Is a Milestone Schedule?

A milestone schedule, or milestone chart, is simply a timeline that uses milestones to divide a project schedule into major phases. Due to its

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How to Decide What's a Project Milestone

As discussed above, project milestones measure progress by breaking the project into phases. A milestone is a marker that separates the end of one phase from the start of another. According to the project management institute (PMI), there are typically five phases in project management: initiation, planning, execution, monitoring & controlling and closure. But when exactly do you add the milestones?

The simple answer is when you've completed everything related to that project phase. For example, completing the project charter is usually the last step in the initiation phase of a project. This would be when you place your milestone to indicate you're moving from initiation to planning.

However, the exact point at which you want to set your milestones might vary depending on your project, your organization and other factors. It's always best to seek help from experts in the industry and in your company or project team. A little guidance upfront can save a lot of headaches later on.

Milestones are more a period in time than the specific completion of tasks or project deliverables, so the question arises, can you have milestones that don't relate to project phases? The short answer is yes. You can set any sort of milestones you want in a project. Traditionally, they break projects into phases, but you can choose to create a milestone to indicate a big task, important event, deliverable or more.

Project Milestones Examples

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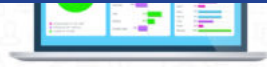
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What could be better to explain how to use milestones in project management than some examples? Let's look at some common project milestones examples for each phase of the project life cycle.

- Project approval

- Start and end of project phases

- Getting your project charter approved

- Securing financing, equipment or resources

- Assembling a project team

- Getting your project plan approved

- Project kick-off meeting

- Completing critical tasks

- Producing key project deliverables

- Reaching project goals and objectives

- Project completion

These milestone examples apply to any project regardless of its

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Track Your Project Progress with Milestones

Part of scheduling a project is being able to monitor and track the progress of that schedule in real-time. Milestone charts are a way to track how far you've come in the project. By noting the completed milestones, you can measure the distance you are from the finish line of a project.

This comes in handy when you are dealing with stakeholders. Stakeholders are not interested in a granular, detailed report on the project's progress. They want broad strokes that indicate whether or not the project is moving along as scheduled. A milestone chart is ideal for this kind of reporting because milestones show the major phases you've finished at this point in the project, according to your plan.

When you're presenting a milestone schedule to stakeholders, you can show them the milestones you completed this month and the ones you're on track to complete for the coming month— and whether or not the milestones were reached as planned or if there were any delays.

How to Report When a Milestone Has Been Reached

How do you know if you've in fact achieved the goals set out for a project phase? Without knowing if the objectives and key performance indicators you planned were reached at the close of your project milestone, then it's an empty victory.

Project reporting can respond to this situation. Generate a status report and get a look at the overall health of your project. Did you complete your tasks on time, within the budget you set? For example, you might

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However, it's also not a cause for undue alarm. Changes are part of any project. The problems arise when those changes aren't responded to. By running a status report you know what's changed and its impact on the project. Now you can work towards getting back on schedule. When you reach your next milestone, run more reports to track your progress and make sure you're staying on track.

ProjectManager makes reporting on milestones easy, thanks to automated project reports.

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While you'll mostly use milestones for the nuts and bolts of scheduling, they are also useful for celebrating project achievements. Obviously, once a milestone has been reached it's because the team has done something right, like completing a project phase or producing an important deliverable. Why not use this opportunity to congratulate them?

Celebrate success in whatever manner is right for you and the project team. It can be as simple as a handshake or a note to the team members. Maybe you want to treat them to lunch or offer a bonus. Whatever the case, acknowledging your team's achievement pays off in dividends in the forms of employee retention, team loyalty and project buy-in. You're also fostering a positive relationship with your team and building trust, which is instrumental to a productive project. Using a project management software with team collaboration tools will help you make sure everybody is aware of these initiatives.

Who knew milestone planning could make you happy? So, why not add a milestone at the end of the project to mark when you're going to have a lunch party or just a celebration of the completion of another successful project. The team will see this final milestone as an incentive to forge forward, and it will create more goodwill that you can bank for the next project when you work with the same team.

How to Use Milestones in Gantt Charts

When you're using project management software like ProjectManager, your milestones are added to the Gantt chart by adding the diamond icon to a point on the project timeline. To create a milestone, pick the task on your schedule and change the property to a milestone. By hovering over the milestone icon, you can view its name.

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the complexity out of creating and editing a Gantt chart. When you're planning the project, just add the tasks and their duration, including the due date, and the Gantt chart will populate the timeline automatically.

With ProjectManager, you can easily assign tasks to your team members and watch their progress as they move towards achieving project milestones. Our Gantt chart software also provides your team with a platform for collaboration. They can share updates and files, enabling dialogues at the task level. You can even set up automatic alerts to make sure milestones are met.

Reporting on milestones for stakeholders is also streamlined because you can view progress in real-time and, with your dashboard, turn that data into clear and colorful charts that can be shared however you see fit. Milestones have never been easier to use.

Milestones are just one of the many project management tools you get when using ProjectManager. Our cloud-based project management software provides online Gantt charts with milestones, real-time data, and a collaborative platform to make you and your team more efficient and productive. See how it can help you manage projects by taking a free 30-day trial today!

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