

— Gantt Charts —

To complete a project successfully, you must control a large number of activities, and ensure that they're completed on schedule. If you miss a deadline or finish a task out of sequence, there could be knock-on effects on the rest of the project. It could deliver late as a result, and cost a lot more. That's why it's helpful to be able to see everything that needs to be done, and know, at a glance, when each activity needs to be completed.

GANTT charts convey this information visually. They outline all of the tasks involved in a project, and their order, shown against a timescale. This gives you an instant overview of a project, its associated tasks, and when these need to be finished.

Gantt charts help you assess how long a project should take, determine the resources needed, and plan the order in which you'll complete tasks. They're also helpful for managing the dependencies between tasks.

Gantt charts are also useful for monitoring a project's progress once it's underway. You can immediately see what should have been achieved by a certain date and, if the project is behind schedule, you can take action to bring it back on course.

— Why Use Them? —

When you set up a Gantt chart, you need to think through all the tasks involved in your project. You'll work out:

- who will be responsible for each task
- how long each task will take
- what problems your team may encounter

This detailed thinking helps you ensure that:

- the schedule is workable
- the right people are assigned to each task
- you have workarounds for potential problems before you start

They help you work out practical aspects of a project such as:

- the minimum time it will take to deliver
- which tasks need to be completed before others can start
- the critical path - the sequence of tasks that must individually be completed on time if the whole project is to deliver on time

You can use them to keep your team and your sponsors informed of progress. Update the chart to show schedule changes and their implications, or use it to communicate that key tasks have been completed.

The Process

Step 1: Identify essential tasks

Gantt charts don't give useful information unless they include all of the activities needed for a project or project phase to be completed. So, to start, list all of these activities. Then, for each task, note its earliest start date and its estimated duration.

Step 2: Identify task relationships

Some tasks will need to be completed before you can start the next one, and others can't end until preceding ones have ended. You don't have to do these in sequence, but you may sometimes need other tasks to be finished first. Identify which of your project's tasks are parallel, and which are sequential. Where tasks are dependent on others, note down the relationship between them. This will give you a deeper understanding of how to organize your project, and it will help when you start scheduling activities on the chart.

Step 3: Input activities into software or a template

You can draw your charts by hand, put them on an Excel spreadsheet or use specialist software, such as Gantto, Matchware, or Microsoft Project team.

Step 4: Chart progress

As your project moves along, it will evolve. Update your chart to reflect changes as soon as they occur. This will help you to keep your plans, your team, and your sponsors up to date.

An Example

Office Move: By Week

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Review floor plan CEO									
	Circulate floor plan ALL								
			Sign off floor plan CEO						
Cost new equipment IT									
	Review new equipment CEO								
		Circulate equipment costs IT							
					Sign off equipment costs CEO				
					Deliver crates EXT				
							Pack ALL		
								Unpack ALL	
								Collect crates EXT	
									Town Hall Meeting CEO