



CMP

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SKUNK WORKS

OUR RATING SYSTEM :

★★★★★ EXCEPTIONAL

★★★★ GREAT

★★★ FAIR

★★ POOR

★ UNFORTUNATE

HANSOFT'S HANSOFT 4.2

By Ben Board

HANSOFT



STATS

Hansoft AB
Bredgrand 18, floor 7.5
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Sweden
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PRICE

Monthly fee per resource account (user): 25 euros
Monthly server fee: 33 euros, plus an additional 3 euros per user for integrated time reporting module.
(Additional pricing structures available for various module setups.)

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

PC running Windows 2000 or XP 400MHz processor 128MB RAM 15MB free disk space.
To run the Hansoft Complete Solution, a server is needed to handle the tasks and all other information concerning the projects. The server runs on a Windows 2000/XP or later.

PROS

1. Online nature transforms project managers' jobs.
2. Features for schedule building and tracking are excellent.
3. Strong functionality for studios that use agile development.

CONS

1. A relatively young and small user base have allowed some bugs to go untreated.
2. Limited compatibility with Microsoft Project.
3. Must be connected to server to edit schedule.

I'M A PRODUCER. I MAKE SCHEDULES. I'm part of a team, and they read the schedules and carry out the tasks while I lie on a velvet chaise lounge and eat grapes that glitter with beads of the purest Alpine spring water.

Actually, I track the team's progress and constantly adjust the schedule to deal with all the changes, repositioning, hiccups, opportunities, delays, and acts of heroism that make up each exciting day. For large parts of those days, I am chained to the schedule, so I might as well enjoy working with it. And for the last nine months I have, because I've been using Hansoft's project management tool.

Sharing a name with the Swedish firm that developed it, Hansoft is a project manager's trusty sidekick, encouraging collaborative scheduling and putting equal focus on tracking schedules and creating them. Everything is online, with all updates occurring in real time so there's no more tracking by printout. Hansoft is especially relevant to the game industry

because it was designed by people who have managed game projects.

Hansoft scales well to multiple projects that share resources, benefiting larger companies. It also allows external agents, such as a publisher, to be granted read-only access to the live schedule. And since version 4, Hansoft has added major features that work within an agile development environment, which is not my speciality and not discussed here, but worth investigating if it's yours.

HANDS ON HANSOFT

There are three core responsibilities project managers have on a daily basis: creating tasks, recording completed tasks, and tracking the overall progress of the team and the project, in an effort to keep the darn thing on the rails. In my experience, Hansoft does all three uncommonly well.

To create schedules, project managers start with a list of tasks, deliverables, dates, and people, which is massaged into a Gantt chart (a project sched-

ule bar-style chart) that is as elegant and beguiling as it is ephemeral.

Hansoft's interface is well designed throughout. Commonly used functions for creating linked tasks and milestones are laid out prominently and are easily accessible via keystrokes. Lesser-used functions are never far away, but don't clutter up the principal view.

The Gantt chart, another feature that needs to be upfront, is clear and easily panned and zoomed. Milestones are their own entities rather than special-case tasks, and as such seem much more powerful. For instance, if the user links a set of tasks to the milestone by which they should be completed, a simple percentage read-out will show just how much trouble that milestone is in.

DELEGATION AND DESCRIPTION

A key feature of Hansoft, enabled by its online arrangement, is delegation. With delegation, the user can create a high-level schedule, including all

the major dates and feature expectations, and unlock portions to be fleshed out by the more knowledgeable team lead. So empowered, the lead can then sub-delegate sections to specialists.

Hansoft the company says it's proud of this feature—and deserves to be. It works brilliantly by allowing the project manager to spend more time monitoring and tracking rather than gophing, assembling, and formatting.

One problem I've found with schedules is how easy it is to turn a meaningful task description into a short and ambiguous task name, which loses its meaning when the task is reached months later. Hansoft has no less than three ways of solving this problem.

First, to each task you can add a hyperlink that might give the assignee more information on its completion, such as a web reference, a link to a document on your local Perforce depot image, or a file on a shared folder. Second, Hansoft actually features a full document repository, complete with version history, where tasks can be directly linked to specified documents. Because it doesn't link to any existing versioning software (such as Perforce), I have hardly used this particular feature—but it's there. Third, Hansoft has a heavy-weight and deeply cool comments system, which made a huge difference on my last project in communication, allowing whole threads of task-specific comments to narrate the progress.

VIEWPOINTS AND VANTAGES

Project managers have the ability to add custom columns to the task list view containing any info they like, be it arbitrary text, hyperlinks, or a custom drop-down box. Users can choose one of the provided suggestions (priority, risk, or confidence) or create their own, such as a column for the project manager to sign off on an asset or feature. With thought, a project manager could design columns that could make a real difference to productivity.

Once a schedule is completed, and if politics require it, the studio can give a license to the publisher that grants access to the headline levels of the schedule. The project manager controls all project staffers privileges in this way, allowing them to change only their own tasks—another powerful tool enabled by the online system.

Each team member has a personal page listing his or her tasks, with new or changed items highlighted (and emailed). The task's pane is used to record completion progress—either binary or by percent, whichever suits you—with explanatory comments. When the task is marked complete, the project manager is sent a notification to check the new addition. No more visiting each team member with a schedule printout! And although Microsoft's online Project Server allows for this online sharing of the schedule, I have found it slow and clunky to use.

Hansoft, on the other hand, has been online from the start, and it shows.

ODDS AND ENDS

I really want to convey how simple tracking is in Hansoft. It gives the project manager just the info that's needed, all in one place, with no paperwork. Problems light up instantly and automatically, and can quickly be resolved. This is how it should be.

Although Hansoft's primary benefits result from it being a purely online tool, its few downfalls stem from that fact as well. For example, I currently can't create or manage schedules when I'm out of the office. Moving schedules to and from Microsoft Project is basic (via XML exports). Also, I've seen a few minor bugs, reflecting the fact that the software is relatively young, but most are swiftly fixed with each release.

In my experience, the technical support is excellent. I'm looking forward to seeing how the agile interface will be refined in future releases, too, since as of press time it was quite new.

Hansoft has greatly increased my effectiveness as project manager on HEATSEEKER, and should be considered a serious, and in many ways superior, alternative to Microsoft Project.

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