Chirp and Eclipse Deliver Project Management for Professional

"Everything lined up with Eclipse. The code strategy, development tools, licensing and community involvement all fell into place perfectly to meet our needs"

P roject management can seem a bit intimidating to many people. With a myriad of interdependencies to track, such as milestones, budgets, timelines, sub projects and tasks, it is no wonder that it has evolved into its own discipline. And given that the software tools of the project management trade are equally complex and intimidating, it is easy to understand why busy professionals don't take the time to master them.

The engineers at Charles Abbott Associates were a case in point. This group of busy, mobile professionals, responsible for road, water, sewer and other projects for local governments throughout California, were stumped for an easy-to-use project management application that met their needs for simplicity as well as power. Then, in 2005, one of the engineers downloaded the free evaluation of Chirp, from Plum Canary Corporation of Boston Mass. Chirp was exactly the Project Management application he had been looking for, and it soon spread throughout his team.

Chirp is successful with small to mid-sized groups of professionals because it meets their needs. Jay Batson, President of Plum Canary explains that it fills a requirement for a collaborative project management tool that any user can afford and use. To meet its

design goals, it had to include a thick client that allowed a fast, modern interface and disconnected use for mobile workers. It also had to support both Windows and OS X seamlessly, providing the same functionality on both operating systems.

Eclipse Had it All

The Plum Canary team looked at a number of platforms, but selected the Eclipse Rich Client Platform (RCP). Microsoft's .Net platform lacked support for the Mac – an essential requirement for a user-base that they expected to include marketing, advertising and other creative professionals. Building their own platform was not an option if they wanted to meet their tight 14 month release schedule on time and on budget. Swing did not provide the responsiveness or native look their users would expect. Finally, they also looked at Trolltech's Qt windowing system, but were not keen on working in a C++ based environment since Java had proven to be an architecturally elegant language that encourages good coding, and they wanted to take advantage of those characteristics.

In contrast, RCP delivered the speed and look of native windowing on both operating systems, the IDE allowed them to cross-develop for each target, and Eclipse allowed them to work in Java.
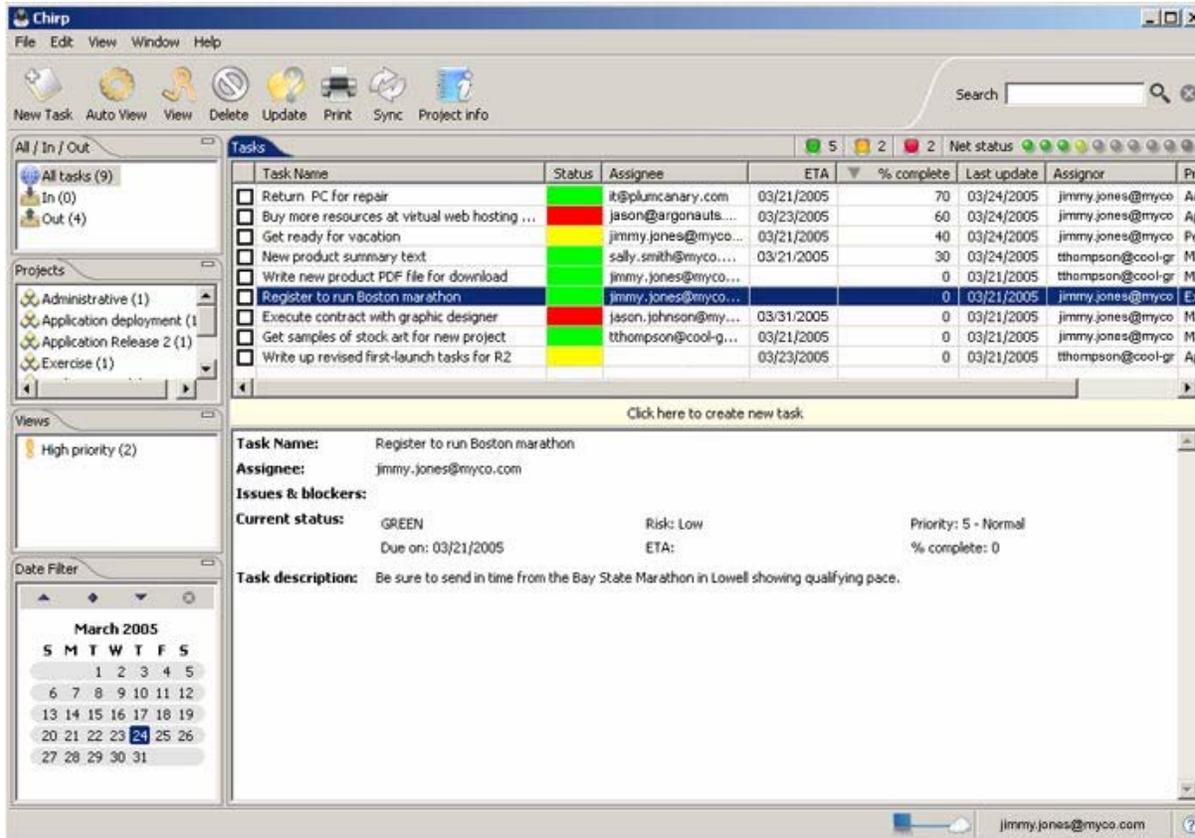
Just as important, the open source nature of Eclipse and the vibrant community around it, including the likes of IBM, reassured them that the platform is viable and healthy.

As Batson relates "everything lined up with Eclipse. The code strategy, development tools, licensing and community involvement all fell into place perfectly to meet our needs".

updating and help systems. For instance, they used the Eclipse Update Manager to implement a polling timer on the Chirp client that checks for updates at regular intervals and prompts the user to install any it finds.

A Responsive Community

The open source nature of the software

Plum Canary's Chirp software used the Eclipse RCP to provide powerful and easy to use project management for individuals and small teams. Users can quickly identify issues that are blocking progress and require attention.

Like most developers, the Chip team had little experience in cross-platform thick client development, and had to learn to build RCP-style applications. However, they found the that the tutorials on the Eclipse website were an excellent resource for bringing themselves up to speed.

Plum Canary benefited from not having to reinvent many components that provide common functionality, such as software

meant that they could also find and fix problems they encountered in the platform, often with a 48 hour fix time. Batson relates that they have been submitting their patches back to the Eclipse community, participating in the open source bazaar of ideas that continually strengthens and improves Eclipse.

Another benefit of Eclipse's open source model for the Chirp project is the sheer

number of developers who can focus their attention on a problem and work out the best solution in the shortest amount of time.

The success of Chirp to date, with thousands of downloads and hundreds of users like Charles Abbott, has confirmed for Plum Canary that they made the right decision adopting RCP. Future versions of Chirp will expand their use of Eclipse products, and a planned web version will also use the Eclipse IDE, providing friendly and effective project management for busy professionals.

Ron Stone is a technology writer and content management consultant based in Ottawa, Canada.