

## Case study: Mac-Group



# mac-group supports its growth strategy with planning excellence and Powerproject

**Summary:** Newry-based mac-group has been well known in the interior fit-out space for a long time, but it is now building a broader future. In the past few years it has expanded firmly into the mainstream construction business. It now has four offices around Ireland and the UK and is still growing.



Planning to deliver amazing fit-outs to transform, renew and refurbish existing buildings was exacting enough. With wider construction came fresh planning and programme management challenges.

The company's response is a bold initiative to make planning excellence a part of the company DNA, supported by Powerproject software.

When it was established in Dublin in 2002, mac-group set out to do things differently and better than the norm. It established a reputation for delivering ambitious fit-out projects. It built a highly engaged team to deliver beyond expectations on fit-out projects that can range from £500k to £25m.

The company has since diversified. Today it is established in the mainstream construction business, with projects spanning residential, commercial and industrial sectors in Ireland, the UK and Europe, and proudly proclaims itself as "Dynamic Construction People." It has formed an exciting partnership to deliver volumetric modular solutions and tap into booming demand for high speed residential delivery in Ireland.

In the early stages, the company had managed without a formal planning department. Site managers and project managers had planned activities individually, but there was no formal or integrated department to support them.

As mac-group grew, construction operations increased, and projects became larger. The leaders of its Interiors and Construction businesses recognised a need for change. Brendan Moley, Interiors MD, spearheaded an initiative to embed planning excellence across the organisation.

*"Powerproject is robust and does absolutely everything we need."*

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## Accessible professional skills

The first challenge was to bring in more professional planning skills and make them widely accessible. The company created a core planning team with full-time planners based in Newry and Birmingham. Valerie McNeill, Planning Manager, has been working to instil planning discipline and educate colleagues across the organisation.

mac-group already used Powerproject from Elecosoft as its standard planning software solution. Its use of the software is now expanding with the business, having more than doubled its user licenses to more than 30 in the past two years. It is now a platform for enabling people across the organisation to plan.

Valerie explained: "Our bid, pre-construction and technical services teams, through to the site operational teams, are engaged in developing our programmes and have a full understanding of the challenges and buildability of each project."

She continued, "Our core planning team is integral to the compilation of our schedules and provides the necessary expertise that ensures programme integrity and that logic and critical path have been considered and applied."

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## Supporting managers

Empowering and supporting site and project managers across the business to become progressively more involved in planning is part of the plan. "The idea we're aiming at is that everyone buys into good planning. We are there for whenever the managers on site need to come back to us to support any pinch points. We try to keep it with them as far as possible, and just step in to help out occasionally."

Part of the need is to educate and build user confidence, believes Valerie. "Powerproject is robust and does absolutely everything we need, so I've tried to educate the project managers as to what they can get from it. Before this they were generally using it only to create Gantt charts. Now I'm helping them understand how a programme is actually put together, and how they can use the filtering system and different views to manage sub-contractors during a live project."

The software's ease of use is helping adoption: "Our project teams are using Powerproject because it's user-friendly and performs like other Windows systems – it is more straight-forward to use than some other project management applications."

Valerie is confident that good support is available whenever it is needed "I've been in touch with Elecosoft a lot for support, and they are very useful. In one instance I was trying to set up a view to pull out a sub-contractor programme but didn't want the usual summary bar for the whole programme that shows with a normal filter. The support desk helped figure out a workaround, so I could do exactly what I wanted."

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## End-to-end planning

The use of Powerproject has been extended to support not just individual projects, but the end-to-end process, as Valerie described: “We now use Powerproject from the prequalification stage, throughout the tendering process, right through to delivering the job.”

“Creating high-level programmes at prequal and tender stages lets us demonstrate to clients exactly how we’ll deliver the job, so we use them in our presentations. Our bid team will put together a methodology and we reflect that in the programme. Once we’ve identified all the risks to the project and assessed the potential impact on the critical path, we consider various mitigation measures to ensure that our schedule has been de-risked from the outset. Our vast experience of specialist high end fit-out projects ensures that we can deliver our schedule in the optimum time-period without compromising on quality.”

Powerproject also enables the team to keep a clear and current visibility of progress and monitor any challenges that may emerge. “We monitor progress on a weekly basis in order to be fully informed of actual progress or, indeed, delay – so that we can adapt our approach to ensure things get back on track. In Powerproject we can easily see if we are running behind or if there’s an issue coming up. We can address it before it happens, so it doesn’t impact on things further down the line.”

## Choose your views

Managing sub-contractors is especially important in a business that has founded itself on quality. Valerie said “We have a preferred supply chain comprised of sub-contractors who know how we approach our jobs. We are very tight on quality management on site – everything has to be done in the right way first time round. It’s not for ourselves, but for our customers, to make sure we meet their needs and expectations.”

This creates high-dependency relationships with suppliers that mac-group is confident can deliver the amazing finishes for which it is known. It requires very tight management of the timeline: “Because we have a lot of bespoke elements on our jobs, we know that we must manage the long lead times for the many specialist packages specified. The process starts with architect’s designs, then working drawings from the supplier, then approvals, even before any element goes into production. Even after delivery, we must then install it. This can be a long process, further complicated by sampling of materials, finishes, veneers, and so on. Sometimes the fit-out window is quite tight, so we cannot afford to lose any time.”

Valerie described how their programmes often comprise numerous supplier sub-programmes: “When we put together a programme, even at tender stage, we must liaise with the supply chain and confirm all lead times and periods for installation. Sometimes these individual supply items need their own critical path – a mini-programme from the sub-contractor has to be integrated into the main Powerproject programme. It must also interface with other sub-contractors – the joinery contractor may have to make allowance for apertures or fittings based on information from a lighting supplier, for example. We use Powerproject to manage the flow of information between contractors.”



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To keep communications crystal clear, Valerie believes views are powerful tools for project managers to use. “I like the fact that Powerproject lets us choose to view the whole programme or a summary, such as for presentation to a client. Clients often only want to see one page, not a list of 6500 activities. Once you have it set up, you can save the views, or even create a coding structure and pull out individual programmes for separate sub-contractors.”

She went on: “Good communication is part of the expectation. We use Powerproject to help us produce regular reports, providing them bi-weekly or monthly to our fit-out and construction partners. We also update the client on a bi-weekly basis, including a programme marked up with progress in the report.”

## Breaking new ground

As the company expands it is inevitably encountering new challenges. Being able to plan and manage progress consistently and tightly in Powerproject is helping mac-group to develop robust, deliverable programmes for projects that constantly increase in size and complexity. Valerie described one project success as an example: “One George’s Quay in Dublin was an existing office building where we were contracted to add both new front and rear extensions to an existing building. It was more complex than your normal project, as we undertook stripping down areas of the building, construction of new areas, and fit-out of 140,000 square feet of new office space across six floors. We had to build a new steel frame and concrete structure with glazed facades, replace all the lifts, and more – it brought many elements to plan. We used Powerproject to break the programme down to the detail of every element of the works.”

This project featured several complicated supply elements, as Valerie outlined: “With all the windows in the existing building plus the new glazed facades in the extensions, the glazing package was hefty. The timeline for supply had to tie into the programme perfectly.”

Powerproject is also proving helpful as the company engages in more multi-phased projects. mac-group recently completed Phase 1 of a €40m logistics and industrial park at Baldonnell in south County Dublin, but the inclusion of various buildings in different phases has been subject to several revisions. “The project has been knocked back a few times as the client confirmed their needs and whether they wanted to combine two of the originally planned buildings into one; it meant that we had to present several different programme options. We plotted different scenarios in Powerproject based on two different sets of planning permission for the next phase.”

## Future focus

mac-group remains ambitious and confident about the future and sees Powerproject as an important support for its changing priorities. Valerie said: “We’re growing all the time. The bigger the projects get, the more we are asked – and are able – to do. For example, the need for traceability from programme to programme is important. We use base-lining so we can track projects from the tender programme through every revision, so we have the entire project history there and accessible in Powerproject. We can not only manage change but build best practices.”

mac-group is busy developing new best practices not just internally, but in its business operations. Its recent joint venture with modular specialist Skystone is offering a solution which is delivering high quality turnkey modular solutions, with units manufactured offsite for hotel, student accommodation and residential developments, delivering speed, quality control and predictability benefits. Units are not just pre-fab modules delivered with fully tested M&E and plumbing, but can be delivered with full furniture, fixtures and fittings pre-installed.

The Powerproject software gives them the flexibility to scale, Valerie believes: “Powerproject is such a versatile tool, we can use it on any project. A lot of our sub-contractors may use other tools, but we can integrate their information in Powerproject, and be confident we can manage every part of the process and every supplier sub-programme within it.”

The company has already noticed efficiency gains:

“Powerproject definitely helps us maximise our efficiency. We produce programmes carefully, so we can interrogate the float and, even if a supplier lets us down, we can check and manage that float, so it doesn’t impact the completion date.”

Valerie believes that the new approach is delivering immediate value at a company management level, saying: “As Planning Manager I am seeing Powerproject being used to control project planning across the group, ensuring the company directors are fully informed of workflow and resource allocations to manage the day to day operational teams.”

It looks like a bright future for this ambitious company, and for its relationship with Elecosoft. As it looks to build its modular business and contemplate further growth, mac-group is also looking at whether other tools in the Powerproject suite may support it; such as considering what benefits Site Progress Mobile, Powerproject’s companion progress management app, might add on larger construction sites.

mac-group is quite clearly determined to stay at the forefront of its sector and has already become the first interiors company in the Republic of Ireland to be awarded Global BIM Level

2 Certification by the UK certifying authority BRE. Its newly established BIM department is also exploring ways to tie Powerproject into planning via the Powerproject BIM module.

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