

Software review

Blue Ant Version 12 – Comprehensive updates for ease of use and performance

by Elisabeth Wagner

Service companies, whose financial profitability depends on their project business and who want to keep a constant eye on resources and costs, are among the most frequent users of Blue Ant. The software gives them comprehensive functionality for portfolio management, scheduling and resource planning at PMO and individual project level, and project employees' self-organization. On the basis of comprehensive and up-to-date planning, feedback and reporting data, the software supports costing and accounting and shows differences between target/actual at an early stage.

The manufacturer, proventis, is continuously refining the software to meet new market and customer requirements. The current version provides improvements in usability, extended functionality and convenience for agile work and a new concept for mobile access to the user interface and project data. Because larger customers, such as the global automotive supplier Bosch, are increasingly using Blue Ant to handle complex projects, the software's ability to process large amounts of data has also been enhanced.

Project planning and controlling

Blue Ant supports all essential functions for planning, management and controlling. The software also provides a number of special features.

Current resource planning through line management

A special feature of Blue Ant is the software's support for detailed resource planning integrating the line with various levels of commitment. This allows the project management to plan in certain skills without already requesting specific employees ("Simulated resources"). They then reserve these either as "real" resources by name or as "Virtual" resources. In the latter case, it is the line managers who first specifically name the relevant persons.

The new "Team resource" in Blue Ant Version 12 shortens the process considerably. Previously, when project management planned 10 virtual resources for Skill X, for example, it had to store them as 10 full-time or 20 part-time employees. Later it was necessary to specify the resources with their available times and to update the plans on this basis. With the team resource, the responsibility now remains with the line, i.e. with the reservation of team resources the task of project management is finished, as long as the line does not raise any objections. Only when the employees assigned to the project by the department - not in Blue Ant - start planning and working for the project do their names appear in the system. It is helpful for line management that it does not have to decide a long time in advance who is to take over the pending project tasks.

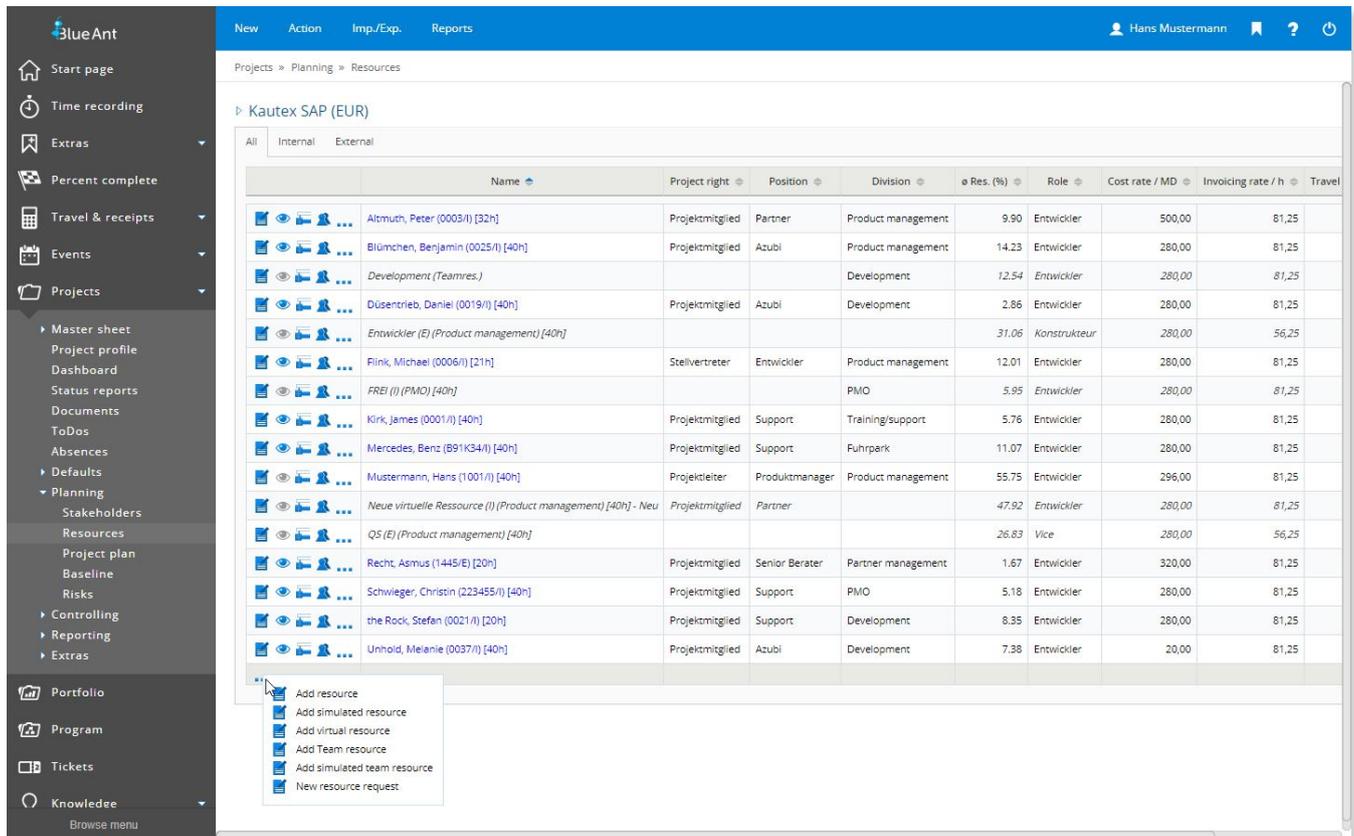


Figure 1: New team resources for resource planning, which first have to be specified by the line.

Like the other resource types, team resources appear in various modules. For example, line management sees when and for what team resources are generally planned and how individual employees are planned in the projects in its resource planning.

Functional additions for more operating convenience

In Blue Ant, users can define their own masks and thus create important overviews or provide functionality. In this way, it is also possible, for example, to set up a simple stakeholder management system – an option that users frequently take advantage of. The new version of Blue Ant now has its own stakeholder module. Stakeholders can be named here and structured according to freely configurable types such as client, public authority, customer, works council. Project management can freely define attributes such as influence, conflict potential or project proximity. Three of these attributes can be visualized simultaneously in a graphical stakeholder matrix.

In addition to these basic functionalities, you can define the phases in which a stakeholder is relevant and whether they are included in the status reporting process. If special reports for individuals or groups are deemed useful, you can generate an impromptu report based on defined criteria and specify the target group using the standard report functionality. Technically, the new module is fully integrated, so "Stakeholders" is now an element in the selection menu that is linked to each activity.

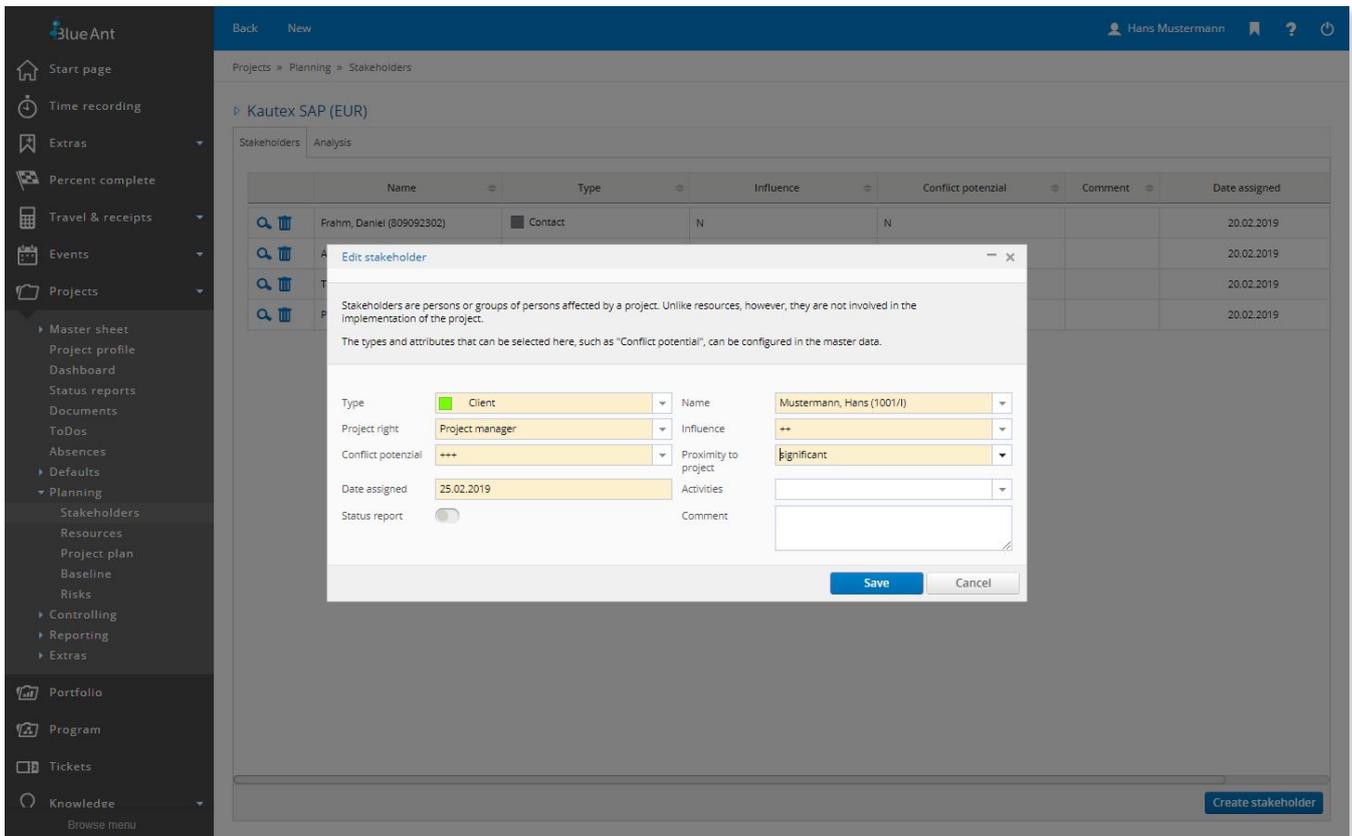


Figure 2: Input mask for the definition of stakeholders

Similarly, invoices can now be generated directly in the project management dashboard without changing modules. They are now anchored in project controlling, which avoids having to first switch to the "Management" menu, as before.

In Blue Ant Version 12, the tabular work breakdown structure is also available as an organization chart including relevant controlling information and editing options. This is helpful if individual sub-areas or the project hierarchy are of interest to the controller.

Graphics

The graphics have become more user-friendly and are now interactive in several places, such as in the utilization information. Users can change the time horizon in the timeline, zoom into the graphic, and display information on individual elements by mouse-over. As in the tables, users can now move from the overall view to the detailed view and back, for example from the view of the project landscape to the individual project and down to individual activities.

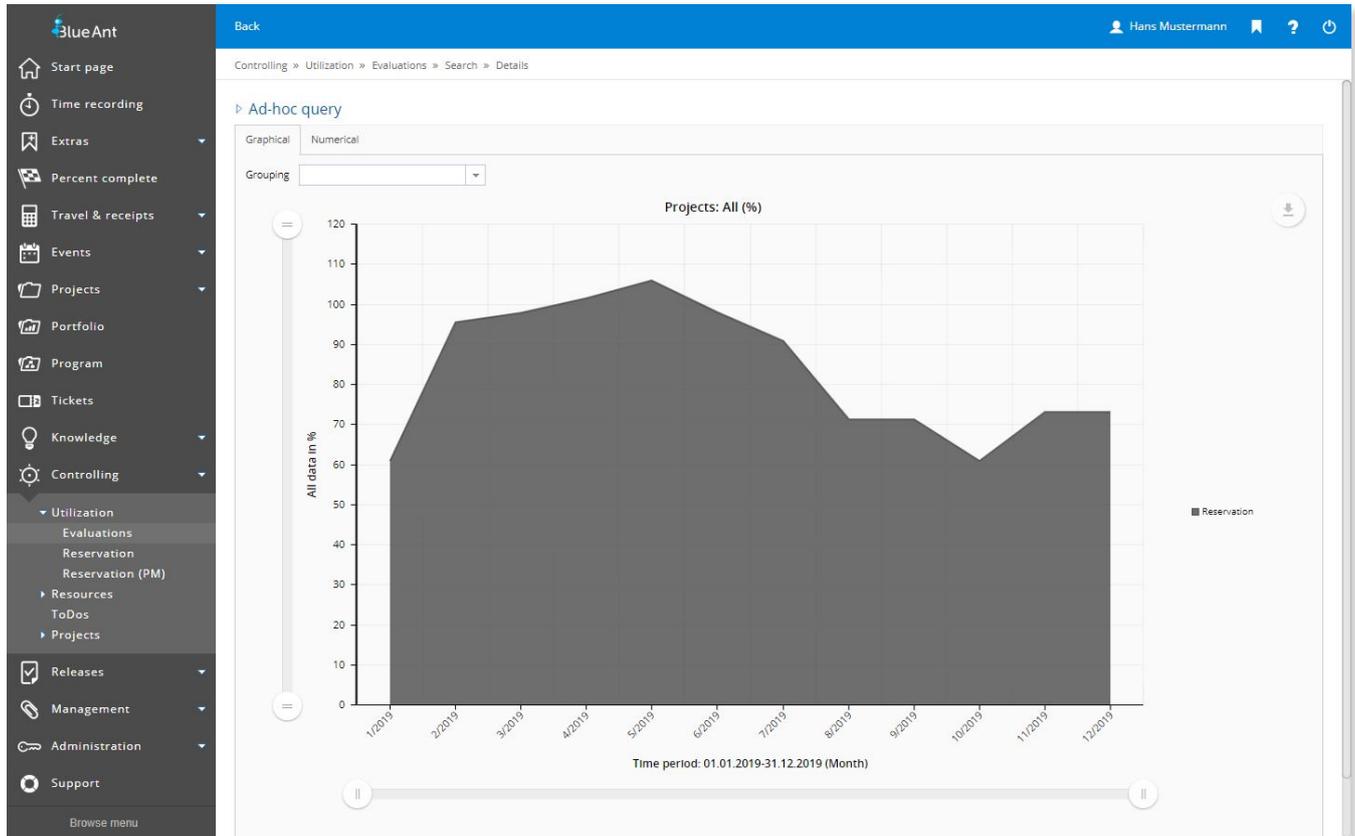


Figure 3: From the overall view to the detail; now also possible using graphical views.

ToDo lists

At the interface between project management and employees, the ToDo list is an important element that now appears directly in the project plan and no longer has to be accessed by other means. The ToDos can be sorted as needed, e.g. according to activities, status or responsibilities. If something changes, simply move the ToDo with the mouse and the links to the project schedule will remain correct. There are also new technical links to adopt ToDos from external systems. This simplifies work for companies who define the basic structure or the schedule in Blue Ant, but prefer to create individual planning in JIRA at the work level using tickets or ToDos, which can ultimately significantly reduce the need for adaptations at plan level.

Updates for the Kanban board and agile planning

Kanban board

The Kanban board was implemented in Version 11 of Blue Ant. Here, project management and employees can organize ToDos and agilely communicate with each other. In the current version, this functionality has been significantly expanded. Kanban boards can now be attached to any elements in the project plan, such as projects, sub-projects, activities or collective activities. Another new development is that completion dates, whose time

frame is automatically suggested when they are linked to a time-defined element, e.g. an activity, are now attached to the ToDos. If the activity is moved on the time axis, the ToDos are automatically rescheduled. A new button in the ToDo field is practical for employees to record their working time without first switching to the "Time recording" module.

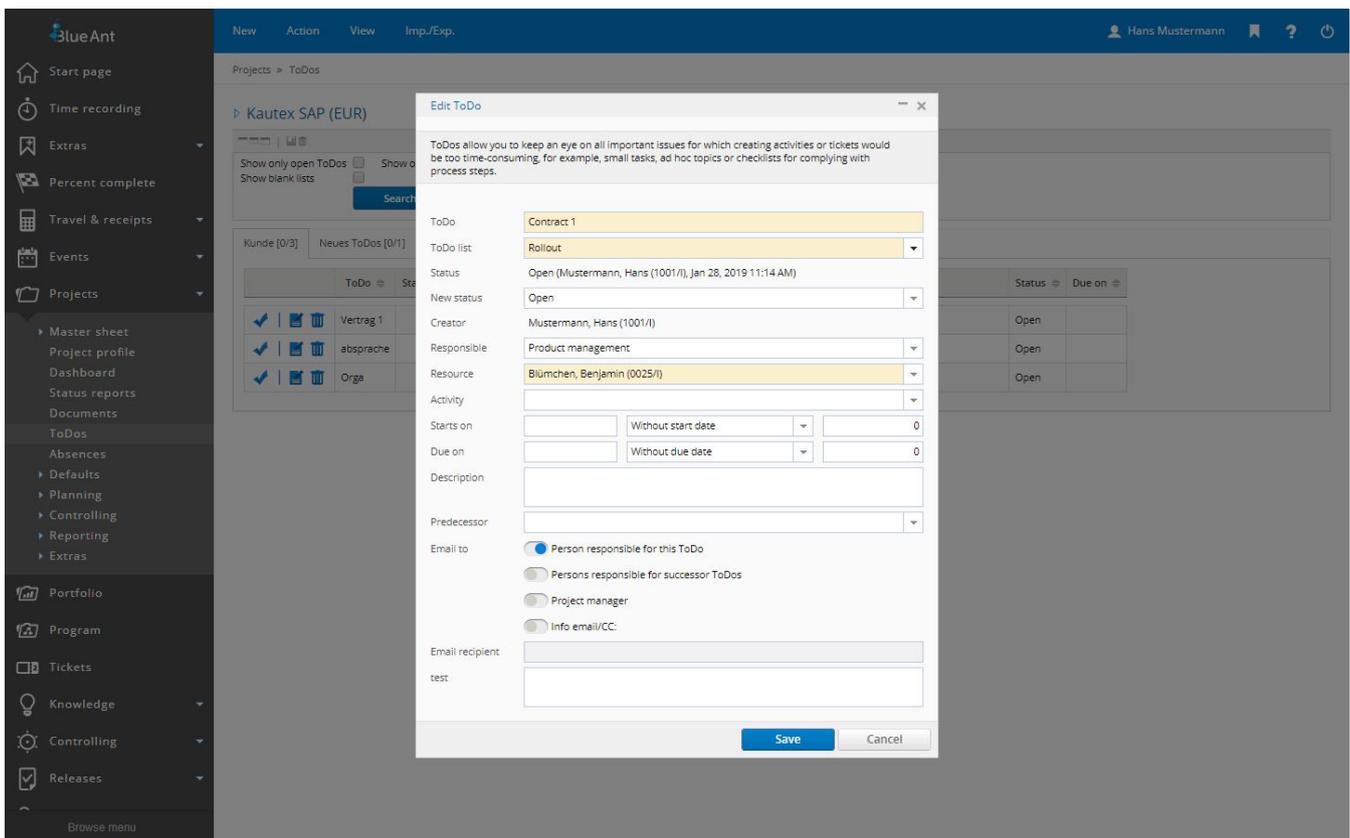


Figure 4: A time frame in relation to the activity duration is automatically suggested for the ToDo "Buy biscuits" within the "Protocol" activity.

Agile planning

The further development of the agile functionality is not limited to the Kanban board alone; the module itself has also been completely revised. It has now become much more powerful and can process even large amounts of data smoothly.

The navigation on the interface is now closer to Excel. Users can move comfortably through the project using the cursor keys, as opposed to just using the tab keys; one of the most interesting updates for users who work a lot with the system.

The change of the displayed time horizon, for example from the total sprint to the week to the day, has been technically reconfigured. Until now, this was done in a relatively complex background process, the required

computer time caused delays, and rounding errors sometimes occurred when recalculating at sprint level. All this has now disappeared; users can switch to the weekly or daily planning of a sprint with one click and without any time delay - a relief for all those who want to plan imminent sprints in detail. Under "Resources" you can see at a glance which project team members are scheduled.

		02.2016					
			Wk 6 2016	Wk 7 2016	Wk 8 2016	Wk 9 2016	03.2016
		Activity/Resource	No.	Work	Work	Work	Work
	+ 1. Activity	1	1.81	2.27	2.27	0.45	3.20
	+ Sprint 4	2	1.07	1.33	1.33	0.27	4.80
	+ Sprint 5	3	3.04	3.80	3.80	0.76	9.00
	- Workshop	4	0.53	0.67	0.67	0.13	
	Consultant (I) [40h]		0.27	0.33	0.33	0.07	
	Developer (I) [40h]		0.27	0.33	0.33	0.07	
	Efficiency	5					
	QM	6					
	Double-click for new entry...						
	Total		6.45	8.07	8.07	1.61	17.00

Figure 5: The time horizon for agile planning can be selected with a single click, like the weekly view for Sprint 3 here.

The "Column configuration" button above the table, which provides additional time perspectives, such as the annual or quarterly view or the entire project duration, is interesting from the reporting perspective. Whereas previously the planned values were always displayed here, further data such as actual values or costs are now available for selection. This new, system-wide feature is helpful in changing the column width, too.

Resource planning and reporting for project employees

Even though resource planning is basically one of the tasks of project management, in practice it is often the individual team members, for example in consulting projects, who agree on the tasks to be performed with the customer. You can now reserve such appointments yourself in time recording and no longer have to ask project management to do it.

The most frequently used interface for the project members' own organization, the calendar, has been completely updated. It now resembles common scheduling tools like Outlook, but its functionality goes further. Users can switch between different calendar views for day, week or month or alternatively select the list view. Holding the mouse over the calendar displays information about the entries, which can be opened and edited directly from this view or moved with the mouse with a single click. All appointments from Blue Ant are summarized here in one view: Absences (planned, requested, approved, rejected), holidays, public holidays, end dates for activities and Todos. Users working with the ticket system will automatically have the resulting tasks in their calendar. With so much information, it is helpful for orientation that activities, tickets, Todos can be labelled differently using a large colour selection.

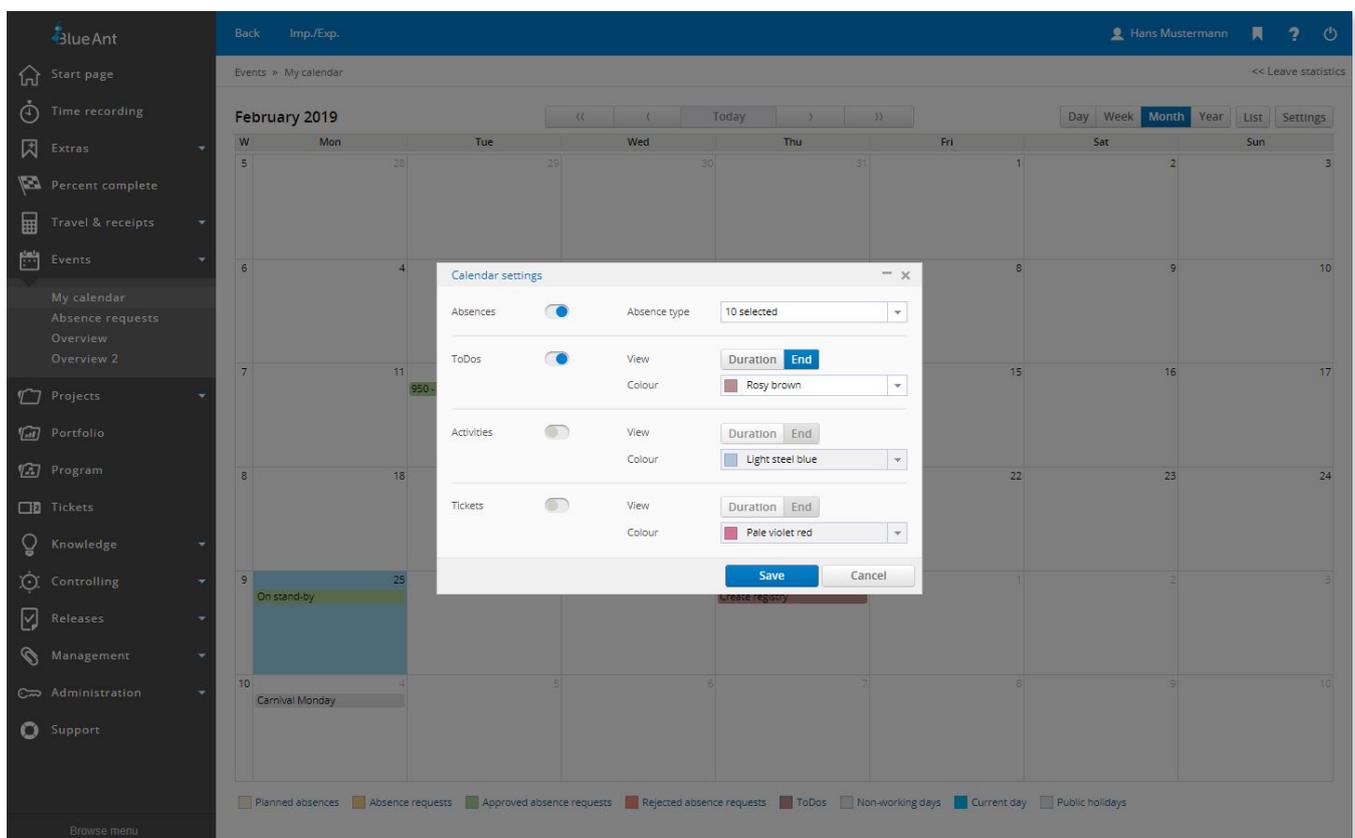


Figure 6: Labelling of various appointments using the colour palette in the newly designed calendar

The most common system activity for many project members is recording hours and days worked. The content of these entries often remains the same, only the times change. For this, Blue Ant now provides the option for users to define and use their own templates in the time recording screen.

For time recording via a mobile device, e.g. smartphone, Blue Ant has taken a new direction with version 12, which is to be gradually implemented for other functions as well: Responsive design instead of App. When the user accesses the program from a smartphone via the browser, the system recognizes the mobile device and

displays the content optimized for the screen size. The existing Blue Ant app for time recording will continue to be provided for the time being, but will not be developed further.

Technical features – upgrade in the "Engine room"

One of Blue Ant's strengths is its reporting engine, with which users can design reports and send them as status reports, invoices, requirement specifications, risk charts, utilization charts, etc. If mass data is processed, e.g. to obtain a monthly evaluation of all recorded working times of 500 employees in 100 projects, this can lead to performance problems or slow down other processes on the server. In order to avoid this for customers with complex project landscapes, evaluations can now be characterized as "High complexity" and thus outsourced to another server. The user does not notice anything; the system continues to run smoothly.

A new symbol is visible to the normal user in the header area: "Show my report jobs" - a central point for all reports generated within the last 14 days. The administrator has a similar central access point to manage reports, configure output formats (CSV, DOC, PPT, PDF, etc.) and intervene in case of malfunctions. Another new feature is the central view of report orders and error reports, which also serves as a starting point for error analysis

Sophisticated identity management and integration of systems via Single Sign On

Another development for administrators who are responsible for data exchange with other systems is the support of the SAML 2.0 process, with which cloud services can be integrated into identity management. Users benefit from seamless transitions and links. The same goal is pursued by the expansion of connectors, which facilitate data exchange in addition to web services and enable customers to import data without having to configure their own external interfaces. Thus, project-relevant information such as employee data, absence times, working hours, receipts, etc. can be updated during periods of low business activity. Some data can be exported in the other direction from Blue Ant to other IT systems.

GDPR adaptations

In 2018, no project management software can avoid the topic of GDPR. In fact, according to the manufacturer, many regulations were already fulfilled, e.g. the user-related definition of rights, logging of changes to rights groups, password security and encryption. However, some additions have been made, such as the anonymization of personal data. Previously, it was possible to deactivate such data records. They then remained in the database and were no longer visible in the system, but could be reactivated. Now, depending on your requirements, you can also make the data anonymous, i.e. overwrite the personal data permanently without deleting the associated data. In addition, there is a protocol for person-related activities that completely documents who changed which data and when.

System requirements and licences

Blue Ant technology is suitable for use under various UNIX, Windows and Linux variants on all major hardware platforms as well as in client/server architectures. The common database, which is accessed by all users, can be managed with standard database systems.

Blue Ant is available in three editions: the Standard version for companies with up to 100 users, the Enterprise version with open interfaces and single sign-on functionality and the Cloud version, including operation of the server infrastructure. The licence model makes a distinction between named and concurrent user licences, which refers to the maximum number of users logged in at the same time. In the Standard and Enterprise editions, the cost of licences to operate the software on your own hardware is between 350 and 430 euros per user. The Cloud Edition starts at €2,695 per year and is particularly suitable for smaller numbers of users up to approx. 50, for occasional projects or for extensive testing of the software in pilot projects. If the Cloud Edition is converted into a purchase version, the last six months of rental costs are deducted.

Conclusion

With seamless interaction of all levels and roles involved in the project, Blue Ant is a comprehensive all-in-one solution for project-oriented companies. Smooth functionality is a high priority for the manufacturer. The current version contains some technical updates which react to the increasing complexity of customer projects, e.g. the possibility to outsource complex evaluations from the project server. The introduction of responsive design for smartphone users, initially for time recording, paves the way for pleasant "customer journeys" even on small screens.

The consistent further development of the agile functionality is welcome, as more and more project managers are working with it. Blue Ant thus ensures that the data required and generated on the Kanban board is sensibly integrated into the overall system. In general, usability is one of this software's biggest strengths.

Contact

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