Starz Animation Toronto: Scheduling an Animated Fantasy Epic

Canada's leading digital animation studio plans the visionary visual effects for *"9"* with FastTrack Schedule

Customer Profile
Starz Animation Toronto
Toronto, Canada
www.starzanimation.com

Industry
Entertainment: Digital Animation

Challenge
Keep multiple projects on schedule, determine production capacity, and respond quickly to shifting priorities

Solution
Use FastTrack Schedule to develop production plans, 'what-if' scenarios, and schedule reports for team members and clients

Benefits
- Clear birds-eye view of deliverable dates and project status

- Proactive planning to shifts in scope, priorities, workloads

- Visual 'what-if' scenarios for vetting new projects

- Promotes effective collaboration between technology development and animation production teams

- Provides transparency and builds client trust

In an industry known for being incredibly imaginative and innovative, as well as intensely deadline-driven, Starz Animation Toronto needs a solution that enables it to keep multiple projects on schedule and prepare for the unanticipated changes that occur throughout the creative production process. Starz Animation Toronto found the right tool in AEC Software's FastTrack Schedule.

Proactive Planning is Key

As Canada's leading digital animation studio, Starz Animation Toronto works with major Hollywood and independent studios; having produced several popular animated features, including *"9"* for Focus Features, Tim Burton, and Timur Bekmambetov; and *"Gnomeo and Juliet"* for Miramax and Rocket Pictures. FastTrack Schedule played an invaluable part in the success of both digital films.

Terry Dale is Starz's Vice President of Operations, responsible for overseeing the studio's technology development and animation production teams – ensuring both entities are working together on projects effectively and efficiently.

"Our internal technology systems allow us to see what is happening with our projects on a day-to-day basis, but in a deadline-driven industry where things are always changing, this just isn't enough," said Dale. "We need a way to stay ahead. Rather than being reactive to shifts in resources, schedules and workload, we want to be proactive – plan for the unexpected and be confident in our ability to handle such a situation successfully, should it arise."

Frustration-Free with FastTrack Schedule
In its search for a project management solution to meet this need, Starz Animation Toronto initially invested in a system that couldn't meet the studio's needs.

Noting that the studio "wasted a lot of time" with a popular project management program that was too big and cumbersome, Dale says, "We needed a tool that could provide a clear birds-eye view of our ongoing projects, quickly communicate schedules and resources, and most importantly, allow us to look ahead and predict possible scenarios in the future."

"FastTrack Schedule is a lot easier, and is more task and detail-oriented than other project management solutions."

A member of Terry's team had used AEC Software's FastTrack Schedule before, and recommended he take a look at the software.

"I immediately realized FastTrack Schedule is a lot easier, and is more task and detail-oriented than other project management solutions I explored," said Dale. "And FastTrack Schedule is extremely cost-effective. I was excited about what we saw, so we bought several licenses, got it up and running in a couple of days and since then have left all of our previous project management frustrations behind."

"In a state of constant change, shifting priorities and varying schedules, FastTrack Schedule enables us to be flexible to our customers' requests and quick to make adjustments."

Terry Dale,
Vice President of Operations,
Starz Animation Toronto

Transforming 'What-Ifs' into Project Plans

Dale and his team at Starz Animation Toronto use FastTrack Schedule in the pre-planning stages of a project, to ensure the studio has the capacity to complete the work before making any commitments to prospective clients.

"Now using FastTrack Schedule, we input real-time information into a Gantt chart and then add data to create 'what-if' situations. This allows us to visualize what will happen if we take on another project and how we can fit it in without creating a production nightmare," said Dale. "It's easy, quick and exactly what we need to be more accurate and confident in our scheduling decisions. Additionally, we can export and print those 'what-if' scenario charts and project plans as colorful PDF presentations and share them with whoever needs to see exactly what is going on."

As production on a project begins, Dale and his team continue to rely on FastTrack Schedule's traditional project management capabilities of planning, tracking and reporting project goals to manage the team's deliverable dates.

"By providing a new level of transparency, we are able to build a new level of trust with our clients."

FastTrack Schedule was key to the success of the animated fantasy epic *"9"*, from Focus Features. Unlike other productions in the past that typically span up to two years, Starz Animation Toronto worked on a compressed time schedule for the movie. Faced with a lot to do in a very short period of time, FastTrack Schedule helps the team meet its deadlines, particularly important in the final stages of the project when the last images are being rendered. Mistakes in the finishing phases of production are devastating to animation productions teams.

"The animation industry is a very creative industry – we work with people who have big ideas, imaginative spirits and artistic breakthroughs that may arise at any minute. In a state of constant change, shifting priorities and varying schedules, FastTrack Schedule enables us to be flexible to our customers' requests and quick to make adjustments," explains Dale. "And FastTrack Schedule's presentation capabilities allow us to communicate those changes across departments as well as to the client directly."

"FastTrack Schedule is easy, quick and exactly what we need to be more accurate and confident in our scheduling decisions."

"For one of our current projects, the in-house producer saw what we were doing with FastTrack Schedule and requested the same ability to manage and monitor the project, and to create predictions with possible 'what-if' scenarios," said Dale. "By providing a new level of transparency, we are able to build a new level of trust with our clients."

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Current Success Leading to Future Opportunities

In short, Dale said, Starz Animation Toronto has been very pleased with FastTrack Schedule and the team at AEC Software.

"The people at AEC Software have been great to work with. Whenever we've had a question, they've responded immediately with resourceful answers," Dale said. "We look forward to working with them to explore new ways we can use FastTrack Schedule at Starz."

For more information, visit us online at http://www.aecsoftware.com