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as let you observe and manage the process as it moves from contract to completion.

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This year's lineup of construction accounting packages represents some of the best packages built to handle the complex needs of project-based cost accounting. Like many businesses, there's a lot more to making a construction business successful than simply reporting the historical debits and credits. For the contractor, the profitability of a job may be determined (for better or worse) long before the groundbreaking ceremony. The accuracy of the project manager's estimates, including important items such as materials cost, labor cost, equipment cost and subcontractor costs, will determine the project's financial success.

The packages reviewed here provide the tools to accurately estimate the job, as well as letting you observe and manage the process as it moves from contract to completion. This is accomplished by providing data input that lets you assign costs (direct and indirect) to the job, as well as providing specialized reports that help you to keep the pulse of the project. Other important aspects of most construction packages include scheduling and time management to make sure that tasks happen on time and in the right order.

Important considerations when shopping for a construction accounting package for your

business or client include the specific type of business, the volume of transactions that will be processed, and the number of anticipated software users. Construction-related activities fall into the broad categories of 'project management' or 'service management.'

Project management usually involves construction of specific buildings, houses, offices or other one-of-a-kind projects. The company oversees and manages each project from beginning to end, whether the work is done by their employees or

through the use of third-party subcontractors. Service management generally

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The volume of transactions to be processed determines the level of software that needs to be purchased. A small sole proprietor with a single bookkeeper needs less processing power than a national contractor with multiple locations and a large accounting staff. You should clearly define what your needs are as well as the operating limits of the software you're considering. Several of the packages reviewed here provide very economical alternatives for the small single-user environment.

Since software is an investment that you'll end up living with for many years, make the appropriate investment in time to assure yourself that the software can provide the features, tools and, most importantly, reports that you need. Each of these companies can provide a demo that you can try in your own environment. I would also like to encourage you to look beyond the 'star rating' of each of these products. A lower star rating generally translates into a more limited feature set, or a product with fewer bells and whistles. However, this may also mean a more economical package that still provides adequate information and reporting power. Every product here is worthy of consideration for a specific need and market segment.

[A-Systems Corporation 'JobView](#)

A-Systems JobView version 4.2 introduces a number of new features to an already powerful and mature construction accounting system. The program is available at three levels: Small Builder Advantage, Standard Edition and Preferred Edition. The company actually provides Small Builder Advantage for \$39.95, which is a 'basics only' version of JobView for startup companies. The Preferred Edition was reviewed here and costs \$4,995, so keep in mind that various features mentioned may not be available at all software levels.

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same, so if a company starts with the Small Business Edition and grows more, the data will port to the Enterprise Edition with no retraining or data loss. The Small Business Edition with the five core program modules and a single-user license starts at \$4,750. The same configuration for The Enterprise Edition starts at \$6,300.

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Best Software ' Timberline Office Accounting

Timberline Office is an integrated family of financial and operations software that covers a broad spectrum of related needs, from job cost to project management to service management. Recent enhancements include the Timberline Office Desktop, a customizable workspace that provides access to all applications and modules, a multi-function HTML pane, and a favorites pane. Other modules received numerous productivity enhancements and faster database access using the Pervasive SQL database engine. For a new client, an expected software cost for a suggested base package of Timberline Office for construction accounting would be \$7,390. This would include Job Cost, GL, AP, Cash Management, Address Book, Financial Statement Designer, Information Assistant, a one-year subscription to Anytime Learning, and a one-year EssentialCare service plan that includes software updates and unlimited support.

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Cougar Mountain Software ' Cougar Mountain Job Cost

Cougar Mountain's Job Cost module is an extension of its integrated core accounting suite. Although it is not as specifically oriented toward construction accounting as some of the other products reviewed, it has the essential tools and reports to provide a good amount of managerial information to manage project

costs in general. As a job cost module, it can handle either ‘make to order’ or

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(Single User, Network and Client/Server) to address the job cost accounting needs of a wide range of construction businesses. It offers a basic set of modules that covers the most common needs in a package that's easy to use. The company introduced various general enhancements to nearly every module this past year, as well as a number of reports. The Single User edition costs \$3,800; the two-user Network edition costs \$4,200; and the two-user Client Server edition costs \$5,200. Pricing includes all training and first-year support. Additional concurrent users are quoted based on package. As well, the Purchase Orders and Equipment Cost modules cost \$900 each.

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C-U-C Software ‘EMS 2000 Professional

EMS 2000 Professional is a fully integrated suite of job cost, service management and accounting modules that caters to the HVAC, sheet metal, electrical, plumbing, mechanical, roofing, fire prevention, and general contracting industries. Written and developed in a working service contracting company, EMS provides many built-in tools for the service contractor that might otherwise need to be tracked and managed by hand or other third-party software. The starting price level of the product is \$4,375 for the base accounting, job cost and reporting system, and comes with a six-user license. Additional users can be purchased.

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Easy Street, Inc. ‘Total Office Manager

Total Office Manager is a basic, easy-to-use package designed to provide the service management industry with a QuickBooks-style interface, plus extended features such as telephone messaging, contact manager, work order scheduling

and job costing. Total Office Manager costs \$8,999 for the basic five-user license.

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this series are 'compatible' with Windows XP, only a few have mounted the significant testing effort required to be 'certified' by Microsoft. In addition, eTEK also released a new version of its products for Microsoft Office 2003. A complete single-user eTEK XPress system can be purchased for \$4,875, including support and training; comparable complete multi-user MTX systems range from \$9,595 to \$11,995; large-scale Millennium+ SQL versions start at \$17,995.

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Geac Commercial Systems 'StarBuilder

StarBuilder is the high-end Microsoft SQL Server-based product from Geac Commercial Systems. It offers a full suite of integrated modules for medium to large architects, engineers, contractors, and construction companies. It features a solid user interface and underlying database technology worthy of high-volume, multi-user and multi-location enterprises. StarBuilder has a base price of \$8,000, ranging to \$30,000. Although not reviewed here, the company also offers a lower-level product called The Construction Manager (TCM) with a solid set of integrated job cost and financial accounting modules for the small construction company. TCM provides a well-designed user interface and open database (Microsoft Access) structure that makes it easy to learn with the additional advantage of data accessibility for customized reporting, data analysis or data export. TCM has a base price of \$2,600, ranging to \$10,000.

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Intuit 'Master Builder

Released in October 2004, Master Builder Version 10 brings more than 60 new features and enhancements, including new information-sharing capabilities, communications features, estimating enhancements, production tools, and new

accounting and business analysis features. Master Builder costs \$2,395 for the

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general accounting package to address the unique needs of construction contractors. It has a familiar feel to anyone acquainted with Intuit's QuickBooks line, and will appeal especially to any construction business that has already been using QuickBooks, but wishes to gain greater business management control by using job estimates, invoicing, costing and bill payment. QuickBooks Premier: Contractor Edition costs \$499.95.

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Maxwell Systems Inc. 'Maxwell Management Suite

Formerly called Maxwell NGS 2000, the Maxwell Management Suite offers a broad selection of modules to address nearly any construction specialty, including HVAC/Mechanical, Electrical, Heavy Highway, Materials, General Contractors and Subcontractors. Other optional add-ons and third-party tools are also available for a tailored business management solution. Version 6.1 continues the company's commitment to product improvement with enhancements to the Project Documents and Order Processing modules. Maxwell Management Suite costs \$7,000 and up, increasing as functionality is added.

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MICS 'Builder Information System

Builder Information System (BIS) from Management Information Control systems, Inc. (MICS) is a slick package that offers core job cost functionality with numerous optional integrated modules for a well-rounded system that can fit the needs of a wide variety of construction firms. The BIS Standard Edition begins at approximately \$3,200; the Professional Edition begins at approximately \$9,250; and the Enterprise Edition begins at approximately

\$12,025. Each price is for a typical system including initial training and

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of Completion analysis and indirect cost allocation to jobs. Toolbox pricing ranges from \$6,100 for a single-user system. The company also offers Toolbox Lite, which starts at \$1,000.

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Technology

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