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From the December 2006 Issue

This year's group of high-end accounting packages represents some of the very best, most adaptable and customizable solutions available for mid-market companies requiring systems capable of growing alongside their own businesses. These products boast an extensive selection of integrated modules that go well beyond the standard accounting, distribution and manufacturing modules, combining rich feature sets with well designed, efficient and user-friendly interfaces. With infrastructure often as the only limitation, these systems scale to handle high-transaction volume environments and hundreds of users working across multiple locations. While each of the systems reviewed can be used for a variety of businesses, we have tried to identify the industries where these packages set themselves apart from their competition.

Over the last year, these high-end accounting systems have not only added features but have significantly improved the user experience by adding tighter integration to Customer Relationship Management (CRM), Fixed Asset, Payroll and Human Resource Management systems. New powerful business intelligence tools and dashboards add to the experience by offering end users an almost infinite number of ways to easily view and analyze the enormous amounts of data contained inside these accounting systems.

As each of these products has matured, more third-party solutions have become available to provide complete robust vertical solutions for businesses that

require specialized service management, rental, manufacturing, project accounting

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or integration with third-party applications. A few of the vendors offer programmatic

access to the respective application's business objects through Visual Basic. This powerful approach allows for customization or integration that is not invasive to the native programming code, provides some level of upgrade protection, and also ensures the integrity of data added to the database.

To provide consistency among the reviews, the following areas were evaluated for each package:

Modules/Scalability — This section breaks down the available modules as well as any other significant features that merit highlighting. This section also mentions new modules and enhancements that have recently been added.

Usability/User Experience & Security — This section evaluates the overall user experience in using the software, from the menus to transaction entry. A requirement for any system in this class is the ability to tailor workflow to meet a user's needs and how that impacts the overall user experience. As expected, each of the systems uses some form of role-based security.

Extensibility — This section examines the availability of third-party vertical solutions and integration to solutions that extend the product's base functionality to include payroll, human resource management, fixed assets, CRM, Point of Sale and other applications. All but one of the solutions reviewed has a moderate to extensive list of add-ons. While the quantity of available add-ons is certainly a plus, our evaluation also focuses on the quality of the integration with these additional modules.

Integration/Customization — The ability to tailor,

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let the user create reports based on specific formats and needs. Other systems include Business Objects' Crystal Reports, which has become the standard for many mid-market and high-end accounting systems. Financial statement report writing tools vary from product to product, and each offers a dashboard of some sort as well as a variety of business intelligence tools.

Support, Training & Help — This section evaluates each program's online Help system, as well as the availability and methods of product support and training. Reasonably priced classroom or web-based training should be available for new users at convenient times and locations.

Overall Assessment — This section looks at the strengths and challenges of each of the products reviewed. Every system will excel in some industries and fall short in others. For that reason, we have attempted to identify the best industry fit for each of the systems and assess the quality and value of the system based on its best fit.

In closing, the reader is reminded that, while software reviews provide valuable insight to a system's features, strengths and weaknesses, it should never be the final authority for selecting a system. For that reason, a thorough needs analysis and system evaluation is absolutely essential for selecting an ERP system. □

We would like to give special thanks to the membership and leadership of the Information Technology Alliance (ITA) for partnering with us on a survey that provided feedback on the accounting systems included in this

year's

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technology
products and services. By partnering with them, we can pass on
part of their
extensive knowledge and experience to our readers, providing
additional
insight into the strengths and weaknesses of these systems. Along
this line,
each product review includes a section that lists some of the
specific “competitive
advantages” and “competitive disadvantages” that were
cited by ITA members as well as areas for improvement if noted.
More data
and information about the [ITA
survey can be viewed here](#).

Once again, we appreciate the assistance of the ITA professionals
who
participated in this survey, providing us with valuable knowledge
that we
have been able to pass on to you, our readers.

~~ Gregory L. LaFollette, CPA.CITP, Executive Editor

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appears to include some additional tools for project management.

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[Review](#)

Microsoft — Microsoft

Dynamics GP

Microsoft Dynamics GP (formerly known as Microsoft Great Plains) continues to be one of the flagship products in Microsoft's mid-market accounting lineup. And version 9.0 of Dynamics GP further strengthens its already rich feature set and builds on its strong position in the marketplace. At the same time, Microsoft is working to position all users of its various mid-market products for the successor product, simply referred to as "Dynamics," due to roll out over the course of the next few years.

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Sage Software, Inc. —

Sage Accpac 500 ERP

Sage Accpac 500 ERP (enterprise resource planning) is one of the most powerful members of Sage Software's mid-market business management systems portfolio. The system includes a full suite of modules including core accounting, distribution, project accounting, and a number of enhancements called "Accpac Options."

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Sage Software, Inc. —

Sage MAS 500 ERP 7.0

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— [SouthWare Excellence Series, Rev.12](#)

SouthWare Excellence Series is a comprehensive product with an impressive feature set that incorporates over 20 years of development and refinement. SouthWare's development philosophy seeks to continuously enhance the mature product with recent technology. Revision 12, released earlier this year, focuses on helping people perform their various roles in a more efficient and simple manner.

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