that have occurred. Products have already come and gone, vendors have exchanged products, and the web-based model is quickly transforming the expectations that mobile users and regional firms have.

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From the October 2007 Issue

Having done this review for the past three years, it's amazing to see the changes that have occurred. Products have already come and gone, vendors have exchanged products, and the web-based model is quickly transforming the expectations that mobile users and regional firms have. Last year, this review focused on the ease with which our 10-timekeeper firm could set up an installation, enter basic data and begin using each product (see the 2006 Practice Management review at www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/1326).

This year, the emphasis tends toward the user: what's missing, what would be nice to see and what could be done better. Over the last two years, assurances were made from software developers that big changes were coming, and we're beginning to see such changes. Two of the products are thin applications (one hosted), and have growing user bases, and one desktop application now has Vista support with tools built especially for it. Developers are going to have to meet some new expectations from firms, too, both in the areas of technology and in tools. Every firm must ask itself, "Which product fits my needs?" But many firms are re-evaluating their internal needs. Like what, you ask?

Well, two years ago, I would not have given much thought to implementing any Apple hardware. Tonight, I'm planning on buying two desktops and one laptop. MPAN agreements from Microsoft, specially designed for accountants and

the information that is necessary for us to do our job, support decision-making processes, and not require significant daily supervision. Clients have expectations: Their information needs to be secure, and it should be easily accessible when they want it. This unfortunate paradox means that accountants must review the security roles in use, be able to anticipate their clients' needs, and have well designed and implemented policies.

While no application would fulfill those demands perfectly, several applications include new security functions, particularly integration to Active Directory, roles assignments and multiple administrator levels. Interfaces are seeing marked improvement, and web-based applications no longer have cumbersome updates and refresh lags. Features to track proposals and win/loss rates are becoming popular.

Now would be an excellent opportunity to do a corporate scorecard and see how well you meet your clients' needs and recognize any shifts that may have occurred internally. Any application can tell you that a rainy day could be coming, but it's more important to understand the cause.

All of these products were reviewed last year, and every application has seen improvements, from database engines supported and easier installations to new project management tools, new export capabilities, and new modules or add-ons. More importantly, the applications now represent a changing focus seen across the business world. The visible difference between the applications is their adoption of newer programming and development standards and database vehicles, which drives the speed and security of the application.

Fundamentally, however, firms should not focus on the question of how fast or how much data can be shown. Rather, they should focus on how secure the data is, how much control the system administrator really has, and how well it can adopt or adapt to the processes of a package. While the reviews did not directly

score against such a rubric, firms should also consider this to be a necessary

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