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From the October 2005 Issue

In this day and age, many people are looking for various signs, and some even think, "The end is near." While I won't speculate as to what they think is coming to an end, it appears that some software vendors in this lineup believe that their end is near by the signs of their software. A few vendor submissions appeared to have lost all hope and given up, while others put forth a shining effort to revolutionize their product and the customer experience. In any case, I hope that the vendors are listening: Don't poor accountants deserve some happiness in this world, too?

The product lineup consists of vendors that have been in the Practice Management arena for several years. At the time of the review, some products were undergoing large-scale rewrites, such as Practice CS, while others were in the process of releasing new editions (TimeMatters 7 should be available by press time). To those vendors who are regularly producing new versions with major updates, I say "thank you."

The prototype firm for this review is a 10-timekeeper office with two partners and eight staff and admin members. This firm performs services for five bookkeeping clients, works on 10 audits, and has 200 tax engagements per year. Several of the employees graduated from college within the past three years and consider themselves technologically savvy. This firm attended and paid attention to the practice management issues addressed at AICPA Tech 2005: security needs, document

management, research tools and prospect tracking. And they are looking for a

Scalability and stability is the second area of focus. Products were only judged against their stated scalability — if a product was intended for five to 25 users, then the review was only concerned with how well it might serve the prototype firm. Similarly, if a product was intended for firms of all sizes, then the product was judged against implementations in both large and small firms. In some cases, software packages have a lower score because database security could be compromised or because crashing or errors persisted during the testing phase.

The next two sections cover productivity tools, features and reporting. Every product will have strengths and weaknesses, but the most important areas for this review were scheduling, easy timekeeping, research capabilities, and the ability to support sound management decision-making. Some products offered advanced
capabilities such as custom report building, marketing tools, court and legal proceeding handling, and document management. If your firm has no means of document
management at this time, it would be wise to consider a package that can assist in the handling of both your hardcopy and softcopy documents.

Rounding out the reviews are sections for support and integration. Surprisingly, some packages had missing or very limited Help sections. For this review, Software Technology, Inc., CaseWare and LexisNexis Time Matters provided the best sets of documentation, while CCH and Sage provided great assistance with setup materials,
guides and tutorials. Integration considers basic capabilities such as synchronizing with Outlook and handheld devices.

Because some of the vendors requested information as to how scoring works, here's the basic principle applied to overall ratings for this review:

5 STARS — This product is amazing, and the vendor should

3 STARS — The vendor has striven for mediocrity. At one point, this product was likely a 4- or 5-star product, but has since been neglected.

2.5 STARS — 70 percent of the features expected are available, and it might take a while for some users to get accustomed to the software. Some users will know that better software exists and wonder why management was so cheap.

2 STARS — All users take significantly longer to learn to use the features of the software, and most people desire a new product within the next year.

1.5 STARS — No one likes it, it makes you mad to work with it, and if a company forces it on staff, some people will likely quit by the end of the week.

1 STAR — The interface isn't written in English, and all your time and billing entries are exported to Nigeria. For those just entering the search for practice management software, you might be best to hold off until 2006, as some major updates are expected. Next year's review will likely play host to many 4- and 5-star products.

Mr. Altman is information systems manager for Altman, Rogers & Co., an audit and tax firm with four offices across Alaska. He also serves as vice president of Altman Consulting and Technology, Inc., an accounting and mapping technologies service provider.

AccountantsWorld — Accountant's Office Online

> AccountantsWorld offers Accountant's Office Online, a web-based application that enables firms to access various AccountantsWorld applications including the Time2Money time management and billing system...

CCH Tax & Accounting — CCH ProSystem *fx* Practice

ProSystem *fx* Practice 2005, Version 6.2, provides extensive practice management tools that integrate with the ProSystem *fx* Office suite. Practice 2005 offers time tracking, contact management, billing, project management and custom reporting.

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Review

LexisNexis — TimeMatters 6

TimeMatters 6 provides for the necessities of timekeeping, customer relations, billings, employee scheduling and project management.

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Review

Office Tools Pro– Office Tools Pro 2005

Office Tools Pro 2005 is a complete office management suite, offering document management, calendaring/scheduling, project tracking and contact tracking.

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Review

Sage Software (CPASoftware Division) — CPA Practice Manager

CPA Practice Manager includes time and expense entry, client and project management and a large selection of pre-sorted lists for reporting.

Thomson Creative Solutions —

Practice CS

Practice CS, Version 2005.1.0, provides a new environment for time and billing with its initial release.

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Review

Practice Management Software —

Executive Summary

Our prototype firm felt fairly uninspired by some of the products in this review. While looks aren't everything, if the software is intended to replace your background for six or more hours per day, they count for something. Firms should look for software that offers digital dashboards, intuitive user interfaces, advanced scheduling features, and integration with newer software and widely available technology.

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