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costs it could eliminate (e.g., wages of a seasonal employee), the revenue it could generate (e.g., additional services you could offer), and the freedom it could ...

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As an accountant, one of the most important decisions you make is choosing which software to use. With so many options available, choosing wisely can be a daunting

task. Throughout my career, I've been exposed to accounting software as an end user,

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(e.g., extra time to spend with family). If these benefits exceed the price, purchasing the software is a viable option. Avoid falling into the “it-doesn't-do-everything-I-want-it-to” trap. There is no such thing as perfect software, and focusing on imperfections can distract you from simply analyzing whether the software's value exceeds its cost. Keep in mind that if the value is greater than the cost, you will receive an immediate benefit by making the purchase. Waiting for something to exist that has everything you want delays this benefit, costing you time and opportunities you will never get back.

- **Does the feature set align with your needs?**

Generally, you will be evaluating software against competitors. Each competitor provides a unique list of features and a unique price. Often, products become more expensive as more features are added, but these additional features are not always helpful for all users. Find a product where the features included most closely align with your needs. Generally speaking, the price will correlate accordingly, and you'll avoid paying for expensive features you don't need.

- **Does the software have a user-friendly interface?**

Many accounting software interfaces in the market today were created before intuitive user experiences became a priority. In recent years, companies like Apple and Google have inspired a wave of modern, user-friendly designs. These are created by product designers who spend their entire careers learning how to make human-centric, elegant, and easy-to-use software. Not only do product designers make things look nicer, they place features where they make the most sense so you can work faster.

- **How easily does the software integrate with other software?**

With advancements of cloud-based software, companies are increasingly willing to

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- **How does the software company gather feedback from users?**

While it may seem obvious to speak with customers to understand their needs, many software companies don't take the time to do it! Many limit customer interactions to an email address where enhancement requests can be submitted. Some important ways software companies should seek customer feedback include watching how customers currently work, asking questions as part of specific feature research, or validating prototype designs to make sure the product is usable. If you never hear from your software company, you should question whether it does the necessary research to build solutions that really meet your needs. On the flip side, if your software company reaches out for feedback, be sure to make the time to give it. The accounting industry as a whole will be better off if software makers better understand the specific, unique needs of practitioners.

- **How well does it serve the needs of various roles in your office?**

In accounting firms, it's common to have different individuals playing different roles. Demonstrating the software to people in these different roles is important to ensure all users' needs are met. Less-experienced staff may be doing more of the day-to-day work, while more experienced managers or partners may be coordinating work, analyzing profitability, and managing relationships. Ideally, software should be comprehensive enough to serve both granular and high-level needs. Great software will make work easier, while also providing deep insights into the work that is being done. Surfacing insights is often accomplished with reporting or dashboard features that summarize the work being tracked in the system.

- **What kind of training and support is offered?**

As products evolve, they inevitably become too complex to understand everything in one sitting. A good software company provides a tailored onboarding experience to

get you started, but also gives you information about additional features contextually

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backups, and protection against physical theft. When using cloud-based software, the software company is responsible for providing these security measures for you. If you are considering a cloud-based solution, ask about the level of encryption used. Industry standard levels include AES 128 or AS 256. Stay away from companies that use DES3 or that don't use encryption at all. You should also ask if the company does anything to further secure personally identifiable information (PII), like adding an additional layer of encryption. Finally, when you visit the company's website, more-secure sites will display "https://" in the URL, not "http://."

In addition to considering these questions, be sure to take advantage of free trials offered by different companies. Enter your most challenging client's information and see how it is handled. Don't forget to read reviews contained in accounting publications or written by the software's customers. Making good choices for software is not easy, but hopefully the guidance in this article will help you make more effective decisions.

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