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Microsoft will debut a new program this fall geared toward small businesses. Although a finalized version of the software is not yet available and as such we cannot perform a thorough review of it, the review staff of The CPA Technology Advisor was able to obtain a beta version and thought information about this product would be valuable to our readers because of the potential force Microsoft could have on this market.

Microsoft Office Small Business Accounting is an off-the-shelf program that will be available at most retailers that currently offer Microsoft's Office and operating system as well as reseller partners and independent-software vendors (ISVs). Microsoft has extended significant effort toward the ISV community to help foster a collaborative environment that will develop applications and web services that integrate with Small Business Accounting. It will be offered as a stand-alone program and in a bundle with the professional Office 2003 applications, called Microsoft Office Small Business Management Edition. It will support up to five concurrent users. This package will also include an updated version of Outlook with Business Contact Manager. Microsoft has not specifically laid out the retail strategy for the program and has not made public the anticipated retail price.

The program offers a variety of assistants that ease the setup of new companies and includes dozens of account templates for common business types and can be used to support multiple companies. The main Company dashboard strongly resembles Outlook 2003, with multiple panes that allow the user to view several financial activities at the same time. These screens can be customized to display reminders such as inventory items to re-order, cash flow forecasts, overdue invoices and a bank account summary.

Additional dashboards are available from a tabbed list on the left of the screen,

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payroll service is a hosted service that is accessed directly through the program and uses the same interface, since it was developed specifically for the Microsoft product. This optional service is available in three versions, allowing users to either manage payroll themselves with the ability to print fileable forms or e-file for an additional fee, or

completely outsource payroll management to ADP, including filing, printing and mailing services. Small Business Accounting on its own includes a timesheet recording system that can be tied in to both the payroll and the billing system. The program's inventory management system offers FIFO costing, but does not support multiple costing methods or other more complex inventory management options. Therefore, the program is more suited for less-complex inventory-based businesses or other types of concerns such as service-based businesses.

The system includes more than 40 customizable reports and includes the expected trial balance, P&L, balance sheet and a variety of transaction detail reports, as well as a small selection of reports focusing on customers and receivables, sales, vendors and payables, purchases, inventory, banking and employees and payroll. One of the greatest attributes of the program is its solid integration with Word, Excel and Outlook, allowing easy customization of reports, development of professional client letters, transfer of data between the program and Excel, and integration of contact management data from Outlook. We were not able to test upward migration capabilities with Microsoft's more robust Small Business Financials solution, which is geared toward companies needing stronger accounting and business management functions. The program supports import of existing XML, Excel and QuickBooks data.

Microsoft says the program is focused at users currently using spreadsheet and word processing applications for their bookkeeping, but there is no doubt the company is trying to make a play for the lucrative market that is currently dominated by Intuit's QuickBooks.

Overall, the system provides a clean and crisp interface with good functionality for

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