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The Small Business Administration estimates that there are over 23 million small businesses currently operating in the United States.

Of these, nearly 75% are considered sole practitioners, basically one- or two-person operations. Many of these businesses will purchase some type of business/financial software in the near future. To be sure, there is not a shortage of quality accounting software products aimed at the small business entrepreneur. But what about those who may need a little more help or a little less confusion?

It's no secret that traditional accounting software can frighten off new business owners who already have enough on their plate with which to deal. I just had a small business owner tell me the other day that she had no idea what 'amortization' was. This lack of knowledge doesn't make her unintelligent; it just means that she's not an accountant. So a program that routinely uses terms like asset, depreciation, equity and amortization will certainly give financially challenged business owners pause.

Enter programs like Shoebox Records, QuickBooks Simple Start and Bookkeeper 2005. These off-the-shelf type programs are designed specifically for the 'non-accountant' small business owner who wants to get a better handle on their income and expenses, but doesn't want to become a financial expert in the process.

Editor's Note:

This section appeared along with our full review of Small Business Accounting Software in the June/July 2005 issue. That review can be located [here](#).

Shoebox Records from SageFire Inc. (www.sagefire.com; 866-804-6444) bills itself as a 'visually smart and functionally simple financial record tracking solution.'

Shoebox Records, an online money management program is designed for the small

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a logical sequence and drop-down arrows and guides available for most fields. Shoebox Records uses feature descriptions like Enter Transaction, Company Profile, Track Invoices and Balance Accounts. Using Shoebox Records, you can easily record routine expenses, track income, perform online invoicing and even write checks.

When entering transactions or creating invoices, the screen will display the last five entries or transactions posted. When creating invoices, you can also customize your invoice logo. And the auto-tracking feature is terrific. You can choose to enter an annual mileage total, or enter mileage by occasion with an area to enter the purpose of the trip.

Paul Bretz, owner of Mile Hi Nuts and Candy in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, has used Shoebox Records since June 2004. "Shoebox Records is very user friendly," says Mr. Bretz. "Data input is quick and complete. I record my sales on a daily basis, along with expenses, and it takes less than five minutes."

Reporting is limited, with a total of 13 reports including Income and Expense, Balance Sheet and Trial Balance reports. If you get stuck, a comprehensive Help feature is available or you can take advantage of the Customer Support feature included in the monthly fee. For more in-depth training, SageFire also schedules online training sessions for all system users.

Because Shoebox Records is an online product, there is no software to install or maintain. For customer peace of mind, Shoebox Records uses industry-strength encryption technology to ensure that customer financial information remains secure.

Shoebox Records is a strong advocate for using a tax professional for financial planning, rather than the do-it-yourself approach that traditional software may use. As such, Shoebox Records offers the Tax Advisor Platform, which provides the accountant with access to their clients' financial information online. This feature,

which must be purchased separately, eliminates the need to provide the accountant

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latest QuickBooks product, aimed at small businesses looking to get a better handle on their business finances. Written specifically for those unfamiliar with standard accounting terms, Simple Start uses common terminology throughout the program, such as money in and invoices that haven't been paid. This phraseology makes it much easier for non-accountants to use the program, without sacrificing functionality. This entry-level product will produce customer estimates, run sales reports and track bank deposit details. And with its uncluttered data-entry screens, it only takes minutes to create invoices, record expenses or write checks.

Simple Start takes minutes to install, and total company setup time is generally less than 30 minutes. Simple Start's "setup interview" asks new users a series of questions that determines how your business will operate. Once these questions are answered, you're ready to begin.

When setting up your company, you can choose from a variety of company types, including Sole Proprietor, Partnership, Limited Liability, S Corporation or Non-Profit. Because there are subtle differences between corporation and sole proprietors, you can be sure that tax information will be accurate.

The main screen of Simple Start has three sections: Money In (includes estimates, invoices, sales reports and deposits), Your Business (contains customer, vendor and bank account information) and Money Out (where checks are written and recorded, and refunds processed). These sections employ a flowchart-style format so users can quickly familiarize themselves with normal workflow. These same functions can also be found on the left side of the screen.

Navigating through Simple Start is easy. Clicking on one of the system features will display a list of available options. To speed up the initial setup, Simple Start lets you add customers and vendors as needed. Data-entry screens have drop-down arrows for quick lookup capability. Under Related Activities, you can choose to edit items,

view history of an invoice or see a list of invoices that haven't been paid. For those in

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available for an additional cost. A series of sales, customer and tax reports is included, as are accountant reports, which include a Profit and Loss report (P&L) and a Balance Sheet. Intuit includes 30 days of free support with the purchase of Simple Start. List price for Simple Start is \$99.95. An online version is also available for those who need more mobility. QuickBooks Simple Start is a good entry-level program for small businesses. What makes Simple Start an even better choice is its ability to expand as your business does.

Bookkeeper 2005, developed by MySoftware and distributed by Avanquest USA (www.avanquestusa.com; 800-325-0834) is an easy-to-use program that is geared around the core activities of a small business and maintains a true GL and chart of accounts in the background. A primary navigation screen allows access to virtually all of the modules, including basic inventory, vendors, employees, customers, payables, deposits, AR, writing checks, creating invoices and estimates, and purchase orders. Bookkeeper also includes a payroll application that can track vacation and sick leave hours and manage federal and state withholding and various pre- and post-tax deductions. Users can also subscribe to the vendor's tax table updates to keep track of changes to withholding taxes. The subscription covers a year's worth of periodic updates. The payroll function can also pull data from the system's Timesheets module, which provides multiple tracking capabilities, whether keeping track for billing activities in a professional firm, for payroll purposes, for job or project tracking, or for productivity measurement. The system can also print forms W-2, W-3 and 1099.

Common tasks like invoicing, entering transactions, and managing bank accounts are extremely simple, with data-entry screens that use pull-down lists and other data-entry aides.

The system's AP module eases tracking of bills and allows payment in batches or

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sheet reports, budgeting, cash flow and income statements. AR and AP aging, inventory, and a variety of banking, client and vendor reports also add to the depth of the program's reporting.

Bookkeeper's inventory system provides good basic support for tracking whole and partial quantities and can be set to alert the user when item levels reach a minimum level. The system's To-Do utility also provides the user with sortable alerts, whether automatically generated by the system or added by the user. The "to do" items generated by the program include alerts for pending bills, invoices, inventory, reconciling bank accounts, re-ordering checks and printing tasks. The system includes a good help utility that provides task-specific assistance throughout the program.

Bob Sturm, president of GT Motorcars Inc. in Gainesville, Florida, recently automated his accounting department with the MySoftware Bookkeeper package. "We were very surprised how easy this program was to set up and use," he said. "Employing a manual accounting style for the last 15 years made the thought of automating our practices slightly intimidating, but this software was so simple to understand, the transition took half the time we originally projected."

Bookkeeper is available for \$29.95, and the add-on subscription to the payroll tax updates costs \$19.95.

Technology

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