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From the Oct. 2007 Review of Practice Management Systems

Practice CS, a component of the CS Professional Suite, offers midsize firms a collaborative, real-time approach to practice management. Boutique accounting firms will be rewarded with the easy interface and appropriate client management tools, while midsize firms (30 or more timekeepers) can implement the software as part of the full-service suite.

Ease of Use/Flexibility – 5 Stars
From the point of installation, users will recognize the emphasis placed on ease-of-use. Gone are any further concerns about software setup difficulties; that's been replaced with a three-step, guided installation process. Now tailored more for a server environment, the software can still be run in a desktop-SQL instance for smaller shops. Part of making something easy is removing extensive, under-used options. Users will find that the billing process and reporting tools provide the bare necessities. Not to say that this will impede a workflow; billing options include multiple types, the ability to setup recurring bills, by engagement, and templates within engagements that provide for mark-up/mark-down defaults.

Some firms may need to change how they go about their processes. Certain management styles will benefit from the emphasis of on-demand, real-time statistics provided by dashboarding and engagement control. Users access general work processes, setup functions and dashboards from the three focus areas of clients, staff and firm. Dashboards provide snapshots of data (WIP, historical collections, firm billing, staff time, etc.) from portlets selected for viewing.

The addition of the engagement/project management function may introduce a

from the SQL database capabilities, and the growth structure afforded by adopting tools as needed from the suite is an advantage. Practice CS appears to be an extremely stable application and, to date, has allowed for easy upgrades without fear of data loss. Concerns over growth should be directed more toward the in-house administrative level. Engagement systems may take on different forms within a company where partners manage projects differently. This can be a concern administratively, but the allowance of templating and regular training can alleviate much of that problem. Most Practice CS features require initial adoption, though Outlook integration and calendaring can wait. They'll already be set up, but you can choose not to use them.

Productivity Tools/Features – 4 Stars
While remote or offline timekeeping is not available within Practice CS, remote processing is available via Virtual Office CS. Practice CS is intended to manage projects in real-time, in the office. Growing firms will benefit the most from this, though any firm that wants to use project-based billing and staff management practices should highly consider this package. The Client Management module allows for prospect tracking, which can help firms track new clients as well as the reasons they may have lost certain bids.

Partners who feel they can never keep up with the ongoing projects can use project management reporting and dashboarding tools to get the information as they require it, no longer waiting for staff meetings. Of course, as with any product, staff must be well trained and understand the value in maintaining the system with high accuracy. If admin are always plagued by never knowing if staff are in or out, they will appreciate having access to that info now. Having some sort of familiar IM interface would be better, but the in/out board for right now is sufficient. However, since it doesn't have any sort of auto updating or quick buttons for changing status, I foresee this as being

inaccurate at times. (Personally, I'd suggest making a pop-out window

and can affect a number of clients simultaneously.

The ability to view your Outlook calendar and task items (tasks require target dates) on the staff calendar is excellent. Document management is not provided within Practice CS, but the program integrates very well with FileCabinet CS, which is available for an additional cost. The Client Management module tracks client communications, but website tracking is not available within Practice CS.

Reporting – 4 Stars
Although there are few available reports, the flexibility of the report writer is ingenious in providing the user with virtually any report he wants. The reports are intended to augment the data seen in the real-time views and assist for software setup analysis. Several are intended to provide details regarding available default values, sorting options and company workflow options. However, there are several useful, concise reports for client investment analysis, billing and time summaries, and project status reports. Users may select sort and layout options, and date ranges are both built-in and customizable. One item that is useful is the report basis — some reports can be modified to be based on several different variables. Firms should ensure during testing that they can recover the information they need if printed reports remain a necessity.

Support/Help/ Updates – 5 Stars
Thomson Tax & Accounting is a major software vendor that has provided quality products for many years. The innovations shown in Practice CS show the vendor's commitment toward building quality products. Downloads and a knowledgebase are both available in a secure portion of the Thomson Tax & Accounting website, and a newsletter is published for users of the CS Professional Suite. An assortment

of fee-based online web classes are available, and the vendor hosts an annual

entries), and exporting of contacts. No support for mobile devices is presently available.

Relative Value – 4.5 Stars
Larger firms looking for a suite approach will see the most value from Practice CS. Other firms in need of an efficient product can benefit from the real-time information about projects, clients, firm cash flow and ease with which billing can be accomplished. For a 10-timekeeper office, a renewable license fee is $3,000; perpetual licensing is $4,500.

2007 Overall Rating: 4.5 Stars

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