county taxing authorities. The software, from noted tax research publisher CCH Tax & Accounting, also has available options that integrate or otherwise enhance the ProSystem fx Tax system, including tax planning and analysis, financial and estate planning, document management, practice management suite, client organizers, a variety of research tools and a web development tool application. The company also develops programs for trial balance, fixed assets, sales tax compliance and write-up/engagement and document management. The cost for our prototype firm (details on page 8) would be approximately $11,000 based on catalog pricing, although additional discounts are available through bundling and promotional offers. The company also offers a pay-per-return pricing system for firms with lower volume. CCH representatives can provide a more accurate pricing estimate based on firm specifics.

Learning Curve ' 4.5 Stars

As demonstrated in our recent meeting with CCH Tax & Accounting, the company has dramatically redesigned the interface for ProSystem fx Tax, providing an additional Worksheets View, as well as generally easing navigation through components such as a new navigation panel that can be easily hidden to allow greater work space, or returned to view when necessary. The system's master client list includes multiple query tools that enable searching by client ID or name, as well as filtering by tax product, status, last activity, office group, preparer or other staff.

The system allows data entry via multiple methods, including form-based, interview and organizer modes and the new Worksheet View, which provides an additional interview method. Users have the ability to switch between these methods with one click. The Worksheet View includes a convenient record of data entered that can simplify review processes or be used for record keeping purposes, and enables simplified cutting and pasting of data, even from multiple spreadsheet columns and rows into the system using its 'grid' system of data entry, which was also

demonstrated in our meeting with CCH. ProSystem fx Tax employs smart data-entry

integrate with each other, enabling them to act as a full suite for financial professionals. As such, ProSystem fx Tax and its sibling programs share common interfaces and databases, transferring data throughout the system as needed. This singular database structure enables changes to entities, assets or forms to occur throughout the suite of programs with only one action on the part of the preparer. This common interface structure helps users learn the system, and the memory allocation system reduces redundant entry. Return history is available for both forms and worksheets.

Use/Workflow & Productivity Tools ' 5 Stars

ProSystem fx's organization structure adds to the productivity of the program, with fairly intuitive icons and shortcuts to primary system features. The forms tree that appears on the left side of the screen during data entry eases movement between and selection of forms within a client return, and allows moving between methods of data entry. The system allows overrides of its automated calculations and provides methods of tracking these overrides, as well as an audit trail. The system includes numerous user and management workflow tools, including the Client Manager, which aids in maintenance of client profiles, while the To Do List helps organize tasks and manage client-related items and personal activities such as assigning due dates and prioritizing items. DataScan Plus lets users search for clients that are affected by new tax law changes or other criteria and enables building and saving customized searches. The function also provides an array of customizable analytical reports, lists and mailing labels.

ProSystem fx Tax also includes a diagnostic function that examines state and federal forms for errors or missing data and provides suggestions for maximizing credits and deductions. Through Tax Notebook, professionals can give online tax organizers to clients as well as send electronic returns to remote clients, whether wintering in

Florida or abroad. Through integration with CCH's Engagement program, users can

Betty L. Owen, a CPA in Collierville, Tennessee, had used ProSystem fx Tax for about 15 years while working for another firm. 'When my partner and I started our own practice in 2000, we evaluated a couple of other packages but decided to stay with the system because I'd always been very happy with it,' she said. 'ProSystem handles multi-state returns very well, and if I need assistance with more complex returns, CCH provides excellent assistance through their help line.'

Integration, Import & Export ' 5 Stars

As noted earlier, ProSystem fx Tax integrates with CCH's ProSystem fx Office, which includes accounting, office management and a wide array of tax compliance applications. This integration aids in data flow, whether it's asset depreciation data or K-1 information. The system also now supports importing of business K-1 information into the individual K series Interview Forms, and tax codes have been added to the system's G/L Direct link to include Forms for Partnership, Corp and S-Corp. Rental tax codes have also been added for 1120 returns. In addition to saving returns in *.PDF output, ProSystem fx Tax can export and import files in spreadsheet format and can import data from GainsKeeper Pro. CCH offers data conversions for users of most competitive tax programs, as well.

Support/Training & Help System ' 5 Stars

In addition to several tutorials and instruction guides that are built into the program, as well as an advanced help utility that includes extensive right-click menu items such as Step-by-Step guidance and context-specific assistance and form instructions, CCH offers an online support center with product updates, FAQs, news, demos and training options. The company offers seminars, web-conferences, on-site programs and its annual tax update session, with some courses eligible for CPE credit. As discussed in our meeting, there is also a reasonably active, user-managed

self-help group called Profx Talk at YahooGroups.com. This year, the company will

interface is welcome, showing a renewed commitment to simplifying the experience of the software user.

Relative Value ' 4.5 Stars

ProSystem fx Tax is most productive in offices that engage year-round clients using CCH's other financial and practice management software, which then can almost effortlessly integrate with the tax program, requiring much less data entry on the part of the preparer. The software requires a bit of an investment, but offers significant productivity tools and other enhancements that can streamline data entry, review and audit tasks, thereby saving time and allowing for additional clients per staff member. The program is ideally suited, therefore, for mid-sized and larger firms offering diverse, year-round client services. However, the company noted that a significant percentage of its customers are small firms with 10 or fewer on staff.

2005 Overall Rating: 5

Each of the programs was assessed in the following areas: Learning Curve addresses the ease with which new users are likely to grow comfortable and proficient with the program. This encompasses expected prerequisite knowledge and whether average users will likely need advanced training or support in order to use the program productively. Use/Workflow & Productivity Tools addresses how well a user can move around in the program and perform necessary tasks as a result of the interface, and the way work is handled from the start of a tax engagement (interview) to finish (delivery of return and possible planning for next year). This section notes tools that help professionals keep track of client and tax authority status for returns, as well as additional functions such as integrated calculators and cross-form linking that streamline the entire process.

The Integration/Import & Export section concerns a system's ability to transfer and

commitment to continued development of its product by looking at the technological culture of the company and its product development history. No professional wants to invest in a preparation package that stagnates or whose vendor goes out of business. Finally, Relative Value offers the reviewer's subjective assessment of the dollar-value ratio of the software. The most expensive option does not necessarily guarantee the best value, nor is the product with the lowest sticker price always the greater bargain.

The Overall Score will provide an average of the review components, rounded to the nearest half-star. Following the review section, the Executive Summary provides a synopsis of the review and is accompanied by a summary chart with all products and grades. To add more value and insight to our reviews, we invited the various tax preparation vendors to visit our office for a hands-on demonstration of their respective products. Each vendor had an opportunity to demonstrate the functionality of their product and highlight the various aspects they believe sets their product apart from those of their competitors within the specific review sections outlined above.

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