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I recently spent a very enjoyable three hours previewing some of the features and benefits of Microsoft's soon to be released OS, Vista. One of the most prominent changes you'll see is called Aero. In addition to being visually stunning, this new graphical interface and visual style will enable developers to quickly and easily exploit the desktop by hooking to the Internet or locally installed applications (or both) and displaying specific information to the user. As we've grown accustomed to with Microsoft, this isn't at all a new concept. Apple's been doing it for years. On the PC side, you can go back to the early '90s and a program called PointCast, which utilized a conceptually similar technology (albeit "push," rather than "pull") to populate users' desktops with highly personalized information. Unfortunately, both the product and its owners were greedy. The product gobbled up huge portions of bandwidth, and network administrators were quick to ban its use. At the same time, its owners spurned a $450 million buyout from Rupert Murdoch. Eventually, both the product and the company died in the dot-com bust of 2000. But "push" has given way to "pull."

Fast forward, and note that Yahoo! recently bought a company called Konfabulator and mercifully renamed its product Yahoo! Widgets. Then Google got into the act with its "Google Gadgets," which are a part of the Google Desktop. But it's the advent of Vista that will again prove that Microsoft's prowess isn't as a technological innovator, but rather as a marketing one. Vista, and Aero specifically, will open the eyes of the world to the concept of "gadgets." I submit that, as a technological advisor to your partners, staff and clients, you'd better have a solid idea of what this "new" technology is and an even better understanding of what it

will eventually mean for the way we each interact with important data and the

status report on some chosen metric of your practice. These little mini-applications are very, very specific in what they do. Consequently, they are both very small and very numerous. Today, there are literally tens of thousands available, and many, if not most, are FREE! Until Vista rolls out, you'll have to download either the Google Desktop or the Yahoo! Widgets "engine" to utilize gadgets or widgets (as they're called in the Yahoo! world). Unfortunately, the two current "flavors" are not interchangeable, but you CAN run the two platforms concurrently.

These "gizmos" (my term designed to encompass both camps) are important to portal and application developers. They bring users to their services seamlessly from their desktops without having to open a program or even a browser. This more direct route allows increased use of their services.

So what, you ask, might this have to do with the practice of public accounting? Let's first think about their application on YOUR desktop. A current example of the concept lies with CCH@Hand, the service that brings specific parts of the CCH research library directly to your desktop. While not technically a widget or a gadget, the service most definitely portends the concept's usage. And Thomson has rolled out its Practice CS product that highlights the "dashboard" concept. Again, this is not technically a widget or a gadget, but it's certainly another portender. Intuit's wiki-powered Tax Almanac service is available via RSS, and many handy gadgets can pull that feed directly to your desktop. (Note that each of these products has won an Innovation Award or an Honorable Mention in *The CPA Technology Advisor's* Annual Tax & Accounting Technology Innovation competition.)

These early indicators are a glimpse into the future. For this future to completely unfold, we need both platform and data format uniformity. Once the Vista platform

provides developers the ubiquity they need to insure usage and XML becomes the

CLIENTS' critical success indicators. Every morning you might, at a glance, see last night's table turn at your restaurant client, yesterday's production at your manufacturing client, and today's scheduled closings for your mortgage broker client. This sort of immediate, always-up-to-date information will make it possible to provide highly personalized and highly valued management advice to your clients.

There are client-to-accountant applications also. You may well develop a firm gizmo to distribute to your clients. That gizmo would poll your website and push specific updates back to your clients. For example, you might choose to report targeted tax news or an upcoming deposit deadline. All of this development, starting with PointCast, then e-mail notifications, then RSS feeds, now gizmos, dashboards and portals, has been evolutionary. The future, and the full benefit, requires "machine-to-machine" communication. Now that we've nearly achieved broadband ubiquity, we're starting to see what that future might hold — that the change to our business processes and professional interactions will be revolutionary.

For now, Yahoo! Widgets and Google Gadgets are little more than toys with some passing value. Forward thinking practitioners are beginning to understand that the confluence of broadband, Vista and XML will bring about a significant change in how we communicate with the data upon which we depend. Let the future begin!

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