the Dec. 2006 Review of High-End Accounting Systems

Microsoft Dynamics GP (formerly known as Microsoft Great Plains) continues to be one of the flagship products in Microsoft's mid-market accounting lineup. And version 9.0 of Dynamics GP further strengthens its already rich feature set and builds on its strong position in the marketplace. Microsoft has improved Dynamics GP by continuing to drive additional functionality into and around the product. At the same time, Microsoft is working to position all users of its various mid-market products for the successor product, simply referred to as "Dynamics," due to roll out over the course of the next few years. In the meantime, new and existing users have not been left in the cold as Microsoft continues to actively address functionality and usability across the product.

Modules/Scalability — 5 Stars
Until recently, Dynamics GP was packaged and sold by module, with an extensive lineup ranging from Financials (GL, AP and AR), Distribution (SOP, IM and POP) along with a host of additional modules that covers Project Management, Manufacturing,
Field Service, Payroll, Human Resources and E-Commerce, to name just a few. Microsoft changed all that recently, however, when it converted to a flat pricing model known as "Business Ready Licensing" where the product is now sold in one of two pricing bundles or tiers consisting of an entire suite of modules. Specifically, the first, or Business Essentials tier consists of the following modules: General Ledger, Payables, Receivables, Bank Reconciliation, Fixed Assets, Analytics, Intercompany, Multi-currency, Safe Pay, FRx financial reporter, Inventory Control, Purchase Orders, Sales Orders, Invoicing and Landed Cost.

The second, or Advanced Management, tier adds the following additional modules:

of end users.

ITA Survey Feedback for Microsoft Dynamics GP

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Competitive Advantages:
- Product maturity
- Extensive vertical versions
- Quality add-ons and third-party integrations
- Carries the Microsoft brand and interfaces with all other Microsoft products
- Growing install base
- User-friendly and easy to train clients on
- Portal applications

Competitive Disadvantages:
- Confusion surrounding Microsoft's product line commitment long-term
- Some end users buy because it is Microsoft and not based on feature set
- Integration manager isn't including all tables and fields

Usability/User Experience/Security — 3.5 Stars
With the release of version 8.0, Microsoft introduced a new look and feel to the GP front end — giving it an Outlook-like appearance and enhancing usability across the product. Version 9.0 continues to build on that functionality by adding roles and custom home pages where users can access critical information across the system. Home pages can be modified to include quick links to commonly performed tasks, list outstanding "To Do" items, access to Outlook e-mail and calendar items, display of quick business metrics and launch of preferred reports. The ability to tailor custom home pages by user significantly improves

accessibility. Other nice features include the use of toolbars across the top

behave like most newer Windows-based applications. For example, many Dynamics GP screens have fixed sizes (i.e., they can't be scaled to fill the screen), which can notably limit usability. When screens do scale, once a transaction is posted or the screen is closed, it usually reverts back to its smaller, more limited view when re-opened or moving on to enter the next record. In addition, it's curious that a good number of screens still do not list corresponding descriptions next to key lookup fields. For example, item descriptions do not appear on the Sales Order Processing screen unless a user utilizes the lookup list to select a part number during the data-entry process or changes the screen view to a detailed view. Other screens seem similarly challenged.

As well, while each release of the product incorporates additional functionality, use of some of these additional features and functions can be difficult and awkward. Given that this product, along with other products in Microsoft's mid-market accounting software lineup (Solomon, Axapta and Navision) will be replaced by an entirely new product in the coming years, we don't expect to see many of these oddities re-solved in the remaining releases. Product security is comprehensive and well thought out, enabling administrators to control the use of the product by company, user, user class, function and field. It appears that the product can support virtually any security scenario.

Extensibility — 5 Stars
Given the maturity of the core product and large independent developer community, a great number of highly specialized applications currently exist to help make Dynamics GP an exacting fit across a variety of industries. These specialized solutions can be easily located on the Microsoft Solution Finder website. Although not necessarily specific to Dynamics GP, Microsoft has invested considerably over the past few years to help focus attention on several key vertical markets where it believes its mid-market products are a particularly strong fit, including

automotive, construction, distribution, education, government, healthcare,

available through the Business Portal product, which enables outside users, such as employees, customers and vendors, to use a web interface to enter and collaborate on information directly tied back to the underlying Dynamics GP product. Examples include employee timesheet and expense report entry, HRM self service, purchase requisitions, executive KPI dashboards, and customizable customer pages where visitors can review open activity and balances.

Integration/Customization — 4 Stars

Dynamics GP offers a variety of tools and methods for customizing the product and integrating it with the outside world. Screens can be modified using the built-in Modifier tool, enabling users to hide and add fields, modify screen prompts, change tab sequence, globally modify field terminology and incorporate custom VBA (Visual Basic for Applications) code for virtually any purpose. The Great Plains Extender tool set enables users to easily link additional windows into existing forms, expand note fields, add additional fields, create data-entry templates and customize lookups.

The Integration Manager application can be used to design re-usable import templates that integrate data from outside programs. Integration Manager can also replace field values and perform all necessary data validation during the import process. Unfortunately, Integration Manager does not support the importing of data into all modules, so there are instances where this tool can't be used as the user might expect. Import from ADP is a pre-configured function capable of retrieving ADP payroll transactions into the GL module. The eConnect Enterprise Application Integration solution is a high-end tool set that enables developers to integrate Dynamics GP with a variety of outside sources, including web stores, legacy applications, etc., using some of the latest and most common languages and methodologies. Dexterity is the actual Dynamics GP development

language and can be used by developers to create highly customized add-ons and

Reports can be used for custom forms and additional reporting. The FRx suite of modules provides comprehensive GL financial reporting. SmartList is a built-in, highly customizable query tool that enables users to create sophisticated queries across a variety of modules. Query results can then be listed onscreen; sent to the printer; clicked on to drilldown to underlying transactions; or pushed to Microsoft Word or Microsoft Excel. SmartList is a true standout among accounting
product query tools.

Support, Training & Help — 5 Stars
Help and documentation available within Dynamics GP continues to be some of the best and strongest of any of the products reviewed. All product manuals are available in a *.PDF format and can be easily accessed and printed from the Help pull-down menu. Manuals are well formatted and up to date. One particularly
helpful feature is the "what's new" document provided with
each new release. In addition, field level (F1) Help is insightful and consistent. In the same way, product technical support provided by Microsoft is some of the best available. The online knowledgebase seems to address all of the most common issues, and technical support provided by Microsoft representatives is responsive and meaningful.

Overall Assessment
Despite some usability challenges and plans to supersede this product in the not-too-distant future, Microsoft Dynamics GP continues to remain a truly diverse and solid product capable of supporting large numbers of users across a variety of industries with strong reporting, customization and extensibility capabilities.

2006 Overall Rating: 4.5 Stars

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