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I have worked on an enormous array of software products over the years, including standard accounting programs, products for nonprofits and property managers, and specialty products for the music industry. But one of the more difficult specialty genres I've encountered is construction. Although the review is titled "Construction," it really encompasses far more than that. According to the U.S. Department of Labor-Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were over 800,000 construction-related businesses operating in the United States just a few years ago, with this area expected to continue to grow at a rate of around 11 percent each year until the year 2014. A little more than 200,000 of these businesses are building construction companies, such as homebuilders and commercial and industrial builders. The balance of these businesses are painting, plumbing, HVAC service and repair contractors, home remodeling companies, and even large scale sub-specialties such as heavy equipment, road and bridge construction, and even civil engineering. That's quite a variety of professions to lump under the guise of construction.

The first section of each product review explains exactly what the product does. Can you easily track work in progress, track employee labor costs, and tie them directly to a specific job? Can you track budgeted expenses? Does it contain a job scheduling module, where you can track percent of completion and record start and end dates? Does it track job revenues by salesperson or by project? Can you track your heavy equipment and monitor labor costs directly to each piece of equipment? Can you

enter and track change orders, enter job phases and monitor the profitability for each

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navigate through the system? Can you figure out how to set up a new company, enter a new job, or run a report without referring to the manual or Help files? Are the data-entry screens easily navigated or are they cluttered? Do data-entry screens contain lookup options? Is there a sample company you can use for training purposes prior to entering live data for your company?

Modules & Add-Ons

This section identifies the modules included with the core product. Is the system modular in structure? What modules are available to add to the core product? Modules and functionality need to be considered carefully. While all of the products reviewed contain a decent Job Cost module, there are other modules that can be just as important depending on the specific type of construction business. Is there Equipment Tracking, Inventory, Payroll, Service and Dispatch, Estimating, Production Management and/or Project Management functionality?

Chances are you won't need all of the modules that are available with many of the products; some offer upwards of 50 modules. But it's nice to know that they are available if and when you need them.

Productivity Tools

This section explores available tools such as customized toolbars and homepages, task management functionality, and even to-do lists designed to make your life a little easier and your business more productive.

Import/Export & Integration

Import and export functionality can be important, particularly to larger companies that require more flexibility with data. Can you import information from pricing software? Can you export data to Excel or Word files? Do all of the functions or modules integrate? Does the product integrate with other third-party applications?

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available training options are mentioned.

Relative Value

The biggest question here is, “Relative to what?” If you're a small construction company looking to automate your office, you're probably looking for an entry-level product that is affordably priced. While the product may not contain the features found in more sophisticated products, it does the job and it does it well.

On the other hand, a company with thousands of employees has much greater software demands. The product they purchase must be able to perform at a level of sophistication not found in entry-level products. Relative Value is like buying a house; it's worth what you're willing to pay for it, and it's based on needs.

Aptora Corporation — Total Office Manager

Total Office Manager from Aptora Corporation is a service management and accounting software product designed for construction-related industries, including HVAC, electrical and appliance repair companies. Total Office Manager is ideal for small to midsize companies, and can be installed on up to five individual computers with one license.

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A-Systems, Corp. — A-Systems JobView

JobView, from A-Systems, is in its 30th year of development. A sophisticated, yet easy-to-use program, JobView provides users with three product levels: The Preferred Edition (contains all system modules bundled together); the Standard Edition (provides many of the modules included with the Preferred Edition); and the Small Builder Advantage Edition (ideal for smaller businesses).

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[CUC Software Inc. — Contractor Essentials](#)

CUC Software, makers of EMS Construction software, released Contractor Essentials in early 2006. Although CUC Software continues to support both products, the vendor is beginning to convert existing EMS customers to Contractor Essentials. Contractor Essentials is a completely revised and updated product designed for construction and contracting businesses of all sizes.

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[CYMA Systems, Inc. — CYMA Accounting For Windows](#)

CYMA is a veteran in the accounting software industry, providing technology solutions since 1980. The latest version of CYMA Accounting For Windows (Version 9) highlights the Job Cost module that is available. Not specifically designed for the construction industry, CYMA is still a strong contender in this niche area, mainly because of its excellent Job Cost module.

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[Dexter + Chaney — Forefront Construction Suite](#)

Forefront from Dexter + Chaney is an enterprise-level software program designed for construction and construction-related businesses. Founded in 1981, the vendor continues to improve Forefront each year, adding even more new features and enhancing existing ones. Large scale and feature rich, Forefront offers industry-specific functionality for heavy highway, utility, electrical, mechanical, specialty, and general contractors.

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Intuit, Inc. —

QuickBooks Enterprise Solutions: Contractor Edition 7.0

What began as an entry-level bookkeeping program has become a series of specialty niche software products in a variety of sizes to suit small to midsize companies. The Contractor Edition of QuickBooks Enterprise Solutions 7.0 provides users with an excellent software product designed specifically for growing and midsize contractors and is now available in five-, 10-, 15- and 20-user versions. In addition, version 7.0 features enhanced capacity and can handle 100,000 or more customers, vendors and employees, and 100,000 or more inventory, non-inventory and service items.

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Management Information Control Systems, Inc. —

Builder Information System

Builder Information System (BIS) from Management Information Control Systems, Inc. (MICS) is a financial management program designed specifically for the construction industry, including General and Specialty Contractors such as Commercial, Home Builders, Electrical and Mechanical Contractors. With 18 modules, BIS is available in three editions. The Standard Edition is targeted to small companies with up to three concurrent users that require full accounting functionality along with full-featured Job Cost and Job Billing.

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Sage Software — Peachtree Premium Accounting for Construction 2007

Peachtree's reputation in the software industry remains strong. Peachtree by Sage Premium Accounting for Construction 2007, released in June of 2006,

contains all of the core strengths that have made Peachtree one of the most

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contractors, including electricians, heavy construction contractors, plumbing and HVAC, and homebuilders. Master Builder has a multitude of strong features, including the Executive Dashboard, which allows users to check important business statistics, including cash balance, profitability, job status and any change orders. The Executive Dashboard also allows for the monitoring of receivables balances, aged accounts, payable balances and income from operations.

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Sage Software — Timberline Office

Sage Timberline Office is an enterprise-level product designed for a variety of professional construction and contractor-related businesses. The program offers an extensive array of modules (over 50) that are suitable for mid to large construction companies. Timberline's Job Cost module can track numerous types of data, including estimates, costs, contracts and subcontracts, purchase orders, customer data, and billings. Over 250 user-defined fields can be used to track additional data.

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Toolbox Software — Toolbox

Toolbox Software has been offering software to construction and construction-related companies for over 10 years. Originally designed by a construction-specific CPA firm, Toolbox offers a non-modular approach, which is most suitable for mid-sized companies. Real-time transaction processing, easy flexibility and numerous customizing options are found throughout Toolbox, including multi-company processing, where users can choose to utilize the same database or create a new one.

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