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tools for professional preparation firms. The software is available in individual modules or in a suite that satisfies the individual, business and other entity preparation needs of our prototype firm. TaxWorks also includes an appointment scheduler, fixed asset management, a paperless office feature and an office management system whether the product is purchased in whole, by module, or on a pay-per-return basis. The program costs \$3,995 with no additional charge for multiple users in the same office; license renewals are \$2,495. The company is currently offering new users the renewal cost. Federal and state transmission fees cost \$1.50; with volume discounts, e-filing costs would be about an additional \$750.

### **Learning Curve – 5 Stars**

The primary work screens in TaxWorks are easy to understand, with tabbed screens, large icons and client selection lists. The various modules within the program share data where needed and work through the same interface. TaxWorks opens to the Client Selection List for the type of client used last (1040, 1120, etc.). Tabs for the other client types are easily accessible, and each list is searchable and sortable by multiple data columns. The selection window is not expandable, but should be to allow viewing all categories at once. Most client data is entered through interview

screens with calculations in real-time, although a form view is available that shows

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### **Use/Workflow & Productivity Tools – 4 Stars**

TaxWorks has a functionally designed interface that makes moving between common forms and worksheets fairly simple, usually in one click. The client selection list is also well organized, but does not include IRS status/acknowledgements. The addition of form-based input would be welcomed, but the program's split-screen interface allows preparers to easily look at in-progress returns and switch back to the data-entry interview screens.

These input screens use 'smart' entry fields that remember commonly used data, such as occupation and employer, and the program has a built-in ZIP code database that makes it unnecessary to enter the city name, and also automatically associates the return with any municipal or school district tax forms. During data entry, several right-click functions allow users to attach notes to a field or mark it as estimated, get line-specific help, or jump to a detailed summary statement for the field. The program automatically computes FICA wages and withholding amounts, but these are overridable. The business module also includes a function for quickly converting 1120S returns to 1120 returns.

TaxWorks includes a built-in billing and invoicing system in the Tax Practice Manager function that allows considerable customization with regards to client letters, setting fees for forms, and a variety of printing options. The program also includes an asset management function with 60 depreciation methods, as well as Section 179 expenses and special depreciation allowances. The function can handle transactions including like-kind exchanges, group sales and partial dispositions. The Paperless Office function allows saving of files in \*.PDF format for electronic storage and allows sending copies of forms and e-mail organizers electronically. For this tax season, the company has debuted an integrated appointment scheduler that is available for an extra fee and includes multiple calendar views for users. TaxWorks also includes Review and Audit features that give the user detailed information on

errors, an audit trail of overrides, and a central point for printing all forms involved

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our Novell server.'

Alan Haacke, TaxWorks' director of public relations, said the company is focusing on implementing new Internet technologies, such as the program's new electronic filing system. With the new system, Mr. Haacke says synchronization of transmitter and user databases is no longer a problem, resulting in benefits that include being able to stop a return at the filing center, quicker access to all e-file information, no more rehanging of checks or acknowledgements, and more accurate reporting.

### **Integration/Import & Export – 3 Stars**

TaxWorks can import client data from People's Choice accounting software, and also offers limited support for importing and exporting into \*.XLS format. Data conversion is available for new users switching from some other programs. Data moves fluidly within the program's modules as necessary, and prior year client data is easily transferable.

### **Support/Training & Help System – 2.5 Stars**

The built-in help utility in TaxWorks offers standard search and index features, as well as links to the company's web site and support. The company provides only a print tutorial that accompanies a sample return, but use of the program is intuitive enough that the lack of a video tutorial or hands-on training function shouldn't affect most users. The My Account section of the company's web site offers acknowledgement tracking and program update downloads. The online E-File center also lets users e-mail confirmation letters to clients, view and print bank product checks, and generate e-file and bank product reports. The Support tab only provides phone-based support information and e-mail. Tax season support hours are 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. M-F; 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays (MT). The lack of FAQs, an online manual, a support community, or other enhancements is curious.

## Product Evolution & Vendor Vision – 4 Stars

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With more than 5,000 accounting and tax offices using TaxWorks, Mr. Haacke says the company reaches out to these users to get feedback that helps guide product development. 'At the end of each tax season, we send out a detailed survey asking for input. We always get a very generous response.'

The parent company of TaxWorks also owns self-prep web site TaxEngine.com and includes a link to that page on the TaxWorks web site. While this may be of service to misdirected self-filers who end up on their web site, professional users would be better served by a 'find a preparer in your area list' comprised of TaxWorks users who want to opt-in to the directory. While this might compromise their customer list, at least it wouldn't be competing with their customers.

### Relative Value – 4.5 Stars

TaxWorks is easy to use and move around in, which is a good thing since it is limited in support features. The program itself offers a good feature base that includes online tracking of client return status and acknowledgements, as well as accompanying functions such as the asset manager and scheduler. With its fixed pricing and pay-per return options, and because of its limited training and import capabilities, the program is best suited for small to medium-sized firms, although the ability to configure multiple users with only one license purchase will certainly be attractive to offices with several preparers.

### 2004 OVERALL RATING

The tax preparation suites included in this review section were graded on the following six areas: Learning Curve; Use/Workflow & Productivity Tools; Integration/Import & Export; Support/Training & Help

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for returns, as well as additional tools such as integrated calculators and cross-form linking that streamline the entire process.

The **Integration/Import & Export** rating assesses the program's capability to import and export data to software from other vendors, and how the program retrieves existing data from the previous year. **Support/Training & Help System** looks at how the vendor has incorporated assistance features into its program (through its help utility), the quality of its support documentation (both print and built-in), and the extent of its online help component, whether it be simple FAQs, online user communities or more advanced systems. This section will also consider the availability of phone-based support and optional training programs offered by the vendor.

The **Product Evolution & Vendor Vision** score is reflective of the company's commitment to continued development of its product by looking at the technological culture of the company and its product development history.

Software developers with an eye to the future are more likely to provide user-focused resources including downloadable or automatic program updates, and often lead the field in providing additional tools and program capabilities that help in the productivity of the software.

**Relative Value** will provide a subjective determination of the dollar-value ratio of the software. While it is often said, 'you get what you pay for,' the most expensive option does not necessarily guarantee the best value, nor is the product with the lowest sticker price always the greater bargain. On this line, we will look at the value

of the features and tools provided in a software suite and provide a judgment on how

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