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For those who still don't quite understand the whole "cloud computing" movement, don't worry. You don't really need to know what it is to be a part of it. In fact, you already are a part of it.

Much of the things we do for our professional and personal lives are now done through web-based programs, and with the continued movement of small and mid-sized business accounting systems to online platforms, businesses and their accountants will continue to move increasingly toward the cloud model. As more and more of our business data is hosted through online programs, the more it is available to the other programs you use for professional or personal purposes. This interconnectivity between web-based programs is part of the definition of this cloud. Imagine a world where your client's accounting data would be seamlessly integrated with your write-up package, where reconciliations would be virtually instant, where financial data could be streamed directly into your planning or preparation systems. Zero data-entry accounting. That is what the cloud will soon mean for professional practices.

The core of the client-accountant-cloud relationship will be the client's web-based accounting system. Through the Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) model, small businesses essentially rent their software under agreements that usually have per month and per user fees. This method makes it easier for small businesses to give users access to only the features and modules they need and, therefore, to only pay for those features the business needs. But SaaS, especially when it comes to small business accounting, has many more benefits than just the delivery platform. That is why, for this year's review of small business accounting systems, we've separated the programs into two groups: web-based SaaS systems, and traditionally installed on-premise programs. The review of on-premise small business accounting products

appeared in our April/May issue and is available at

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all of the programs we use will be web-based, at this point, a business needs to decide on whether these mobility, collaboration, remote office and integration features are essential or potentially advantageous for them. If so, now's the time to go web-based.

For professional public accountants, there are other potential significant advantages to having clients who are using web-based accounting systems. First off, the accountant can log in instantly to help the client troubleshoot a bookkeeping or transactional error, instead of waiting until the end of the month. Second, there's no need for an "end of the month" for write-up since the professional can access live client data in real time to reconcile accounts, make correcting entries, run financials or perform any other work.

The web-based SaaS accounting packages on the market vary widely in functionality and pricing, with some geared more toward the mid-sized enterprise level. For the purposes of reviews, we define small business accounting products as those that cost \$5,500 or less for one to five users of the core package. The key is in finding the solutions that offer the feature sets that most benefit a particular small business. Then, the business will want to demo one or two of the programs. And since they are all web-based, each has online demos or trial versions.

[Box out]

Advantages to SaaS SMB Accounting Systems

- Near-universal access to the program and files from anywhere
- Greater mobility integration- apps, smart phones

- Ecommerce integration- the backend of online shopping- e-shopping carts

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