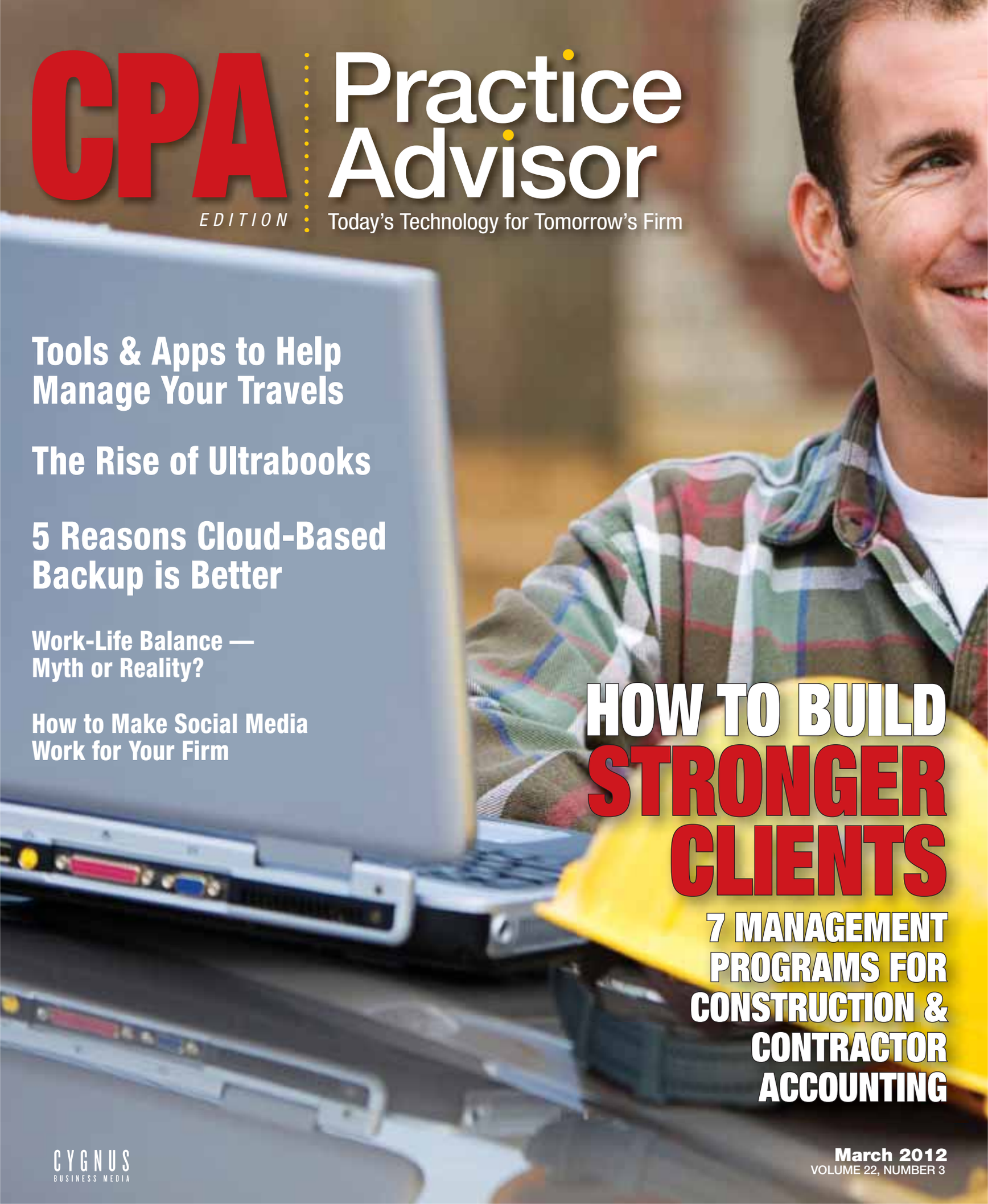
CPA EDITION
Practice Advisor
Today's Technology for Tomorrow's Firm



Tools & Apps to Help Manage Your Travels

The Rise of Ultrabooks

5 Reasons Cloud-Based Backup is Better

Work-Life Balance — Myth or Reality?

How to Make Social Media Work for Your Firm

HOW TO BUILD STRONGER CLIENTS

7 MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS FOR CONSTRUCTION & CONTRACTOR ACCOUNTING

CYGNUS BUSINESS MEDIA

March 2012
VOLUME 22, NUMBER 3

Going on Vacation?
Take Us Along With You

Tax season may just be about to get started, but if you're one of the many professionals who takes a well-earned vacation after filing the last of your client returns and extensions, now's the perfect time to plan it, since it'll give you something tangible to look forward to.

Take *CPA Practice Advisor* with you, and you'll have something else to look forward to:

A chance to win a $1,500 travel voucher for your next trip.

Whether you're heading to sun-drenched beaches, the mountains, flying abroad, cruising the sea, heading to Disney World or any other vacation destination local or far, remember to pack the latest issue of *CPA Practice Advisor* or *NSA Practice Advisor*, or check us out online for the latest reviews, columns and features on your tablet device.

Send in a picture of yourself holding *CPA Practice Advisor* or your tablet device displaying our website or digital edition, and you'll be entered to win a $1,500 travel voucher. Submitted photos may be used in the magazine, in our digital version, on our website or promoted via social media. Individuals submitting photos may also be selected to be profiled in a feature article.

Tax season won't last forever, so make your travel plans soon…
and remember:

Take *CPA Practice Advisor* with you!

For more information and contest rules:
www.CPAPracticeAdvisor.com/10455591

To enter, email the photo as an attachment to: editor@cpapracticeadvisor.com, with the subject line On Vacation. Be sure to include your full name, contact information and location of the photo … and identify any other people in the picture with you. Remember, either the magazine, the digital edition or our website needs to be visible in the photo, as well.

Deadline for photo entries: May 31, 2012

Sponsored by: BNA Software®

www.CPAPracticeAdvisor.com

VOLUME 22, NUMBER 3

CPA Practice Advisor
Today's Technology for Tomorrow's Firm

NSA Practice Advisor
Today's Technology for Tomorrow's Firm

800-547-7377 • www.CPAPracticeAdvisor.com

Practice Advisor, (ISSN #2160-8725 (print), ISSN #2160-8733 (digital); USPS #017-576) is published in a print edition eight times a year (May, June, July, August, September, October, November and December) by Cygnus Business Media, Inc., incorporating two editions known as *CPA Practice Advisor* and *NSA Practice Advisor,* 1233 Janesville Avenue, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin 53538. Periodicals postage paid at Fort Atkinson, WI 53538 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in the U.S.A.
Send all subscription inquiries or change of address to:
Practice Advisor,
PO Box 3258, Northbrook, IL 60065-3258.
Phone: (877) 382-9187 (toll free); 847-559-7598 (local)
Fax: (847) 564-9453
Email: Circ.CPA@omeda.com
Subscription Rates: The basic annual rate is $3, based on qualifying associations of 10,000 or more public accountants that may also subscribe for all their public accountant members (certain restrictive covenants apply) for a basic subscription rate of $9 per member for a three-year subscription.
One year subscription for all others: USA - $48; CAN $70 GST; INT'L $99 GST #131910168.
POSTMASTER, please send address changes to:
Practice Advisor, P.O. Box 3258, Northbrook, IL 60065-3258.
Canadian address changes to:
Canada Post PM40612608. Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to: *Practice Advisor*, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2.

CYGNUS BUSINESS MEDIA
BPA WORLDWIDE
PRINTED WITH SOY INK

Life-Work Balance — Myth or Reality?

There's one question that continues to linger in the profession: does life-work balance really exist? Or is it a myth? As I look back over my thirty-year career, I recall enjoying periods of life-work balance, while other times seemed like utter chaos. Like the popular 70's song says, "To everything, turn, turn, turn, there is a season…" (The Byrds).

These lyrics represent the stages of life—bringing to light that there is a time for everything. And while this column may be over-simplifying the deeper meaning of this historic song, it hits my point that we all go through stages in life—some balanced and some chaotic. Overall, however, we strive for the reality that life-work balance can be achieved most of the time.

Life is made up of a series of stages. In brief, my "stages" included marrying my wife Michelle (30 years and going strong), graduating from college and starting my career in the profession, and raising three children—and all while trying to make my mark in the profession. The next big stage was starting my own firm and trying to grow a successful business, while trying hard to maintain a healthy relationship with my wife and kids. At this stage, life-work balance seemed like nothing more than a far off myth.

After years of building a Next Generation Accounting Firm, I started to see life-work balance as a reality. I implemented the right technologies, enhanced processes, got the right people on my bus (staff), and continued to improve and tweak operations to continually increase efficiencies. I also worked hard to build strong relationships both in the office and within the community.

I now own a business that I can work "on" and not "in." In fact, I'm taking two weeks off in the fall to explore Paris and Italy's Amalfi coast with my wife. Right now, I have my balance. Of course, this doesn't mean I still won't experience stages of chaos. That will always happen, but I know that balance will always come around again… turn, turn, turn.

Over the past thirty years, I've learned that the question of life-work balance being myth or reality doesn't really have an answer. It's not something that we obtain permanently, but stages we enjoy while on the journey. And hopefully, if you are doing things right, those stages of balance last a little longer each time, while the chaos lightens up a bit with each turn. ●

M. Darren Root, CPA.CITP
Executive Editor

Darren is the Executive Editor of CPA Practice Advisor. He remains in public practice as the principal of Root & Associates, LLC, in Bloomington, Indiana, and is president of his consulting practice, RootWorks. He formerly served on the Board of the AICPA's CITP Credentials Committee and is a former member of the Board of Directors for the Indiana CPA Society. He speaks at dozens of professional organizations each year and frequently serves as a guest lecturer at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business.

CPA Practice Advisor
VOLUME 22, NUMBER 3
Today's Technology for Tomorrow's Firm

6


38

26

3

CONTENTS

ON THE COVER/PRODUCT REVIEW

COLUMNS

FEATURES

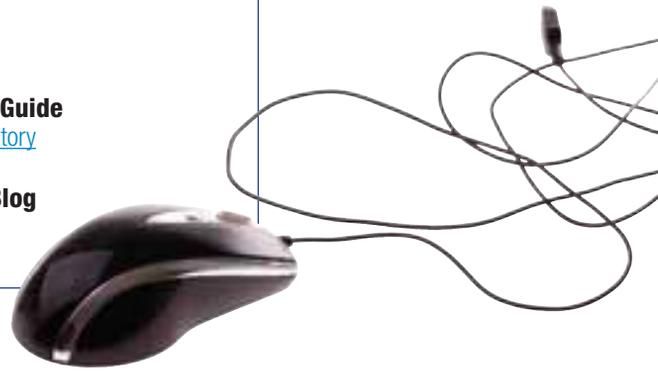
WEB EXCLUSIVES

Take our Productivity Survey
www.CPAPracticeAdvisor.com/productivity-survey

Find the Best Fit for Document Management
www.CPAPracticeAdvisor.com/dms-survey

Check out our Online Buyer's Guide
www.CPAPracticeAdvisor.com/directory

Share Your Thoughts on our Blog
www.CPATechViews.com



Five Reasons Cloud-Based Backup is Better

What would you do if all of your client data was suddenly gone?

Web-based applications are now an integral component of virtually every American's life, both personal and professional. From online banking programs for consumers, to professional programs that once were installed on local computers and servers, the benefits of these software-as-a-service systems is that they are instantly accessible from anywhere, allowing us to be more mobile, and yet still as productive, if not more so.

This does mean, of course, that some of our personal or professional data is hosted outside of our personal control – it's "in the cloud" – stored on remote servers that are usually owned and managed by major data hosting providers like Amazon, by the technology developers themselves, such as Intuit, Thomson Reuters, CCH and BNA, or through third-party providers, such as Iron Mountain, Gillware, SmartVault and Acct1st.

The primary concern of all computer users should always be security, especially those in professions such as accounting, tax compliance, financial advisory services and others that manage sensitive client information. However, over the 15-plus years that online programs and web-based backup have been available, it has been proven that online storage is not only secure, but is actually safer and more reliable than simply keeping the information on your office computers or servers, even when you perform backups in-house.

With Data Backup, Humans are the Weakest Link.

The main reason for this is the human element. As with any technology, a data backup routine is only as effective as the weakest component, and human error is the most common contributor to lost data. Whether it's getting lax on backups and performing them less and less frequently, storing the backups or having a backup drive located in the same office with the computers, or being too casual with passwords and office security protocols.

While it is easy to see the potential danger of theft related to the final point, the problem with where the backup is located becomes a factor when dealing with natural disasters or fires that may damage your office building and the contents within it. This wouldn't result in unauthorized access to the sensitive information, but suddenly losing all of your client information and their tax, accounting and financial data would have a crushing effect on your practice.

After the "weakest link" human factor, the most common cause of data loss without a fire, theft or natural disaster is system crashes. It's a simple fact of life in the technology age that we live in, that hard drives fail, including those in external backup devices. When this happens, sometimes the data can be recovered, but with total crashes, all is lost. The odds of both your computer and external hard drive failing simultaneously are about nil, but if you haven't been maintaining a near-perfect backup routine then you may still lose days or weeks worth of client activity. This wouldn't necessarily result in a total failure of your firm, but the time spent recreating that data would put incredible stress on staff and clients alike.

FIVE Reasons Cloud-Based Backup is Better than Local:

- Automation of backup processes
- Safer from natural disasters
- Safer from computer/server crashes
- Redundancy (data stored in more than one location)
- Support when restoring data

Isaac M. O'Bannon, Editor

Isaac is the Editor for CPA Practice Advisor, having joined the publication in September 2002. Through his experience in the areas of consumer and professional-level software and peripherals, as well as knowledge of the public accounting field, he provides reviews of technologies used by accountants and their business clients as well as contributing a regular column that provides helpful information that ranges from improving search techniques to when to upgrade a computer to computing security issues. He can be reached at isaac.obannon@cpapracticeadvisor.com.

THE FIRST WAY TO DRAMATICALLY IMPROVE THE RELIABILITY OF DATA BACKUPS IS TO TAKE HUMANS OUT OF THE PICTURE.

How Web-Based Backup Avoids these Pitfalls.

The first way to dramatically improve the reliability of data backups is to take humans out of the picture. Yes, as I noted above, technology fails at times, too, but us humans are more likely to forget even routine things. A central feature to almost all web-based backup systems available for both consumers and professional businesses is that, after initial setup, they automatically perform the functions at pre-scheduled times (such as in the middle of the night, so it doesn't slow down your computers while you and your staff are using them).

When it comes to security, these online systems also stand above local solutions such as external hard drives or discs, and for several reasons. To start with, they automatically encrypt all data before it is uploaded and the data remains encrypted while it is stored at the backup service provider. Additionally, most advanced systems don't just back up your data to one location, but to at least two or more locations in geographically diverse areas of the country.

With no backup or with backup in your office, the data is at risk from fire, flood, tornados, earthquakes, hurricanes, theft, computer crashes and countless other disasters. With the redundancy and geographic separation of web-based backup, however, it is virtually impossible for the data to be lost because of one or more of these events. In addition to government-level encryption, all of the major data backup providers also have strong physical security at their locations, including armed guards, biometric technologies and many have security audits and testing, including meeting the requirements of the Statement on Standards for Attestation Engagements (SSAE) No. 16, which replaced SAS 70 as the new attestation standard for service organizations.

For those who note that even the government, banks and other financial institutions get hacked, yes, no system is perfect. But from a hacker's perspective, which would be easier to target: Several small accounting firms with bare bones security, or a technology powerhouse? The odds of cloud-based client data being compromised are much less than data stored within a firm's office.

What would you do if your client data went MIA tomorrow? With cloud-based, online backup, if one of the above disasters did happen to the computers in your office, the client data and even all of the other entire contents, programs and email on those computers could be quickly retrieved and installed on brand new computers. With no backup plan in place, your odds are better at a Las Vegas slot machine, and even with a local system in place, you may be flipping a coin.

The difference is potentially the choice of a day or two of downtime as you get the data back and get new systems up and running, or early retirement as many of your clients look for a more reliable firm. ●

PROFESSIONAL ONLINE DATA BACKUP SERVICES

The following companies offer trusted online backup solutions that meet the needs of small and mid-sized businesses. While there are many consumer-level systems and also free versions of some of the business ones, they generally don't have the storage space required for accounting firms managing dozens or even hundreds of client QuickBooks files or other accounting data.

BarracudaNetworks (www.barracudanetworks.com/backup)

Carbonite Business Backup (www.Carbonite.com/business)

CrashPlan PROe (www.crashplan.com/enterprise)

eTegrity (www.compunite.com)

iBackup Professional (www.iBackup.com/professional)

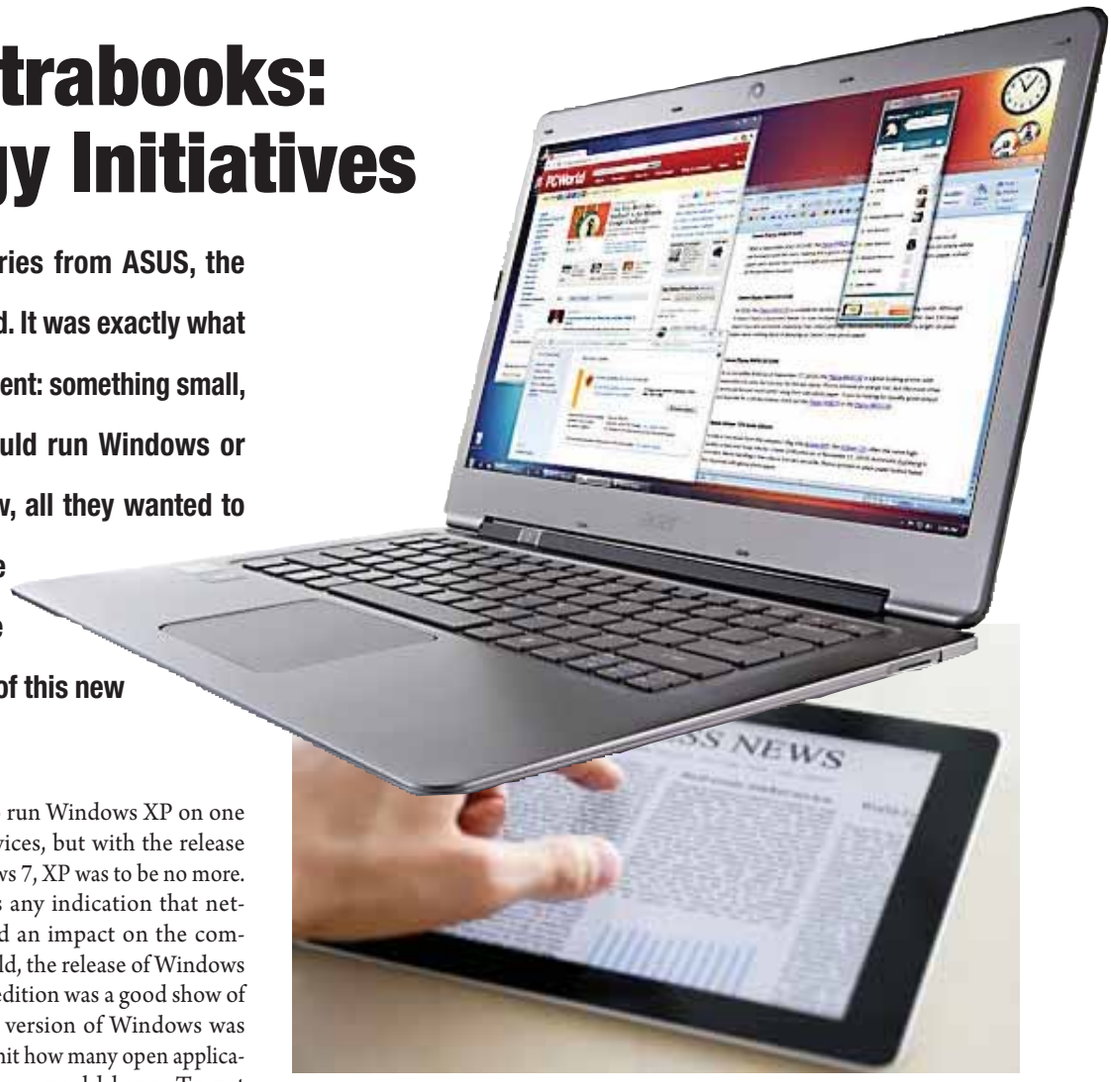
IronMountain (IronMountain.com)

Gillware Backup for Accountants (backup.Gillware.com/ap)

MozyPro (www.Mozy.com/pro)

If you are only wanting to backup essential client data such as QB files, tax, etc., then multiply the number of clients by 0.10 GB. If you want to have everything on a workstation backed up, including system and files, plus client data, then estimate at a full 1 GB per client, which also allows for average firm files. Pricing will range from about $20 per month for essential data only, to $50-$100 per month for backing up everything, depending upon the number of clients. Networked servers can also be backed up at reasonable costs, but they vary greatly, so check with a vendor.)

The Rise of Ultrabooks: Top Technology Initiatives



Back in 2007, the EEE series from ASUS, the netbook line, was released. It was exactly what people needed at the moment: something small, portable, light, and it could run Windows or Linux. Even if it was slow, all they wanted to do were basic computing tasks. After the release of the EEE series netbook, people instantly wanted more performance out of this new line of laptops.

To handle the need for performance, the processor for the netbooks would just keep getting a small performance boost each release before finally getting a second processing core. This helped, if you wanted to run Windows XP on one of the devices, but with the release of Windows 7, XP was to be no more. If there is any indication that netbooks had an impact on the computer world, the release of Windows 7 Starter edition was a good show of that. This version of Windows was built to limit how many open applications a user could have. To get around this, the computer industry would have to redesign the compact laptop industry again. Thus, the entry of Ultrabooks. Ultrabooks typically have a lighter weight of less than three pounds, a solid state drive (SSD), and have the ability for an instant on.

Randy Johnston

Mr. Johnston is executive vice president and partner of K2 Enterprises and Network Management Group, Inc.
He is a nationally recognized educator, consultant and writer with over 30 years' experience. He can be contacted at randy.johnston@cpapracticeadvisor.com.

Before jumping into Ultrabooks too far, one other computing revolution needs to be mentioned: the rise of the tablet. Whether you consider the market leader Apple with their iPad and iPad 2, other notable business competitors like the Samsung Galaxy, RIM Playbook (Blackberry), the Motorola Xoom, or the personal tablet offerings like the Amazon Kindle Fire, each tablet has features that make them useful tools.

Instant on, touch screen navigation, web browsing, and the ability to answer email, take a few notes and consume content of all kinds have made the category of tablets a notable force. In preparing this article for you, research did not produce reliable numbers of tablets delivered from different providers, but Apple has sold well over 50 million units, Samsung has sold over 10 million units and Amazon has sold over 5 million units.

> ULTRABOOKS TYPICALLY HAVE A LIGHTER WEIGHT OF LESS THAN THREE POUNDS, A SOLID STATE DRIVE (SSD), AND HAVE THE ABILITY FOR AN INSTANT ON.

What type of computers are Ultrabooks, and why are they important? At the 2012 International CES show, over 25 new Ultrabooks were shown. Older laptops that fit in the Ultrabook format and type are the MacBook Air and Samsung Series 9 type of laptops. They are very light, very thin, and most important they have a full processor, not an Intel Atom. With the advances in processor technology, companies can now have extremely thin laptops without giving up on performance.

Steve Jobs made sure everyone

knew you could get a compact laptop without losing the performance with the 2011 MacBook Air 2 model refresh. Samsung jumped on the boat with Apple when they released their Series 9 laptop in March 2011 which had a thinner thickest point but weighed in at a half of a pound heavier.

ASUS revealed at Computex their entrance into the market with their yet to be released UX21 model, which is now the smaller unit in their Zenbook line released in October 2011. The hands-on performance with the ASUS Zenbook is on par with everything the MacBook Air has to offer with its thinness or form factor as well as with its speed. ASUS goes on to say that with the specs on the model, you should be able to jam a Core i7 in the form factor.

What company offerings were available before and after CES?

1) Models introduced before CES

a) Acer Aspire S3

- CPU: 2nd generation Intel® Core™ i5, i7 processor
- Screen Size: 13.3", 1366 x 768
- Weight: 3.0 lbs.
- Responsiveness: Instant On*, Instant Connect
- Graphics: Intel HD Graphics 3000
- Battery Life: Up to 6 hours
- Operating System: Windows® 7

b) ASUS Zenbook (the old UX21/31)

- CPU: 2nd generation Intel® Core™ i3, i5, i7 processor
- Screen Size: 11.6", 1366 x 768
- Weight: 2.42 lbs.
- Responsiveness: S4®KBD (< 7 seconds)
- Graphics: Intel HD Graphics 3000
- Battery Life: Up to 5 hours
- Operating System: Windows® 7

c) Lenovo IdeaPad u300s

- CPU: 2nd generation Intel® Core™ i3, i5, i7 processor
- Screen Size: 13.3", 1366 x 768
- Weight: 2.9 lbs.
- Responsiveness: S4®KBD (< 7 seconds)
- Graphics: Intel HD Graphics 3000
- Battery Life: Up to 8 hours
- Operating System: Windows® 7

d) Toshiba Portege Z830 – the world's lightest ultrabook as of this writing

- CPU: 2nd generation Intel® Core™ i3, i5, i7 processor
- Screen Size: 13.3", 1366 x 768
- Weight: 2.45 lbs.
- Responsiveness: S4®KBD (< 7 seconds)
- Graphics: Intel HD Graphics 3000
- Battery Life: Up to 8 hours
- Operating System: Windows® 7

e) HP Folio

2) Ultrabooks – Good designs to consider introduced at CES

a) Sony Vaio Z series –8 Gb ram. DVD multi monitors. High graphics in separate but included box. Can have dual ssd drives 64 128 or 256 for max disk of 500gb. Includes true lightpeak, not thunderbolt. Weighs less than the Mac Air at about same price at high end.

b) Samsung Series 9 - 13.3 inch Ultralight, USB 3.0, SD, Micro HDMI, 128SSD, $1300

c) Lenovo YOGA, folds over and doubles as a tablet

d) HP Envy 14 SPECTRE - Gorilla glass 2.0 - $1400

With this background, consider the following computer classifications:

1) Ultrabook
2) Netbook
3) Tablet
4) Notebook

Note that the Ultrabook can do most things that a notebook can do. It operates at a similar speed because of the SSD and processors used, has only a slightly smaller screen, and can do pretty much do everything a notebook can do. As a firm strategy, consider how long notebooks will make sense to purchase, particularly if an Ultrabook is used in conjunction with some of the new portable monitors such as the Samsung LD220G, Toshiba Mobile Monitor and the MMT Field Monitor Pro or Monitor2Go.

> TO USERS CONSIDERING NETBOOKS I WOULD SAY: SAVE UP THE EXTRA MONEY AND BUY THE CHEAPEST ULTRABOOK.

Some Ultrabook models have been demonstrated that have touch screens that can fold over to become a tablet. Consider the size and weight of a tablet plus a mechanical keyboard when compared to an Ultrabook. Tablets will have approximately the same weight, operate much slower and not have nearly as much flexibility as an Ultrabook. In today's market, they will have similar price. It is safe to say, in my eyes, netbooks should be counting down their days soon. The only life lines for netbooks are their price point. If you want the best performing netbook, it will still cost you $400-500, although I'm enjoying my $300 Google Chromebook immensely. To users considering netbooks I would say: save up the extra money and buy the cheapest Ultrabook. Ultrabook computer prices will have to come down once other companies start entering the market and that will happen sooner than you think. ●

CCH
a Wolters Kluwer business

An excerpt from the Fall 2011 issue of CCH Partners

Double-Digit Growth

An innovative "dashboard" helps clients — and a California firm itself — monitor performance in near real time.

These days, even in the most volatile of market conditions, Andy Armanino can flip open his laptop and with a few keystrokes quickly see where the firm stands — that day — in terms of charge hours, realization, billing and collection, profitability by service line and other key performance indicators (KPIs).

"Previously, those KPIs were difficult to get at, requiring a lot of heavy lifting by our IT team," he says. "We might do it in advance of a partner meeting, but the rest of the time we would wonder about it. You might see people with their heads down and figure you're doing OK. But that's not the way we want to run our business."

Adds Matt Armanino: "We want to be the go-to resource for the CFO group — on their speed dial — not just on finance issues but with business process or people issues that will help them grow their businesses."

UNDERSTANDING CLIENT NEEDS

That holistic approach underpins year after year of double-digit growth and development of a robust consulting practice that now contributes about one-third of the firm's annual revenue. "We don't want to be a product provider, selling audits or tax returns," he says. "We want to understand what the client needs, where they want to be in the future, and how to help them get there."

The firm kicked off a project internally to develop a custom business intelligence (BI) solution tailored to the firm's needs. Using a web-based platform called QlikView, the firm created a second-generation BI product that works with ProSystem *fx*® Practice Management and provides an easy-to-use graphical interface that partners of the firm can use to review firm-wide metrics or to drill down to get specific performance data on individual clients, engagements, offices or staff.

NAVIGATING A PATH TO SUCCESS

"One of our core values is continuous improvement, and this tool supports that effectively," Matt explains. For example, top-level numbers for the valuation practice might be on track, but drill down and you discover charge hours for two people are way off. You investigate and find one person on vacation and the other in need of guidance. "That might have been masked before because the high-level results looked OK," Matt says. "Now we can see areas where you can drive continuous improvement."

Brothers Matt (left) and Andy (right) Armanino are a go-to team who help firms chart their growth with near real-time analytics.

'AN APP-LIKE EXPERIENCE'

"The tool we deployed gave us wonderful information," Andy says. "It allowed us to see where our business was headed, where we could make changes and take advantage of opportunities."

And it helps time wise, Matt says. "It's a solution that can be deployed in a matter of weeks, not months, and that users can learn in a few hours. "It's an app-like experience. If you know how to use an iPhone or Google, you can use this product to answer the 'how are we doing' questions."

A NATURAL PARTNERSHIP

About a year ago, the firm was asked to make a presentation to 50 to 75 managing partners at a Moore Stevens affiliate conference.

A 20-minute demo of Armanino McKenna's dashboard was a hit, especially with Mike Sabbatis, president and CEO of CCH Tax and Accounting North America, who was in the audience and quickly saw the potential value for other CCH customers.

That fortuitous meeting grew into a natural partnership. Working together, the firm and CCH have developed ProSystem *fx* Practice Intelligence, which consists of the QlikView platform and a custom version of the firm's dashboard that accesses Practice Management data files. It's a web-based solution that keeps up-to-date firm data live in memory for quick analysis and fast graphical response. Armanino McKenna acts as the implementation and consulting partner, working with other CPA firms to tailor the solution to their specific needs. *– John Hiatt*

2011-0036-3

Watch your profits grow

To learn more about Practice Intelligence, and watch a video featuring the Armanino brothers, visit **CCHGroup.com/ProSystemPracticeIntelligence**

What's Next?

As I write this column for the March issue, I am returning from a trip to NY where I spent time with accountants, firms, and vendors discussing how to move the accounting profession into the cloud faster. My guess is that as you read this it is the farthest thing from your mind. You are in the middle of tax season and are probably more concerned about client returns or just getting a day off. But before you know it, May will be here and you'll have time to start planning what's next.

The thing that struck me most about this session with 75+ folks was that everyone was passionate that moving to the cloud was paramount and something that was going to happen whether the profession wanted to or not. As I listened to session after session, the big aha was that I realized that the transition to the cloud had already happened.

At the core, all the vendors in the session were building on the cloud and when we looked around at the folks that weren't in the room, we realized that they too were building their new applications for the profession in the cloud. If the technologists have switched development platforms from desktop to the cloud, then it is only a matter of time before customers will **have** to follow.

Rene Lacerte
Mr. Lacerte is CEO and Founder of Bill.com and the former CEO and co-founder of PayCycle, which was acquired by Intuit in 2009. As a third-generation entrepreneur building solutions for accountants, he is uniquely qualified to bring insights from an entrepreneur's and accountant's perspective. He can be contacted at rene.lacerte@CPAPracticeAdvisor.com.

I could go into all the reasons why vendors and developers have switched their development platforms over to the cloud but I am more interested in understanding the resistance to customer adoption. Granted some of the applications are new and less well known but that hasn't stopped folks from adopting the likes of Facebook or Zynga. So here is the list of reasons I heard as possible explanations: lack of trust combined with confusion, laziness and not enough time.

TRUST: People continue to worry about the security of the data in the cloud. While I can't speak for all cloud developers, I believe that when the cloud is done right it is more secure than any alternative. Data is backed up and locked down with passwords and user names that are unique to each user. You cannot say the same for filing cabinets, checkbooks and desktop applications.

CONFUSION: Often this is voiced as a lack of confidence that the new technology is going to "stick around." Based on all the developers I know and talk to, it is here to stay until something better comes around in a decade or two. Mostly though, I think the confusion stems from the sheer number of new products on the market. Even for someone in the technology business like me, it is hard to keep track. My advice is to focus on **one** part of your practice and see how you can adapt that to the cloud. The sooner you understand it the more likely you will be able to successful with it for your entire practice.

LAZINESS: Let's face it we are all lazy. Learning new stuff is heard. But it is not impossible. One of the great things about the cloud is that many of the products leverage the technology to provide better service. Service thru chat, email or phone is common. Best of all the central hosting allows the support organization to be more informed about your issues resulting in quicker and better support.

TIME: We never have enough of it and we always think new things take more time. I agree that adapting new technologies takes time but in my experience the initial investment always pay off very quickly. Whether it is a new phone or a new application, I am soon spending significantly less time. Our customers in fact tell us that they spend 50 – 75% less time managing their account payables. This statistic is not uncommon among cloud applications. So if you can find the time to make the switch, you'll soon have more time to grow your business or even be a little lazier.

REVIEW SECTIONS

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS
- General Navigation & Ease of Use
- Customization Features/Dashboards/Overviews
- Multi-location Support
- Platform Support (Windows 7/Vista/XP)

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITES
- GL/AP/AR/Payroll Functionality
- Additional Accounting Modules (fixed assets, warehousing, inventory, etc.)
- Audit Trail
- Security Features/Users Roles

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES
- Estimating
- Project Management w/Job Costing & Tracking
- Change Order Processing
- Customer/Vendor/Employee/Subcontractor
- Management
- Inventory/Purchasing
- Scheduling/Dispatch
- Equipment Management

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS
- Business & Project Detail & Summary
- Invoicing (AIA Compliant)
- Client Communication Templates
- Document Management
- Mobile Management Tools/Remote Access

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT
- Data Transfer/Import
- External Integration (add-on programs & modules)

HELP/SUPPORT
- Built-in Support Features
- System Updates (best if downloadable or automatic download)
- Support Website/Documentation
- U.S.-Based Live Support (better if support is free)

Mary Girsch-Bock
Mary began her career as an accountant in the property management industry, later moving into the healthcare industry. She is now a freelance writer specializing in business and technology issues and is the author of her first book, several HR handbooks, training manuals, and other in-house publications. She can be reached at mary.girschbock@cpapracticeadvisor.com.

Seven Management Systems that Can Help Contractors & Construction Firms Build a Stronger Business

While some industries have managed to struggle back from the weakened economy we've experienced the last few years, the construction industry has continued to suffer. Only in recent months have we seen an upturn in the number of large construction jobs such as new homes and commercial projects. Contractors initially saw a similar fate, but individualized services that contractors offer have not suffered nearly as much as large construction projects have.

While economic pressures may have been different for each, construction and contractor companies are similar in one way; each has struggled trying to find how to become and stay profitable. In essence, searching for a way to stay in business.

Software alone will certainly not be the deciding force in the success or demise of a business; but a solid financial software product can certainly play a role in any resulting success. While having solid GL, AR, AP, and Payroll functionality is important for any business, it's often the additional functions that help business owners keep their numbers in the black. Features like dashboards, which provide owners and managers with a quick overview of their business are particularly helpful if one is reluctant to search through stacks of financial statements. Of course, business owners often know if they're succeeding or not, but having that overview handy sure makes it a lot easier to know exactly how much money they're bringing in. Or not bringing in.

For some businesses, document management is a bonus module, not a necessity. But in the construction world, where everything is driven by paper, such as contracts, change orders, blueprints, invoices, etc., a good document management system means less time searching for that lost piece of paper and more time spent on your business.

Finally, construction and contractor businesses have a unique set of requirements when it comes to software. Not only do they need solid accounting/financial capability, but they also require functionality that can manage job detail, fulfill unique billing requirements, and track other items such as change orders, workers compensation insurance, retention amounts, and provide good project management capability.

> BUT IN THE CONSTRUCTION WORLD, WHERE EVERYTHING IS DRIVEN BY PAPER, SUCH AS CONTRACTS, CHANGE ORDERS, BLUEPRINTS, INVOICES, ETC., A GOOD DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM MEANS LESS TIME SEARCHING FOR THAT LOST PIECE OF PAPER AND MORE TIME SPENT ON YOUR BUSINESS.

The construction software we're reviewing all have one thing in common – solid accounting functionality. Some offer basic construction specific functionality, enough for the small construction company, but not really enough for the larger company, or the growing company. Others offer a full menu of features that can suit just about any construction/contractor business.

For this review we've looked at six areas that need to be considered before purchasing new software for a construction or contractor business. They are:

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS – This includes areas such as general system navigation, ease of use, and platform support. Basic information that's important when deciding what software to purchase.

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES – We look at the four core components of an accounting system: GL, AR, AP, and Payroll. What other modules are available? Does the system have an adequate audit trail and user security?

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES – In this section we look at the availability of everything from estimating, project management ability, change order processing, scheduling and dispatch functions, and equipment management.

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS – We look at the reports that are available, if the system can handle AIA billing, does it offer client templates or document management capability, and can employees access the system remotely.

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT – We answer questions such as 'how easy is it to import or export data?' 'What formats are used?' 'Is the system completely integrated with add-ons?'

HELP/SUPPORT – In this section we look at everything from built-in support capability to how easy it is to retrieve system updates.

While it will take more than a good construction software product to make your client's business successful, it certainly will go a long way toward making their lives a bit easier, and hopefully a lot more profitable. ●

A-Systems Corporation – A-Systems JobView

2012 OVERALL RATING ★★★★½

BEST FIT

JobView offers excellent scalability, offering small to mid-sized construction related businesses a solid financial and job costing product while providing assurance that the software can transition and grow with them.

STRENGTHS

- Scalable: available in three versions
- Excellent full-featured payroll designed for the construction industry
- Latest version contains system wide enhancements
- Excellent reporting capability

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- There is not an available service/dispatch module
- The product currently lacks integrated remote access

A-Systems Corporation is entering its 34th year of providing software designed specifically for construction companies. Currently in offered in three versions, A-Systems JobView can easily work for construction companies of all sizes, from a small startup construction company to a large thriving enterprise.

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

A-Systems JobView offers users an easy to use interface that was designed for simplicity. A drop down menu provides easy system access to all program modules. A series of icons are located to the left of the user screen which can be used to select functions. Data entry wizards are available, and hot keys allow users direct access to most options. Journal entry screens are well designed and compact, and contain user tabs that provide instant access to additional functions in each module. A New Company Startup Wizard, which guides new users through various options and selections, and simplifies the setup process.

JobView includes Management Overview screens (dashboards) that offer excellent drill down capability. Users can choose the Graph View, which provides summary financial information in a graphical format. The viewer system allows users to review up to date information about every job in the system. Each view screen is password protected for greater security. Separate views are also available for both the project manager and the job supervisor, reporting data relevant each job. JobView is designed on a Windows platform, and supports with the latest Microsoft operating systems, including Windows XP. Windows Vista, and Windows 7. ★★★★★

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES

Each edition of JobView contains solid accounting/financial functionality, and includes modules for GL, AP, AR, and Payroll. The GL allows users to setup and maintain multiple companies, and can easily provide management with separate or combined financial statements, as needed. JobView provides users with a default chart of accounts option for quick setup but users can also choose to either customize the default chart of accounts or create their own. Both job numbers and account numbers can be up to 10 characters in length. JobView uses a batch system for posting transactions, and recurring journal entries can be automatically recorded and reversed. Users can choose when to close the month or delay year-end closings as needed, with an unlimited number of fiscal periods able to be open in the system at one time. The AP module allows users to easily expense an invoice against multiple jobs and cost codes, and users can search the system for possible duplicate invoices prior to entering data. Users can also post invoices into prior accounting periods. The AP module easily handles subcontract payments including retentions. JobView's AR module is excellent, and includes industry specific functions such as time and billing, AIA draws, progress billings, along with the ability to produce customized invoices and recurring bills as needed. The payroll module is construction specific and easily handles multi-state payroll processing, and also handles multiple deduction types. Certified payroll is also available in JobView, and the payroll module supports direct deposit capability. Users can also import payroll information from field employees directly into JobView, and all workers compensation and tax rates are updated constantly by A-Systems. Additional modules available for JobView include Inventory Warehousing, Equipment Costing, Purchase Orders, Fixed Asset Management, and Sales Quote/Sales Order.

JobView includes built-in audit trail functionality that cannot be shut off. All transactions processed in JobView are recorded and can be accessed if necessary. User security is set for each employee; with each system user assigned system access based on their position, and can range from view-only access to full system access, as well as specific feature access within each module. ★★★★★

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES

JobView allows users to import job estimates from a variety of sources, including other databases and third-party software applications. Budgets can track costs by groupings such as Labor, Material, Subcontracts, Equipment, and Other (categories and can be modified as needed). The new job option in JobView provides users with a useful tool for entering detailed information for each job, such as job site, billing, phases, and any pertinent certifications. Users can review the Project Management Overview for quick access to job progress and current phases, as well as budgeted, actual, and costs for each job. The 'as-of' reporting option allows job supervisors and project managers to view job progress and costs as of the date specified. A built in Projections and Modeling function allows users to easily forecast job expenses 36 months in advance. Change order processing is available and amendments can be tracked using multiple criteria. The AP module tracks detailed information on insurance expirations, vendor payment terms and 1099 information. The built in Contact Manager function allows users to track projects, prospects, and upcoming issues, and easily integrates with the AP, AR, and Payroll modules. JobView also contains numerous user-defined fields for storing custom information.

JobView's Inventory Warehousing module allows users to manage inventory in multiple warehouses. Users can assign multiple pricing levels to vendors or for each item maintained in inventory. The Purchase Order module provides users with a warning when potential expenses may exceed the current budget. The Equipment Costing module allows users to keep track of equipment data, including user, hours in use, income received from usage, etc. ★★★★½

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS

JobView contains an excellent report-generator, creating numerous standard reports that can be easily customized as needed. The DataView custom report writer is also available in JobView for those requiring specialized reports. Company overview screens also provide users with overall financial performance indicators, as well as detailed financial information about individual jobs. Management reports can be geared toward the appropriate staff member, displaying only the information needed. The AR module easily handles AIA invoicing, and the Contact Manager allows users to create templates for vendor and customer correspondence. The Electronic File Cabinet, an add-on module, allows users to attach customer and vendor documents, photos, contracts, and files to system transactions, and provides electronic access to these documents to necessary personnel. JobView is currently developing a remote access version of JobView and expects to have it available in the near future. Reports can be easily emailed to customers and vendors, or exported using a variety of file formats. ★★★★½

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT

The product's import and export capabilities allow users to import transactions and other data in batches from some third party estimation, electronic time clock, and payroll applications. Users can also export data using a plain text (*.TXT) format. As a completely integrated system, all JobView modules work together, and users can scale up to a more powerful version of the product or add additional modules as needed. JobView offers a wide range of other tools, including Point of Sale, ODBC, Credit Card Processing, and Electronic Import/Export modules. ★★★★★

HELP/SUPPORT

Along with an excellent help function found throughout the product, JobView also offers many features designed to assist new users with system setup and navigation, including a Procedures Guide for routine tasks. JobView also offers product technical support agreements that can be purchased on a quarterly, semi-annual or annual basis. Various user training options are also available, and all support questions are handled through JobView's office in the U.S. ★★★★★

SUMMARY & PRICING

A-Systems JobView is available in three separate editions (Small Builder Advantage, Standard, and Preferred). Prices range from $79.95 at the entry level, up to the Preferred edition, which currently has a retail price of $4,99 . Extremely scalable, flexible, and easy to use, JobView continues to be an excellent choice for small to mid-sized construction related businesses.

800-365-6790 **www.a-systems.net**

Sage Master Builder

2012 OVERALL RATING ★★★★★

BEST FIT

Sage Master Builder is designed for growing mid-sized construction businesses looking for industry-focused features, such as estimating, scheduling, payroll, job costing and service management, in addition to accounting and business operations functions.

STRENGTHS

- Enhanced user dispatch and dashboard overviews
- Customizable user home screens
- Comprehensive payroll management
- Full time audit trail
- Excellent job costing and reporting

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- No native SaaS/web-version, but ASP hosting available
- GL accounts limited to 10 digit alpha-numeric IDs

With comprehensive modules and utilities for business accounting, Sage Master Builder provides construction and financials management. The program includes full GL, AR, AP, payroll equipment costing and job costing, along with tools for managing projects, subcontractors, inventories, service issues, project estimating and analysis. Sage Master Builder is designed to handle all aspects of construction management, from estimating, through invoicing, inventory management, job completion, accounting and reporting.

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

Sage Master Builder opens into a full-screen interface that offers an expandable menu list of core program modules on the left, including the GL, accounting reporting, AR, AP, payroll, project management, utilities, equipment management, estimating, scheduling, service receivables, inventory and reporting. The home screen also offers icons for calendaring, a calculator, scheduled reports and help, and users can add custom links to specific areas of the program. Additionally, text-based links at the bottom of the screen give quick access to new user resources, customer resources, add-on products, an online learning center, checks and supplies, and additional free resources. The system also offers customizable user dashboards that can display key data, and new custom alerts let management know of important events and milestones.

When selecting one of the core modules from the menu, it expands to show specific functions within that module, making it easy to move to key and frequently-performed tasks. The Accounts Payable module, for instance, opens to offer links to payable reports, invoices/credits, vendor payments, vendor management, vendor 1099 functions and management of recurring payables.

Sage Master Builder is designed for use on Windows-based computers, and can be networked or installed on all computers in the business, with the number of concurrent users based on the license. The program also can be used to run multiple, separate construction entities with the same license, and also supporting firms with multiple office, worksite and inventory locations. ★★★★★

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES

Sage Master Builder includes a fully-integrated accounting system that includes GL, AR, AP, invoicing, purchase orders, payroll and equipment costing, with a full-time audit trail to ensure data integrity. The system offers four templates for setting up common charts of accounts for construction and contractor entities, or the ability to create complete customized charts. The GL supports 10-digit account number structures with additional customization options. Account management screens display charts and offer selection lists and tabbed views.

Vendor and customer lists in the AP and AR modules enable quick searching and drill-down access to contracts, as well as tabbed views for invoicing defaults, contact information, purchase orders, invoices, payments and certificates. Additional features in the AP module include management of credit card accounts, loan payments and vehicle cost and depreciation management.

When creating invoices, users can bill by job and phase, and can quickly view a contract summary that shows change orders, percent billed, balance on contract and percent complete. With the Time and Materials billing function within the AR module, the contractor can easily generate invoices based upon overhead costs and desired markup. On customer invoices, the markup can be visible or not shown, depending upon preference.

Sage Master Builder includes a full-time audit trail that tracks all transactions and data entry tasks, logging user, date and time. An audit error utility and payroll audit function are also included. A year-end closing wizard assists with the year-end closing process. The system offers user-level access rights and user groups, with granular permission to specific features. The program also offers additional optional modules for inventory, project management, scheduling, document control, estimating and equipment management. ★★★★★

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES

Sage Master Builder has a strong collection of production-focused modules and features designed to streamline construction management tasking. To start with the beginning of a new project business cycle, the system's estimating module helps to closely manage costs, and an add-on module, Sage Estimating, includes takeoff reports, parts pricing, assemblies, part/assembly classes, takeoffs, board footage and a parts database. As a result of this detailed management, the estimating feature helps create accurate cost projections that can be fully customized to each client or prospect, and that automatically use the most up-to-date pricing from subcontractors, vendors and labor. When converting an estimate into a live project, users can easily create budgets, subcontracts and purchase orders. The system also offers integration with third-party planning and estimating programs.

Sage Master Builder's production-focused functions are centered around a impressive scheduling feature that helps optimize the use of resources and time, with project, subcontract, budget and milestone oversight easily viewed by foremen and management. It includes the ability to create task lists for vendors and subcontractors, and screens are automatically populated with data from the original estimate and change orders.

Project management tools include detailed job costing, with benchmarking of projects, subcontractor contracts and progress-based billing. Change order processing, including saving of customer approvals, is handled via easy-to-use screens that include project cost and billing changes. The system offers detailed customer management screens that include billing histories, payment details and access to certificates and additional customer information screens. Similar screens enable management of vendor data, with quick access to payables and purchase order functions. Subcontractor management utilities include budgeting and tracking of liability insurance certificates.

The built-in employee payroll functions include management tools that can track any number of deductions, multiple wages per employee, salary advances and bonuses. Inventory tools allow tracking individual parts and assemblies in multiple warehouse/yard locations. Purchasing capabilities include quick generation of purchase orders from estimates, and completion-based ordering. An equipment management feature also offers tracking and cost allocation to projects, while monitoring scheduled maintenance requirements.

Newly-enhanced dispatch options are focused on the dispatch board, with enables more effective management and communication with technicians in the field. It allows tracking of incoming calls, work orders and bills. The service management module offers color-coded prioritization of jobs and advance scheduling of technicians, with the ability to email service orders directly from within the program. ★★★★★

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Sage Master Builder includes very impressive analysis and reporting capabilities, including overall financial analysis and project-by-project insight, with a total of more than 1,000 pre-configured, customizable reports. The report writing wizard guides you through custom report creation. For accounting-focused reporting, the system includes a library of GAAP statements, including multiple options for trial balance, balance sheet, income statement, GL, journals, check registers, cash flow statements, AP and AR aging and analysis, retention, and other financial reports and documents.

Construction-focused reporting options include extensive job costing with summaries, WIPs, billing and profitability, as well as bonding reports, budgeting, proposals and home builder reports. Customer invoicing is AIA compliant and the program offers customizable templates for client letters, proposals and estimates. Sage Master Builder includes a document control feature that stores job-related documents in a single location. A mobile app from Data-Maxx is available for time tracking, inventory and purchasing, and while SaaS and native remote access isn't available, it can be used with third party remote access programs like LogMeIn and GoToMyPC. The system can also be hosted by an application service provider (ASP). ★★★★½

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT

All of the modules in Sage Master Builder share databases that enable seamless integration with the other modules. Additionally, the system can work with Sage's or other third party estimating programs and offers email dispatch and client communication functions. ★★★★★

HELP/SUPPORT

Built-in support features include a getting started guide, fully indexed help utility and quick access to support and help topics from the program's home page. Online support is accessible via personalizable customer portals, and include a knowledgebase, program updates, installation guides, access to the user community and tracking of support issues. Sage University also offers a variety of training options. The system is supported by a nationwide network of Sage partners who are available for training, implementation, sales and consulting. Updates are available by CD or manual download. All support is U.S. based. ★★★★★

SUMMARY & PRICING

With exceptional job costing, reporting and estimating features, Sage Master Builder is best suited to growing mid-sized construction firms that have outgrown generic small business accounting software. The core system, which includes GL, AP, AR, payroll and equipment costing, is priced at about $3,000 for the first software user. Pricing for additional modules, like service management, inventory, equipment management, document control, and estimating, varies.

800-628-6583 **www.sagemasterbuilder.com**

CYMA Systems Inc. – CYMA Job Cost Accounting for Windows

2012 OVERALL RATING ★★★★½

BEST FIT

CYMA is a best suited for mid-sized construction companies that require a solid job cost module, excellent job tracking capability, along with flexible billing capacity.

STRENGTHS

- Modular design offers smaller companies purchasing flexibility
- Solid job cost module
- Highly customizable
- Excellent HR module

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- No remote access capability
- No equipment management module available

CYMA Job Cost Accounting for Windows offers construction companies and contractors a solid accounting/financial product along with a powerful job cost module. Modular in design, CYMA is a completely integrated system that offers users a solid selection of system modules. CYMA offers an impressive list of features and can be used as a stand alone module as well.

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

All system navigation in CYMA is completed through eDesk, which is found in the System Manager module and is required when running any CYMA module. Used as a centerpiece to all system functionality, the eDesk contains various learning tools which include the Getting Started Guide, as well as module tutorials. The eDesk interface can also be customized to suit the needs of all system users, and can store frequently used functions and common links for quick, easy access. A drop down menu bar at the top of the screen provides quick access to all system functions as well as various lists, banking information, and employee data. All data entry screens are user friendly and contain the necessary look up functions. CYMA currently offers system users three different data entry methods, so users can choose the method they are most comfortable with.

Along with excellent customization capability, the eDesk contains a series of financial calculators that provide job supervisors and managers with quick access to company financial information and Quick Entry grids allow those doing data entry to customize the process in each system module.

The latest version of CYMA contains significant enhancements in Human Resources, Payroll, and Employee Self-Service. An additional release is due at the end of 2012 that will cover all modules.

CYMA Job Cost Accounting works with Windows 2000, Windows XP Professional, and Windows Vista. For the more robust server version, you'll need Windows 2000+ Server edition. ★★★★½

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES

Along with the System Manager module, which is required, CYMA offers solid accounting modules such as GL, AR, AP, Payroll, Sales Order, Client Billing, Purchase Order, and Bank Reconciliation. The GL module allows users to create accounts using up to 24 digit alphanumeric characters and up to 10 user-defined segments. CYMA uses a batch entry system, so transactions can be reviewed prior to posting. Users can also enter and track data in up to 100 custom fields, and accounts can be easily created on the fly. CYMA's AP module allows users to establish and utilize multiple banks for transactions, supports EFT payments, and allows users to allocate expenses to projects and jobs. The AR module can process volume billing for multiple customers, handle numerous payment types, and can email statements directly to customers. CYMA's Payroll module has been significantly enhanced in this latest release, and together with the new Human Resources products, allows users to better calculate salary accruals, and easily tracks various deduction types such as garnishments, child support payments, and charitable deductions. Various HR forms are also available for manager/supervisor use. The PR module also supports direct deposit, with new, customizable formats that will work with just about any financial institution. The batch system tracks all user transactions, and multi-level security is available for various system categories including company wide, data entry, and system functions. ★★★★½

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FUNCTIONS

CYMA users can enter job estimates for both skills/labor, and materials, and choose between the Detail Budget type and the Cost Code Budget type. CYMA tracks up to 6 different types of job cost categories, and users can invoice costs using a variety (up to 25) billing methods. The Maintain Jobs screen offers a comprehensive selection of information to be entered for each job, including contract revenue, budget, and actual totals, along with other financial information. The Budget Estimator allows project managers to determine the needed materials and skills for each job, resulting in more accurate, hands-on budgeting. CYMA's main interface screen allows users to enter a comprehensive amount of information for each job including job details, invoicing information, labor, products used, tasks, and notes specific to each job.

All job charges can be adjusted as needed, with the corresponding journal entry created automatically.

The AP module maintains a detailed history for each vendor type entered in the system, so users can easily track suppliers, subcontractors, and general AP vendors easily. Customers can be entered and track by customer type, and varying levels of pricing can be assigned to each customer accordingly. A detailed payment history is available for each customer, and invoices can be generated in multiple time increments, as needed The updated CYMA P/R module handles multi-state processing, tracks all levels of employee deductions, and the addition of HR forms makes it easy to track and process any payroll changes. The optional Inventory module creates custom units of measure and easily converts units of measure as needed. CYMA also offers users real time inventory tracking along with the ability to create user-defined tracking categories as needed. The optional purchase order module provides a detailed record of all purchases along with a budget control option to alert managers when a project is potentially going over-budget. ★★★★☆

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS

CYMA Job Cost Accounting offers a good selection of job costing reporting including the Job Types report, which offers management a solid view of all job types in progress. The Budget to Actual report is available in a variety of formats, including summary, detail, and cost only. CYMA's customization capability means that users can create custom forms for customers and vendors, and also have the ability to email invoices and statements to customers as needed. For those looking for more customization options, users can opt for Crystal Reports, which seamlessly integrates with CYMA. Users can also attach documents, images, and notes to any job, vendor, customer, or inventory master file as needed. All CYMA reports can be exported using a variety of file formats including HTML, Word, Excel, and PDF. Excellent customization features in CYMA allow users to create custom invoices, statements, forms, and other correspondence. ★★★★☆

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT

All CYMA modules integrate with the required System Manager module and can be purchased as needed. Data from other third party applications can also be imported into various CYMA modules using a .CSV file format. Additional add-on modules available from CYMA include CYMA Forms, CYMA Alerts, CYMA State Payroll Forms, Crystal Reports, and the F9 Report Writer. ★★★★★

HELP/SUPPORT

CYMA offers users an excellent selection of tutorials designed to assist new users in system setup and basic navigation. An excellent 'help' function is also available. All new users are required to purchase the Software Maintenance Plan for the first year. The maintenance plan includes all software updates, enhancements, and service packs. There are also numerous product support packages available for users to choose from. The CYMA Knowledgebase provides users with immediate access to frequently asked questions (FAQ), and provides assistance with common system issues. CYMA also offers online training, and a complete set of training manuals are also available for all system modules. ★★★★★

SUMMARY & PRICING

CYMA Job Cost Accounting is an excellent product for the mid-sized construction company that requires flexible job costing options along with excellent financial capability. CYMA's modular design allows even small construction companies to purchase only the modules needed, with the ability to add more as needed. Currently priced at $645.00 per module, CYMA offers small to-mid-sized businesses a level of flexibility while building a system that will last.

800-292-2962 **www.cyma.com**

eTEK International Inc. - eTEK Accounting

2012 OVERALL RATING ★★★★½

BEST FIT

eTEK is well-suited for smaller construction companies that require flexibility and customization capability and is currently being marketed as a "next step up" from off-the shelf products.

STRENGTHS

- Updated and redesigned for Microsoft Office 2010
- Solid Equipment Management module comes standard with product
- Good accounting functionality
- Excellent job tracking capability

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- No scheduling or dispatch function available
- Limited document management capability

eTEK Accounting for Microsoft Office 2010 from *eTEK* International is a fully integrated accounting software product offering the construction industry a higher level of flexibility while offering users an easy to use interface designed using Microsoft Office 2010 design. Looking ahead, e*TEK* plans on releasing a new version later this year that will take advantage of Microsoft Office 365, utilizing cloud-based technology for easier system access.

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

eTEK 's user interface is designed around the Microsoft 2010 Office user interface, making system navigation particularly easy for experienced Office users. The main user interface utilizes a series of function icons, with software modules listed below. Clicking on an icon will reveal all related functions found within that category. Similarly, clicking on a particular module will display all of the features that can be found within that module, making even initial system navigation fairly straightforward.

Along with easy system navigation, *eTEK* offers easily navigated data entry screens, with all the necessary look up options available to users. Users can choose from a variety of data entry methods that will suit their style and their needs. The recent addition of Executive Dashboards allows users to quickly access vital data. The executive dashboard is completely customizable and can be designed during the initial system setup and implementation, and is offered to both company CEO's and CFO's at no additional cost. For additional financial reporting options, use the inquiry screens which will display both job and financial data as needed. *eTEK* also provides users with the capability to create a job template that can be saved for future use.

eTEK is available as either a traditional desktop product or as a SaaS product, providing users with a choice of software delivery methods. Built specifically for a Windows platform, *eTEK* works with Windows XP, Windows Vista and Windows 7. ★★★★★

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES

Maintaining its flexibility, users can choose to enter data into the GL in real time or use the batch system for better transaction control. Real time processing also means that users can enter and post data to any financial period at any time. System flexibility also extends to the GL account setup, where users can use up to 4 segments, which can contain up to 9 digits. Recurring journal entries can be saved in the system, and both sales and work orders can be added on the fly. The system can handle multiple cash accounts for easier transaction tracking, and invoice templates can be created and saved, eliminating the need to recreate an invoice for each billing. *eTEK*'s AR module offers system flexibility, allowing to post payments as desired. Users can also create multiple billing types, which include industry standard AIA billings. The new HR module, which is included in the payroll module (or as a standalone module) contains a complete employee management system including benefits administration, workers compensation, and all certifications. The HR module also generates essential reports as needed.

eTEK also offers a solid selection of financial modules which includes Cash Management, Purchasing, and Inventory. All system transactions are tracked in *eTEK*, providing users with solid audit trail functionality. Multi-level security is available with both menu and function level security available. ★★★★★

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES

eTEK's flexibility continues with its job cost functions, giving users the option to create estimates at any level of the job. Another terrific feature is the Estimates to Complete function, which allows project managers and supervisors the ability to review job costs at any phase of the job, providing good management, and good cost controls. Users can enter estimates in a variety of categories including job materials, and employee/contractor labor and overtime hours, if applicable. Each job entered into the system has a complete master file where all project and cost detail and be reviewed. Users can enter project change orders with all changes automatically tracked. Customer tracking capability allows users to track all levels of customer activity including all a detailed transaction history, payment detail and average discounts, if any. Users can also easily compare actual costs against estimates, with drill-down capability available throughout *eTEK*. All AIA billing information is easily tracked, with users able to search for AIA billings based on a variety of criteria. Like customer tracking, a detailed vendor history is easily available including order history and payment terms. *eTEK*'s payroll module tracks employee information such as salary history and tax deductions, and other deductions as needed.

The Inventory module allows users to define inventory products to suit user business type, and users can define minimum/maximum inventory levels for better inventory management. Non-inventory items can also be setup and billed as needed, and multiple inventory location tracking is available. The Purchasing module offers complete integration with the job cost module, and extensive drill-down capability allows users to access complete supplier information down to the originating document. The Equipment Management module allows users to track equipment usage against specific projects and jobs. Equipment serial numbers can also be entered into the system, while users can also attach equipment images and detailed notes as needed. ★★★★½

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS

eTEK offers users a good selection of standard reports which includes the comprehensive Estimates Report, which provides users with a recap of all estimated labor, materials, and equipment costs by job. The Job Cost Report offers an in-depth view of each job, and Work-In-Progress reports provide an excellent picture of where each job is, and the required amount needed to complete. All reports are professional in appearance, and the report wizard offers users excellent report customization capabilities. AIA compliant invoicing is available in *eTEK*, and templates can be created in various modules throughout *eTEK*. All *eTEK* reports are easily exported using a variety of formats including PDF, XPS, Excel, Word or Text or emailed to recipients directly from the print screen. Remote access is available using *eTEK*'s SaaS option. ★★★★½

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT

All *eTEK* modules integrate seamlessly, providing users with a comprehensive financial product. Excellent integration with Microsoft Office products increased software effective, and provides a seamless link for better reporting. *eTEK* also allows easy importing of data from third-party estimating programs. ★★★★★

HELP/SUPPORT

eTEK contains solid Help functionality within the product. Users videos are also available to guide new users through the product. Various support agreements are also available, with support costs generally running about 20% of the software costs. *eTEK* also provides all users with a private FTP site, where they can access and download system updates and enhancements as needed, as well as access FAQ's and other information as needed. ★★★★★

SUMMARY & PRICING

eTEK has recently announced reduced pricing for their software, hoping to target smaller construction companies. A single-user system which includes GL, AP, AR, Cash Management, CRM, Job Cost with Equipment and AIA billing is now less than $2,800.00, a reduction of more than $1,000.00, making it a logical and affordable solution to smaller construction companies that have outgrown off-the-shelf software products.

800-888-6894 **www.etek.net**

FOUNDATION Software - FOUNDATION for Windows

2012 OVERALL RATING ★★★★★

BEST FIT

FOUNDATION for Windows contains a full menu of features designed specifically for construction related businesses. While small construction companies with under $1 million in revenues may not need Foundation, just about any mid-to large construction company or contracting firm will find this product useful.

STRENGTHS

- Easy to navigate, uncluttered user interface
- Excellent scheduling and service dispatch modules
- Terrific selection of add-on modules
- Solid import/export/integration capabilities

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- Greater initial investment may make it beyond the reach of companies with under $1 million in revenue.
- The powerful features may require a greater learning curve than off-the-shelf software.

FOUNDATION Software has been in business since 1985. Foundation's original product was DOS-based. In the early 2000s they rewrote the software in a Windows environment. Featuring a Microsoft SQL database, FOUNDATION continually enhances its product for its core customer base, which includes construction trade businesses of all sizes.

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

FOUNDATION for Windows offers users a graphical menu that contains four major sections; Base Modules, Additional Modules, Project Control, and Tools. Easy to navigate, FOUNDATION has a drop-down menu bar at the top of the screen for quick system access. Users can choose to use the default screen, or customize the interface to suit their needs, adding frequently used program functions, reports, and external links for quick access via QuickLinks. Foundation's data entry screens are well-designed and contain all the necessary look-up options. The FOUNDATION Wizard allows users to create a series of steps attached to each activity, with those same steps available each time that activity is completed. Numerous user-defined screens are found throughout the product, making it easy to track the detail needed. FOUNDATION also contains excellent dashboard reporting functionality, with dashboards available in a variety of categories including GL, AR, AP, Job Cost, and Change Order modules. All dashboard reports contain drill-down capability.

FOUNDATION is easily accessed from remote locations using FOUNDATION SaaS, an online or "cloud" deployment option of their accounting software. They also offer a web-based application for mobile devices (iPads, tablets, smartphones, netbooks, etc.) that is used with FOUNDATION called FOUNDATION mobile. FOUNDATION mobile makes it easy for field employees to enter timecards and related information. FOUNDATION runs on Windows 7 Professional, Vista Business, and XP Professional and will run on either 32 –bit or 64-bit versions of the operating systems listed above. ★★★★★

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES

FOUNDATION offers users excellent accounting and financial capability. The GL allows users to post transactions into both prior and future periods it is a fully date-sensitive system. GL accounts are user-definable, and each account can be divided into 4 subdivisions for more in-depth tracking. FOUNDATION supports multiple companies and users which can be consolidated for more accurate reporting. The AP module offers users simplified data entry options with data automatically populating data fields. Recurring invoices can be set up in FOUNDATION and vendor payment selection is flexible, with users able to produce positive pay. The AR module offers users multiple invoicing options including Time & Materials Billing and Unit Price Billing. Recurring billings can be set up, and users can also create custom invoices and custom customer statements. AIA billings are also supported with the standard G702 and G703 built in. Foundation's Payroll module is designed for construction companies , easily handling Worker's Compensation detail, prevailing wage fringe calculations , and union specific functionality such as deductions, multi-pay rates and various other union requirements. The FOUNDATION payroll module also offers certified payroll reports. Foundation's core construction system includes GL, AP, AR, Payroll, Purchase Order, Job Costing, DataGenie Report Designer and CPA Audit/Review Console. An excellent audit trail is built into every module, with all transactions receiving a unique code when posted. System security is multi-level, with users assigned a specific company (or companies) with security assigned per module and per feature in each module. ★★★★★

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES

Users can enter and track estimates for quantities, units, or dollar amounts, and can easily track estimated versus actual dollars for each job in the system. Users can also update existing estimates as the job progresses. Users can easily keep track of historical data, making it easy to more accurately estimate future jobs. FOUNDATION also integrates with various third-party industry-specific estimating programs. Foundation's optional Project Management module has been completely revamped, now allowing owners and project managers to easily access all job related documents such as RFP's, transmittals, field logs and change orders from a single location called the job center. Users can track all change orders, with the ability to easily assign a category to each change order. All customer, vendor, employee, and subcontractor data is easily managed in FOUNDATION, with subcontractor data tracked in the Purchase Order module, where users can also manage vital information such as certificates of insurance, insurance expiration dates, and workers compensation detail. The Document Imaging and Routing module provides users with the ability to manage all documents and graphic files related to a job, like job pictures, and allow users to route invoices to the appropriate personnel for approval.

The Inventory module supports an unlimited number of items, multiple pricing levels, and varying options for unit measure. The Purchase Order/Subcontract module can track spending levels for products purchased, and users can choose to enter an abbreviated version o f the P.O. or add detail as needed. FOUNDATION for Windows offers an excellent Service Dispatch module which uses a user-defined color coded dispatch board, making call scheduling, progress, and completion tracking easy. Company dispatchers can easily send messages to field technicians using text messaging, and the module also tracks associated items such as equipment warranties, equipment maintenance detail, and can manage all active service contracts. ★★★★★

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS

FOUNDATION for Windows contains excellent reporting options, offering hundreds of standard reports. Excellent Job Cost reporting options include the Job History detail, where users can view all data for the specific job(s) at the transaction level, and the Work in Progress report, which is vital for project managers who wish to keep on schedule and under budget. Bonding and Work in Progress reports offers users detail such as Total Cost, Prior Profit, Current Billings and Prior Billings.

The Over/Under Billing provides an in-depth look at budget details for each job, allowing project managers to see what jobs are over billed, and what jobs are under billed. AIA invoicing is also available in Foundation, and can be completed on standard forms. The optional executive dashboards offer users an excellent selection of reports in Job Cost, GL, AP, AR, and Change Order modules, The Genie Series report writers provides users with custom form and reporting options and the ability to create templates for future use. Foundation's Document Imaging and Routing module allows users to route invoices to managers for approval and attach all related documents to one central file. Their SaaS deployment option allows easy access, with all remote and field employees able to access the system wherever they are. ★★★★★

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT

Both import and export Genies are available to assist users in transferring data to and from third-party applications. Other data such as purchase order, employee time , and estimating information can be imported into FOUNDATION as well. FOUNDATION easily integrates with all Microsoft Office products such as Excel, Word, and Access. Outlook integration also allows users to save emails and attachments directly to each project or job. Add-on modules such as Project Management, Scheduling, Service Dispatch, Equipment, Time & Material , Inventory, Fixed Assets, Unit Price Billing, Executive Dashboard, Document Imaging & Routing, and Consolidated General Ledger easily integrate with the core construction accounting modules. ★★★★★

HELP/SUPPORT

A built-in Help wizard is available in Foundation, and users can download all system updates directly from the FOUNDATION Software website. FOUNDATION also offers a variety of training options which include both onsite and online training. All system support is handled from Foundation's corporate offices in Ohio. The Maintenance program, included in the pricing, offers new users six months of toll-free telephone and email support. ★★★★★

SUMMARY & PRICING

FOUNDATION for Windows is really the most state of the art construction accounting product available on the market today. FOUNDATION has found a way to combine an amazing array of modules and features into an easily navigated system. Suitable for all but the smallest construction and contracting businesses, FOUNDATION currently starts at $7,000 for a single-user system.

800-246-0800 **www.foundationsoft.com**

Sage Peachtree Premium Construction Accounting 2012

2012 OVERALL RATING ★★★★½

BEST FIT

Peachtree is an excellent entry level product that is well-suited for smaller construction companies or contractors that desire affordability and functionality along with solid industry-specific features.

STRENGTHS

- Affordable, easy to use industry specific product
- Solid job cost functionality
- Large selection of add-on products available
- Excellent support system
- Scalable – able to ramp up to Peachtree Quantum or other Sage products

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- No scheduling/dispatch functionality
- No equipment management functionality

Peachtree, like its competitors, continues to make consistent enhancements to its entry-level accounting product. Filled with new features and enhancements, Sage Peachtree Premium Construction Accounting 2012 is well suited for small construction companies.

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

Peachtree's user interface uses centers for easy system navigation, with the various centers representing the various system functions. All centers are displayed to the right of the screen and automatically refresh when another center is accessed. Users can use the default screen, or customize it to better suit their needs. New users can make use of the included wizards that can help with system installation and product setup. Peachtree's data entry screens are easily navigated and are well designed, with all the necessary lookup options available. Peachtree's Business Status feature offers users a variety of views highlighting various company data such as Account Balances, Aged Payables, and Revenue YTD. Peachtree's Dashboard function has also added 11 additional modules (sections) iincluding Payroll, Top Vendors, Inventory Adjustments, and Item Purchase History. Both are fully customizable, so users can easily access the necessary views as needed. Peachtree offers remote access for quick access from anywhere, and runs on a Windows platform and will work with Windows XP, Windows Vista and Windows 7. ★★★★★

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES

Sage Peachtree Premium Accounting for Construction 2012 offers users the identical set of features and functionality found in their general accounting product, along with options designed specifically for the construction industry. Upon installation, Peachtree will install a construction-specific chart of accounts that can be utilized as is, or customized as needed.

Peachtree offers users the ability to make payments electronically, and the banking function makes reconciliation easy. An excellent selection of business tools such as user-defined dashboards, tight budget controls and company benchmarking get and keep owners on top of their financial situation. Solid AP functionality offers includes processing of vendor payments and credits, as well as handling time and expense tracking. The new Vendor Management Center allows users to view current orders, look up various vendor information, and drill down to specific vendor details and transactions. Peachtree's AR functionality allows users to access customer information, process customer invoices and receipts, customize detail as needed, and users can also drill down to customer and transaction detail as needed. Peachtree currently offers users three payroll options: Simple, Select, and Managed, with users able to choose what level of payroll, if any they wish to process in house. Both inventory and purchase order functions are also available in Peachtree as well.

Peachtree contains excellent audit trail functionality, with all system transactions tracked in detail which includes system user, transaction date and time. Managers can assign user security by module, choosing the features and functions that can be accessed by specific personnel. ★★★★½

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES

Peachtree allows users to enter estimates directly into each job or job phase. For additional information, users can access the Estimates history, which provides detailed information on all estimates that have been entered into the system since the original estimate was entered. Peachtree's Job and Project Management Center provides users with detailed information on each job, including the job status indicator, so users can determine which jobs are on track, and which need assistance. Users can also track both actual and committed costs for each job, and can easily enter and track change order and Bill of Materials revisions. The Job List provides project managers with detailed information on all jobs currently entered into the system. Users can also view other pertinent information such as job phases and change order processing as needed. Users can easily track subcontractor insurance expiration dates, process and track labor burden assessments, and track progress billing.

Peachtree easily tracks all vendor, customer, employee, and subcontractor detail, including the ability to sort and manage all data within each center. Detailed historical data is available for vendors, customers, and employees and users can track subcontractor information by simply entering them in the regular vendor management center, with subcontractor data tracked separately from standard vendor files. Expense accounts and insurance information can also be entered for each subcontractor entered into the system.

Peachtree's Inventory and Services Management Center tracks all inventory activity, with users able to track inventory using LIFO, FIFO, and Special Unit Valuation. Users can opt to utilize the user-defined codes for more specialized tracking, and inventory levels can be adjusted as needed. ★★★★

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Peachtree Construction offers users a solid selection of reports which track varying levels of job data in the Job and Project Management Center. Users can run reports such as the Job Ledger, which displays all of the transactions associated with each particular job, and The Work in Progress report, which shows project managers relevant details about the job, including all job activity to date, along with actual revenues and expenses incurred. The Business Intelligence Tool helps users create 'smart' reports.' The new Sage Peachtree add-on application is designed to for users to create custom reports in Excel. All reports offer drill-down capability, and users have the ability to combine numerous reports into a single report.

Peachtree offers users the ability to create custom templates which can be used for customer invoices and statements, along with sales orders and other correspondence such as letters. All reports can be easily exported into Excel directly from the print screen, or saved as a PDF or emailed to recipients. Peachtree also allows users to attach relevant documents such as contracts, blueprints, or

change orders to the corresponding file. The remote access add-on allows users to access Peachtree files from any location. ★★★★

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT

Peachtree contains an import/export filter that allows users to import or export files in an ASCII (.csv) format. Users can also import and convert QuickBooks data into Peachtree. Peachtree also offers a long list of add-on modules both from Peachtree and third-party applications that are designed to integrate with Peachtree financial products. ★★★★½

HELP/SUPPORT

Peachtree contains an excellent 'help' function that can be accessed throughout the product. Various tutorials and the Getting Started Guide are available for new users, making product installation and setup quick. The "What's New in Peachtree" displays a list of all new product features, and the "Show Me How To" function allows users to search for instructions for the function that they wish to complete. There are also links to the Peachtree website, where users will find various support tools as well. All Peachtree software enhancements and updates are available on the Peachtree website and can be downloaded at any time. Peachtree also offers a variety of product support plans which include access to the support help line, as well as all system updates. All support is handled in the U.S. with costs dependant on the level of support desired. ★★★★★

SUMMARY & PRICING

Sage Peachtree Premium Construction Accounting 2012 is currently priced at $499.99 for a single user system, with an upgrade costing $449.99. A 5-user system is $1,199.99.

With its latest release, Peachtree continues to provide small business owners an excellent, industry specific software product that is affordable, and can be up and running in hours, not days.

877-815-8287 **www.peachtree.com**

Sage Timberline Office

2012 OVERALL RATING ★★★★★

BEST FIT

Sage Timberline Office is best-suited for mid-sized to large contractors and real estate management businesses looking for a scalable solution for residential, commercial, industrial, government and specialty construction enterprises, including heavy construction as well as real estate developers.

STRENGTHS

- Totally customizable user interface
- Broad user-defined data fields for more comprehensive data tracking
- Powerful estimating module
- New Personal Assistant and Excel-based reporting tools
- Integrates with Sage CRM
- Comprehensive reporting and document management
- Remote time entry for field personnel
- Integrated Project Management

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- No SaaS/web-based option (will be debuted in Spring 2012)
- Initial installation and training support is recommended

Sage offers several programs designed for businesses in the construction and real estate development fields, most notably Sage Timberline (available in Enterprise and the Office version reviewed here), and Sage Master Builder. Additional programs include Sage Timberline Estimating, which can be integrated into the previously mentioned programs, providing advanced estimating functions.

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

Sage Timberline Office is geared toward giving mid-sized and large construction and real estate managers and developers a comprehensive solution for managing the financial and production sides of their entities. The system opens into a very attractive and easy-to-use interface that provides extensive user customization options. The system is available with a variety of modules based on the type of construction entity, with the core accounting desktop displaying a vertical menu for accessing the other modules, reporting, inquiries and online resources. Users can tailor the interface to their needs and can also customize screens to include links to functions and external websites. The drag and drop customization options are very user friendly and further aid in user productivity.

A detailed and expandable tasks menu offers a folder-based view that lets users jump to modules and specific functions, while dashboard views of key business data are available for each of the core areas of the business, such as receivables, budgeting, job cost, project management, property management, service management and more than a dozen other areas.

Sage Timberline Office can be used as a stand-alone program or networked across all users within a firm. It is built on the Microsoft .NET platform and offers multi-location support, as well as offering remote access tools and mobile apps. ★★★★★

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES

The core accounting module in Sage Timberline Office includes full GL, AR, AP, job costing, equipment costing, billing and payroll, as well as offering remote time and data entry, allowing users to enter information from the work site. The GL offers 25-character fields for account IDs, and enables the management and tracking of multiple, separate or interconnected companies, with divisions, departments and other sub-entities. Other account tracking functions include tracking debit activity, up to 250 user-defined data fields for additional information, tracking of joint venture ownership percentages and restriction of GL accounts to specific modules.

The program's accounts receivable module offers detailed customer tracking, including credit limits, ratings and histories, default billing information, tax exemption status and certificates, customer contact information, correspondence logs that track memos, letters and other interaction, and the ability to link such correspondence to customers, contracts, contract items, change orders, invoices, jobs, cost codes, cash receipts or other items. The AR also has extensive aging management tools. Payables functions also offer the same extensive tracking of vendors and subcontractors as the AR module does for customers. Other optional accounting-focused modules include job costing, billing, equipment costing (including depreciation), full payroll and remote time entry, which can be used to enter time and distribute it to multiple jobs, cost codes, categories, pay IDs or other factors. A timesheet approval system can also be used, allowing managers and accounting to monitor, change and approve entries as necessary. A built-in, full-time audit trail and task-specific security functions at the user level help ensure data integrity and access only to authorized users. ★★★★★

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES

The construction and property management modules available with Sage Timberline Office depend upon the nature of the construction business. The program can be set up to manage firms in commercial/industrial, residential and electrical/mechanical contracting and construction, or specialty and service contractors, real estate developers and managers, corporate or government property owners, and heavy highway construction firms. For residential builders, the key construction modules include estimating, production management, document management and property management.

Recently added features include a new personal assistant tool, which can monitors critical project and property information and delivers automatic alerts about profit, compliance, and a broad range of key activities, and the Sage Timberline Office Connector, a business intelligence tool that lets users query, report and move data back and forth between Excel and Timberline Office.

Sage Timberline Estimating offers tools for automating many processes. The estimating spreadsheet system offers a customizable interface that shows all related factors, including easily sortable columnar data for takeoff quantity, labor productivity, labor quantity, and prices, material costs, and other information, with the spreadsheets linked to several extensive databases. Users can do quick takeoffs, adding items to estimates individually, or use assembly/group-based takeoffs or model takeoffs to start an entire project based on templates. More detailed information on Timberline Estimating is at www.sagetimberlineestimating.com/Solutions.

The program's Desktop and Job Central console offers a centralized location for job setup and management, including estimates and billing, with the ability to drill down to job components, materials, parts, labor and related documents. The change management functions give users tools for tracking contract changes, and also includes customer and in-house approval routing processes.

The payroll module in Sage Timberline Office supports all states, multi-state employees, and allows unlimited deductions, including garnishments, insurance and retirement programs, and other third party pay. The module includes utilities for managing union payrolls, tax reciprocity, certified payrolls and workers' compensation, with the ability to run payrolls on any frequency. Customer, vendor, employee and subcontractor management screens offer extensive detail and drilldown to histories and credit limits, as applicable, as well as reporting functions.

The inventory module tracks items in a shared database with purchasing, helping to consolidate the functions and streamline inventory reordering. It supports LIFO, FIFO, last cost, standard and average cost methods. For scheduling and dispatch functions, the program can be used to manage up to 50 technicians, each of whom can remotely access customer and project billing and service histories, and can receive work orders wirelessly while in the field. Equipment cost and service management functions help track asset and vehicle usage, as well as rental information, license and insurance expiration dates, warrantees and user-defined information. ★★★★★

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Sage Timberline Office has a library of more than 500 customizable reports covering both business accounting information and project management, and the system includes a financial statement designer that can be used to create standard and custom sets of financials. The program also offers integration with Crystal Reports.

Job costing reports include committed cost details, completion trends, the change order log, WIPS and other AIA-compliant output. Templates are available based on business type and industry language, and are also available for customer communications. Document management functions include the ability to store all project-related items with the job, keeping various documents, correspondence, invoices, blueprints, images and specs organized.

The program offers a remote time entry feature for employees in the field to enter time and job data, as well as a remote dispatch scheduling utility. The company recently debuted two new reporting and management tools, Sage Timberline Office Connector, a business intelligence tool that lets users search and report, and move data back and forth, between Excel and Timberline, and Sage Timberline MyAssistant which proactively monitors data and delivers automatic alerts about business critical information requiring action. The Sage Desktop offers dashboarding management and reporting capabilitieswith the ability to drill down to job components, materials, parts, labor and related documents. ★★★★★

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT

Each of the standard and optional modules in Sage Timberline Office integrates seamlessly, and the program also integrates with Sage CRM and can import data from Excel. Integration with Crystal Reports is also offered. ★★★★★

HELP/SUPPORT

The program's built-in support and help features include context and task-specific help, how-tos and tips, along with links to online sources. The Sage support site is based on customized user portals that give access to product downloads and documentation, knowledgebases, contact information, a user community and training options. Premium support services are available via subscription pricing, as well as through Sage's network of consultants and the Sage Accountants Network. All support staff for U.S. users are based in the U.S. ★★★★★

SUMMARY & PRICING

Sage Timberline Office is one of the premier construction management systems on the market, providing an exceptional user interface and customization capabilities, with powerful database-driven estimating features, powerful job costing, exceptional reporting and very strong business management and accounting tools. Program pricing varies based on the specific module set and user base for each firm, with investments starting around $10,000 on average.

800-628-6583 **www.sagetimberlineoffice.com**

C-U-C Software — Contractor Essentials

2012 OVERALL RATING ★★★★½

BEST FIT

Contractor Essentials from CUC Software is an excellent fit for small to mid-sized construction-related businesses of any size, but its abundance of specialty modules makes it a terrific choice for service-related contractors.

STRENGTHS

- The "My Appointments" function allows users to easily manage appointments and workload
- An extensive array of add-on modules makes it suitable for just about any type of construction related business
- Top-notch service and dispatch module provides dispatchers with both excellent scheduling capability and customer/equipment/warranty history at a glance
- Offers built-in estimating capability

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- Report customization options could be improved
- Better product and support detail on website would be helpful

In business for over 30 years, CUC Software has been offering construction specific software designed for both the construction and the trade industry. Contractor Essentials contains solid accounting functionality along with an impressive selection of modules that handle everything from job costing to service dispatch.

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

Contractor Essentials offers users an easily navigated user interface screen. A drop down menu at the top provides access to system functions, and a user-defined vertical menu located at the left of the main screen provides quick access to designated user functions and common tasks. Users can also choose to utilize organizational tools such as the 'My Tasks' area, or simply hide it if not used. Contractor Essentials data entry screens are well-designed, and contain an abundance of drop-down menus, although the search function is somewhat awkward. All data entry screens offer an extensive array of tabs for quick access to related screens. For quick access to vital company information, the Critical Performance Measures module provides categorized reports that look at both company and industry targets, and measures current company performance against both. Remote employees can easily access the system from their location. Contractor Essentials works on a Windows platform, and will work with Windows Vista, Windows XP and Windows 7. Server users will need Windows 2000+. Contractor Essential's data entry screens are easily navigated and contain good look up options as well as tabs to related module options. ★★★★☆

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES

Contractor Essentials is a modular product, with users able to choose the modules needed. The core financial modules include GL, AP, AR, and Payroll, with additional functions such as asset management and budgeting found in the GL module. The AP module offers users the ability to pay invoices traditionally via check, by credit card, or by direct deposit. Enter recurring invoices for future payment, and easily integrate with the Contractor Essentials Purchase Order module for easy tracking of system expenses. The AR module provides easy customer tracking and maintenance, and also contains the ability to manage all bank deposits, as well as handling recurrent invoicing for customers. The Payroll module is construction/contractor specific, offering options such as productivity reporting and union reports. It can also handle multiple pay rates for each employee, and is multi-state friendly, with Certified Payroll available. There are numerous accounting and financial modules available as well, including Estimating, Point of Sale, Progress/AIA Billing, and Inventory & Inventory Kit Assemblies. Contractor Essentials contains solid audit trail functionality, with all system transactions tracked by user. Multi-level security provides managers with the ability to determine system level usage based on both primary and secondary level menus, with the option to assign system passwords as needed. ★★★★★

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES

Contractor Essentials contains project estimate capability in the Job Cost module, with users able to edit and track estimates as needed. Percentages can be assigned to the basic estimate, and adjusted when necessary. The optional Material Estimation module allows users to enter bid information into the system and later convert the data into a job. Bid information can also be imported from portable electronic devices, making it easy for field personnel to track information and later export into the main system.

All job information is easily accessible by project managers and extensive job, estimating, and materials billing and reporting options available, which provides those managers with quick access to current data. Users can also access current job information by customer number, including details such as job cost by phase, progress billing, and time & materials billing. Managers can easily enter change order information, with both original and change order status accessible.

Contractor Essentials contains excellent vendor, customer, employee, and subcontractor tracking and management capability. The Marketing Manager module allows users to track potential leads, convert those leads to sales, and also interfaces with both Microsoft Word, for easy document and letter processing, and the Critical Performance Measures module, so managers will also have excellent sales, and sales conversion rates available. Features such as the Notes/Files option allows users to record all outside interaction, whether with a customer or vendor, and users can assign tasks to follow up on any new or existing items. The Payroll module contains excellent employee management capability, with users able to enter separate classifications for each employee that can be later tied back to a specific job or function. The Inventory module allows users to set up and manage inventory items, including bar coding for easier tracking. The serialized inventory option allows you to enter serial numbers when receiving products, making it easier to track against a job. An Inventory Kit Assembly module is available as well. The Purchase Order module, found under the AP module, funnels all purchasing detail directly into AP for each vendor management and invoicing. Other optional modules, such as the Vehicle Maintenance module allows users to track costs for each vehicle in service, including any scheduled maintenance. The Tool Management module provides managers an easy way to keep track of valuable tools, with managers able to check tools out to specific employees and specific jobs. Contractor Essentials also contains an excellent Service Management and Dispatch module which makes scheduling and tracking job detail easy. Not only does this module handle scheduling, it also provides phone system handlers with excellent information during the phone call, such as a detailed customer and service history. This module also integrates with the E-Service module, which provides service dispatchers with the ability to dispatch service call details to technicians in the field. An excellent Equipment Management module rounds out this impressive set of construction related modules, offering the ability to track vital detail about every piece of equipment including install dates, warranty detail and expiration and a complete service history. ★★★★★

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Contractor Essentials offers a good selection of job-related reports, including all job reports, progress billing reports, and estimates to actual totals. Labor and maintenance reports can be found in all of the optional job/contractor related modules, and AIA billing are available in Contractor Essentials as well. Contractor Essentials makes good use of templates, and users can easily create a variety of customized forms to suit their needs. The "My Appointments feature found on the main user screen provides managers and employees both with an excellent time management tool, where users can easily access all current jobs and service details, as well as track all upcoming appointments. Recurring appointments can be easily entered in the My Appointments feature, with the ability to assign a specific priority level to each appointment. ★★★★½

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT

Contractor Essentials is a modular system, with a long list of module available that completely integrate with the core system. Other add-ons include Map Manager, Flat Rate Pricing Interface, Point of Sale Invoicing, In-House Manufacturing, Time and Material Billing, Progress Billing, and a Remote Time Clock Interface. Contractor Essentials also offers excellent integration with Microsoft Office products, and contains a direct interface with both Microsoft Word and Outlook. ★★★★★

HELP/SUPPORT

Contractor Essentials contains solid help functionality. Various support plans are available for system users, depending on their needs. Toll-free support and all product upgrades and enhancements are available to every support users. Users can log into the support page on the CUC Software website to gain access to support personnel. Per-call support is available as well. Training options vary, with both onsite and classroom training available as needed. System users can also receive daily system tips on both Facebook and Twitter. ★★★★½

SUMMARY & PRICING

Contractor Essentials from CUC Software starts at $10,685 for a 1-3 user system, and is available to lease for around $335.00 per month. Contractor Essentials basic system includes GL, AR, AP, PR, Job Costing, Service Manager, Inventory, and Equipment Tracking modules with any additional modules prices separately.

While suitable for any construction company, Contractor Essentials is truly designed for the service contractor with a variety of industry specific modules available to just about any type of service contractor. Affordable pricing makes it particularly suitable to smaller businesses.

800-272-9908 **www.cucsoft.com**

Intuit, Inc. – QuickBooks Premier Contractor 2012

2012 OVERALL RATING ★★★★½

BEST FIT

QuickBooks Premier Contractor 2012 is well suited for small or start-up construction companies that need an easy to use software product that fits into their budget.

STRENGTHS

- Affordable for most budgets and easy to use
- Limited time/expertise needed for installation and setup
- Solid accounting capability with industry specific chart of accounts
- Good integration with third-party software and a wide range of add-ons

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- Limited ability for product expansion
- Limited customization capability

As in previous years, Intuit continues to update its popular QuickBooks business management software with new features and product enhancements. QuickBooks Premier Contractor 2012 provides tools to manage and track jobs for most small and mid-sized construction companies.

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

QuickBooks continues to provide users with a customizable, easy to navigate user interface screen. The application uses transaction cycle-based Home Page as the main navigation point. All controls are navigated by using a drop down menu at the top of the screen, as well as workflow diagrams that display the available options for each area of the business (customers, vendors, employees, banking etc). Data entry screens are consistent with earlier versions, and all screens include look up options for quicker data entry. The new Calendar View provides better calendar management functions and users can scan documents and add to-dos to further improve functionality. Company Snapshots provide users with comprehensive views of selected reports such as payment status and company aging reports. A QuickBooks add-on provides remote personnel with easy system access. Data entry screens are consistent throughout QuickBooks and contain the necessary look up options. Although there is a Mac OS version of QuickBooks Pro, as well as a separate Online Edition of the application, the Premier Contractor Edition is available only for computers running Microsoft Windows. Job costing and some other features needed by construction companies are not supported on either the Mac OS or the Online edition of the program. ★★★★★

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES

QuickBooks Premier Contractor 2012 contains solid core accounting functionality including GL, AP, AR, and Payroll functions. New in 2012 is the Inventory Center, which allows users to manage inventory transactions from a single location. Users can utilize batch transaction processing when invoicing the same item or service. Recurring billings and invoices can be automated, and users can set the intervals between processing. The Premier Contractor edition uses construction related vocabulary and the chart of accounts that installs with this edition includes construction specific accounts. QuickBooks also offers numerous Payroll options, where users can either process payroll in-house, or utilize an outside payroll service. Solid banking functionality simplifies the import, tracking, and reconciliation of bank accounts and credit cards. QuickBooks contains a transaction audit trail, with an audit trail report available on demand. Managers can assign varying levels of access to QuickBooks, including full or specified access to each transaction cycle, and system areas can be made accessible or off limits as desired. ★★★★½

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES

QuickBooks Premier Contractor 2012 contains solid estimation tools, allowing users to create custom estimates and estimate templates which can be used in future jobs. Quotes can be easily modified if necessary, and users have the ability to create multiple quotes for each job in the system. Good reporting ability allows users to track all job related costs, and project managers can easily track job estimates against actual results. Change orders are easily entered, and can be added to an existing estimate. Subcontractor time and expenses can be tracked and paid directly from the system. QuickBooks centers easily track all customer, vendor, and employee information, allowing users to create new items, search for existing data, or print lists or reports as needed. The new Leads Center provides users with the ability to better track any potential sales leads and can easily convert those leads to sales. The Inventory Center provides users with a centralized area to manage inventory transactions which include entering part numbers, units of measure, and re-order points. There are also a number of user-defined fields available for additional tracking. Users can create purchase order templates for future use, and add new vendor information as needed. Remote employees can easily access QuickBooks through a remote access subscription to the QuickBooks Remote Access Service, or have their instance of QuickBooks hosted by a third party hosting provider. ★★★★

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS

The Contractor Edition offers a good selection of construction specific reports including the comprehensive Job Profitability Detail, which allows managers to determine how profitable a job is, and where the profit is originating. The Profit & Loss by Job provides management with income and expense information, and can also compare actual results with amounts estimated. The QuickBooks Report Center makes it easy to run reports from a central location, with all available system reports categorized for quick access. Reports can be easily customized as needed, and exported to Excel directly from the print screen. QuickBooks incorporates templates throughout the application, so users can quickly create and save billing, invoicing, reporting, or other recurring transactions for future usage. QuickBooks users can now also access industry specific report templates created by other users. The application can create groups of reports as well as customer invoices and statements. All reports can be published as a PDF file. QuickBooks allows users to maintain complete control over all documents by attaching relevant documents such as blueprints, contracts, and reports to transactions / items / customers / vendors / employees within the software for free – the documents are stored locally next to the data file. An online document storage service is no longer offered with the 2012 version of QuickBooks. ★★★★☆

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT

Standing data can be imported and exported using a text file format, and third party tools are available to simplify the transaction import process. Users can also import data using a .csv format, and files can be exported to Excel as needed. All data imported into QuickBooks will need to be modified prior to importing into existing data files. QuickBooks works with a long list of third-party software applications, as well as existing Intuit add-ons such as Intuit Sync Manager, which helps to keep files accurate. ★★★★½

HELP/SUPPORT

All QuickBooks products are truly designed for the new system user, and as such, contain a wide range of learning tools and training options. Learning tutorials guide new users through basic system functions and the Windows 'help' function allows users to quickly access information about any topic. Setup wizards can be implemented during installation and business setup, simplifying the configuration process. QuickBooks also offers excellent online help, as well as the availability of local QuickBooks experts for those who need onsite assistance. Periodic system updates can be downloaded and installed automatically, or downloaded manually. Many training options are also available to new users, and a popular user community can assist new users and answer questions as needed. Support options are available, with users able to choose the level of support they will need. While routine support calls are frequently routed overseas, all payroll related questions are handled by U.S. personnel only. A word of caution: if utilizing local 'experts,' look for certification and construction industry experience and references. Many consultants call themselves QuickBooks experts. The true experts will be able to document their capabilities and expertise. ★★★★★

SUMMARY & PRICING

QuickBooks Premier 2012 is a reliable, consistent application. A single user system is $399.95, with the 2012 upgrade version priced at $359.95. A 3-user version has a list price of will run $999.95, with suggested upgrade pricing of $899.95.

An excellent entry level product, QuickBooks is ideal for the smaller construction company looking for an affordable product that just about anyone can use.

877-683-3280 **www.intuit.com**

Management Information Control Systems – Builder Information System (BIS)

2012 OVERALL RATING ★★★★½

BEST FIT

Builder Information Systems is well-suited for small to mid-sized or larger construction related businesses that desire a scalable product that offers room for growth.

STRENGTHS

- Scalable with 4 Editions available
- Excellent job costing capability
- Excellent subcontract management
- Solid document management and imaging capability
- Real-time with an excellent audit trail

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- No dispatch module available

Builder Information Systems (BIS) from Management Information Control Systems has been a steady provider of financial and job cost software since 1983. BIS continues to offers construction companies a solid financial product with excellent job management tools which is available in four editions (Essential, Standard, Professional, and Enterprise).

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

BIS offers users a fully customizable user interface that is driven by the 'My Desktop' function. Users can choose to display complete 'my desktop' options which include system links, my favorites, my dashboard, and workspaces. Clicking or selecting links will display all of the features and functions found within the module, or users can access specific tasks using the drop down menu bar at the top of the screen. Users can access a recap of all system jobs from the 'My Jobs' screen, including detailed information on Billing & Cost, Cash Flow, Labor and Subcontract detail. Data entry screens are free of clutter and easily navigated and contain tabs where varying levels of detailed information can be entered. All data entry screens also contain the necessary look-up options, and a good number of user defined fields making it easy to enter and track the information needed. BIS is easily accessed remotely by anyone with access to an Internet connection. BIS is designed to work on a Windows platform, including Windows XP, Windows Vista, and Windows 7. ★★★★★

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITIES

The GL module is included in all versions of BIS. The Essential and Standard versions of BIS include other core modules along with a few optional modules. In the Professional and Enterprise levels, all modules except the GL are optional, so companies can choose only the features required.

The GL allows users to utilize up to a 10 digit account number and a 40 character account description. New companies can be configured with a default chart of accounts, enter a custom list of accounts, or modify the accounts used in another company. BIS easily handles multiple companies and the Professional and Enterprise editions can also handle up to 10,000 departments. The AP module tracks workers compensation insurance as well as both liability and auto insurance information. Partial payments are easily handled and recurring invoices can be set up as needed. Users may also choose to pay invoices using a credit card. The AR module contains a recurring billing option, handles contract invoices and both debit and credit memos. Users can also assign up to nine discount levels for all customers. The Payroll module is geared toward construction companies and easily handles multi-state payroll, union and certified payrolls, and contains the ability to distribute payroll hours to multiple jobs. Additional modules offered by BIS include Job Billing, Inventory, Purchase Order, and Bank Reconciliation.

Built-in audit trail functionality tracks all system transactions with a report available for reviewing when desired. BIS offers multi-level security for all users, including module and menu level security options. Each edition of BIS offers increased security levels, with the Enterprise edition of BIS offering the most sophisticated system security options. ★★★★★

CONSTRUCTION/CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FEATURES

The BIS job cost module imports estimates from a variety of third-party applications, as well as from an Excel spreadsheet. The Job Cost function allows users to track expenses for every job in the system and compare actual totals to budgeted projections. Users can easily create job budgets which track material and labor, as well as equipment and subcontract costs. The optional Job Scheduling module, available for the Professional or Enterprise edition is an excellent tool for project managers, providing them with the ability to schedule any job-related activity, track job progress and completion and costs incurred to date. Change orders are processed through the AR module and can be easily added and tracked. Change order totals can also be viewed, offering detail on budgets and adjustments as well as any adjustments made. The new Time & Materials Billing functionality allows users to enter actual job related costs – such as labor, materials, and equipment and add a percentage markup. The optional Subcontract module tracks insurance expiration dates, invoices, payments, retention, and back charges. Both the AP and the AR modules offer detailed information on vendors and customers, including transaction and billing history, with the ability to customize each account as needed. The Payroll module tracks employee history, including salary, job history, tax information, Paid Time off accruals and adjustments. An optional Inventory module allows users to assign inventory items to a department, a group, or a sub-group, establishes re-order levels, and even adds a product image to the inventory file. The Purchase Order module provides managers with the option to create vouchers for better spending control. An excellent Equipment module tracks every piece of equipment including serial numbers, fuel usage, mileage, and all related maintenance costs. ★★★★★

REPORTING & MANAGEMENT TOOLS

BIS contains excellent reporting capability, with each installed module containing a solid selection of reporting options. Job cost reporting options are particularly strong, with reports such as the Job Cost Status Report, which provides users with the detailed expenses of each job in the system. The Labor Distribution Report allows managers to quickly view labor costs for each project. The Job Cost Ledger is an excellent audit tool; providing users with a detailed listing of all system transactions posted for each job. Drill down capability can be found in all BIS reports and the optional Report Writer module allows users to create custom reports with ease. AIA Billing is available in the BIS Job Billing module, and comes with all of the necessary forms needed for change order processing, project billing, and certificate of payment processing. Both the Document Manager and the Document Link and Imaging modules offers excellent document management capability, first by tracking all of the necessary documents for each job, and then by linking all related documents into a central file. Users can create custom templates in the Document & Link Imaging module as well, and can easily access BIS from any remote location. ★★★★★

INTEGRATION/IMPORT/EXPORT

Users can easily import budget and estimate data directly into BIS. BIS also offers custom programming for special applications which integrate BIS data with other management tools. All reports can be exported using a variety of file formats including PDF, RTF, Excel, and HTML. BIS is a completely integrated system, with all modules seamlessly integrated. Both Professional and Enterprise edition users can also mix and match modules as needed, buying only the ones necessary, and adding others at a later time. ★★★★★

HELP/SUPPORT

BIS offers users an excellent help system, with users able to search and locate answers easily. The new Video Learning Center offers users a series of training videos that create a hands-on type of experience by demonstrating how a particular function is performed. System updates can be downloaded directly from the BIS website by anyone with a current support plan in place. The BIS website also contains information on each system module and provides screen shots for viewing. There are a variety of support plans available from BIS, or users can choose to receive support on a per-incident basis. All BIS support is available during regular business hours. ★★★★★

SUMMARY & PRICING

BIS from Management Information Control Systems (MICS) is a scalable product that offers construction and contractor businesses with the customization and flexibility they need to run their business profitably. BIS software pricing starts at $1,895, with pricing dependent on the edition and modules purchased. (BIS also offers a new mobile application designed for Droid devices which allows users to access their BIS® data in a read-only functionality at this time but that actual data entry and compatibility with Apple products is on the horizon.

800-838-6427 **www.bissoftware.com**

Three Apps for Mobile Professionals

A second software revolution taking place around us is the mobile revolution, which is changing the way we work, live, and communicate with everyone in our lives. The "app economy" is changing the way software is written, published, used, and consumed by everyone and major publishers are now direct competitors with apps from startups. Individual developers can now support themselves by selling apps in these mobile marketplaces, while outsourcing the sales and fulfillment to the major marketplaces from Apple, Amazon, and Google.

This month, we bring you three apps which can make life easier for you and your clients.

IRS2Go, a consumer-oriented free app which can help your clients find out their refund status.

Key Ring Reward Cards, a tool which will help you store all of those loyalty cards on your phone instead of carrying them around with you.

We will also discuss the Google Docs app for Android, and give you a glimpse into the future of this cloud-based service on mobile devices.

Brian Tankersley, CPA.CITP, Technology Editor

Brian Tankersley is a Knoxville, Tennessee CPA and consultant whose practice is focused on technology consulting and training for accountants. Brian is a nationally recognized speaker with K2 Enterprises (k2e.com), and blogs on accounting technology at CPATechBlog.com. Comments, suggestions, and errata are always welcome, and should be e-mailed to brian.tankersley@CPAPracticeAdvisor.com.

APP PROFILE: IRS2Go 2.0

Summary: A basic tax application for practitioners and clients.

The Internal Revenue Service has created a new version of its application for users of Apple iOS and Android devices. The app allows taxpayers to check on the status of their current year refund without calling your office twice a day. Users can also order transcripts for their tax accounts directly from within the app. IRS customer service numbers are also included, and can be automatically dialed from within the app. Users can engage with the IRS by following their social media posts or subscribing to e-mail updates from within the application.

Benefits:

- Allows taxpayers and practitioners to check individual income tax refund status for the current filing year instantly, and order printed transcripts to be delivered to their address of record.
- Users can view YouTube videos and access IRS social media posts, as well as subscribe to updates on personal income tax rules from within the app.
- The "Contact Us" tab allows users to dial the appropriate IRS customer service number directly from their smartphone.

Potential Limitations:

- Tax updates through here are designed for a general audience, so the topics may be somewhat simplistic for practitioners.
- Tool is not designed to assist with taxes other than income taxes, nor is it designed to make any kind of tax payments.
- Does not have strong integration with the IRS website, nor does it provide links to IRS e-Services for practitioners, publications or forms.

Operating Systems: iOS, Android
Publisher: Internal Revenue Service
Publisher's Website: www.irs.gov
Price: Free

APP PROFILE: Key Ring Reward Cards

Summary: A helpful tool for simplifying your wallet.

Over the last twenty years, many retailers have established customer loyalty cards which allow us to receive special rewards based on our past purchases. Many of us lose out on discounts because we do not (and cannot) carry all of these cards. Key Ring Rewards Cards is an app for smartphones and tablets which stores these bar codes on your smartphone, with free cloud-based data backup. The software will create a barcode similar to the one included on the original card which can be scanned

by the cashier directly from the phone screen.

This tool can also be used to retain other types of barcodes, including gym passes, membership cards, and almost any other identification number.

Benefits:

- Allows you to participate in loyalty plans without carrying all of the cards, as well as share your loyalty cards with your spouse and children for maximum savings and rewards.
- The app turns the camera on your smartphone into a barcode scanner which can automatically read the data on loyalty card barcodes.
- Cloud-based backup allows you to easily populate your data on a new device without having to rescan all of the cards.
- Custom coupons from some stores can be presented to you from within the mobile app.

Potential Limitations:

- Some scanners are unable to recognize the barcodes rendered on the smartphone screens.
- Application will not work with programs which utilize technologies other than barcodes (e.g. RFID, magnetic card readers) to store and retrieve identifying information.
- There are some potential privacy concerns associated with a third party having all of your membership numbers.

Operating Systems: iOS, Android, BlackBerry, Windows Mobile

Publisher: Mobestream Media
Publisher's Website: www.keyringapp.com
Price: Free

APP PROFILE:

Google Docs App for Android

Summary: An interesting tool for web-based collaboration.

Although Google Docs is thought of as a weak replacement for Microsoft Office, there are situations where it can be used much more easily than some of the tools which use native Microsoft Office apps. The collaboration features within Google Docs are much easier to configure than Microsoft alternatives like Microsoft SharePoint, Microsoft Office365, or Windows Live SkyDrive. Although Google Docs is not appropriate for some information, it is an excellent tool for non-confidential real time collaboration with other users on the go.

Benefits:

- The new Android version of Google Docs includes offline editing, for those rare occasions when your mobile device can't get online.
- Documents composed or edited on mobile devices can be retrieved and edited from within the Microsoft Office applications for Windows using the Google Cloud Connect add-in.
- Google Docs provides simple sharing of information with other users, and includes advanced features like automatic saving, version control, and tools for organizing your data.

Potential Limitations:

- The Google environment's security and privacy are a concern to many, as Google will not certify that their environment and complies with regulatory requirements such as HIPAA and Gramm-Leach-Bliley. Google will also not certify that stored data is encrypted at rest. Many employers will not want copies of confidential data stored on Google's servers, and there is not a simple way to password protect individual files and still retain the ability to edit the documents on a mobile device.
- There are limitations on the size of documents in Google Docs, and many large or complex documents cannot be accessed. Commonly used Microsoft Office features such as Excel PivotTables, automatic tables of contents in Microsoft Word, and connections to external databases (e.g. mail merges) are not supported.
- Formatting is inconsistent, and all large documents tested had significant differences in how the document was rendered in the Windows version of Microsoft Office and Google Docs.

Operating Systems: An App is available for Android devices, but there is also a mobile version of the web application (http://docs.google.com) which can be used on other devices, including BlackBerry, iOS, Linux, and Windows Mobile.
Publisher: Google
Publisher's Website: www.google.com/mobile/docs/
Price: Free

How to Make Social Media Work for Your Firm

Whether you already use social media for business or you're still thinking about it, the concept to start with is, "why." You can most certainly jump in and start experimenting—that's how many people begin. But sometimes I see frustration mount as these folks evaluate if their efforts are worth it.

The typical metrics (e.g., followers or connections, comments, or retweets) are nice for the ego but don't often correlate with dollars. It's at this point that some people abandon their attempts. Others realize that some goals might be helpful.

Michelle Golden

Michelle is a growth and profitability strategist. With her deep knowledge of firm operations and sharp observation skills to quickly grasp a firm's nuances, she guides practitioners toward improved profitability and stronger, healthier cultures. She focuses on strategic consulting and facilitation around long- and short-term planning, positioning and pricing, messaging, and communications (both online and off).

The most important aspect in using social media effectively is to be clear about your business-related purpose for using these tools. Why are you there? There are several possible reasons that fall into these three categories:

Business Development. By building and strengthening relationships with current and future clients and referral sources through sharing and interacting, you can enhance your credibility, seem more personable and interesting, and show that you're highly accessible. Relationships for recruiting and community involvement are also enriched through social media activities.

THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT IN USING SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTIVELY IS TO BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS-RELATED PURPOSE FOR USING THESE TOOLS.

Customer Service and Reputation Management. Monitoring online mentions of yourself and your business provides opportunities to help others, manage imperfect situations, and stand out from other firms. You develop a proactive fan base to offset any negative sentiments with a higher ratio of praise to criticism (think Amazon reviews). Your presence online permits you to increase loyalty and make problems right.

Just Plain Learning. There's never been an easier way to isolate (through time-saving filters) high-quality, timely information to expand your knowledge. You can set-up content to be fed to you or manually skim for good articles within your chosen communities of peers, thought leaders, industry experts, and clients.

Select your primary purpose; this drives your considerations and next steps. It also drives who does what. Generally, educational and relationship-based activities must occur at the individual practitioner level. Others can perform monitoring, with your direction.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Start by identifying exactly who you are trying to reach. Where do they already congregate both online and off? What will it take to be a participant and maybe an influencer in those communities?

Think about one niche area at a time. Niches can be by industry, market segment (e.g., family-owned business, public companies), demographic (e.g., retirees, recent immigrants), or situational (e.g., divorcees, people caring for aging parents).

Then, within a niche, who are the decision influencers in terms of their roles? For each role, consider the person's mindset, business concerns, interests, and technological sophistication. What organizations and resources do they trust? Are they involved in discussion or LinkedIn groups? What blogs and Twitter feeds do they follow? Ask some clients these questions if you're not sure.

Your end goal is sales through warm inquiries and qualified referrals. To get them, you need to be visible to and (ideally) have conversations with influential people on topics they are interested in. They should see that you're credible and capable. This is how trust begins.

CUSTOMER SERVICE AND REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

Monitoring online mentions can be delegated, but the subsequent interactions for reputation management are

tricky. Outsource only if you carefully qualify the vendor and assure they follow your protocol for interacting on your behalf. Reputations can be harmed more than helped by ill-qualified employees or vendors. To understand some risks, see "Why Outsourcing Social Media Isn't Always the Best Step" (http://bit.ly/outsource).

To monitor for mentions, I like Google Reader to automatically aggregate results for search parameters that relate to you and your firm. Hubspot, a social media service company, has a great instructional webinar (www.hubspot.com/archive/monitor-social-media-presence-daily) on how to set up monitoring so it takes less than ten minutes (they say daily, but once or twice a week is sufficient).

You might want to track mentions to see if your presence is growing and if the right things are being noticed. Track:

- Where did it appear & who said it?
- What was said? Categorize the nature of the mention and keep a clip file.
- Who responded and how fast? Keep the response in a clip file, too.

The last item is the most important. Respond with thanks to positive mentions and if you find a negative mention, seek to resolve it. Don't be overly concerned about the occasional problem aired online. It's actually pretty easy to look good, even in a complaint situation.

Handle it exactly as you should handle a face-to-face complaint:

1) "I'm sorry about your experience,"
2) "I'm going to make it right," and
3) you take it offline: "Let's talk by [phone or email]." When others see this reply trail they see that you're reasonable, own mistakes, and resolve them. To normal people, it's not whether you make a mistake, it's how you handle it that matters. Studies show that customer loyalty is stronger after mistakes are resolved well than when no mistake occurred; credibility can be gained through fallibility.

LEARNING

Leveraging social media just for learning is a great goal. But reading and reposting is passive as far as marketing's concerned; don't expect new business to result. Simply setting up Twitter or LinkedIn accounts won't suddenly (or ever) drive up your revenues.

To get started finding great content, follow other CPAs and industry thought leaders on Twitter. For a head start, my CPA-related twitter lists will direct you to many:

- twitter.com/michellegolden/cpas-cas-who-tweet
- twitter.com/michellegolden/accounting-news-info
- twitter.com/michellegolden/accounting-awesomeness
- twitter.com/michellegolden/accounting-firms-corp

IT'S ABOUT CONVERSATION

Social media tools are simply communication channels, they're never strategies in and of themselves. Tools like LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and blogs are for conversations within specific marketing strategies. The word "conversation" is key.

SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS ARE SIMPLY COMMUNICATION CHANNELS, THEY'RE NEVER STRATEGIES IN AND OF THEMSELVES.

Social media channels aren't appropriate for the one-way broadcasting typical of corporate marketing. It's okay to occasionally mention what you're doing or have been recognized for, but no more than once in, say, ten interactions, just like you would converse at a ball game or dinner with your client or prospect. As long as you treat your digital conversations the way you treat personal conversations, you'll be golden.

Treating

Toward the end of 2011, I was at the annual Sleeter Conference, which is quickly becoming the Super Bowl for accountants, if such a thing is possible. They held a session about Financial Dashboards, and the auditorium was quite literally standing room only. People were squeezing in as others waited outside for people to leave.

And, rightfully so. Accountants and bookkeepers are eager to put dashboards in front of their clients. There's no faster way to drive a deeper relationship than to begin surfacing insights and automating opportunities for more regular and substantive interaction. Oh, and clients are screaming for a way to answer their own questions quickly... in the cloud.

ACS (aka, "Accountant Cloud Stagnation")

The Problem

Tragically, the session ended up focusing on one of the most advanced tools in the marketplace, and as confusing jargon began to mingle with complicated (sorry, "sophisticated") software, many of those eager eyes turned to a shade of horror and uncertainty. I witnessed, in fast-forward, a process I've seen many times: Accountants know they need to be in the cloud, their clients are asking for it, and they want to deliver, but they end up not taking the plunge. "Maybe next year."

Why No Plunge?

The pundits will tell you it's concern over security or that accountants don't get technology, but I think that's ridiculous. (If CPAs can figure out QuickBooks, they can figure out anything!)

No, I think there are two opposing forces that are behind this rampant Accountant Cloud Stagnation (ACS) epidemic...

- Many accountants believe that each of their clients is unique and needs thorough customization of any dashboard they would consider using.
- Many accountants believe they don't have time to customize (or learn *how* to customize) all these crazy, "sophisticated" cloud software suites that are out there.

The Cure

I think ACS is a curable malady, and these three simple steps can help you get started today:

1. Find a solution that is turn-key and works with your existing business

Many accountants mistakenly believe that in order to "get into the cloud" they need to leave their existing processes behind. Most accountants are comfortable with QuickBooks desktop, and that's fine. In fact, it's more than fine. There are plenty of cloud solutions that interface with QuickBooks securely. Intuit handles all the data transfers, so you know you're OK. Just keep what you've got and bolt on what you need.

> IF CPAS CAN FIGURE OUT QUICKBOOKS, THEY CAN FIGURE OUT ANYTHING!

And the idea is to provide a fully turn-key solution for accountants. Upload your logo, set your color scheme and you've got a fully-branded solution for your clients the same day. Leave QuickBooks Desktop right where it is (your office or your clients'), and let's get to work!

2. Make a couple modest customizations for each client

I used to consult for CFOs of Fortune 500 companies in nearly every industry under the sun, and it blew my mind initially that they were all running all the same reports for 80 percent of their work. Sure, retail companies have inventory analyses and manufacturers have supply chain analyses, but they both look at the same cash flow projections and profitability analysis.

Listen, if you were to plug in 30 clients from 10 different industries, each client wouldn't need 100 percent of the reports that are available. But with a couple targeted customizations for each, your clients would have a ton of information at their fingertips that used to take a lot of time to compile and often times never gets done. They call that the 80/20 rule, and it's a good one.

3. Fill the gaps... with your expert advice!

If you sat down today and plugged in a web-based dashboard tool for your clients, made a couple tweaks for each, and then put the application in their hands, there would no doubt be a ton of gaps. If it had industry benchmarks, you would probably want to make adjustments for geography or business size. If there were no benchmarks, you would want to talk through the context of several key metrics. In fact, you might be tempted to discount the value of the cloud-based app because of its limitations.

But the app is just a starting point for the conversation. Rather than working your fingers to the bone trying to customize each report to automatically generate crisp, automated gold, our clients have had a lot more success just printing the reports out, penning them up, and talking with their clients about what they think.

Because that's the point of these tools

Cloud-based apps don't give you all the answers. (Be wary of folks who say they do!) Instead, they provide data in an easy way so that you can drive the conversation to the next level and help your clients achieve their goals. Essentially, cloud apps can help CPAs migrate from "bookkeeper" to trusted business advisor, in the eyes of their clients. And that's the win we're all seeking here.

In time, you'll learn the tricks and shortcuts about particular tools just as you have with Excel, and in time your clients will have all the reporting they need, but that's later.

Today is about taking the plunge. You can do it. ACS is supremely treatable, but it starts with you.

By Adam Neary

Mr. Neary is the CEO of Profitably, a web app that helps businesses - and their advisors - plan, measure, and execute on what matters: the business. He can be reached by email at adam.neary@profitably.com.

How is Your Website Performing?

Website analytics offer immense insight to help you fine tune your web presence.

More firms are beginning to understand the necessity of having a website. In an "online" world, the web is where people go first to research products and services. In essence, it has become the new "front door" to business, and the same is true for accounting firms.

The profession has made significant strides. Today, more firms have a web presence than ever before. However, just having a website isn't enough. You must also understand how your site is performing in order to consistently improve your "front door" and make it more inviting for visitors to not only enter…but to stay.

Web analytics are still a fairly new concept in the profession, so we compiled the following questions and answers to help you. Hugh Duffy, noted web analytic and SEO guru at Build Your Firm (www.buildyourfirm.com), offers helpful, seasoned advice.

QUESTION: *What are website analytics? And why should firms care?*

ANSWER: Website analytics provide you with diagnostic feedback about how many people are visiting your website, where they are going, where they came from, how much time they are spending on your site, and other visitor behavior such as:

- How many pages were visited while on your site?
- Which pages were visited first or from which page they exited?
- Where they came from— another website, search engine, organic listing in search engine results page, pay per click ad, or where in the country or outside the U.S.?
- What keywords were typed in (if coming from a search engine)?
- What types of browsers used—IE, Firefox, Safari, Chrome?

This diagnostic information can help you diagnose problems and better understand the path users take while on your website. Ultimately, this type of information enables you to improve a visitor's overall website experience.

QUESTION: *What is a common misperception that most accountants have about their website?*

ANSWER: Most accountants believe that everyone comes to their website at the home page. Website analytics indicate, however, that search engines and advertising drive website visitors to a wide variety of pages. In other words, they may come in the front door, side door, or back door. For example, search engines may drive most traffic to the About Us page, which is not typically the most appealing page and may result in a visitor hitting the back button and proceeding to the next accounting website. This means websites need to be designed so that a user can easily get to the information they need in one to two simple clicks…so they don't quickly exit.

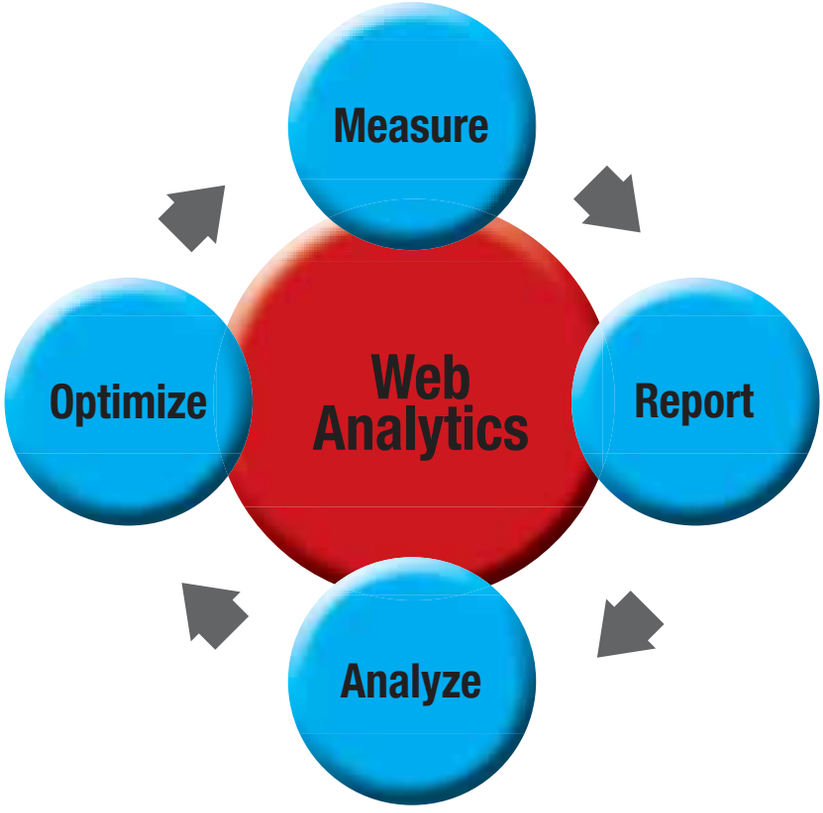
QUESTION: *What website analytics tools should firms consider?*

ANSWER: The best fit for small accounting firms is Google Analytics. It's a powerful and free tool, and most accounting website providers should be able to support its installation. However, it's important to note that the analysis work itself has to be regularly performed by the firm. Appointing a dedicated staff member to the task is recommended. Google Analytics is by far the industry leader and it is more than adequate for a firm's needs. To set up a Google Analytics account, simply go to google.com/analytics.

There are fee-based analytics programs on the market; however, most firms may not wish to invest the time and money required to adequately support them. For those interested, a

Kristy Short, Ed.D

Kristy is a partner in RootWorks Communications (RootWorks.com) and president of SAS Communications 360 (SAScommunications360.com) — firms dedicated to providing practice management education, branding, marketing, and public relations services to the accounting profession. She is also a professor of English and marketing at University of Phoenix and Cleary University. You can reach her at kristy.short@CPAPracticeAdvisor.com.



few fee-based tools include Omniture to Webtrends.

QUESTION: *What are the types of items to examine when analyzing a website?*

ANSWER: The key items to analyze are as follows:

- **Bounce Rate**—The bounce rate is the percent of visitors that land on a page and do not advance (dead-end) or hit the back button. This is a flag that the initial landing page may not be meeting visitors' expectations and should be adjusted to better draw them into the website and visit multiple pages.
- **Exit Page**—Analyzing the primary page where visitors are exiting is key. You will want to examine exit pages to see if you've failed to deliver some type of needed information.
- **Click Path**—This represents the traffic flow that website visitors take after arriving at the website. Looking at the path of the user will tell you a lot about how visitors navigate your site.
- **Average Length of Session**—Over time, you want to increase the average number of pages per visitor and expand the length of time the visitor spends on your site. The longer they are on your site, the more likely it is that their needs are being met.
- **Unique Visitors and Average Number of Pages Per Unique Visitor**—You will want to monitor the total reach of your website by monitoring the number of unique visitors in combination with the average number of pages per unique visitor. For example, a person that comes to your website five times in one day accessing fifty pages only counts as one unique visitor.

QUESTION: *If a firm performs the proper analytics work and draws the conclusion the site is not generating enough leads, what is recommended?*

ANSWER: Analyzing the source of website traffic is a key task for firms looking to further improve results. Analyzing traffic sources answers the questions: How are people finding your website? And how does that compare to other accounting firm sites? For example, what percent of the website traffic is coming from search engines based on your site's secured placements in Google, Yahoo, and Bing? What are other traffic sources—QuickBooks Certified Pro Advisor directory, online yellow pages, and social media outlets such as LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, and blog? There are still other sources to consider like your Local Chamber of Commerce, placement in local accounting associations, and miscellaneous articles that have been published online. Lastly, how much is coming from advertising sources like Google Adwords, Yahoo, and Bing? Based on all this, you can examine which sources are generating the most qualified leads and adjust accordingly. For such a large-scale task, it may be easier to enlist a web analysis or SEO expert.

QUESTION: *What other areas are important to analyze to improve website productivity?*

ANSWER: Another area to investigate is broken links to a missing page and error pages. In other words, you want the analysis to highlight how many pages are coming up as broken links (e.g., page not found). Most sites have broken links now and again, but it's critical to make sure they are fixed quickly.

QUESTION: *How can a firm identify website pages that are not performing well?*

ANSWER: The key indicator for a poorly performing page is a high bounce rate or high percentage of exits. Most analytics packages provide a report of the top exit pages for you to monitor.

Because websites are the new front door to your firm, it's more important than ever to ensure that your door is working properly, is aesthetically pleasing, and always inviting! You not only want people to come in, but you also want them to stay. The longer a visitors is on your site, the more likely they are to engage and eventually contact you.

By properly analyzing your website, you are better equipped to apply needed enhancements and stay in front of issues, such as broken links or poorly designed pages. Just like your firm, you want to keep your site running efficiently. Web analytics offers a blueprint to do just that. ●

Tools and Apps to Help

Whether you are heading to Greece for a holiday with the family or off to visit a client, traveling can be challenging, and even just planning your travels can be time-consuming and frustrating. Nothing is more unnerving than to arrive two hours late for a connecting flight and have no idea whether you are going to make it to your final destination in time for an important event or meeting. And this can happen no matter how many hours you spent working to find the best flight connections at the best prices. Whether you are traveling for business or pleasure, the last thing you want to do is be given an inadequate food voucher or be sent to one of those nearby airport hotels with sticky carpet!

Today there are many tools, including websites and internet-enabled devices using travel-related apps that can rescue you from unpleasant outcomes. Tools such as Google Maps are useful for finding directions and checking out public transportation and, if you have a smartphone with GPS, products such as NAVIGON MobileNavigator provide high-quality maps for your phone and allow voice communication for hands-free directions. Products like Evernote and Microsoft OneNote can help organize all the small details travelers have to keep up with. In practical terms, these tools can help you know where you are and keep track of all your up-to-date travel details.

In this article, I give you a view "from 30,000 feet" of the types of tools available for empowering travelers. I also provide insights into some of the powerful new features that we could not even imagine only a couple of years ago.

Types of Tools

Unlike traditional software solutions wherein you usually get all your modules from the same vendor, cloud solutions (i.e., those for which there is no on-premise software to load) are services, not products, and fragmentation is the rule. For instance, you might choose one product to keep track of airline travel details and another to keep your appointments and calendar. Fortunately, the new cloud apps integrate well with other cloud apps in addition to traditional applications. For example, if you are currently an MS Exchange user, almost all these new cloud-based apps work well with Outlook and Exchange for email, calendaring and contact management. This article will cover three travel tool categories:

- Discount and bargain sites
- Tracking and reporting for business travel
- Credit card and club memberships

Discount and Bargain Sites

The recession has made the travel marketplace very competitive, and there are a number of sites that can help you benefit from this competitive environment. If you are a frequent traveler you know these sites well, because they probably have saved you thousands of dollars over the years.

Leading Travel Price Search Engines

- Travelocity.com
- Orbitz.com
- Expedia.com
- RentalCars.com (Just got an intermediate-class car in Seattle for $13.32 per day from a "top 5" vendor!)
- Hotels.com (Prepayment in full can save a lot for those who are sure of where they want to stay.)
- OpenTable.com
- Priceline.com
- Kayak.com (Search using several search engines at one time.)
- IWantaCruise.com
- Travelzoo.com
- Cheapoair.com

(You have to love the names of the last two!)

If you are a seasoned traveler, you also know that it pays to shop around

Manage Your Travels

and not always rely on the same price search engine. Sometimes, the actual seller's site (as opposed to travel agencies and travel search engines) have packages that may even be cheaper than the rack rates, which makes the extra features a real bonus. This is often true with hotel chains and airlines — particularly if a package deal suits you and your travel dates are flexible. These promotions can sometimes be hard to believe, prompting you to wonder how air, hotel, car, and meals can possibly be offered at such a low price.

Of course, there are things to watch out for when you find a deal that seems just too good to be true. Here is a short list:

- Package deals may use charter airlines or non-chain hotels.
- Rental cars may not be actually AT the airport. One night, I rode in an old van for 20 minutes in the rain to get to the rental car facility, which was down a dirt road that was under construction.
- Hotels may be undergoing renovation — and you get what you pay for.
- Star ratings and neighborhood rankings for hotels may be generous to the hotel operator. Check things out on Google Earth.
- Refunds may be limited.
- Rebooking options may be limited.
- The fine print may stipulate some unpleasant possible consequences. For example, if your flight is cancelled, you may be the last one on the list to be rebooked.

Tracking and Reporting for Business Travel

With more than 500,000 apps for the iPhone alone, it is not surprising that there are many choices for travelers. The few products covered in this section are good examples of the wealth of services currently available in the cloud.

TripIt Pro

When your first flight arrived late and you were concerned about making your connecting flight, if you were like most travelers in the past you raced to the counter to be near the front of the line, which was not an effective plan on so many levels. Now, if you are a TripIt Pro user (www.Tripit.com), you simply whip out your handheld device. Within a matter of seconds, TripIt Pro informs you of the status and gate location of your connecting flight as well as other available connections. This can mean the difference between making it to your destination and spending the night in an airport hotel in the connecting city.

TripIt Pro is the leading mobile trip organizer. It is an amazing tool that you can access through the Web or through apps on your smartphone or other handheld devices. If you are a business traveler and have not tried this product, you owe it to yourself to do so. Here are just some of the features of this cloud-based service:

- Sends instant alerts about flight delays, cancellations, and gate changes, right to your phone
- Provides alternatives when your flight is delayed, including flight status and open seats
- Tracks all your points from airlines, hotels, and other travel related vendors
- Stores all your frequent travel account information, balances, and expiration dates in one place (at last!)
- Monitors airfares after booking, and notifies you of any potential refunds or credits
- Allows you to automatically share all your travel plans with others
- Provides complimentary one-year memberships to Hertz #1 Club Gold and Regus Gold
- Affords complimentary access to 1,100 business lounges worldwide
- Works with the iPhone and iPad as well as Android, BlackBerry, and Windows smartphones

FlightView Elite

FlightView Elite (www.FlightView.com) provides real-time information about flight schedules, flight statuses, weather conditions, and more. For flights that are en route, users see an in-air flight tracker map with the flight path, the aircraft's position, and radar weather. You can also choose to receive alerts for flight status changes, including delays and cancellations, and gate assignment changes, even when the app on your phone is closed. The following are some of the features of FlightView Elite:

- Tracks flights by number or route
- Allows multiday searches for flights yesterday, today, tomorrow, and — in some cases — the next 90 days
- Shows in-air flight details, such as flight time remaining, duration, and planned gate and baggage claim information
- Has a calendar integration function that allows for the quick insertion of a flight into the device calendar
- Sends flight status alerts with immediate notification of flight status changes, delays, cancellations, and gate changes
- Includes visually compelling maps (e.g., flight tracker map for in-air flights and an airport delay map, both with current radar weather)

Concur Breeze Expense Reporting

Concur Breeze (www.Concur.com) is an exceptional cloud-based tool for tracking and reporting travel expenses. It is designed for small businesses and provides a simple, cost-efficient expense management solution that integrates directly with QuickBooks and other small-business accounting solutions. Users of this app no longer need to use a spreadsheet for their expense reports (as long as their employers agree).

Users can input and access expense report information with a Web browser, iPhone, or iPad or with a BlackBerry or Android smartphone. Receipts can be entered using a scanner or the photo capabilities of devices such as iPads and smartphones. This significantly reduces the drudgery most employees associate with expense reporting, improves the accuracy and timeliness of expense reports and management reports, and saves users time that is usually spent accounting and reporting.

We adopted Concur Breeze as our expense reporting tool earlier this year, and it has significantly improved the expense reporting and tracking process, both for our employees and for the office staff that takes care of accounting and reporting. The following are some of the functions we find most helpful:

- Record expenses with a smartphone (including capturing the receipt image with the built-in camera) and then simply toss the actual receipt.
- Securely import credit card charges that auto-populate an expense report.
- Tag expenses by client, project, or business unit to track where the company money is being spent.

With Concur Breeze, our accounting

staff processes expense reports and eliminates data entry (and errors) by seamlessly transferring expense reporting data into our accounting software.

Credit Card and Club Memberships

The airlines and hotel chains all work hard to get you to use their credit cards. They send paper mail and email daily, and they even have people standing in airports trying to flag down potential customers. The credit card industry is a big money business, particularly with the large purchases travelers make such as airline tickets, hotel bills, business lunches, and rental cars. Getting you to use their card saves them merchant fees on all these transactions. Since you are likely to use the card for other purchases, they also make money on the cards. Furthermore, the free travel you "earn" may be restricted to off-peak times, when seats would have gone unsold and therefore cost them little or nothing to offer as rewards. Because these cards are so profitable for the airlines, their offers to travelers are typically very attractive.

- Some Platinum American Express and other cards offer things like: Access to airport lounges
- Free checked bags
- Purchase protection
- Airline miles
- Double points when travel is booked through them
- In addition to some or all of the above benefits, airline credit cards may also offer some or all of the following benefits: Early boarding
- A high level of frequent flyer status with that airline
- Preferred seating
- Access to priority lanes for security screening
- Discounts on in-flight food and entertainment
- Complimentary travel certificates for a spouse
- Bonus miles for signing up

With credit cards, you will need to choose the kind of rewards program that suits you best. Some people prefer cards that offer straight cash rebates. Others prefer cards that offer point systems that let you buy airline tickets based on the dollar cost of the tickets. With these two types of rewards, you don't have to worry about traveling on dates when seats are available using airline miles. Instead, you simply use your cash rebate or points to purchase tickets at current prices — there are no blackout dates to worry about.

Airline club memberships also offer a quiet, comfortable place to relax and/or work between flights. These memberships also provide elite access to airline ticket agents; if there are flight problems and you absolutely need to talk to a live agent, airline clubrooms usually provide immediate access with no lines.

Conclusion

With each passing day, more good tools for travelers are being developed and released. Many of them — like the plethora of apps that exist for smartphones — are already at your command. You just need to take the time to learn how to use them. With so many choices, the question is, "where to start?" The answer is: Start anywhere, but just start! These tools can save you time, reduce stress, and help you make your travel experiences less costly and more pleasant. ●

By Will Fleenor

*Will Fleenor is a Shareholder of **K2E, LLC**. Will has conducted seminars for 48 State CPA Societies, and has spoken at numerous accounting technology conferences, including speaking at the AICPA Information Technology Conference for 22 years, as well as doing training for other organizations such as the FBI. Will is a past Chairman of the AICPA Information Technology Conference, as well as past chairman of other conferences and professional committees. Will is a co-author of the Practitioners Publishing Company's "Guide to Installing Microcomputer Accounting Systems" and has had numerous articles published in professional journals including the Journal of Accountancy, the CPA Journal, and others.*

INTRODUCING MICHELLE GOLDEN

the newest addition to CPA Practice Advisor's columnists

Michelle Golden
Golden Rules Of Social Media

Michelle is a growth and profitability strategist. With her deep knowledge of firm operations and sharp observation skills to quickly grasp a firm's nuances, she guides practitioners toward improved profitability and stronger, healthier cultures.
She focuses on strategic consulting and facilitation around long- and short-term planning, positioning and pricing, messaging, and communications (both online and off).

Darren Root
My Perspective

Isaac O'Bannon
Tips & Tricks

Brian Tankersley
Monthly Micro Apps

Randy Johnston
From The Trenches

Jason Blumer
The Change Agent

Dave McClure
The Bleeding Edge

Kristy Short
Marketing In Practice

Rene Lacerte
Business In Practice

Doug Sleeter
The Small Business Advisor

Roman Kepczyk
Technology In Practice

CPA Practice Advisor
Today's Technology for Tomorrow's Firm

2012 CES Trends in Your Future

Our annual two day pilgrimage to the International Consumer Electronics Show (CES) each January is complete and there are a number of trends and products that we believe will impact the accounting profession in the year ahead. For those not familiar with CES, it is one of the largest trade shows in the world with over 153,000 attendees reviewing thousands of new consumer gadgets in venues covering 1.8M square feet (or to put that into perspective-37 football fields).

While most of these products debut on the consumer /end user side, the successful tools eventually find their way into accounting firms. We found four key CES trends with the potential of impacting accountants technology decisions in 2012: ultra-mobile devices, hyper-convergence, component miniaturization, and the evolution of personal clouds.

Roman H. Kepczyk, CPA.CITP

Roman H. Kepczyk, CPA.CITP is Director of Consulting for Xcentric, LLC. and works exclusively with accounting firms to implement today's leading best practices and technologies. Roman recently updated his "Quantum of Paperless: A Partner's Guide to Accounting Firm Optimization," which is available at Amazon.com.

1 Ultra-Mobile Devices: While there were numerous tablet rollouts this year, none were interesting enough to have us consider jumping ship from our iPad2 (yet). Where we did see a significant trend was in the number of ultra-portable laptops that are copying Apple's streamlined Airbook format. Intel showcased at least twelve laptops that were less than one inch thin, weigh less than three pounds, and have extended battery lives of eight to ten hours.

At the same time Mobile Technology (MMT2.com) debuted their latest mobile monitor that sports a 15.6" screen and even one version that can also can integrate an iPad or Android tablet. The benefit to this combination is that accountants will be able to carry the laptop and a dual screen into the field in significantly smaller and lighter package that is about the size of a traditional laptop. The mobile monitor with integrated tablet bay also allows accountants to present information on their tablet while allowing clients sitting across from them to simultaneously see what is on their screen.

The ultraportable HP Envy Spectre and Samsung 9 Series had great specifications, but the product that we are waiting to compare them to is Dell's latest XPS laptop that has a 13" screen but fits in a form factor that is closer to a 12" device. This smaller form factor will allow road warriors to actually work on small regional jets (even when the person in front of them leans their seat back) for five or more hours. Lenovo displayed their Yoga device which is an ultraportable laptop that can convert into a touch tablet (which was one of the first devices we saw demonstrating Windows 8 touch screen capabilities). Intel also showcased future prototypes of this type of device pointing to future laptops being less than a half inch thick and easily converting between a tablet and a laptop with a keyboard.

2 Hyper Convergence: The convergence between smartphones and tablets was obvious, with both products integrating each other's capabilities. While the screens on smart phones stretch to become larger, the tablets are integrating better mobile phone capabilities (as evidenced by products such as the Samsung Galaxy) to the point where both devices will do the same thing and it is just a matter of the user deciding what size screen they want to carry and work on.

While auditors will most likely use smartphones, along with their laptops, tax personnel and consultants may opt for the larger screens of a tablet that has the integrated voice telephone features including cameras. This quality of the integrated cameras is surpassing the "point and shoot" cameras that many of us carry and as one presenter joked: "watching someone take pictures with an iPad is fairly awkward, but

WITH ACCOUNTANTS ADOPTING PORTALS FOR SECURE DELIVERY OF CLIENT DATA, WE CAN EXPECT TO SEE INTEGRATION OF OUR CLOUDS WITH OTHER BUSINESS, PERSONAL, AND PUBLIC CLOUDS SO THAT CLIENTS CAN EVENTUALLY GO TO ONE PLACE TO MANAGE ALL OF OUR INFORMATION.

you have to admit they have a pretty big view finder." We see this convergence taking accountants from the realm of yesterday's PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants) to today's PIDs (Personal Internet Devices), which gets our vote for the best three letter acronym of the show.

3 Component Miniaturization: Intel announced their first Android smartphone which has similar functionality to a miniature netbook, but stuffed into a form factor one tenth the size. While we are always impressed at how many features they are stuffing into these smartphones and ultra portable devices through miniaturization of components, other devices such as scanners and projectors are also being impacted. There were a number of PicoP projectors demonstrated and we can expect that they will eventually find their way into our "converged" devices such as 3M's Camcorder Projector and the MicroVision devices hoping to eventually find their way into cell phones.

In addition, from an imaging perspective, the smallest unit we saw (other than your smartphone camera) was the HoverCam Mini which can be used for presenting and projecting video or images which could be tax returns or financial statements. By the way, if you are impressed by the slim profile of the Motorola Droid Razr and Fujitsu Arrows Es smartphones, check out the Huawei Ascend P1 which is less than 7mm thin!

4 Cloud, Cloud and More Clouds: The consumer electronics industry realizes that most people use a variety of cloud applications prompting InfoWorld to rebrand the show as the "Cloud Electronics Show." In addition to consumers using the cloud for personal email, social networking, digital sharing of files and photos on the web, and services such as banking and portfolio management, vendors were touting the "cloud" resources behind their products. Users today want to access the same information and resources on multiple devices (smartphone, tablet, PC and Television) so that they can pick up where they were regardless of what tool they are using (think about having your timesheet open on all these devices at all times. Consolidation of these features into personal clouds is already occurring and companies (such as Facebook and Google) are making it easier to build both a personal cloud and public cloud.

With accountants adopting portals for secure delivery of client data, we can expect to see integration of our clouds with other business, personal, and public clouds so that clients can eventually go to one place to manage all of our information. Consumer products such as Sugarsync, Dropbox, and Apple's iCloud will be driving developers to do the same for "work clouds."

CES 2012 was another great experience and we see these consumer trends pushing into tomorrow's accounting firms allowing us to more effectively serve our clients, which is why we are in this business in the first place.

2011 TOP TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVES FOR PUBLIC ACCOUNTING

This list reflects the top issues identified by CPAs in Public Accounting.

1. Data Retention Policies and Structure
2. Remote Access
3. Control and Use of Mobile Devices
4. Information Security
5. Staff and Management Training
6. Tax Workpaper Automation
7. Saving and Making Money with Technology
8. Technology Cost Controls
9. Portals (Vendor and Client)
10. Privacy Policies and Compliance
11. Process Documentation and Improvements
12. Spreadsheet Management
13. Server and Desktop Virtualization
14. Overall Data Proliferation and Control
15. Mobile Technology Controls
16. Project Management & Deployment of New Implementations
17. Lifecycle of Technology
18. Budget Processes
19. Cloud Computing / SaaS Computing
20. Deployment of Smartphones

AICPA®

The Purpose of Mobile Technologies

The other day, I had some important things to get into our document management system (DMS). I was on the other side of town and had to route this paperwork to other team members in my firm, get some other projects started and deliver some information to my customers. So I pulled over in an Office Depot parking lot and got in the back seat of my car. I pulled out my leather man bag (it's not a purse!) and set up my office.

I turned my hotspot on from my iPhone, flipped open my MacBook Pro 17" and plugged in my Fujitsu ScanSnap S1100. I was set! I began scanning client documents, uploading documents to our DMS, passed out some To Dos to our team members, and set out to get some work done for an hour and a half before my next appointment... right in the back seat of my car. Apart from having a coffee maker in the back seat and an electrical outlet, I had everything I needed to get my work done when, where and how I needed to get it done.

Jason Blumer, CPA.CITP

Jason M. Blumer, CPA.CITP, CFE, is managing shareholder of Blumer & Associates, CPAs, PC. He wears flip flops and jeans, says "dude" a lot, and often works in coffee shops with headphones blaring the latest Bloomberg podcasts (though he doesn't understand most of it). Jason loves new game-changing cloud technology and plays rock and roll too loud. His daily duties include consulting, process design, blogging, marketing and business development, innovative thinking, coaching, practice management, and acting as a change agent. Jason founded the THRIVEal +CPA Network to enhance and change the tax and accounting profession based on the foundational tenets of Community, Collaboration, Technology and Innovation.

Proper Planning

But this setup was by design. It takes some planning to make sure I am mobile in every aspect of my business. I have committed to make sure that if my man bag is with me (it's not a purse!), then I am *at the office* no matter where I am. The value of my mobile office is one of the most important things to me. It may not be for you, so I may not suggest that you lug a heavy bag around with you, through airports and back and forth to client appointments. But I have to have it that way. Due to the design of my mobile office, I can work anywhere, anyhow and anyway I want. I can go to my physical office (which we will soon close), I can go to a coffee shop, I can fly across the country or I can stay home… all the while I am assured that I am never away from my office.

But you can't just have it that way without first planning it to be that way. You can't be mobile unless you first move to the cloud. Mobile is becoming the buzz word of late… but it assumes that you have dealt with the cloud issue first. Is your firm 100% cloud-based? You need to be if you ever want to become a mobile firm. Cloud products release mobile apps that make smart use of the cloud product. Cloud is first. Mobile comes second. That is how you must set up your firm too: go to the cloud first, then become mobile.

How can this proper planning help you to be a more effective and efficient firm? Let's explore a few scenarios together…

What if I were in the back of my car, scanning documents and I had nowhere to put them for a few hours, or even days?

Our DMS and client portal system (SmartVault) are cloud based so I was able to not only scan important documents, but immediately place them in our DMS for our team members to access. **Knowledge Take Away (KTA):** speed is your friend when designing your internal business processes. The cloud, and thus mobile, gives you speed. When knowledge is created by you, your team or your clients, you need the

APART FROM HAVING A COFFEE MAKER IN THE BACK SEAT AND AN ELECTRICAL OUTLET, I HAD EVERYTHING I NEEDED TO GET MY WORK DONE WHEN, WHERE AND HOW I NEEDED TO GET IT DONE.

ability to get that document to its right location as soon as possible. It allows for speed, agility and scalability of your processes. If all team members are trained on how this works, then no one slows anyone else down (are their tax files to be reviewed in the partner's floor right now?).

What if I were in the back of my car, scanning documents, but I had no internet access, thus using my desktop as a temporary holding location?

My scanned documents would probably have sat on my desktop for some time waiting for internet access until either the client or the team members in our firm asked where they were. **KTA:** create the abilities within your firm to get *knowledge* to its end point without any layovers. Any intermediary stop-overs (like a computer desktop or the corner of your physical desk) can kill your efficiency and create information log-jams.

What if I were in the back of my car, and I wanted to pass out some To Dos to my team members but my practice management software was back on my server?

I would probably just hold this data in my brain or on a sticky note until I can get to my software. Having our Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software (as opposed to practice management software) online allows me to quickly purge my brain of what my client just told me to pass along to one of our team members. **KTA:** the brain of the firm owner is a bad place to store data! The quicker data can leave a brain and make it to a 'To Do' on a workflow platform (we use XCM Solutions), the quicker the work can get done for the customer.

JUST LIKE ANYTHING YOU DO IN YOUR FIRM, YOUR FIRST CONSIDERATION MUST ALWAYS BE YOUR CUSTOMERS.

What if I am in another city and am producing paper that my team members need to begin work for that client?

The ability to digitize paper is a must because paper is always being generated within processes. I'm not sure businesses will ever stop creating paper, but until they do, we must be able to digitize that paper immediately to keep our cloud-based, mobile-accelerated firms moving forward. **KTA:** digitize paper as early in your processes as possible (like scanning client documents up front in your tax prep process). The earlier you scan, the earlier you can shred. And the earlier you shred in your process, the less temptation you will have to touch that paper twice. Twice-touched paper is the doom to all business processes for many reasons. Here are two: (1) it demands you be localized near the paper itself and (2) you have to pay human labor to cart it through your firm. Paying administrative people to cart paper through a firm is just plain dumb.

The Real Purpose of Mobile Technologies

Just like anything you do in your firm, your first consideration must always be your customers. This consideration is the biggest planning step of all on your way to the cloud, and then mobile. What if your clients don't want you to be cloud-based and mobile-based. For me, I would tell you that you have the wrong clients. But maybe you can't make that move yet. Make sure in everything you do, it is all centered around meeting the needs of the customer. If you fail to consider this, and then go cloud and mobile, you may tick a lot of people off. So don't do it right now if it's wrong for *your* customers.

So, you have to ask yourself, is going mobile really what your customers want? Why not ask them? If you are ready to go mobile, but your clients are not, then you have a decision to make: will you begin the long process of changing your client base, or will you stay behind while all other firms move to become mobile? Only you can look ahead to the future of our profession and try to innovate where your new customers will want you to be. And this bit of knowledge cannot be found in my magic man bag, which is not a purse!