A WINDOW ON ACCOUNTS PRODUCTION

Available software for this basic client service
has some catching up to do – but the gap is being filled

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The production of client accounts may not be glamorous, but it is the bread-and-butter of most accounting practices – it is usually the statutory audit of those accounts that has clients knocking on the accountants' door for the first time. Uninspiring, even unrewarding (financially and otherwise) it may be, but it is a job worth doing well. Once a practice has established itself as capable of completing the task well, on time and at an acceptable price, the competent production of client accounts can lead to work in more lucrative and interesting areas such as consultancy or investment.

Producing client accounts is an area where automation offers considerable benefits, and consequently is often the first area a practice chooses to automate. Unfortunately, over the past few years, while the rest of the IT industry (and its customers) has been grappling with minor trends like open systems, and insignificant little developments like Windows, most of the suppliers of accounts production software have been looking the other way. The core software for at least one package, for example, has remained untouched since it first saw the light of day about a decade ago.

For as long as the practising accountant is prepared to buy antiquated and unfriendly software, there will be companies more than happy to supply it. The profession's apparent reluctance to demand change from its suppliers may suit those accountants who prefer to work with the devil they know, but it will do them no favours in the long term.

The greatest benefit practice automation offers is the ability to maximise throughput and fee income by increasing the amount of base-load work that a practice can efficiently process. To stand the best chance of achieving this, accountants need to use the most efficient and easily learnt software available – usually the most up-to-date.

While the software industry has changed a great deal in the past few years, accounts production software has changed relatively little. Until recently the marketplace had not seen a new accounts production package since Software Systems for Accountants In Practice released its open systems offering SSAPII (see panel 2) in January 1990, and significant updates from other suppliers have been sparse. But that is all about to change.

At the end of 1992 Orchard Software (in Ireland) released Apex; since the beginning of 1993 Tudor has merged with the Inform Corporation to become IT Professional Sys-

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tems and has released Meta4; and Broadwood Technology Ltd (composed of ex-Orchard employees) has released Visa (see panel 1), the first real Windows package for accounting practices.

Orchard Software was the Irish distributor for the popular Finax package for almost a decade. But when Solution 6 took over Paxus, the company that had developed Finax, the Irish distribution rights were transferred to Solution 6's Dublin subsidiary. Orchard decided to develop its own offering for the accountancy profession (of which it had much accumulated knowledge), and used the 4GL Clipper to do so.

Being tied to a 4GL can have drawbacks: end-users are subject to the whims of the 4GL supplier, and if they disappear off the face of the earth, end-users may find themselves following in their wake. But being allied to the US giant Computer Associates (current owner of Clipper) ought to mean Apex users suffer no such fate. Another minor drawback is that Apex will only run on fairly modern hardware.

But as Orchard's managing director, Bernard Donnelly, points out, at £400 for the single-user version 'Apex is priced very competitively.' A practice could purchase a state-of-the-art system for under £1,500 (including hardware and software). Although cheaper hardware is available, Apex is at its best running on a PC with a hard disk, a couple of MB of RAM, at least a 386 processor and version 5.0 of MS DOS.

In the case of Apex, the disadvantages of using a 4GL would seem to be few, and the advantages weigh more heavily. Opting for Clipper enabled Orchard to get Apex to the market in months rather than years, without functionality suffering – it goes well beyond the minimal requirements of an incomplete records system (see ACCOUNTANCY, July, p 66). And the use of Clipper will also ease the path to improved functionality in the future. Orchard will be able to incorporate additional functionality into Apex as it becomes available in Clipper. This will be good news for Apex users because, as Mr Donnelly explains: 'A Windows version of Clipper is already available in the US, so Orchard will probably be able to offer its Windows version of Apex before the end of 1993.'

The reason that many of the established packages for accounts production software are updated so infrequently is because they were written in programming languages like Basic and Cobol which make it difficult to produce major enhancements to software to timescales acceptable by today's standards.

It was the decision to take the open systems route and develop its software in the programming language 'C' that has enabled SSAP to supply modern software that can take advantage of up-to-date hardware. But one of its reasons for recently joining forces with Hartley Computer International Ltd (Hartley acquired SSAP) was so that the two could combine to get a Windows product to market more quickly than either would have been able to do in isolation.

(In addition, SSAP gains access to the Hartley name and distribution network in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific rim. David Hartley acquires an established package with the potential to generate revenue for the next two years, while he completes his current product development cycle.)

Tudor Business Systems and the Inform Corporation merged to become IT Professional Business Systems for similar reasons. Inform had modern practice management software, and Tudor had Meta4, the accounts production package it has produced using the 4GL Jam (a popular product with major corporations in the US and the UK).

IT Professional Systems joins the 'elite' ranks of those supplying open systems solutions for accounts production. Meta4 will run on DOS, Novell, SCO Unix, Unix v4.0 and Windows. It is not a true Windows package, although this version of Meta4 does include some added Windows-type functionality.

A version of Meta4 with full Windows functionality will be available before the end of the year.

1: VISA – SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON?

'If you've got something that works, you ought to stick with it.' This was the software philosophy of sole practitioner Alan Solomons until about six months ago when an encounter with a couple of his clients convinced him it was time to change.

'They were using Microsoft Excel to produce a cash flow forecast that looked a quantum leap beyond what I could do on Supercalc,' says Mr Solomons. 'It woke me up on the spreadsheet front, and I began using Quattro Pro for Windows to improve my presentation. Like many people I thought that new software meant massive investment and a massive learning curve, so I was prepared to put a lot of effort into using Quattro Pro and was amazed to find I didn't need to. That was an education in itself. Suddenly I discovered that a learning curve could be a thing of the past.'

The software proved so easy to use that Mr Solomons also moved from Wordperfect 5.1 to Lotus Ami Pro 3.0 – much to the initial distress of his secretary, who has since happily deleted the old wordprocessor from her machine.

All of this led Mr Solomons into thinking about his accounts software, and a greater awareness of what's available, and what it might have to offer him and his clients.

'When clients ask me to recommend software to them, I can't really expect them to use Finax because its too expensive – especially for my small clients. They don't want to spend £600 to £800 on a bit of software that doesn't do much more (as far as they're concerned) than something like Sage or Tas Books.' So, inspired by his experiences with Quattro Pro and Ami Pro, Mr Solomons began looking at other software, and has recently found a package he thinks may turn out to be the answer to his dreams.

Even after his positive experiences with other Windows packages, he was surprised to find he could manage Visa quite well without the aid of a manual: 'Using it was so easy it was amazing. And it won't break any piggy banks. You could give a client bought sales ledgers and nominal ledgers for £450. Without those the cost comes down to as little as £150.

'Because it's so easy to use, there's no learning curve. So, a client can play with it, and get it right even if they don't know anything about double entry,' says Mr Solomons. And they don't have to work their way through the hefty manuals that accompany many other packages.

The main reason that Windows-based applications are easy to learn is the consistency of the graphical user interface. When you have learnt to use one Windows-based application, you have also learnt the basics for the others.

Like other Windows packages, Visa makes extensive use of icons. These are presented in a couple of bars across the screen. As Mr Solomons points out, 'when you move your cursor or pointer on to one of the icons it doesn't matter if you don't know what it is, because what it is

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appears in a little window. You click on it and find you've got sales invoice processing . . . I've been converted to Windows.'

Another attraction of Windows-based applications like Visa is the extent to which they can simplify the printing process. Because users can change typeface fonts on screen, they don't need to concern themselves with printer drivers.

Many so-called Windows packages behave so much like standard DOS packages that they may as well be one. Because it is a true Windows package, rather than a package that just makes use of Windows-type interfaces, it's possible to open windows from within Visa. This multitasking is another part of the Windows (and consequently Visa's) appeal, and it can be a boon to the accountant. Mr Solomons explains: 'If you're in the sales ledger and you need to make a contra-entry because the customer is also a supplier, you can open

up the suppliers side and have both ledgers next to each other and see what's going on. If you're doing something that affects the nominal ledger you can call up the trial balance, double-click on the appropriate nominal ledger code, and hey presto, there's the nominal ledger.'

With Visa, it's possible to use a window to scroll through the suppliers, customers or nominal ledger codes. And if the user wants more detail, a click will produce the supplier's name and address, etc.

'A nominal ledger code can be expanded into the complete nominal account,' adds Mr Solomons, 'so I can open up a sales ledger account and look at the allocation – I can even open up a company at the same time. And if I was processing a group of companies, I could easily sort out intercompany accounts because I can compare the accounts of two companies on screen at the same time.' It isn't necessary to come all the way out and close the job being worked on before going into another one – which is what Mr Solomons has to do with Finax, the software he is currently using.

When going through a cheque book, the cheques are not often grouped into those applying to suppliers and nonsuppliers. Visa presents two cheque books on screen, one for supplier cheques and another for non-suppliers. Users merely click on the appropriate icon, rather than go in and out of or into the suppliers ledger to process all the appropriate cheques. As Mr Solomons has found, 'It takes no time at all. You can do the supplier cheque then the Inland Revenue cheque, a couple more supplier cheques, the Customs & Excise check, without having to go in and out of anything. You're just clicking on a couple of icons and pushing one to the side of the screen while you do the other. It's almost like you'd be doing it for real with pieces of paper.'

And, if a client should call while you're processing, in addition to reminding him that he owes you money, you can quickly call up your sales ledger and tell him exactly how much his bill is. Not something Mr Solomons can do with his existing software. Yet.