

Honest Feedback from Real Users of Construction Software



Construction

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Construction software includes more robust job cost abilities; inventory tracking that manages units of measure, units promised and pending orders; job estimates versus actual cost estimates; and a marriage between project management and accounting.

By Lori Widmer

Are software vendors finally exceeding our expectations? This year's stable of accounting software for the construction industry is full of products that go beyond simply tacking on the name "construction" to the current product. Through some of the most comprehensive software upgrades and offerings to date, vendors are sending a clear "committed" message to their customers.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in the day-to-day functions these products deliver. In the "olden" days, construction accounting products focused heavily on the accounting process, threw in a dash of construction function, and completely ignored the need for contractors to file taxes and reconcile accounts. No longer, amen. Today's software is truly an enterprise-wide solution in every sense.


In the past, applications that claimed to be geared toward the construction industry were clearly lacking any resemblance to a product that might actually be built for contractors. Today, users have ample choices that understand what a contractor needs and how software helps. The vendors represented here ramped up their applications in a manner that can only improve a user's process.

Some of the functions this new breed of application now handles include more robust job cost abilities; inventory tracking that manages units of measure, units promised and pending orders; job estimates versus actual cost estimates; and a marriage between project management and accounting. Other enhancements include an at-a-glance view of the business' cur-

rent financial picture; under-billed-job details; and much more integration with standard applications, such as Microsoft (MS) Excel and Word. Some even allow for integration with MS PowerPoint and third-party software systems, while others also serve as tax centers when federal and state taxes are due – a solution that could eliminate the need for a separate tax product.

The home pages of these applications are probably the most sensible designs seen so far. Nothing says "we hear you" to a user more than a self-explanatory way of maneuvering around the application.

Still, with all these advancements, all is not perfect. In the case of one or two products, installation was a series of minor glitches and involved more than a few contacts with the support department. Also, some still require specific versions of MS products, which this reviewer did not have handy. Still, in the case of a day-to-day use of the products, the upgrade would make sense and would be a small additional cost. In addition, one of the more telling signs that these products are more user friendly would be the lack of free support. Not that there isn't any – most of the vendors do supply a small amount of free help.

Still, these applications are tough enough, yet simplified to the point that users needn't bother with support. All have some form of tutorial, either online or within the application. Any user can hop onto the system and within just a few minutes find his or her way around quickly. That speaks well to just how hard vendors are working to make sure your experience is a good one. From the looks of things, they've succeeded. 

Scalability Key to Enhance Construction Efforts

With codes that are 100 percent user-defined and flexible, the Job Cost Module has extensive job cost management reports.



By Lori Widmer

It's simple, and maybe that's the beauty of it. The eTEK Accounting application gives users a simple solution to their accounting needs by taking away what's not needed – too much function for the task.

Based in Greenwood, Colo., eTEK specializes in Microsoft Office-based construction accounting software with an emphasis on job cost accounting, and payrolls for subcontractors and general contractors in all trades. These include electrical contractors, home builders, painters, carpenters, roofing contractors, HVAC/plumbers and remodeling contractors.



eTEK distinguishes itself among the competition in several ways. First, the system provides an estimate of costs remaining to complete any project/job and uses this information to calculate projected profitability in Work-in-Progress (WIP) reporting. Second, eTEK integrates its supply chain management suite with job cost, payroll and general accounting – even at the very basic level of a single user contractor.

Benefits and Features

- Included in the base eTEK Accounting system are general ledger, budgeting and cash management.
- Users can create custom payroll, job costing or labor analysis reports from the system's report wizard.
- eTEK is scalable; the initial product allows up to five users, but also expands to meet most user needs.
- Beyond the base system, eTEK offers a number of add-on modules, including accounts payable; a payroll module complete with W2s, certified payroll and annual tax table updates for all 50 states; an additional accounts receivable module that adds billing options; a supply chain management module; and an American Institute of Architects' (AIA) module.
- The Job Cost module has extensive job cost management reports, and the codes are 100 percent user-defined and flexible. Examples are WIP; cost vs. estimates by project, job, phase and/or task; billing/receipts analysis; AIA billing; and supply chain management with integrated work orders/sales orders, purchasing and inventory control.

Support

At a minimum, eTEK Accounting requires MS Access 2003 and MS Windows 2000. Support can be accessed through an online help form. Support may also be reached via email. The company offers web-based training with interactive videos, CD tutorials and onsite training (at a cost of \$1,200/day plus travel reimbursement).

Summary

The features in eTEK are plentiful. It is obvious the company has a focus on the components of an accounting program specifically designed for the construction market. For a simple solution that really delivers, eTEK is a viable choice.

What Users Say

"We've been using software and support from eTEK for many years, and I recommend them without reservation," says **Jack Langlitz**, CFO of Couple to Couple League International, Inc., in Cincinnati, Ohio. "They are true professionals who do an outstanding job. You can count on them to conduct business with impeccable integrity and trust."

Rich Langenwaller, general manager of a large diversified west coast plumbing/HVAC corporation, appreciates the integration with his current program: "eTEK integrated its construction-oriented online purchasing and inventory control systems with our legacy in-house accounting program (Timberline). As a result, we now have much improved real-time control over our purchasing and inventories in multiple divisions across multiple locations."

eTEK International, Inc.

www.eTEK.net

800-888-6894



Advanced Job Costing Provides Management Tools

Each area of the business has its own specific center.

By Lori Widmer

What Users Say

“With Enterprise Solutions, we’re still discovering new reports,” **Larry Miller** says, controller of the South Bay Boat Yard in San Diego, Calif. “We’re getting real-time information, job costing and ease of use that shows us what’s really happening.”

“Previously, we’d have to do our estimates in a spreadsheet or write our correspondence in a word processing program. And while they transferred back and forth all right, it wasn’t great,” says **Kandy Amerson**, owner of Changing Colors Painting in Prairie Village, Kan. “With QuickBooks Contractor, it is much, much better because everything – and I mean everything – is right there, together.”

Intuit, Inc

www.quickbooksenterprise.com
866-379-6635

How do you make a product that functions as an enterprise-wide solution, while maintaining ease-of-use functionality? Intuit has managed to do just that with QuickBooks Enterprise Solutions: Contractor Edition 7.0. This program handles nearly every construction business function without the unwieldy layout of many software applications that sacrifice aesthetics over ability. The system boasting advanced job costing capabilities allows contractors to manage their businesses with more efficiency.

Benefits and Features

- Enterprise Solutions now can hold more than 100,000 customers, vendors and employees, and more than 100,000 inventory, non-inventory and service items.
- The icon map within each function easily locates the necessary task. Each icon



is connected in sequential order so users know which task is to be performed next.

- Each area of the business has its own specific center offering a quick view of accounts. For example, the Report Center houses charts, graphs and other detailed looks at how the business and jobs are doing financially with 19 contractor-specific reports.
- The system is scalable from five to 20 simultaneous users.
- Enhancements to Inventory Management include Units of Measure to buy the same item in one unit of measure, stock it in another and sell it in yet another. Available-to-Promise tracks the exact amount of inventory on hand, including where it is committed and what has been ordered. The Sales Order Fulfillment worksheet provides a single view of all pending orders.
- An improved Shipping Manager function supports multi-parcel shipping functionality so you can ship multiple packages from single orders.
- By automatically classifying account information, QuickBooks decreases the need to re-enter frequently used business expenses.

Support

The price of QuickBooks Enterprise includes the Full-Service Plan, entitling customers to automatic product upgrades, a dedicated support engineer, interactive training tools and data protection services for one year from the date of purchase. Phone support is available from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m., Pacific Time. The product integrates with Microsoft (MS) Excel and Word, and synchronizes contacts within MS Outlook.

Summary

Users add customer job lists and item lists, and one more line item customer job to the check function. From there, users run reports and analyses. Reports also can break the information down by vendor, as well as job and vendor summary, and job and vendor detail. With QuickBooks Enterprise Solutions: Contractor Edition 7.0, Intuit delivers a smart product that can get users up and running in no time. Setup is simple – an interview process allows a company to set up QuickBooks for the business in less than 30 minutes and features a contractor-specific chart of accounts. A sample company is provided for training purposes.

Job Costing Tracks all Jobs in Detail

With stored information on 700 cities, "RSMMeans" allows users to rework an estimate based on a specific location.



By Lori Widmer

To call this program just an accounting solution for the construction sector would be shortchanging it – Sage Timberline Office accounting and management offers construction businesses a soup-to-nuts business management and accounting tool.

Benefits and Features

- Job costing is extensive and includes the ability to track all jobs in as much or little detail as the user wants. Typical job cost tracking includes contract amounts, estimates, costs, subcontracts, purchase orders, quantity totals, customer information and billings. Projects can be tracked by week, month, quarter or year.
 - Information, such as estimates or direct costs, can be imported into the system from other programs.
 - Users reconcile accounts through the Sage Timberline Office desktop, with Microsoft Excel available as a tool for part of the reconciliation process.
 - The Estimating application uses "RSMMeans," which allows users to rework an estimate based on a specific location. The application stores information on 700 cities, so it's more likely a user will have access to local pricing, which can mean more accurate estimates.
- The procurement feature helps select vendors and with the purchasing process. The application generates requests for quotes (RFQs), manages the materials side of a project and integrates with handheld software to track inventory and record purchases from the job site.
- Reporting tools are robust and include interactive inquiries, allowing users to drill-down through multiple levels of data and get an up-to-the-minute snapshot of important business information.



Support

Sage offers three support levels and communication options: phone, email and client extranet. Self-help resources are available online, including SmartStart, a free 60-day support option that gives users software maintenance and unlimited support starting the 61st day after the product is purchased, or on the first contact with the support staff.

Also available are online training sessions, classroom training, consulting services, optional subscription service plans, online help and self-help options, and an annual conference for users. An independent Timberline Users Group online facilitates user-to-user help, discusses the product on an interactive board, and receives news and information as well as holds events and conferences.

Summary

This user was able to set up companies quickly. As I sampled the reconciliation function, Sage Timberline Office integrated flawlessly with MS Excel. The simple, yet appealing desktop and main screen, contradict the power this application delivers. One slightly different turn of events occurred when I installed Timberline Office, creating a conflict with the Sage Master Builder product I already installed. Even with this minor glitch, the Timberline Office product is a notable software solution for the construction industry.

What Users Say

"The company gained immediate results, such as cutting billing from three days to four hours, and job cost time more than 30 percent, while enabling us to manage multiple projects simultaneously," says **Thomas A. Frank** of James Frank Construction, Inc. in Portland, Ore.

A common occurrence at Griffin Companies in Minneapolis, Minn., is the need to retrieve and make copies of all the leases connected with a particular property – a cumbersome task. "Soon after the implementation of Document Management, one of these situations arose," says **Sharon Moore**, controller. When an important client wanted to refinance a high-rise building, the client thought it might take several days to pull these leases together. Through Timberline, I presented a CD containing all the leases in the required format. The jaws dropped on every single person in the room."

Sage Software

www.sagetimberlineoffice.com

800-628-6583



Job Code Lookup Simplified to Match Open Projects

Security levels ensure vital information cannot be altered accidentally.

By Lori Widmer

What Users Say

Curt Elliott of Milestone Contractors in Indianapolis, Ind., says Viewpoint performed all of the company's accounting and project management tasks instead of duplicating efforts in other software programs. "Within short two years, we eliminated interest expense from the balance sheet and added interest income to take its place. In addition, the accounting group downsized from 31 associates to just 17."

"One client just loves how much "non-accounting" reporting is possible," says **Chris Malafa**, CPA of Soren McAdam Christenson LLP, in Redlands, Calif. "We developed a report for them comparing mechanic hours to hours operated by equipment piece and type. They quickly realized that one particular group of machines was costing them too much in downtime."

Viewpoint Construction Software
www.viewpointcs.com
800-333-3197

Viewpoint V6 is described by its maker, Viewpoint Construction Software, as the "next generation of construction software." Indeed, the company has built an application that serves three market segments within the construction industry – general contractors, heavy highway and specialty/subcontractors. In doing so, the company succeeded in proving it has invested energy into the contractor market.

Benefits and Features

- All core modules – integrated to map to other areas of the product – include typical components found in most programs as well as additional modules specific to construction. These include Job Billing, Project Management, Purchase Management, Subcontract Management, Equipment Management & Maintenance, Human Resources, and several others.
- Viewpoint integrates well with third-party software, including Crystal Reports, Microsoft (MS) Office products, estimating systems, remote data capture software and scale ticketing systems.
- The system houses 1,000 standard reports developed with Crystal. Users can copy and modify standard reports, or define their own.
- Viewpoint is fiscal-month oriented for financial reporting rather than date-oriented, but stores relevant transaction/posting dates for other reporting purposes, such as Job Cost.
- Drill-down capabilities mine to specific transaction line detail on any job. Any job record can have documents attached to it. The Attachment icon on each record is color-coded to alert users to the presence of an attachment.
- Two checks validate information before users run batch processing, with the option to print prior to processing. The functions are uniform throughout all modules.
- Accounts Receivable and Job Billing modules work in tandem. Job Billing allows for monthly progress billing of contracts on a schedule-of-values basis.

Support

Classroom instruction, onsite, online and phone training are available. The company has live tech support available 5 a.m. to 5 p.m., Pacific Time.

Viewpoint fully documents its system requirements, including a dedicated server (Intel 2GHz Xeon or better), MS Windows 2000 Professional or better, and high-capacity backup.

Summary

In fairness to the other vendors represented in this set of reviews, readers should note that this product review had the advantage of the company's guidance – due to the requirement for a dedicated server; the products in the other reviews were test-driven solo.

Looking up job codes is simplified – the system will only look up codes associated with the job that's open in the system. Although the fully loaded product is a function-heavy application that would not be too difficult to get up and running, users would need to understand all components in order to get the most from the product. The company is rolling out the next version of Viewpoint later this year, which adds a bit more user customization to the system and will use the MS .NET platform.

Executive Dashboard Displays all Functions

Accounting functionality is fully integrated with the project management side of the application.



By Lori Widmer

Sage Software introduced its Sage Master Builder solution for the construction industry, and on first blush, this program is a finely honed instrument. Touted as a “profit cycle” management tool, Sage Master Builder allows users to move through the entire project life span, from job estimation to analysis of the business processes.

The Executive Dashboard is the jumping-off point for the entire application. The page displays cash accounts, cash position, receivables, payables, income from operations, outstanding change orders and under-billed jobs. It provides a fast look at where the business stands financially and, more importantly, offer the “why” behind the numbers.

Benefits and Features

- Users are able to make more accurate job estimates. Information from vendors can be updated easily. Templates make it easy for users to create estimates and proposals. Data is entered once and accessed throughout the system.
 - Budgets are set up faster, and users are able to manage purchases with vendors and subcontractors. Users have integrated paper management on all correspondence for a particular job.
- Accounting functionality is fully integrated with the project management side of the application. Cash flow is monitored and managed through both the income and expenses entered into the system.
- With the Under-Billed Jobs section of the dashboard, users see the bid amount, actual cost and difference, as well as the percentage of the contract bid that project represents. The collapsible menu in the program allows users to input information, although the system is a bit unwieldy to the untrained eye.
- A great feature of this system is its ability to show user trends within his or her company through a list of job costing graphs, including gross and/or net profit/sales figures, current ratios, and a comparison of overhead to direct expense.
- Monthly overhead reports allow users to see their financial picture instantly.



Support

Customer Support is available on a subscription basis with several options. BasicCare gives users self-service online resources, including a technical support database. TotalCare offers unlimited phone and fax support, and includes registration discounts to Sage’s annual customer conference. There are also training packages and learning services in real time and on demand.

Summary

For at-a-glance income and expenditures, Master Builder is dynamite. There’s no guesswork – all the figures are on the Executive Dashboard, and users are able to drill down into the data and see specific areas and figures within those areas. Sage Master Builder may seem bare bones on the surface, but is a solid solution. While there is certainly a need for training to understand the functionality, users who can conquer the application’s full capabilities will have tons of performance.

What Users Say

“I can break out varying workers comp codes automatically, and with the push of a button, get information that helps me evaluate my business needs,” says **Michael McCutcheon** of McCutcheon Construction in Berkeley, Calif. “Our supervisors need to know what costs are running, report change orders and schedule changes with the client. Without integrated software, it can be extremely inefficient, if not almost impossible.”

“During construction, 47 change orders totaling \$215,000 were issued to and approved by the owner,” says **Joseyne Santacroce** of Accounting Certified General Contractors, Inc., in Melbourne, Fla. “Without the help of Sage Master Builder, this job would have been a total nightmare.”

Sage Software
www.sagemasterbuilder.com
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