Select Your Next Accounting Software without Vendor Bias

By Robert E. Jones

Accounting compliance is one of the biggest headaches for U.S. federal government contractors. Selecting software is one step in an accounting system implementation, and a daunting task when you consider the number of options, the costs, and the time involved.

This article addresses accounting system compliance, debunks some common myths, and provides practical, unbiased guidance to use when selecting and implementing your next accounting system.

Selecting and implementing accounting software is akin to finding a home and moving your family. Both are long-term projects and require some knowledge of the process and market before embarking on your own endeavor. When families look for a new home, they consider:

- Type of housing (apartment, condo, house, etc.);

- Design (split-level, townhouse, flat, high-rise, etc.);

- Construction (brick or vinyl; basement, crawl space, slab; etc.); and

- Location (school district, proximity to work, amenities, etc.).

New homebuyers and lessees must compare the differences of buying versus renting and what is involved in each process.

As you consider your next accounting software, you will want to consider:

- Type (small, medium, or large);

- Design (core accounting, add-on programs, or integrated enterprise resource planning (ERP);

- Construction (how many users and employees need access); and

- Location (onsite or "software as a service" (SaaS)).

You wouldn't buy a house without considering the size of your family, the amount of stuff you own, or listing the important amenities or qualities of a home, including location, school district, and ease of access to other parts of your life. Your accounting system deserves even greater consideration and care in planning.

Find a Trusted Advisor

Most families use a realtor when finding a home, and for good reason. Realtors are knowledgeable of the market, types of homes, prices, and the processes necessary to complete the transaction. They bring unbiased objective opinions and can often help sort through the emotion and confusion of such a large life event.

In my previous article, "Compelling Reasons to Hire a Consultant,"[1] I talked about the services consultants provide. Those services

include the same market knowledge and unbiased objectivity realtors provide. A good consultant will guide your organization through the process outlined in this article. This outline provides the framework for discussion, evaluation, selection, and implementation.

What is a Compliant Accounting System?

A compliant accounting system says what it does, does what it says, and has evidence to support its claim. In other words, a system is more than the software—it includes the policies, procedures, work guidelines, and audit reports.

Say What You Do

Document your system design, cost pool definitions, and indirect rate structures and allocations. Your system needs written policies and procedures (or an overarching manual) that describes the treatment of specific costs and transactions. Key topics to address include timekeeping, travel and expense reporting, revenue recognition, and unallowable expenses. Your procedures should follow:

- Generally Accepted Accounting Principles[2];

- *Federal Acquisition Regulation* (*FAR*) Part 31, "Cost Principles"[3];

- Cost Accounting Standards[4]; and

- The Defense Contract Audit Agency (DCAA) memoranda for regional directors (audit guidance memos).[5]

You will find additional guidance in DCAA's "Information for Contractors"[6] and the "Preaward Accounting System Adequacy Checklist"[7] (the precursor to the formal Standard Form 1408).

Do What You Say

Make sure your work instructions and daily practices follow the accounting manual. Document deviations with clear explanations and supporting information. Follow your processes every day, week, month, and year. Be consistent! While auditors may find fault in a poorly written or designed procedure, consistency in following that procedure mitigates penalties and findings of system deficiency.

Have Evidence to Support Your Claim

Evidence in the form of financial reports and audit working papers should clearly support your policies and procedures. While access to internal audit working papers is a controversial subject for another article, performing internal audits to identify and correct weaknesses in your system is part of an overall healthy compliance policy.

Why Use Software?

DCAA does not require you to purchase software, does not endorse any brand, and it guarantees no particular brand approval or compliance. In fact, it can deem a paper system compliant. DCAA reviews, audits, reports on, and makes recommendations regarding the adequacy of an accounting system. The contracting officer ultimately approves the system.

Paper is outdated, clunky, time consuming, and more difficult to enforce compliance. Software allows for real-time data entry and reporting across functions and locations. Software programs enforce security through system access and user roles, and help maintain compliance through automated postings and internal controls. Almost any accounting software can be DCAA compliant when you implement it with proper policies, procedures, internal controls (like segregation of duties), and security protocols.

What's in a Brand Name?

If you're anywhere near the accounting department in a government contractor,

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Pros	Cons
Inexpensive.	Limited functionality requires add-on software for things like labor distribution, project management, CRM, DCAA reporting, etc.
Easy to install and use.	Maintaining multiple software vendors can be expensive and cumbersome.
Up and running in hours or days.	
Minimal hardware requirements.	

FIGURE 1. SMALL PROGRAMS (THINK QUICKBOOKS)

you've likely heard two rumors or myths that need debunking: "QuickBooks cannot be DCAA compliant"; and "If you're a real government contractor, you'll install Deltek."

My favorite legal and accounting response—"it all depends"—rings true: It all depends on:

- Size of your business (in terms of employees, revenue, and number of contracts);

- Number of users;

- Type of product or service (manufacturing, inventory, installation, repair); and

- Contract type (fixed-price, time-and-materials, cost-reimbursement).

As a standalone program, QuickBooks may not provide everything you need for compliance and a successful audit. The addition of written policies and the use of add-on programs for tasks such as timekeeping improve your likelihood of building and maintaining an approved system.

Just as no two companies are alike, no two software packages are alike. Common features exist, but the depth of functionality varies from vendor to vendor. Document your needs in a requirements definition and do your homework.

Plenty of companies outgrow QuickBooks for a number of reasons. Companies may have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars converting to and maintaining Deltek only to be disappointed and frustrated. Some companies switched to other vendors and then returned to QuickBooks. Yes, you read correctly—companies are switching from Deltek to QuickBooks. Why? I doubt there exists any single reason, much like there exists no single reason people divorce. Both happen after a number of events over time when one party decides they can no longer afford the relationship mentally, physically, emotionally, and financially. I'm not trying to make software selection an emotional issue, but all purchases are emotional at their core. Not all the reason and logic in the world can outweigh your feelings toward a person, product, or service. Consider the lists of pros and cons for small software packages and full ERP systems when deciding to switch from one to the other.

Software Features You Need

Software programs run the spectrum from simple (basic accounting) to extremely complex (fully integrated ERP). In general, systems that are more complex cost more to purchase, implement, and maintain. That said, a certain level of integration increases the efficiency and effectiveness of your system. As a government contractor, you may want additional features in your core system, such as:

- Budgets for developing interim billing rates,

- Estimating that matches your cost collection system,

- Timekeeping and expense reporting,

- Rate pools and indirect rate calculations,

- Labor distribution and reports,

- Audit traceability (especially for timekeeping),

- Project accounting/job costing, and

- Incurred cost proposal (ICP) reports.

Complications of Integration

While this article focuses on accounting software (the core of any ERP), consider all of the contractor business systems identified in *Defense FAR Supplement* 252.242-7005 ("Six Business Systems Rule")[8] when designing a solution:

- Accounting and Billing System,

- Contractor Purchasing System Administration,

- Cost Estimating System,

- Contractor Property Management System Administration,

- Material Management and Accounting, and

- Earned Value Management System.

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Pros	Cons
Single vendor and software solution.	Expensive to purchase, implement, and maintain.
Seamless integration across functions within organization.	Several months (even years) to fully implement and integrate all divisions or locations.
Easy to share data and reports.	What you gain in breadth of a unified solution may be lost in the depth of functionality in certain modules.

FIGURE 2. LARGE PROGRAMS (ERP—THINK DELTEK)

As you evaluate your current system, consider all aspects of software currently in use. Now may be the time to unify, though some programs have such strength on their own that integrating them may not make sense. For example, many companies use specific customer relationship management (CRM) or human resources (HR) programs because of the breadth and depth of functionality not available in integrated solutions.

Software vendors started either with financials/accounting and added on other modules, or started with other modules and added financials/accounting. Where they started is likely their strength. Regardless of where they started, at least some of their increased functionality came through acquisition instead of design. This means they bought source code from another vendor and modified it to work with their system. More mature vendors may deliver products fully designed or redesigned in-house.

The Pros and Cons of Software Systems

Despite being a small program, QuickBooks can grow with your business and a surprising number of $30 million to $50 million (or larger) companies use it. See **FIGURES 1** and **2** on pages 39 and above, respectively.

Software License Types

Software sales and licensing occurs in two formats: 1) delivery of an application to be installed on a PC or server ("on-premises"), or 2) delivery of the SaaS through the Internet (a.k.a., "hosted" solution).

On-premises software fits organizations with strong IT departments and robust hardware and security systems. Think of buying software on a CD, installing it on your PC, and downloading updates on a regular basis. ERP systems require separate servers (often multiple servers) that introduce additional maintenance and support concerns. Companies who prefer on-premises installation often have strict security protocols and/or want to modify and integrate the software with other systems.

SaaS (hosted) allows a vendor to deliver the software through the Internet, apply patches and upgrades without involvement of the customer, and requires little or no additional hardware. Hosted solutions are excellent choices for virtual companies, organizations with multiple locations or employees who telecommute, and those organizations with limited IT resources to support an on-premises installation.

Who are the Vendors?

The list below identifies the most common government contract accounting software providers. Some are not unique or specific to government contracts, but have developed tools and reports to aid in compliance. As previously noted, DCAA does not automatically approve a system based on the brand name of software.[9]

QuickBooks

QuickBooks[10] is available as an on-premises or SaaS solution. Simple and easy to use with pre-defined reports and setup guides

for a number of industries or business types, companies can implement QuickBooks in a matter of hours or days. Vendors disagree over the compliance feasibility of a QuickBooks-hosted solution, so pricing for comparison purposes assumes on-premises installation. For $300/year, companies can purchase QuickBooks with technical assistance and online backup.

➢ **ICAT Systems**
ICAT[11] is an add-on software for QuickBooks that provides tools for computing indirect rates and allocating indirect costs to contracts, project management, and reports that aid in completion of the ICP. ICAT works only with on-premises QuickBooks, and not the online version. Licenses range from $1,250/year to $3,000/year.

➢ **eFAACT**
eFAACT[12] is an add-on software for QuickBooks available through the Intuit Marketplace[13] and provides tools for timekeeping, expense reporting, project management, labor distribution, and reports that aid in completion of the ICP. eFAACT offers products for both on-premises and SaaS solutions. For comparison purposes, the on-premises version costs $4,175 (one-time) plus $675/year for maintenance.

A complete QuickBooks solution ranges from $1,550/year to $3,300/year, a great price for start-up companies!

(Note that a number of add-on programs for QuickBooks are available through the Intuit

Marketplace. I chose two of the most common add-on programs for this article.)

All of the following vendors are ERP-level solutions in that they deliver core accounting, timekeeping, expense reporting, and tools for labor distribution, project management, job costing, and reports that aid in completion of the ICP. The level of integration varies in terms of both the breadth of available modules and the depth of functionality.

Unanet

Unanet[14] identifies itself as "the one software for projects, people, and financials." Of particular interest with Unanet is the fact the software started as project management and later added financials, where most providers started with core accounting and later added other functionality. As of the printing of this article, Unanet has not released core financials beyond beta testing.

One of Unanet's strengths is the ability to integrate with other software including QuickBooks and SYMPAQ. This puts Unanet somewhere between ICAT/eFAACT and PROCAS. UNANET pricing ranges from $10/month to $30/month per user based on the number of active resources. An active resource is a checkbox per employee per module. In other words, the more employees who have access to more modules, the higher your monthly fee. Their rep estimated pricing for comparison purposes at $1,600/month to $1,800/month.

PROCAS

PROCAS[15] is "project accounting software for government contractors." PROCAS is a quasi-ERP package in that it delivers only accounting, timesheet, expense report, and project management tools. PROCAS does not support manufacturing and inventory, and the HR and CRM modules provide limited functionality. The vendor estimated monthly fees between $1,385 and $2,375 depending on the number of users needing access to advanced reporting tools.

PROCAS provides an interesting footnote on the homepage of their website: "While the

Defense Contract Audit Agency (DCAA) does not support, endorse, or approve accounting software from any vendor, PROCAS clients report that they consistently pass DCAA audits."

SYMPAQ

SYMPAQ[16] falls into the quasi-ERP category in that it delivers cost accounting, timekeeping, expense reporting, and job cost tools. Manufacturing, inventory, and CRM are not supported. SYMPAQ's rep provided a budgetary quote of $1,774 per month and their website states that a complete solution (including technical installation support) ranges from $15,000 to over $30,000 a year.

Microsoft Dynamics NAV

Pleasant Valley Business Solutions (PVBS)[17] headlines its website "premier DCAA-compliant project accounting software for government contractors." With solutions that include manufacturing, inventory control, earned value management systems, and sales order management, Microsoft Dynamics NAV delivers a full ERP solution for small and medium contractors.

NAV offers the same look and feel of other Microsoft products with similar navigation tools such as the ribbon. It easily integrates with Microsoft Office and SharePoint for e-mail and file sharing. PVBS is the leader for Microsoft Dynamics NAV as they developed the project accounting module for government contractors and employ former DCAA auditors and others with direct government contract accounting experience.

BuyERP[18] shows NAV pricing for full access of $2,100/year to $3,000/year per user. Limited access users (timekeeping and expense reporting) are $600/year per user. Our experience with PVBS shows that discounts are available when purchasing multiple modules and/or multiple user licenses.

Jamis

Jamis[19] delivers a full ERP solution, on par with Deltek in terms of features and price. Developed as a homegrown system for a government contractor in San Diego, the

software was later sold, commercialized, and is now available on the open market. Their website claims "designed specifically for government contractors" and "DCAA compliance made easy." While the Jamis rep declined to provide a detailed price quote, he stated that licensing and implementation was in the tens-of-thousands of dollars.

Deltek

Once known for their government contract accounting software, Deltek[20] provides a comprehensive suite of accounting, consulting, and business development and intelligence tools to serve the government contractor enterprise. As with most other vendors, Deltek offers both on-premises and hosted solutions.

Many government contractors know of GCS Premier and Costpoint—Deltek's legendary products. Costpoint's expansion includes offerings for small, medium, and large contractors with confirmation that GCS is headed for the "great software recycling bin" in 2016. As of the printing of this article, Deltek did not respond with a budgetary price quote.

Questions for Every Vendor

Use the following list of questions to evaluate potential vendors as you want to know the history of your potential suitor and gauge the stability of their product:

- How long have they been in business?

- What is the latest version of software?

- When is the next upgrade?

- How often do they upgrade?

- How often do they sunset (i.e., end support on a product)?

- How do they handle patches and repairs?

At some point, your business will grow or change in such a way that your current solution no longer meets your needs. That may require changing to a completely new software, upgrading to the latest version,

Vendor	License: 4 Years	Implementation	Total
QuickBooks	$6,200–$13,200	$5,000–$15,000	$11,200–$28,200
Unanet	$76,800–$86,400	$75,000–$100,000	$151,800–$186,400
PROCAS	$66,480–$114,000	$75,000–$100,000	$141,480–$214,000
SYMPAQ	$85,152	$75,000–$100,000	$160,152–$185,152
Dynamics NAV	$75,000–$110,000	$100,000–$150,000	$175,000–$260,000
Jamis*	$150,000–$300,000	$150,000–$300,000	$300,000–$600,000
Deltek*	$150,000–$300,000	$150,000–$300,000	$300,000–$600,000

Budgetary price quote not provided. Figures estimated based on industry experience.

FIGURE 3.

or implementing new modules or add-ons with your existing provider. All of these are effectively a new software implementation that requires planning, project management, testing, and training.

System Cost

Software implementation costs fall into four categories[21]:

- Software license fees,

- Maintenance fees,

- Hardware, and

- Implementation services.

(For budgetary guidelines, this article addresses items 1 and 4. I combine rough order of magnitude pricing for license fees with implementation services to give you a sense of the budget necessary for a software implementation project.)

Implementation services include technical support from the vendor, project management, and subject matter expertise for accounting and government contracts. Some vendors offer project management support for an additional fee, while other vendors provide only technical support and training for their product. Vendors suggest a software to implementation services ratio of 1:1 to 1:2.[22] Using a ratio of 1:1.5 helps determine if you

are in the right ballpark. My research indicates a market average of $175/hour to $200/hour for all types of implementation support.

Example: Licensing of $10,000 = Implementation Services of $10,000–$15,000.

Four-Year Pricing Summary

Computer software has a lifespan of three to five years. Based on advances in technology and changes in a business's environment, my experience shows that organizations often perform a significant upgrade during this time to remain compliant and/or to receive continued technical support from the vendor. For comparison purposes, we assumed an average of four years when considering both license fees and implementation support. See **FIGURE 3** above.

Time to Implement

Duration

Implementation may last a few weeks or several months. Remember that implementation is more than installing the software. It includes preliminary and concurrent work. A company with 200–400 employees can expect an average implementation to last 8–12 months. Duration depends largely on the quality of the existing policies and procedures, time commitment of employees, and the amount of customization of software and reports.

Time Committment

Select a cross-functional team with knowledge of your entire operation from order to cash and procure to pay. The more work your team does, the less you'll pay consultants and temporary help. The more committed your team (in terms of percentage of time), the faster you will complete the implementation. In addition, the more work your team does, the better they will understand the system. Paying consultants to do the work is expensive and reduces the amount of "learning by doing" your team experiences. It's your system—own it.

Calendar Date

Several factors affect the selection of the go-live date. Knowing that many implementations last several months, pick a date that is reasonable and achievable. While some companies "slam and cram" new systems in weeks rather than months, I question the quality and effectiveness of the result.

Logistical factors include pay periods, end of month, end of quarter, and end of year. All seem logical; however, selecting an off date removes the pressure of closing the period and dealing with new software at the same time. It allows users to adjust, reconcile, and prepare for the next period close.

Phases and Stages of Software Implementation

Phase 1: Primary System Design and Implementation

Phase 1 is best described as those mission-critical processes absolutely necessary to do business on go-live day. Put another way, these are features or functionality in your current system that you cannot live without. Items in scope likely include general ledger, time-keeping, and payroll. Items out of scope may include external portals or enhanced reporting. Out-of-scope items are placed in a "parking lot" and prioritized for Phases 2 and beyond.
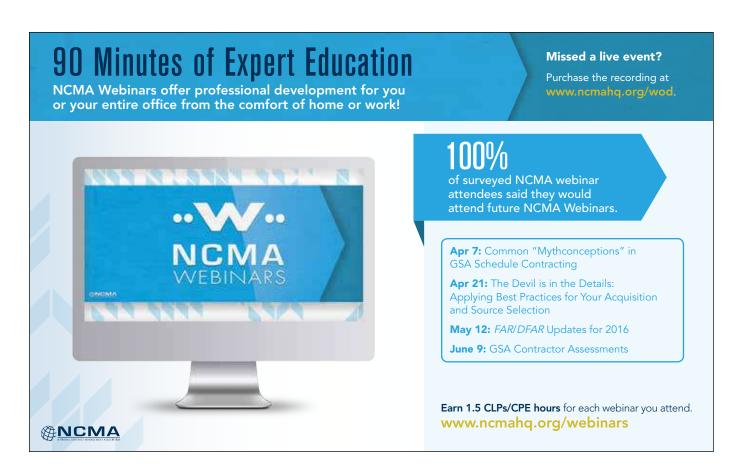
➢ **Stage 1: Processes and Procedures**

Knowing where you are and where you want to go aids in selecting a vehicle and path for your journey. Review existing policies and procedures for compliance with DCAA and Defense Contract Management Agency audit guidelines, FAR 31 cost principles, and Cost Accounting Standards (as applicable).

▪ **Tasks:** Interview employees, observe processes, draw process maps, and write narratives for each process. Given the nature of government contracts and the need for DCAA compliance, special attention should be given to testing and verifying the cost pools, rate structure, estimating system, and comparison to the current pricing model.

▪ **Results:** Two primary goals include mapping "order to cash" (customer pipeline) and "procure to pay" (supply pipeline). These two maps are the heart of your organization, the foundation upon which to build your system, and master documents for testing your solution.

➢ **Stage 2: Requirements Definition**

Describe the organization in terms of size, product line, customer base, and geography serviced. Define the needs and wants of the organization and users in terms of features and functionality. Prioritize the list in terms of "must-have," "nice-to-have,"

and "can-wait." Any vendor you interview will ask for a requirements definition so they understand your business. Do not forego the initial steps of the project by selecting a vendor before you understand the needs and wants of your users.

▪ **Tasks:** Prepare a list of system requirements based on current system functionality, contract requirements, government regulations, and needs and desires of users.

▪ **Results:** Stage 2 should result in a written document outlining the features and functions desired for your system.

➢ **Stage 3: Software Selection**

Evaluate and select software packages and vendors based on the process previously described in this article.

▪ **Tasks:** Identify potential software vendors, schedule demos, document features and functions, and provide

> **Paper is outdated, clunky, time consuming, and more difficult to enforce compliance. Software allows for real-time data entry and reporting across functions and locations.**

executive summary for your management team to make a final decision. Software selection often requires some data testing and verification, hardware analysis, and compatibility reviews with other software and systems.

- **Results:** Signed contract with vendor and any implementation service providers.

➤ **Stage 4: System Implementation**

System implementation includes:

- *Software installation*—the physical installation of the software, drivers, or other tools on the servers and workstations;

- *Software configuration*—the population of the database with company information, customer and supplier lists, user settings, and other master list information (such as part lists, delivery terms, etc.); and

- *Software integration*—making sure the software works with your other systems, which may include modules for sharing or synchronizing data such as CRM or payroll.

Other components of system implementation include:

- Customization,

- Reporting,

- Testing,

- Training, and

- Documentation.

Customization and reporting are two particular items that can cause significant scope creep.

- **Tasks:** Install software, identify hardware gaps, populate database, perform data migration, system testing of the "order to cash" and "procure to pay" pipelines, and train end-users.

- **Results:** Fully functioning system and well-trained users ready to "go-live."

➤ **Stage 5: Go-Live**

This stage involves "flipping the switch"—turning on the new system for all users in a live database. A decision earlier in the process may include running parallel systems, though many vendors and consultants advise against this approach due to the duplicity of work and potential for discrepancies between the two systems.

➤ **Stage 6: Post Go-Live Support**

All change requires time to adjust. With accounting systems, plan for support through your first major period close—i.e., the time when all processes will have been tested and any serious deficiencies identified. Post go-live support includes additional or remedial training, reviewing reports, and assisting management to finalize the implementation project.

- **Tasks:** Complete first period close, ensure that all Phase 1 action items or open issues are resolved or transferred to the appropriate person, and work with management regarding Phase 2.

Phase 2: Supplemental Systems and Modules

Remember that "parking lot" list of items that fell out of scope for Phase 1? Now is the time to review, prioritize, and start

the process again. Subsequent phases are shorter, less intense, and less expensive as the core system is in place and many decisions have already been made. Now, you get to focus on adding the "nice-to-have" features. **CM**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Send comments about this article to cm@ncmahq.org.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert E. Jones, "Compelling Reasons to Hire a Consultant," *Contract Management* Magazine (June 2015).

2. *See* **https://asc.fasb.org** for more information.

3. **https://acquisition.gov/far/current/html/FAR-TOCP31.html**

4. *See* **www.dcaa.mil/cas.html** for more information.

5. *See* **www.dcaa.mil/mrd.html** for more information.

6. *Available at* **www.dcaa.mil/DCAAM_7641.90.pdf**.

7. *Available at* **www.dcaa.mil/Preaward_Survey_of_Prospective_Contractor_Accounting_System_Checklist.pdf**.

8. *See* **www.acq.osd.mil/dpap/dars/dfars/html/current/252242.htm#252.242-7005**.

9. For purposes of the rough order of magnitude pricing information that follows, I assumed 5 users and 100 employees for licensing purposes.

10. *See* **http://quickbooks.intuit.com/**.

11. *See* **www.icatsystems.com/Default.aspx**.

12. *See* **http://efaact.com/efaact/**.

13. *See* **https://marketplace.intuit.com/**.

14. *See* **http://unanet.com/**.

15. *See* **http://procas.com/**.

16. *See* **http://sympaq.com/**.

17. *See* **www.pvbs.net/**.

18. *See* **www.buyerp.com/products/microsoft-dynamics/dynamics-nav.html?mode=list**.

19. *See* **http://jamis.com/**.

20. *See* **www.deltek.com/**.

21. *See* **www.sherwood.com/downloads/.../HowtoBudgetCostofERPSoftware.pdf**.

22. *Ibid.*