

ACCOUNTS SOFTWARE

Intuit QuickBooks Pro 2005

PRICE £204 (£240 inc VAT)

UPGRADE From Quickbooks 2004, £43 (£50 inc VAT); from Quicken, £68 (£80 inc VAT)

INTERNET www.quickbooks.co.uk

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk

VERDICT QuickBooks Pro remains the Swiss Army penknife of accounts software, combining an impressive array of accounting functions at an impressively low price.

With Intuit's decision to withdraw Quicken from the market, many faithful users are being pointed in the direction of the new QuickBooks range. This spans all the way from the £79 entry-level QuickBooks SimpleStart right up to the £450 top-of-the-range QuickBooks Accountant.

SimpleStart offers basic accounting functions: creating estimates, invoices and sales receipts, printing cheques, settling invoices, recording expenses and tracking customer transactions. To this, QuickBooks Regular adds payroll capabilities, stock control, support for recurring transactions and the ability to download bank and credit card information. The Pro version adds multi-user support, budget and cashflow projection tools, customised forms and price levels, as well as job costing, time tracking, and integration with Microsoft Word and Excel. That's a sizeable heap of accounting features for just over £200.

QuickBooks Pro 2005's new feature list is long, but like MYOB Accounting Plus (see p88) it also consists of a lot of minor tweaks. Most of the improvements focus on ease of use. The help system has been revamped, and the new Follow Me Help provides step-by-step guidance for a range of accounting tasks. The Report Navigator has also been overhauled to make it even easier to use. The software now groups its numerous reports more logically, making it simpler to find the one you want. The 2005 version also make it easier to apply customer payments to the correct invoice, whether you're paid by cheque or you download credit-card charge details from an online account at a financial institution.

You're able to customise your invoices and statements, and the ability to directly email



QuickBooks Pro 2005 offers the ability to pay staff via BACS, all from an easy-to-follow interface.

forms such as invoices, purchase orders and sales orders can be a tremendous time-saver. The inventory tools are more flexible than in previous versions too. You can buy, sell and stock items in different units of measure, and it's also possible to combine inventory items to create discrete, finished products.

Even more significant is the support for a variety of time- and money-saving online transactions. Like MYOB, QuickBooks Pro makes great play of the government's £825 cashback bribe if you submit your P14/P35 Employers Annual Returns online. Also new to this release is the ability to pay staff directly via BACS, a value-added service provided in conjunction with Bottomline. This costs £30 per month, which covers 30 transactions, with subsequent transactions costing from 25p each. Not having to make up pay packets or write out cheques is a real convenience for ultra-busy SME businesses.

As well as being able to download bank statements, QuickBooks Pro has other online capabilities. It continues to offer a credit-card merchant service in conjunction with WorldPay, which costs £100 to set up and £100 per annum thereafter. Each credit-card transaction costs 3.9 per cent plus 6p, which isn't bad. All in all, QuickBooks Pro's embrace of online commerce is notably better than any other accounting package, certainly at this price point.

Installation is a trifle lengthy, and once done there's an automatic update feature – minor updates are already

available for the latest version. QuickBooks requires online activation, which is no big deal, but, surprisingly, it also asks if it can send non-personally identifiable information back to Intuit – something not everyone may be comfortable with.

As ever, a wizard walks you through the potential minefield of setting up a chart of accounts for a new company. Like MYOB Accounting Plus, there are a host of predefined charts for various types of companies – you just pick the type closest to your company and proceed.

Quicken users, who were left high and dry by Intuit's abrupt abandonment of its UK user base, can easily upgrade to QuickBooks Pro 2005 for £68 (£80 inc VAT). Novices can avail themselves of the QuickBooks Tutor – a multimedia narrated presentation that talks you through basic procedures, which will do much to calm any first-time nerves.

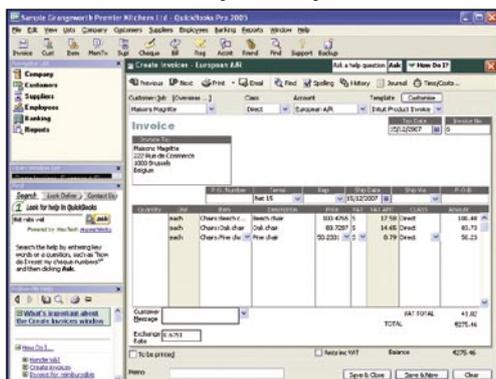
That's in turn helped by the mature interface. Compared to MYOB's somewhat garish appearance, QuickBooks' look and feel is more professional and thoughtful, although it still uses

large pictorial icons to illustrate functions. Another similarity with MYOB is its use of simple flow charts to indicate the links between different processes. These act as convenient, functional menus – you simply choose a function you wish to perform and follow the flow charts and menu options. The adverts for added-value QuickBooks services are a bit of a cheek, however – they might be acceptable on a shareware product, but not on one you've paid for.

Much accounting software carries the baggage of antique code, and QuickBooks Pro is no exception. However, it's slightly unusual in that it needs read/write access to the Registry – a luxury normally denied to Standard Users on a network. So Standard Users can't use QuickBooks Pro 2005 over a network unless they're promoted to Power Users or Local Administrators first.

QuickBooks Pro 2005 has a near-identical feature set to MYOB Accounting Plus, but when it comes to online transactions it has the edge. Although it might not be a major upgrade from last year's version, it's still the most flexible and fully featured accounting package for SMEs with up to 50 employees.

ROGER GANN



You can export an invoice to Microsoft Word for customising before printing it out.

PC PRO RATINGS

EASE OF USE	★★★★☆
FEATURES	★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
OVERALL	★★★★☆

REQUIREMENTS 200MHz Pentium; 64MB RAM; 230MB hard disk space; Windows 98 onwards.