


**Feature Article:**

# Planning for Future Growth - Choosing the Right Technology

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By Ken Garen

When an accounting firm experiences growth, several things usually happen at once. The number of clients and client-related information is growing, as is the number of staff working to serve the clients.

Structuring a business for growth relies on the premise that both the personnel and technological infrastructure can readily accommodate it. For example, if all your client files are in one filing cabinet, and only one person accesses this cabinet each day, it makes sense to place the cabinet near him or her.

When business growth happens, essentially you are adding more



**Ken Garen, President, UBCC**

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people to the mix who need to access that same file cabinet. Now, if you have 20 employees who need convenient access to the file cabinet things change considerably. Complicate the matter further by assuming that several employees need to access the file cabinet or even the same file at the same time. Suddenly, unless you have planned for growth by investing in technological infrastructure that can support it, technology doesn't serve your personnel.

Although filing cabinets still get plenty of use, software and systems required to manage client information stored as electronic data files are now commonplace. Businesses need software designed to run economically and efficiently regardless of whether it is being accessed by one or thousands of users. Ideally, this should occur transparently with little or no effort on the part of the users.

Unfortunately, many software solutions simply won't scale. For example, if your accounting software uses Microsoft's Access as a database, there is a ceiling on the amount of data and number of transactions that can be handled effectively. Additionally, Microsoft's Access only allows one person to use a data file at one time. If the software uses a higher end database application such as SQL or Oracle, the number of users can increase, but the speed of the system slows as the volume of transactions grows.

Limiting the size of the database, its speed, and/or the number of users, is impractical and can derail a business's expansion by slowing work process down. It may also force a migration to another software solution during a critical time when delays, added expenses, and training on new software become insurmountable roadblocks.

## **Non-Portable Software**

With most software applications, the same software won't run across different platforms. When this occurs, the software program written for Windows is fundamentally different and virtually impossible to transfer to another operating system such as Unix, Linux, or Macintosh. This can even happen with versions of Windows as the Vista pioneers are finding out.

To complicate matters, users can't use the same software on different versions of the same operating platform. Imagine the technology challenges faced by businesses when some employees run Windows 98, while others use XP or Vista, and yet others depend on UNIX or Linux, yet all need to access the same software program or data files? Converting data from one system, platform, or software can damage, destroy, or delete mission critical client data.

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## Portable Software

Easily accessing and using a software application on different computer operating systems – “software portability” is similar to the reality that we can play a music CD on any manufacturer’s CD player. Portability is highly desirable in software applications. What company wouldn’t want the ability to run their accounting, payroll, and tax software on a ten-year old Windows-based PC the latest Macintosh system, or a Linux computer? What if, with minimal effort, one software application ran seamlessly on all three systems?

Why should end-users insist on buying software that is portable? Most simply put, end-users should have the ability to use the software on another system with reasonable cost and effort. From an end-user perspective, having portable software means:

- The software can be moved across a wide range of systems (Windows, Macintosh, Linux, UNIX) with minimal adjustments required.
- The software works well with other applications on local or remote systems.
- Little or no retraining is needed on the program.
- Keystrokes are identical on all platforms.

## Platforms and Products

Most software for the accounting industry, whether designed for small or large companies, is written exclusively for Windows. Unfortunately, Windows-based programs often do not allow data to be transferred between them. Switching from one program to another would require users to recreate the data. The only way to extract data from a program would be to keep the data in the format the software recognizes or allows.

For business owners, Windows popularity with users means that it’s relatively easy to find qualified help, and to hire employees who have experience working with it. Windows users have access to a wide variety of software programs and the latest Microsoft (XP and Vista) operating system. However, users will need technical assistance regularly, as Windows and Vista applications don’t scale as well as Linux or Unix-based systems.

Working in Linux favor is its more limited vulnerability to viruses and hackers, faster and more stable performance and scalability. Because Linux is an open source system, users can actually see and manipulate the underlying code for it. This makes Linux adaptable to a company’s specific needs. Linux is definitely a geekier system, requiring specialized technical assistance. The interface is not as user friendly. There are not as many end user applications for smaller businesses.

Macintosh operating systems are now based on UNIX, making it a limited and popular choice. Its vulnerabilities are limited and it is stable. The Macintosh Operating System is also designed to do many functions for the end-user, thus, yielding more productivity .

But Macintosh and UNIX users trade off ease-of-use for functionality.

UNIX is difficult to customize for an individual user, is graphically impaired, and requires odd commands. UNIX is definitely for geeks only and other than software written for Macintosh almost no one is writing for UNIX.

SouthWare, SAP and UBCC all have accounting software designed for platform independence. SouthWare touts its scalability from one to many users, while SAP's programs are designed for mid-size to large companies.

UBCC developed its true, multi-user, real-time, multi-tasking accounting software in such a way to make it easily ported to other systems. Its software runs on over 700 platforms, including all Windows, Linux, and UNIX operating systems and even IBM mainframes. A company using UBCC can grow from one to thousands of users or switch operating environments as needed, and preserve its investment in hardware, data files, software and training time.

### **Buy software for portability, make change easier.**

Buyers should demand highly portable software. If more end-users demanded this portability, more software developers would produce it. Business critical software applications that are highly portable will dramatically affect the ease with which your company can grow. As you seek out software technology to satisfy your current business needs, consider providers that allow for seamless growth and relatively painless transition between all operating systems.

Is your firm in need of a highly portable software technology? You may be more ready than you imagined. Consider your answers to the following questions.

- 1) Does your company function within multiple operating environments, databases, and applications (Windows 95,98, 2000, XP, Vista, Macintosh, Linux, UNIX)?
- 2) Are you forced to work companywide in only one operating system?
- 3) If your client base doubled today, do you have a software application that can immediately grow with you? What if that growth happened over the next two to years?
- 4) Have you already outgrown your current system?
- 5) Are you using a software application customized to your organization that your employees may not like, but they are comfortable with?

Companies and their clients often function within multiple operating environments, making software portability a huge challenge for even the savviest techies. Some stay with their existing accounting systems too long, because it's grown comfortable, or employees are callused to the inefficiencies or quirks of navigating through the system. Change can bring apprehension, and begs questions of training time and financial resources. But comfortable doesn't cut it when making decisions to

invest in portable software technology today, for future seamless business growth seamless.

The software solution for managing your client data, and how portable it is, should be top of mind for anyone planning for future growth because it directly and dramatically impacts how well you can affectively manage it.

**About Author:**

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