● BUSINESS ACCOUNTING

Sage Line 50 v10

PRICE Accountant, £500 (£588 inc VAT);
Accountant Plus, £750 (£881 inc VAT);
Financial Controller, £1,200 (£1,410 inc VAT)

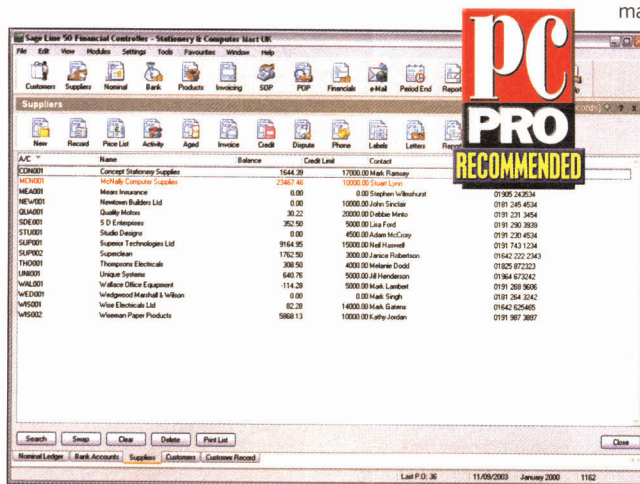**UPGRADE** N/A

INTERNET www.sage.co.uk

SUPPLIER Sage 0191 255 3000

VERDICT More new features than we've come to expect from a new version of Line 50 and it's easier to use too. It looks like Sage is well on track for world domination.

When you look at a product like Microsoft Word, you wonder what happened to the other word-processing software that must at some time or another have existed alongside it. Well, that's pretty much what it's like reviewing Sage Line 50. There are a number of other SME accounting systems still out there, it's true, but none of them can claim the user base of Sage and few of them would dare ask upwards of £1,200 for their top-of-the-range version. Products like QuickBooks are great systems for the small operation, but Sage Line 50 has the medium-sized business market well and truly sewn up. So what does this latest incarnation boast to tempt existing users? Well, for a piece of software this long in the tooth, there's quite a lot on offer.

For starters, we have a brand-new interface – at least in terms of look and feel. The multiple overlapping and stacking windows are gone, replaced by a more modern 'tabbed' full-screen window technique. In other words, when you have several windows open on different parts of the application, they all reside on a tab section along the status bar. You switch from one screen to another by choosing a different tab. However, don't worry if you still like all those windows, as you can opt for the old method of working as well.

Although there are still a few holes, drilling down has also been improved. You can go to a

A new look and feel for Sage Line 50 favours the tabbed full-screen approach instead of multiple overlapping windows.

customer's record, for instance, click on the Activity tab to display transactions and then drill down these transactions to the original invoice. You can even get to the order that invoice was made from. There are still plenty of types of transaction you can't go anywhere with, though, such as anything entered on a batch-processing screen, customer and supplier payments, directly entered bank and cash receipts and payments. It's a nice try, but MYOB's method is far more intuitive.

This version of Sage Line is the easiest to use yet. For the first-time user, the My Business Set-up Wizard takes you through a simple process to tailor the content and layout of screens and create your defaults. Plus, when you want to alter these settings later on, they're much easier to find as they're all in the Configuration Editor. A new Accounts Analyser view for the nominal ledger screen displays your accounts in Profit and Loss Summary and Balance Sheet format. You can use this tree display to navigate around and view data with past year comparisons, for specific months and cumulative for the year so far. You would have needed to create several printed reports for all this in prior versions.

For the company accountant, a new Audit Assistant uses business logic to check for duplicate transactions and out-of-balance situations. The software even

Keeping track of your potential cashflow problems is now made much easier with Line 50's new cashflow analyser screen.

looks for problems with VAT values on accounts transactions. You get a list of suspect entries to verify on screen and there's a suite of VAT audit reports to help reconcile the tax account – all of which is approved by HM Customs & Excise. This is a first for Sage and useful to show your auditors at the end of the year.

The new Cashflow Planner is an excellent addition to the suite. It sits on the Bank menu and shows your estimated cashflow at a glance. You can see exactly what's expected to go out and come in, helping you plan how best to manage your money. Obviously, you'll need to create recurring transactions for standing orders and the like for this to make any sense, but sales and purchase payments are calculated automatically from the due date of invoices.

Although you've always been able to save skeleton documents so you can call these up later to avoid retyping, now Sage Line 50 supports proper repeat orders and invoices. You can schedule both invoices and orders to post at regular intervals, which is ideal for dealing with rental sales agreements and the like.

So the new Sage Line 50 certainly has plenty of enhancements and noteworthy new bits on the menu, and for once it looks like existing users have more than a couple of reasons to upgrade.

If you're new to SME accounting software, Sage Line 50 is definitely a worthy entry on your shopping list. Financial Controller covers all the bases with sales, purchase and nominal ledgers, invoicing, order processing and fixed asset management. You also get a cashbook for direct entries into petty cash, bank and credit card accounts, along with multilevel bill of materials stock control. A management-information system displays accounting data in sales director-friendly format, neatly avoiding non-accounting personnel inadvertently playing with the figures. The financials module offers fast access to profit and loss reporting, audit trail analysis and VAT handling, while prepayments, accruals and standing orders are all on the menu for regular posting.
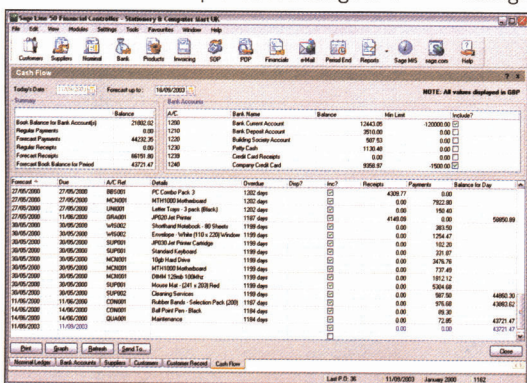
Sage Line 50 isn't perfect, and it's certainly expensive, but you won't find anything nearly so comprehensive at the price. Even with its faults, it remains the most trusted small business accounting system for thousands of users. If you're ready to join the club, version 10 won't disappoint.

TIM WOODWARD

PC PRO RATINGS

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

REQUIREMENTS Pentium/400, 64MB of RAM, 150MB of hard disk space, Windows 98 SE, ME, 2000 or XP.