

2017 Buyer's Guide to Accounting and Financial Software

sage Intacct



AICPA

Business Solutions
Preferred Provider of Financial Applications

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Introduction

The Modern CFO's Balancing Act

Financial leaders today balance the need to manage an increasing level of business complexity with the need for speed. You're expected to keep your eye on multiple entities with multiple regulatory frameworks and multiple currencies. Think that's complicated? Now add frequent change to the equation. A monthly financial check-in isn't good enough for today's CFO. You need the agility to make decisions at a moment's notice—and those decisions must be based on the real-time financial truth.

Here's the question. In today's complicated business climate, is your accounting software helping you grow and compete—or holding you back? This guide will help you understand whether it's time to make a move. You'll discover:

- Why most financial software systems hinder your ability to get good financial information
- The six key questions you need to ask before considering a move to a cloud-based financial solution
- Why the process for evaluating software is different for cloud solutions—and the seven things to make sure you've got in writing

Challenge

Why Is It So Hard to Get Good Financial Information?

It's not you, it's your software.

The last major adoption wave for financial management and accounting software dates back to the late 1980s, following the shift to Microsoft Windows. Every major financial software package today arose from this transition. QuickBooks, Microsoft Dynamics, SAP, and Oracle all pre-date the Internet.

The problem with these systems is that they were never designed for today's always-on, always-connected, always working world. Instead of being able to configure your system on the fly, you have to pay for costly, permanent customizations. As a result, you find yourself held back by vendor lock-in. This lack of flexibility also makes it difficult to get the reports you need, with the right information at the right time.

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And that's precisely why so many companies are trapped in the past, struggling with old fashioned, outdated financial management and accounting software packages. The fallout from using one of these older systems includes spiraling overhead costs, functional limitations, and unnecessary risks. What's more, there's a cost to not being able to gain real-time visibility into your organization's financial and operational KPIs. It's the cost of having your competitors make faster, better decisions than you.

Your First Decision

Choosing a Software Delivery Model

If you are considering a new financial management system, there's one decision you can and should make early on. Which delivery model will provide the highest ROI for your organization?

Here's a high-level overview to help you understand your three main options, followed by a chart with more details.

On-premises solutions. With this traditional model, you license software and run it on your own servers. When considering this model, be sure to account for the capital and operating expenses associated with deployment, operations, support, customization, integration, maintenance, and upgrades. While these costs can be too great for small and mid-sized organizations to sustain, on premises solutions remain a viable option for some larger companies. These organizations often have a built-out IT infrastructure, investment capital, and expertise to support and maintain major software applications.

Hosted solutions (single tenant). In a hosted environment, the software physically resides at a remote data center operated by an expert third-party hosting provider. Your team would usually use a product like Citrix to access the software over the Internet and see the screens being generated at the hosting provider. This model eliminates the responsibility of maintaining hardware infrastructure, and therefore can help you avoid large upfront capital expenditures. But it works by providing you with a unique "instance" of your financial system on a dedicated server. That means you would still face the same costs for customizations, upgrades, integration, and support and service.

Cloud computing solutions (multi-tenant). Just like Google, Amazon, and online banking, cloud-based financial applications were built for the Internet age. Also known as "software as a service" (SaaS), these applications offer direct, always-on access to the solution, typically paid for on a per-user/per-month subscription basis. They are multi tenant, which means you can unlock only your own data, but you work from a shared system—a single set of resources, application infrastructure, and database. There are no upfront fees, capital investments, or long-term commitments because you do not buy, license, or manage the underlying hardware, software, or networking infrastructure. Upgrades are performed at no cost to you. Even if you make extensive changes to the system, your customizations "roll over" to work with the new upgrade.

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Software Delivery Models at a Glance

	On-premises software	Hosted software	Cloud computing/SaaS
Application development	Developed for the 1980s innovation of client/server, Windows-based computing.	Runs on-premises software in a third-party data center and adds a layer for online delivery (e.g. Citrix).	Developed from the ground up for online delivery.
Deployment	Installed on the customer's own hardware.	Installed on a third-party vendor's hardware – delivered via an internet connection.	A single vendor both develops and operates the applications – delivered via an internet connection.
Implementation	Usually 3-6 months.	Usually 3-6 months.	Usually 6-12 weeks.
Customization	Can be expensive and time consuming. Risk of "dead-end" customizations that break when new versions of software are released.	Same as on-premises.	Clickable configurations replace costly customization and do not break with application upgrades.
User interface	Designed for Windows machines in a client/server environment, and not always optimized for ease of use and learning.	Same as on-premises, with an extra layer for presentation (e.g. Citrix).	Designed from scratch for the Web environment, to match the paradigm users expect and are familiar with. Built from the ground up to be easy to use on multiple devices, with multiple operating systems.
Upgrades	12+ months.	Same as on-premises.	Generally quarterly.
Integration	Difficult and expensive.	Same as on-premises.	Readily available via application programming interfaces (APIs).
IT Support	Generally provided by the customer.	Same as on-premises, but complicated by existence of third-party hosting vendor.	Generally included in the package from vendor.
Multi-tenancy	Not multi-tenant. Each instance of the application requires its own hardware/software/networking environment.	Same as on-premises.	Applications are designed to be multi-tenant.
Hardware requirements	Requires a specific operating environment.	Same as on-premises. Users typically limited to Windows only.	Delivered via a Web browser so generally operating system- and browser-agnostic.
Accountability	Vendor is responsible for the software, IT department is responsible for operations.	Hosting provider and software developer are two different organizations so accountability is complex. IT department is still responsible for operations.	One vendor provides end-to-end solution so accountability is inherent.

Considering Cloud

Gut Check: Is the Cloud Right for My Finance Organization?

The cloud offers compelling and unmatched advantages for deploying business software, and particularly financial applications. IDC estimates that worldwide spending on SaaS will double, going from \$29.8 billion in 2013, to [\\$62.1 billion by 2017](#). (Source: IDC.com)

While your next financial solution very well could be a cloud solution, it doesn't have to be. And it certainly should not be a choice based on "what everyone else is doing." Is the cloud right for your finance organization? Conduct a quick gut check with these six questions.

1. Does my team need to work outside the office?

"Anytime, anywhere" [accessibility](#) is a key benefit of moving to the cloud. The whole finance team can work anywhere—in the office, at home, around the corner, or around the world—using only a standard and secure Web browser and an internet connection. You don't need extra security hardware or software, or a VPN connection.

2. Does my business need to accelerate financial processes—without increasing headcount or IT budget?

[High ROI and rapid payback](#) are common with cloud applications. In a recent study by Nucleus Research, cloud-based financial management and accounting implementations were found to [deliver 1.7 times more return on investment](#) than on-premises ones.

(Source: NucleusResearch.com)

Considerable financial advantages come from avoiding the capital investments and operating expenses associated with an on-premises system. But cloud systems also drive higher ROI through time savings and process efficiencies. Since cloud systems are inherently Web based, live, and real-time, they greatly accelerate crucial financial processes like collections, consolidations, and period closes. Plus, modern cloud-based systems offer extensive automation and integration capabilities. You can go a long way toward eliminating productivity busters like manual data entry, paper-based processes, and spreadsheet maintenance.

3. Does my financial system need to integrate with Salesforce.com or other applications?

[Easy integration](#) comes with the territory in the cloud. APIs and Web services enable cloud systems to easily integrate with one another so your company can use the best applications for each functional area of the business. That means no more costly custom programming and maintenance from expensive IT resources.

4. Do my managers want or need self-service access to their relevant KPIs?

[Real-time visibility](#) is a hallmark of today's cloud systems. You can provide access not only to traditional finance department users, but also to other stakeholders across the business. For instance, many organizations that are adopting cloud financials provide real-time dashboards for their management team, so everyone can see the key performance indicators that apply to their department. Others provide access to a broader range of employees so they can view dashboards, enter and approve expenses, and create purchase orders. Some also give lenders, auditors, CPAs, and board members real-time access to key information to build trusted relationships.

5. Does my organization struggle with inefficient processes?

The cloud can help you gain [company-wide operational efficiencies](#). You can streamline classic finance processes—such as consolidations and closes. But you can also leverage the Internet to tie in other company functions and processes, as well as your customers and suppliers. For a few examples, you can coordinate purchasing workflows that involve all stakeholders. You can deliver a 360-degree order-to-cash process that connects finance and sales. And you can create budget dashboards for department managers and help increase operational alignment.

The cloud enables companies to sidestep the pitfalls of “management by spreadsheet” and avoid the limitations of single-user systems like QuickBooks that trap information in desktop silos.

6. Do we need to compete with bigger businesses—on a smaller budget?

A cloud-based financial system lets you tap into [world class infrastructure](#). Your vendor amortizes costs over thousands of customers, so they can maintain world-class infrastructure and provide you with 24x365 operations, continuous backups, disaster recovery, and superior security. This offers you a far higher level of performance, reliability, and security than you may be able to afford on your own. Plus, cloud applications can be provisioned immediately and are upwardly and downwardly scalable. So you can get started quickly and change on a dime.

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Canto Moves to the Cloud with Sage Intacct

Since 1990, Canto has provided digital asset management solutions to customers such as the Red Cross, Saab, Lockheed Martin, and Lufthansa. With offices in Germany and the USA, Canto needed an ERP solution that would provide strong functionality for financial consolidation and project management. The solution also needed to integrate with Salesforce.com and be localized for the company’s headquarters in Germany.

Before moving to Sage Intacct, Canto used Microsoft Dynamics NAV, an on-premises solution that was hosted on servers in Berlin and made accessible to North American users through Citrix. Unfortunately, this system was problematic and required extensive maintenance. It did not enable easy collaboration among global employees who needed access to a single source of accurate ERP data.

Ultimately, Canto selected Sage Intacct to manage its growth while solving its data consolidation and integration challenges. Sage Intacct provides Canto with a best-in-class cloud-based financial management solution. As a result, Canto has reduced IT costs, improved data management, and increased employee productivity.

Collectively, Canto eliminated 500 hours of manual data entry per year and achieved an annual ROI of 91 percent with an eight-month payback period.

Results

- **Reduced IT costs.** After implementing Sage Intacct, Canto was able to reassign one full-time employee who was previously dedicated to application maintenance.
- **Increased revenue recognition efficiency.** Sage Intacct helps Canto recognize revenues during the fiscal period when they actually accrue without using spreadsheets. Canto is now saving one workday/month on revenue recognition.
- **Increased productivity.** Canto employees manage thousands of orders and contracts every year. Contracts now get done three minutes faster; orders get done 10 minutes faster. Canto has also gained time savings on financial closings and other previously manual processes.

Canto eliminated 500 hours of manual data entry per year and achieved an annual ROI of 91 percent with an eight-month payback period.

Evaluating Solutions

Selecting a Solution: It's Still About Best Practices

When it's time to evaluate vendors for your financial system, it's essential to remember that you are ultimately choosing a sophisticated software application. Even with cloud-computing implementations, the basic process of vetting vendors remains unchanged. Consult the basic evaluation checklist below—then be sure to continue to the next section for additional questions you should ask cloud vendors.

Gather requirements. Carefully define and document your needs. Get input and gain consensus from key users in finance and related departments across the organization. Do you need to integrate with CRM systems? Talk to sales. Do you need to deploy new purchase requisition processes? Talk to accounts payable.

Identify top priorities and challenges. No system meets every need for every user. Determine which functionality and requirements are “musts” and rank them so that you can select the system which best fits your finance team's unique needs.

Create an RFI/RFP. With requirements established, now's the time to list your needs, expectations, and parameters on a Request for Proposal (RFP) form that you can send to a short list of vendors. Using the same form for all vendors will allow you to make an apples-to-apples comparison of solutions.

Research your options. Go online to develop a short list, sift through competing offerings, and comb through independent research and reviews. You can consult social networks like LinkedIn and Twitter to connect with people that are already using the products you are evaluating. For real-world reviews by actual users, check out [Proformative](#), [TrustRadius](#), and the [Salesforce.com AppExchange](#).

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Demo or trial from short list. There's no substitute for careful evaluation of the user experience. But also be sure to see how things work at the administrative level as well.

Focus on product fit. Don't overlook the basic truth: Regardless of deployment model, there's still no substitute for functional excellence. You need a financial system that offers the comprehensive, up-to-date features that modern organizations require. For instance, many companies find that multiple entity consolidation and project-based accounting are as essential as real-time reporting, process customization, automated approvals, and integration with other software products.

Check references, score, and select. Be sure you carefully screen vendor references. Make certain that vendors provide access to happy and successful customers, but don't overlook online forums like the Salesforce.com [AppExchange](#), where you can access unscreened, unfiltered feedback about vendor performance.

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Vetting Cloud Vendors

What to Look for in a Cloud Software Provider

When you move finance to the cloud, your vendor—not your IT department—will operate the financial system for you. This fundamental difference should have a major impact on your evaluation process. It's not like the old days when you licensed software from the vendor, and then were on your own. In the cloud computing world, the vendor has to form a long-term partnership with you and continue to earn your business every month. So you need to ensure your vendor can do a better job at running your system than you can—and that it will keep up the good work, month after month.

7 Attributes to Look for in a Cloud Vendor

- 1. Implementation success.** The ideal cloud financials solution is designed from the ground up as a cloud application and is backed by a vendor and partners with extensive experience. Make sure your vendor can point to a proven track record of successful implementations.
- 2. Operational track record.** Your chosen vendor isn't merely developing and licensing software. They're managing the financial systems that run your business—which makes the partnership strategic for you. Find out how your vendor conducts business. What's the cultural fit with your company? What standards do they pursue? Where are the applications physically being run?
- 3. Data ownership.** Ensure that it is unambiguous that you own your own data and can obtain a copy of your data (for an appropriate fee) if your relationship ends. You'll also want an agreement for appropriate assistance in migrating away from the vendor should you ever decide to leave.

4. Infrastructure and security. Most cloud-computing vendors partner with elite data center providers that provide the backbone to their offerings. Find out who those partners are. Where are the data centers located? What are the business-continuity contingencies? What security standards have they adopted? Can they deliver guaranteed and appropriate levels of uptime? How do they prevent, detect, and remediate physical and network security breaches? Thoroughly evaluate each vendor’s network operations center and technology infrastructure.

Ensure your vendor can do a better job at running your system than you can—and that it will keep up the good work, month after month.

5. ROI/TCO. Although the financial models can vary significantly, the total cost of ownership is typically far lower for cloud-computing systems than it is for on-premises and hosted systems. Take the time to carefully structure proper ROI scenarios and timelines to determine the investments and payback periods. The only ongoing costs should be monthly fees for the software subscription, training, and configuration. If you are comparing cloud to on-premises, remember that software licensing for an on-premises solution actually makes up a very small percentage of its total cost. Additional ongoing costs may include customization, hardware, IT personnel, maintenance, training, tuning, customizations, network maintenance, and much more. And that translates into a far more difficult investment hurdle. What’s more, cloud computing costs are taken entirely from OPEX, whereas on-premises deployments typically include even larger OPEX plus significant CAPEX investments. (See Figure 1.)

6. Support agreement. A good support agreement will specify what level of support is free with subscription and will offer several levels of additional support. If it is important to you to have access to U.S. based experts, find out where your vendor’s support team is located. It’s also a good idea to inquire about the people on your support team. Will there be accounting experts and seasoned representatives available to you if needed?

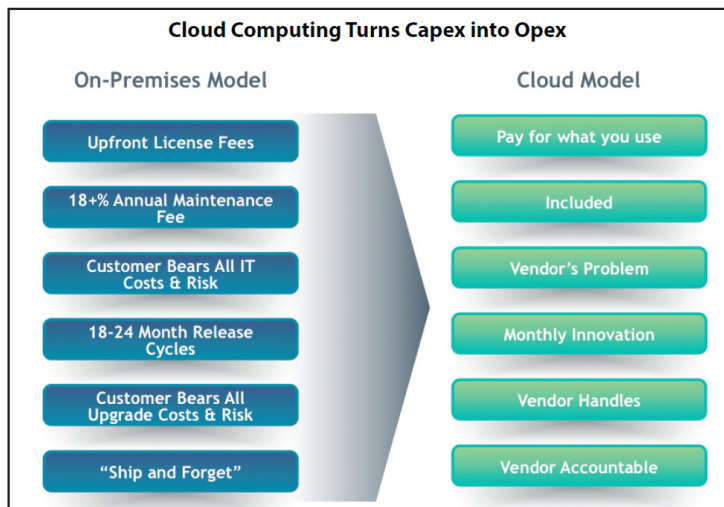


Figure 1

7. Service level agreements. Given the stakes, a world-class service level agreement (SLA) is a non-negotiable requirement when dealing with a cloud-computing vendor. With cloud computing, you rely more heavily on your vendor for support. You can't simply walk down the hall to ask your IT department for assistance if you encounter a system problem. Make sure your vendor has the appropriate infrastructure to offer the best expertise and responsiveness, and be sure to get an ironclad, comprehensive SLA. As the basis of your relationship, this document can be enforced for many years and is essential to setting expectations and insulating your organization from risks. Look for SLA transparency from vendors who are unafraid to publish 12-month histories and current system status on their public websites. If a vendor does not have a public system-status website, it should be a major red flag that they may not have a complete handle on their operations.

7 SLA Must-Haves

Your vendor's Service Level Agreement should specify incentives and penalties for these performance metrics—and more. Make sure you've got the following areas covered, in writing.

- 1. System availability.** Look for a vendor that can commit to 99% availability or higher.
- 2. Disaster recovery.** If there's a data center disaster, make sure that you'll be back up in 24 hours, and that you'll lose no more than 2 hours of data.
- 3. Data integrity and ownership.** If you decide to leave your cloud vendor in the future, you should be able to get your data out of the vendor's system—period.
- 4. Support response.** As a general rule, your vendor should be transparent about what constitutes a high-priority, medium priority, and lower priority issue—and should be able to respond to high priority requests within one to two hours.
- 5. Escalation procedures.** If you have a support case that you feel needs to be escalated, you be provided with a clear escalation path and the contact information of at least three people to contact.
- 6. Maintenance communication.** Your vendor should let you know when regular recurring maintenance activities take place, and should post a special notification if any maintenance activity is expected to take longer than normal.
- 7. Product communication.** Your vendor should commit to providing regular updates on new product features and product release notes.

Buyer Beware

How to Be an Informed Buyer

As the buyer of a cloud solution, you're in control. Again, cloud vendors must earn your business every month. They are motivated to look past the initial sales transaction and focus on a longterm relationship that keeps you happy. After you've done the hard work of assessing your requirements, drawing up your short list, and selecting a vendor to do business with, make sure that you understand what you are going to be paying for and when.

Two Bits of Guidance:

- 1. Be wary of steep upfront discounts.** Protect yourself by ensuring your agreement includes caps on price increases over time, or you can find yourself with a nasty surprise at the end of your first year of service.
- 2. Factor in all the variables to avoid surprises.** Pricing models for cloud applications vary widely. Some vendors charge an all-in-one fee. Others might break out various components like maintenance, support, or training and then add overage charges based on the number of users or number of transactions.

Conclusion

You Are In the Power Seat

With so many alternatives for financial applications, financial leaders must ensure they understand the implications of all options: on-premises, hosted, and cloud computing. Ultimately, cloud computing is about capitalizing on a new software delivery model that accelerates payback of a larger ROI and better aligns the financial organization with the new dynamics of growing businesses.

In this guide, you've discovered why legacy systems make it difficult to get good financial information, what to expect from a modern cloud-based solution, and how to make sure you choose the right solution for your organization. In today's market for accounting applications, the buyer has the power. No matter what solution you choose, you should expect faster financial closes, easier regulatory compliance, less manual work, real-time visibility and reporting, and an outstanding service level agreement. Good luck with your buying journey.

About Sage Intacct

Sage Intacct is the innovation and customer satisfaction leader in cloud Financial Management. With the powerful combination of Sage and Intacct, the Sage Business Cloud offers the best capabilities of both companies. Bringing cloud computing to finance and accounting, Sage Intacct's innovative and award-winning applications are the preferred financial applications for AICPA business solutions. In use by organizations from startups to public companies, Sage Intacct is designed to improve company performance and make finance more productive. Hundreds of leading CPA firms and Value Added Resellers also offer Intacct to their clients.

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