2005 OVERALL RATING
★★★★★

TAX PREP

Thomson Creative Solutions — UltraTax CS

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www.CreativeSolutions.Thomson.com
800-968-8900

With more than 200 modules available for 1040, 1041, 1065, 1120, 1120S, 706, 709, 990, 5500 and state and municipal equivalents of these forms, UltraTax CS provides a comprehensive tax compliance

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system that can integrate with Thomson Creative Solutions' suite of tax planning, asset management, professional accounting and productivity programs. Through a singular database, the program enables data sharing across programs, providing true integration and data consistency across all applications. Licensing of the program to support our hypothetical four-person practice would cost approximately $6,240, inclusive of electronic filing fees. The system can also be used on a pay-per-return basis.

LEARNING CURVE

UltraTax CS opens to a blank screen that allows access to opening or creating a new return by selecting the appropriate icon from the toolbar, which prompts a

subwindow input screen for the appropriate action. The system's client selection screen allows filtering by multiple factors. Within returns, the system offers interview, form and Quick View options for working with and viewing client information, although the primary and most efficient method of data entry is via the interview mode. The Quick View mode serves primarily as a review tool, allowing users to look over a summary of client return information and providing diagnostic reporting. While data can be entered directly within the form-based mode, the system considers direct entry onto most fields to be overrides of calculated information. Depending upon the viewing mode, UltraTax CS provides a split screen with a menu tree on the left that provides access to data-entry categories such as Payments, Income, Farm Rent, etc., while the primary work area of the screen provides tabbed data-entry sheets. The tabs provide additional navigation options, while buttons on each of the tabbed data-entry sheets further allow jumping to sections within these sheets. During forms-based viewing, the primary work area shows a replica of the form, worksheet or other document selected, while in the Quick View mode, the screen provides a summary list of Income, Tax & Payments, Estimates and diagnostic messages.

UltraTax CS uses a comfortable, logically designed interface that is easy to follow, allowing users to move between data-entry tasks and sections, as well as simplifying review processes. The system includes numerous help functions that remain accessible while within returns, including several options available though right-click menus, such as field-specific help, the ability to go from a calculated entry on a form to its corresponding data input screen, and direct access to IRS and RIA® research materials.
★★★★☆

USE/WORKFLOW & PRODUCTIVITY TOOLS

Complementing its well-designed data-entry screens, UltraTax CS includes several features that aid in the data-entry process, including "smart forms" that skip entry fields that don't apply to a client based upon prior entries. "Smart forms" also save frequently used data entries into a pull-down list, enabling users to select a previously entered employer, occupation, city, state, ZIP and other items. Further aiding the review process, UltraTax CS's diagnostic messaging includes linked entries that enable users to jump to noted sections and make corrections if needed. UltraTax CS also includes a built-in depreciation module that automatically transfers

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calculations including depreciation and disposition to appropriate forms within the client's return. The system uses color coding for data on input screens, black for preparer-entered, blue for system computed, red for overridden entries, and fuchsia for imported data, making it easy to know where data originated. The program allows multiple client returns to be open simultaneously, allowing quick access without having to close out of a return in progress.

In our recent meeting with Creative Solutions, the company demonstrated one of its new-for-TY2004 features: Creative Solutions has added secure online portal technology to UltraTax CS. Through UltraTax/1040, an extension of Creative Solutions' web-based portal technology used in its accounting and payroll offerings, 1040 clients are able to fill out tax organizers and even access electronic versions of their completed tax returns when the firm finalizes it. The returns can be posted in *.PDF format, allowing the client to log into the system and print copies as needed. This allows 1040 clients to have the same advantages of access to their financial records as year-round accounting clients. Data entered into web-based and e-mail based client organizers automatically feeds into the tax system, reducing data entry on the part of the firm.

Also new this year, UltraTax CS includes optional Line Finder research integration with RIA's Checkpoint, allowing users to access line-specific research and opinion from within the program. UltraTax CS includes template letters and invoices that can be customized, and allows print previews; one-page, partial and full-return printing with customized collation; managerial reporting functions; and the ability to attach tickmarks and notes to client returns. Through Creative Solutions' document management application FileCabinet CS, users can also draft e-mail copies of returns for client review and for providing to banks and other institutions, as well as the benefits of reducing paper files.

Newport News, Virginia-based Carmines, Robbins & Company, PLC (www.carminesrobbins.com), uses File-Cabinet CS along with UltraTax CS to employ a dual monitor system during tax preparation, according to founding partner Robert Carmines, MST, CFP, PFS, CPA. "This allows a preparer to keep one monitor open on a client's prior-year return while preparing the current return on the other." He noted that UltraTax CS's data sharing capabilities and its integration with FileCabinet CS are the most important features for his firm because of the enhancement in productivity.

Mr. Carmines' firm has a staff of 20 preparers, including remote preparers in Alaska and Germany, servicing primarily small to mid-sized closely held companies and individuals. The firm prepares about 1,000 individual returns annually. "I haven't run into a tax return which I couldn't handle through it yet," said Mr. Carmines. "It works great, support is great, and it solves my headaches by interfacing with all of their other software." ★★★★★

INTEGRATION, IMPORT & EXPORT

UltraTax CS offers total integration with the other products developed by Creative Solutions because all of the company's core programs have been built upon the same primary structure, sharing a singular database that ensures consistency of information across all applications. The importance of this cannot be understated, as it prevents old data from finding its way back on top of newer data and significantly reduces redundant data entry. This integration extends across Creative Solutions' engagement, fixed assets, write-up, trial balance, practice management and tax preparation software. With such integration, the system automatically transfers K-1 data to partner returns and appropriate information between returns of family members. The system can also import web-based and e-mail client organizers, and can produce *.PDF versions of returns and other documents. Unfortunately, the system does not import directly from outside accounting packages, nor does it allow export into spreadsheet or text files. Creative Solutions offers conversions for users of Accountware, Lacerte, Drake, Dunphy, Orrtax, ProSystem *fx* Tax, TaxSimple, TaxWise, TaxWorks, ATX and ProSeries. ★★★★★

SUPPORT/TRAINING & HELP SYSTEM

UltraTax CS includes a strong built-in help utility that includes point-and-click help and line-specific form instructions and tax research (through RIA's Checkpoint®). An online support site provides additional assistance, as does an online community of users of Creative Solutions applications. The company offers live, online and tele-training options, as well as additional training classes at its annual users' conference. ★★★★★

PRODUCT EVOLUTION & VENDOR VISION

Thomson Creative Solutions continues to aggressively develop and improve its line of software, expanding the available productivity and review tools such as checkmarks and tickmarks, simplified drill-down access to supporting forms and placement of notes to any return field. ★★★★★

RELATIVE VALUE

The benefits of total integration between a tax package and accounting/payroll programs used to service a client throughout the year are more than just significant: The time saved per client return can mean more tax clients per preparer, and higher productivity equals higher profitability. In addition to such integration, UltraTax CS also provides the ability to handle complex tax issues and provides research linkage within the system, allowing users to ensure appropriate treatment. Its document management functions and electronic capabilities can assist in the paper reduction process, as well. The system is best utilized when complemented by a suite of Creative Solutions software, but it offers significant productivity benefits even when used as a stand-alone program. ★★★★★

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Executive Summary

The tax preparation suites included in this review vary in their approach to professional tax compliance, but all provide support for year-end compliance for virtually all entities: 1040, 1041, 1065, 1120, 1120S, 706, 709, 990 and 5500. However, some of the packages provide additional features such as office management and scheduling functions, and some also provide a greater degree of integration with accounting packages, which can greatly reduce the amount of time spent entering data for year-round clients.

Although the pricing of the software packages varies greatly, that is not necessarily an indicator of their feature sets or capabilities. According to Norman M. Golden, EA, First Vice President of the California Society of Enrolled Agents, "While price has to be a factor, it is not the overriding one." Mr. Golden stresses that the ability of a tax program to increase the efficiency of a practice is key, and that the software that will accomplish this may be different for different firms. Tax practices need to assess the needs of their offices, then determine what features will most likely help them achieve greater productivity. ■

COMPANY/PRODUCT ➡ CATEGORIES ⬇	ATX Total Tax Office Plus	CCH ProSystem *fx* Tax	Creative Solutions UltraTax CS	Lacerte Lacerte Tax 2004	RIA GoSystem Tax *RS*	TaxWise by UTS TaxWise 2004	TaxWorks by Laser Systems TaxWorks 2004
Learning Curve	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½
Use/Workflow & Productivity Tools	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½
Integration, Import & Export	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★½	★★★½
Support/Training & Help System	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★
Product Evolution & Vendor Vision	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★
Relative Value	★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½
2005 Overall Rating	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★
Approximate price for our prototype firm (as defined on page 8) **Clarifying remarks & pricing information provided directly from the vendors.**	$2,100 for a 4-user license (includes unlimited e-filing of 1040s & 1120 returns)	$11,000 This pricing is based on catalog pricing, although additional discounts are available through bundling and promotional offers. A pay-per-return pricing system is also available for firms with lower volume. CCH representatives can provide a more accurate pricing estimate based on firm specifics.	$6,240 (inclusive of electronic filing fees) System can also be used on a pay-per-return basis.	$7,500 (includes e-file transmission costs) A 15 percent discount is available for customers renewing their software. Lacerte also offers a pay-per-return model starting at $400. This is for pay-per-return ONLY users. If a customer purchases any product for unlimited use, all other Lacerte tax products are available on a pay-per-return basis with no deposit required. Pricing data is based on TY2004 information and may change prior to TY2005. Lacerte offers additional pricing programs, and individual firm characteristics may also influence final price.	$15,500 Pricing may be considerably less depending upon actual firm needs and usage. This fact pattern does not represent the typical user or market for GoSystem Tax *RS*. While certain functionality requirements due to the complexity of the returns may cause a firm with this fact pattern to require GoSystem, this type of firm is not representative of the company's market. Pricing is offered with assumptions of minimal return complexities and with no operational and system customization. In most cases, custom pricing is required due to the nature of services available.	$2,694 TaxWise also offers a pay-per-return system with a license fee of $100, where federal 1040 and first state can be filed for $15; business and specialty returns for $30 with first state. A deposit is required, which acts as an escrow account for filing charges.	$3,995 This pricing does not include e-filing transmission fees, which vary from $1 to $5 per transmission with volume discounts available. TaxWorks is also available on a pay-per-return basis.

PERFORMANCEⁿ

UltraTax CS™

Performance to the nth degree.

Advance to Zero-Time Data Entry

Many tax and accounting firms generate 50% or more of their annual revenue during tax season. So your choice of tax software is vital to the productivity and profitability of your firm.

The advanced technologies in UltraTax CS accelerate every aspect of your tax practice. Using seamless integration, advanced data sharing, and streamlined source document import — you'll cut processing time. With full paperless capabilities, private web portals, collecting client data via the web, electronic filing, and web or email final return delivery — you'll cut preparation time. And with integrated research capabilities delivered from other Thomson products, RIA's Checkpoint and PPC Deskbooks — you'll cut research time. With UltraTax CS, you'll accomplish more — in less time. Achieve unparalleled productivity for your most profitable tax season ever!

UltraTax **CS** — that's Performance to the nth degree.

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