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## TECHNOLOGY

Technology products that make your work go faster and smoother.

# Top Tools for CPAs

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BY STANLEY ZAROWIN

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**T**oday's technology buyers face a unique challenge. Just a few years ago *buyer beware* was the universal watchword for CPAs buying computer equipment. Hardware reliability was so questionable that many cost- and quality-conscious accountants required computer retailers to bench-test hardware to be sure it was sound before they shipped it. Today's products are generally of such high quality that such testing no longer is necessary. Even bargain-basement hardware suffers relatively infrequent failures.

Functionality has improved, too. Today, computers are faster, more accessible (because of the Internet and wireless technology) and, especially when measured by what they can do, are far cheaper than yesterday's models. So what's the challenge?

### **SURGING TECHNOLOGY**

Computer and software technology is advancing at a record pace, but rather than becoming easier to use, today's products generally are more complicated. Many CPAs lack the time and/or the patience to learn the skills needed to take full advantage of these advances. Even worse, the technology continues to move forward, getting more complicated and thus widening the gap between potential and actual use.

Don't mistakenly interpret this challenge as an excuse not to explore the new technology or to fail to seek new ways to use what you have. If you fail to commit yourself to stay ahead of the game, you undoubtedly will slip into obsolescence, which is what happened to many CPAs when they failed to get aboard the fast-moving computer bandwagon of the 1980s. Admittedly, it takes courage to give up what works well now and explore new technology. But consider the alternative: being left behind while your competitors advance.

To help you focus on recent technology that is especially useful to you now, this article will skip the gee-whiz hardware and software—the so-called bleeding-edge technology—and focus on products that will keep you efficient and effective today and in the immediate future.

Manufacturers' list prices often are heavily discounted; for the most current price,

check vendors' Web sites. In some cases I list the "street" price, which I obtained by doing a Google search ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)) for the product.

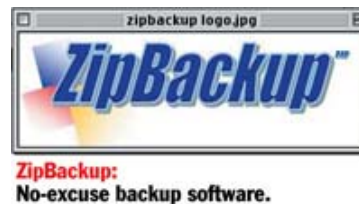
### Data backup

Despite warnings of potential disaster, many accountants still fail to regularly back up their critical data. And by "regularly" I don't mean once a month or once a week. I mean every day—and sometimes even several times a day if the data are especially critical and irreplaceable. The excuses for failing to back up data usually include: "It's too time-consuming," "It's difficult," and the lamest of all, "I forgot."

Admittedly, the first two reasons—time and difficulty—are valid, but they're not excusable. When you've lost critical data for lack of a backup, no excuse will satisfy a client, a boss or, upon reflection, even yourself.

Most of the backup programs I've looked at tend to be complicated, slow and often lack reminders to get you to overcome your procrastination and initiate the backup. Many also suffer from an even more critical shortcoming: If they use compression technology (to squeeze the backed-up data into a more easily storable size), typically the compression method is proprietary. That means the only way you can retrieve your data is to run the program's unique retrieval application—sort of running the backup in reverse. However, if the backup program fails, your data are not accessible, which means either you're out of luck or terribly inconvenienced until you can get the program running again. Such a problem probably happens rarely, but it has to occur only once to mess up your day.

ZipBackup ([www.zipbackup.com](http://www.zipbackup.com)) is a little program that aces those shortcomings. It compacts the files you want to store into the most common, and proven, compression format—compatible with WinZip and PkZip. Both can be added to run natively within Windows; so that eliminates the problem of proprietary compression software.



Also, you can program ZipBackup to back up files onto multiple removable media (such as CDs, DVDs, floppy disks and Zip disks) and you even can split the files for storage on multiple low-capacity removable media. ZipBackup can back up or restore over a network, handling up to 18 million terabytes of data and 4 billion files. A wizard walks you through a few easy steps to initiate a custom backup automatically to fit your schedule. It can perform either incremental, differential or complete backups and can tag files with date and time for easy management.

Its regular price is \$39.95, but it's heavily discounted.

### Data storage

Last year (see "[Hot Stuff: What You Need and What You Don't](#)," *JofA*, Apr.03, page 28) I wrote about flash mass storage devices—more commonly called memory sticks—which are about the size of a cigarette lighter and can hold many megabytes of data. They are so portable some people stuff them in pockets and purses; some "fashion-conscious" accountants wear decorative memory sticks on colorful lanyards. To access its stored data or to add data to it, simply plug the device into a computer's USB (universal serial bus) port and instantly you're in business.

Early memory sticks had limited storage capacity and were pricey, but now, not only have prices fallen but available capacity on some has grown to 1 gigabyte (Gb).



One product, Migo (<http://forwardsolutions.info>), has added a handy little extra: special software that synchronizes its stored data with the data on the computer it's plugged into. CPAs can load homework on their memory stick, and when they return to the office the next day, Migo will synchronize the revised data with the office machine's data.

Street prices run from about \$105 for a 128-Mb model to \$144 for 256-Mb device.

Another memory stick product, StealthSurfer ([www.stealthsurfer.biz](http://www.stealthsurfer.biz)), comes preloaded with its own customized Netscape Web browser. With this feature users can plug into any Internet-connected computer and surf the Net and access their Internet e-mail inboxes in total privacy. When they unplug StealthSurfer, they leave no record (cookies or cached files) of either their surfing or their mail on that computer. All this information remains stored on the device, not on the computer's hard drive. It also can be password-protected.

Prices: A 128-Mb model sells for \$99.95 and a 512-Mb unit sells for \$298.95.

### Personal data assistant

If you've been resisting investing \$500 or more for one of those pocket-size personal digital assistants (PDAs) because you really need one only for an address book, calendar and occasional memos, it's time to rethink your resistance. Palm has introduced a PDA—the Zire 21 ([www.palm.com](http://www.palm.com)), at a fraction of that cost—\$99. It weighs just a few ounces, is only a half-inch thick, synchronizes with Outlook's Contacts and Calendar and contains some easy-to-use memo applications (one even lets you draw diagrams or scribble notes on the screen). For an additional cost, you can add software that also will synchronize files in the rest of the Microsoft Office Suite: Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook e-mail. Bonus: One charge of the rechargeable battery lasts for weeks.



### Screen grab

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but an image of a chart or a section of a spreadsheet copied from your computer screen and inserted into a document can add instant pizzazz and clarity to a report. Sure, you can use your computer's **Print Screen**, but that function is limited, providing few editing possibilities. SnagIt 7.0 ([www.techsmith.com](http://www.techsmith.com)) is software that can grab any graphic (rectangular and nonrectangular) off your screen; it can crop and edit the image, too. SnagIt also can record video snapshots or a running video. Price: \$39.95.

### Remote access

How often does this happen? It's evening and you're at a client's office or at

home and you suddenly realize you need a file that's on your office computer, but your office staff has gone home. Wouldn't it be nice if you could call your computer and command it to send you the file?

With PCAnywhere ([www.symantec.com](http://www.symantec.com)) you can do that from any remote computer with a modem. Once connected to your office computer, you can operate it remotely just as if you were actually sitting in front of it—browse the hard drives and add, erase or transfer files. You even can encrypt the transmission. Price: You can download the product for \$29.95.

### Firewall protection

Security has become a major issue—and that's especially true for CPAs who are obligated to protect their clients' financial data from the prying eyes of hackers. Like it or not, your Internet-connected computer is a window through which a hacker can access data. The only thing that guards this window is a class of programs called firewalls—software that stops all but invited guests.

ZoneAlarm Pro ([www.zonelabs.com](http://www.zonelabs.com)) is such a firewall. It's as effective as many others on the market, but what makes it outstanding is its ease of setup. Many firewalls take advanced skills to get them up and running. ZoneAlarm walks you quickly and easily through the setup.

Once the software is installed, it takes a week or so for the program to learn (from you) who can have access to your computer (pop-up screens ask permission for each new attempt to access your computer). Once it learns the sanctioned sources, the program unobtrusively guards your computer from the uninvited. The company also makes a lightweight free version available for download. The full-featured Pro version costs \$49.95.

### Internet telephone

Making phone calls via the Internet (the technical term for Internet telephony is voice over Internet protocol, or VoIP) still is a little quirky, with echoes and slightly muffled voices, but it's becoming a practical utility. Its main advantage: It's dirt cheap with rates anywhere as low as 1.7 cents a minute. Instead of using an inexpensive (and low-quality) computer microphone, you now can buy a phone specifically designed for use with VoIP: the Clarisys i750 ([www.clarisys.com](http://www.clarisys.com)).

The phone can operate with a desktop or be taken on the road with a laptop. After installing the software (handled by a wizard), all the user has to do is plug the phone cord into an available USB port and the phone is ready for use. Price: \$89.99.

### Presentation projectors

Although you can crowd a group of your clients or colleagues around your laptop to view your PowerPoint presentation, it's much better to have them sit around an ample conference room table and watch the show on a wall-size screen. But for that you'll have to tote a projector—in addition to your laptop—to the conference room. So-called portable projectors used to weigh 10 to 12 pounds. Today, you can get a projector that weighs barely 2 pounds.



**BenQ's BP2120:**  
**\$999 presentation projector.**

Although the InFocus LP120 ([www.infocus.com](http://www.infocus.com)) weighs only 1.98 pounds, it's

no lightweight when it comes to displaying a clear, bright image even in a well-lighted room. It has all the bells and whistles of the 10-pound products (sound, remote controls, an effect button for blanking and digital zooming). Price: \$2,399.

If the InFocus price is beyond your budget, consider the BenQ BP2120 ([www.benq.com](http://www.benq.com)). It costs \$999 and weighs in at 3.8 pounds.



If you must make presentations in a small room or if you prefer to sit close to the screen and next to your computer, consider NEC's WT600 DLP projector ([www.necus.com](http://www.necus.com)). You can position the projector, which weighs 13 pounds, as close as 2.4 inches to the screen and still produce an image with a 40-inch diagonal. Move the projector back to 26 inches from the screen and the image can be as large as 100 inches on the diagonal. That flexibility relies on a complex set of

mirrors inside the unit. There is a trade-off for those accommodations: The projector costs \$6,995.

### Flexible battery charger

You've just landed after a long flight. You reach for your cell phone and discover its battery is dead. Even worse, you forgot to bring the charger. Worry not: You pull out your APC USB Mobile Phone Charger ([www.apc.com](http://www.apc.com)), plug it into your laptop's USB port and in no time it's fully charged. Price: Between \$14 and \$20, depending on model.

### Color printers

Never skimp on printers. Because the documents you print are in-your-face advertisements delivered regularly to your clients, they display your professionalism by demonstrating your concern for quality. In effect, they are your calling cards, and you want them to look good.

In addition, think color. After all, how long has it been since your television was black and white? Color adds focus and interest to any financial report.

If you're going to buy a color printer, avoid ink-jet models unless you plan to do minimal printing. While ink-jet printers are cheaper than laser printers and can produce excellent copies, the cost of the frequently replaced ink cartridges very quickly exceeds the cost of the printer itself. Nearly the same economics apply to monochrome ink-jet printers. It's estimated that, considering the cost of the cartridges, a printed monochrome sheet costs nearly 5 cents compared with a fraction of a penny from a laser printer.

*Bottom line:* In general, the best buys are laser printers—whether color or monochrome. And since their prices have plummeted in recent years, they are an even better buy now.

One of the least expensive monochrome laser printers (it's heavily discounted and costs less than \$200) is the Brother HL1440 ([www.brother.com](http://www.brother.com)). It prints 15



pages per minute (ppm).

A top-quality color laser printer is the Xerox Phaser 6250 ([www.xerox.com](http://www.xerox.com)). It's rated at 26 ppm for both monochrome and color and is priced at \$2,299.

If you need an exhibition-quality printer to handle wide paper for large spreadsheets and presentations—up to 17 inches—consider the Epson Stylus Pro 4000 ([www.epson.com](http://www.epson.com)), which costs \$1,795.

And finally, for the very small office, where cost, space and functionality are major considerations, the Canon MultiPass MP730 ([www.usa.canon.com](http://www.usa.canon.com)) provides color printing (albeit ink-jet) and fax with an automatic document feeder and scanning. Price: \$299.



### Personal scanning

The Visioneer Strobe XP 450 PDF ([www.visioneer.com](http://www.visioneer.com)) is ideal for those small organizations seeking to take an initial step toward a paperless office. The scanner, with a footprint of 5 inches by 12 inches, fits neatly on a desk and converts documents into PDF files at 20 ppm. Price: \$699.99.

You're at your computer and you need to scan a color photo or a newspaper article. No need to locate the office flat-bed scanner. Right between your keyboard and your monitor is the Visioneer Strobe XP 200. It's about the length of a roll of paper towels and half the thickness. Just slip the paper to be scanned into its front slot and it will turn itself on and scan an instant copy. Price: \$299.99.



### Laptop computers

For the CPA on the move, a laptop computer is a must. The ideal machine is lightweight, powerful and has long-lasting battery power. First, accept the fact that no one laptop is superior in all three categories. Compromise is the name of the game. Here are some choices—with pluses and minuses.

■ The Toshiba Portg R100 ([www.shoptoshiba.com](http://www.shoptoshiba.com)) weighs in at 2.4 pounds, has a full-size keyboard, a 12.1-inch display and a 40-Gb hard drive. But its battery life is limited to no more than 2 hours and 20 minutes. It comes with all the typical bells and whistles, including internal wireless Ethernet. Price: about \$1,999.

■ IBM's ThinkPadX31 ([www.ibm.com](http://www.ibm.com)) is a step up in power—and weight. Weighing in at 3.6 pounds (yet only 1.2 inches thick), it sports a full-size keyboard, a 1.2-GHz Pentium M processor, a 40-Gb hard drive, a CD-RW/DVD-ROM, a Gigabit Ethernet adapter, Bluetooth and hardware for wireless. Battery life: nearly five hours. Price: about \$2,199.

If you're not always gentle with your laptop, consider one of IBM's ThinkPad T series machines. Each contains an electronic system that protects the hard drive if the computer is dropped or harshly jostled. The system is based on the technology

used to deploy automobile airbags. A microchip detects physical acceleration and in response temporarily parks the hard drive's head until stability returns. The technology is still a bit crude—it pops an alert each time the computer is nudged. However, it does not seem to interrupt the user's work. Price \$2,899.

### **STAY INFORMED**

Hot new technology continues to flood the market. Some of it will make its way into the mainstream, affecting the way you work. Other products will fall by the wayside either because they're too complicated, too expensive or fail to make our work more effective. Don't feel you have to buy every new product that comes along. But don't fail to keep abreast by checking the literature and watching for updates for the hardware and software you use.

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