

## Microsoft Business Solutions Great Plains v8.0 - Lab Test

Product: Microsoft Business Solutions Great Plains, Financials

Version: 8.0

Date released: June 2004

Price: pricing subject to the number of users and the modules required. User-based pricing model starts from £1,750 per concurrent user for limited modules; Standard edition for up to 10 concurrent users and larger installations based around the number of concurrent users. Contact Microsoft or your nearest reseller for further details.

Databases: Microsoft SQL Server

Reviewed: August 2005

### Introduction

Great Plains - now part of Microsoft Business Solutions -introduced one of the earliest mid-range Windows accounting packages, Dynamics, in 1994. In the absence of Windows packages from the established vendors, Dynamics made a big impact and built up an installed base in the US of some 30,000 users. In April 2001 Microsoft purchased Great Plains for \$1.3bn. The Dynamics product was renamed MBS Great Plains and formed the keystone of the Microsoft Business Solutions group (MBS). In the autumn of 2005, Microsoft rebranded MBS as Microsoft Dynamics and indicated that version 9 of the package would be renamed Microsoft Dynamics GP.

Within the MBS UK product portfolio, Great Plains sits alongside Navision and Axapta, which Microsoft acquired when it bought Danish ERP vendor Navision in 2002. Microsoft has committed to support all of its ERP product families until at least 2013 and will migrate users over time to a new generation product based around Microsoft's .NET architecture.

Great Plains is now on version 8.0. It is a 32 bit Windows client/server product designed for companies turning over between £1m and £500m with anything from two to 500 users. A typical installation would be 12-15 users, and most are built around the financial modules - accounting and project accounting. Originally it was designed to run on the Btrieve database, but now runs on top of Microsoft SQL Server. In addition to Financials, Great Plains includes Project Accounting, Distribution and Field Services modules. This review looks at Financials.

MBS Great Plains has approximately 2,000 installations in the UK, supplied through its network of some 40 dealers, 10 of whom customise the product with add-on modules. Major UK users include Liverpool FC, South East Water, Royal National Institute for the Deaf, Central Telecom, Virgin Active and the Football Association.

### MBS Great Plains v8.0 at a glance

- **Rapidly maturing reporting** Dynamics has prospered within the Microsoft fold. Analytical Accounting addressed European users' concerns about the multi-segment nominal code structure. The software now exploits underlying Microsoft technologies such as SmartLists, FRx and SQL Server Analysis & Reporting Services.
- **Full open period accounting** As befits a modern software product, Great Plains offers full open period accounting, allowing you to post to current, prior and forward periods. You can also operate in different months for different ledgers.
- **Inflexible interface** With several fields displayed on data entry screens, GP can spread a transaction over two or three lines. Reading and entering data on screen could be awkward for occasional users, but Microsoft said customers were more interested in new functionality than getting a more customisable interface.

## Lab Test Score and Verdict

			POOR	FAIR	GOOD	VERY GOOD	EXCELLENT
<b>TRANSACTION PROCESSING</b>	1.1	OPEN PERIOD ACCOUNTING					
	1.2	DIRECT INVOICE ENTRY					
	2.1	NOMINAL LEDGER UPDATE					
	2.2	ERROR CORRECTION					
	3.1	PURCHASE ORDERS					
	3.2	NOMINAL JOURNALS					
<b>PAYMENTS</b>	4.1	CREDIT LEDGER ENQUIRY					
	4.2	RECEIPTS & CASH ALLOCATION					
	4.3	BATCH PAYMENTS					
	5.1	BANK RECONCILIATION					
<b>MANAGEMENT REPORTING</b>	7.1	GL CODING STRUCTURE					
	7.2	GL ENQUIRY/REPORTS					
	7.3	SMARTLISTS					
	7.4	REPORT WRITERS					

### Lab Test methodology

For each software Lab Test, David Carter works with a representative of the software developer to put a series of test transactions through the system. He then works through the application from data entry to payments, procurement, enquiry and reporting facilities. To back the scores awarded in each section in the chart above, the detailed checklist below highlights the features that influenced his conclusions.

Software never stands still. It is not possible for AccountingWEB to Lab Test every version of every product released into the market. But the Lab Tests are periodically updated to reflect new features, bug fixes and other changes that may alter the ratings awarded in the original Lab Test.

In this review the terms Nominal Ledger (NL) and General Ledger (GL) mean the same thing and are used interchangeably. The former term is British, the latter American. Similarly PL means Purchase Ledger (AP in US) and SL means Sales Ledger (AR in US).

## Lab Test Verdict

The introduction of Analytical Accounting in version 8 transformed Great Plains. Previously, the program's single multi-segment account code could result in unwieldy installations with thousands of codes. But now GP offers a highly sophisticated set of analysis tools. You can have any number of separate dimensions, each of which can be attached to a coding hierarchy. The result is that GP is now well equipped to handle the reporting requirements of major organisations.

With the integration of features in Microsoft SQL Server such as data cubes from Analysis Services and Reporting Services, Microsoft has made extra reporting functionality available to take advantage of GP's improved coding structure. These complement the excellent SmartLists facility. SmartLists give the user a window into the GL database, with the ability to select any of the records s/he needs, then switch the whole lot into Excel for analysis.

Any doubts about Great Plains revolve around transaction entry rather than around reporting. The main problem for me was the way the program spread one transaction over two or three lines on each screen, which I found it awkward and difficult to use. Obviously you get accustomed to it over time and Microsoft said that when polled, most users said they wanted new functionality rather than a new screen layout. Attitudes to user interfaces are subjective, after all, so make your own judgement during the demonstration.

### Highlights

- **Analytical Accounting** supports any number of separate dimensions, each of which can be attached to a coding hierarchy - enough to handle the reporting requirements of major organisations.
- **SmartLists** give the user a window into the GL database, with the ability to select any of the records s/he needs, then switch the whole lot into Excel for analysis.
- **FRx** Great Plains comes with a licence for Microsoft's FRx reporting tool that lets you extract balances from the Chart of Accounts and create reports around them.
- **Integration with SQL Server** Analysis Services and Reporting Services provide yet more reporting capabilities from within SQL Server, drawing on online analytical processing data cubes that support multidimensional analysis and reporting. Readymade templates in Great Plains can help you get started.

### Issues of concern

- **Interface** Because there are so many on data entry screens, GP will tend to spread one transaction over two or three lines as you enter transactions. Screen modifier allows you to amend the screens to some extent, but data entry could be awkward for non-accounting staff.
- **Transaction number sequences** GP assigns a one transaction number for payments and a voucher number for everything else. Not having separate numbers for invoices, credit notes etc can make auditing less easy.
- **Cash allocation and the manual bank reconciliation** These modules are adequate, but if they are very important to you, some other systems may offer more advanced features.

## MBS Great Plains - Lab Test verdict

### 1.1. System design: Accounting periods - VERY GOOD

- You can define up to 367 periods and set your own start and end dates
- Can post to current, prior and forward periods
- Can operate in different months for different ledgers.
- Full open period accounting

#### 1.1.1. System design: Transaction types - GOOD

- When you enter the Payables screen, GP asks you whether this transaction is an "Invoice, Financial charge, Miscellaneous charge, Return, Credit Note".
- But there are only two sequential series of numbers - one for payments and one for everything else which is called a voucher number. So GP won't give you one sequential series of invoice numbers, one sequential series of credit notes and so on, but simply one series covering the lot. This may make auditing less easy.
- Every transaction is automatically stamped with the date, time and user name.

### 1.2. Purchase invoice entry - GOOD

- Both batch and real-time entry available
- Good visual feedback - a red label means a field is mandatory, blue means you can drill down.
- Lookup facilities are good - you can choose which fields you want to look up on.
- Displays both dates - date on the document and date of entry. Excellent.
- Currency symbol of GBP was clear.
- Alerts you if the invoice number is already on this account.
- Due date is auto-calculated from the Payment terms. Various terms are supported.
- GP holds a VAT invoice total in the header record but doesn't break down VAT on a line by line basis. This might be a problem for some users.
- Analytical Accounting worked well. Analysing a cost to salesman Andy Palmer automatically analysed to his boss and the rest of the hierarchy. Excellent.
- Detail screens are presented as an Excel-like grid, which is common. However, because there are too many fields to fit across the one screen, they flow over into a second and even third row, so that to enter three GL transaction lines you have to fill in up to nine rows of data on the screen.
- This design is standard throughout GP. There is a "screen modifier" which allows you to modify the layout of a GP screen, but it is not simple drag and drop. During the demonstration I found the screens of GP difficult to read.

### 2.1. GL update/Audit trail - VERY GOOD

- You can use either batch update or "Post thru" directly to the ledgers.
- There was no obvious audit trail report, but in the end we used GP's SmartLists option, which displays a list of each transaction type on screen.
- Very easy to display all the transactions on screen, and drill down to the detail.

### 2.2. Error correction - GOOD

- You can automatically reverse a nominal journal.
- Purchase and sales invoices have to be voided, then a new one entered.
- No facility to create a credit note by auto-reversing the sales invoice.
- Analytical Accounting dimension fields can be amended - a key benefit.

### 3.1. Purchase orders - GOOD

- Purchase orders can be automatically sent to suppliers as email, in text or PDF.
- POP in GP is designed for a stock-based company, with lots of small fields.

- You can amend the screens to some extent, but data entry will be awkward for non-accounting staff.
- Needs an internet-like browser screen as a front-end to make it easier to use. [Since the Lab Test was undertaken, MBS introduced a web-based Business Portal to let users enter transactions and raise requisitions over the Internet and raise requisitions. They don't need a copy of GP on their machine to do so.]

### **3.2. General ledger journals - VERY GOOD**

- Quick Journal entry allows you to set up an "offset account" such as Petty Cash.
- You can save a regular journal, then later look up the list and re-use it.
- You can automatically apportion journal amounts
- You can also post an inter-company journal.

### **4.1. Credit ledger enquiry - GOOD**

- Shows aged balance, with unallocated cash separately totalled. Good
- Easy to see which payments paid an invoice.
- Easy to de-allocate a payment wrongly allocated.
- Screen layout with each transaction running over two screens is difficult to read.
- Original invoice amount is in top line while Amount Remaining is in the second.
- No ability to select from a list of available data fields, or to re-arrange layout.

### **4.2. Receipts and Cash allocation - GOOD**

- Can deposit bankings separately and allocate later, or do both at once. Good.
- Cash allocation is straightforward, but invoices extended over three lines.
- Mass allocate facility auto-applies an amount against the oldest invoices.
- No facility to auto-allocate a receipt against a monthly balance and pay off all the invoices.

### **4.3. Batch payments to suppliers - VERY GOOD**

- Payment Recommendations report allows you to choose your Due Date.
- You can choose to pay invoices in a specific currency.
- You can choose to include unallocated payments and credit notes in the report.
- you can choose only suppliers with a particular priority rating.
- Edit Payments option makes it easy to deselect invoices you don't want to pay.
- Creates a BACS output file to be sent to the bank.

### **5.1. Bank reconciliation - GOOD**

- Manual bank rec has limited facilities for matching transactions on screen. For example to find a cheque for £117.50, you have to scroll up and down to find it.
- You can tick a single total of the day's receipts. Good.
- But if one of the day's cheques has bounced you cannot expand the batch to see the individual transactions and untick it. You have to find it later in a new Enquiry and void it.
- GP does not capture the bank statement reference or the date of reconciliation. So it will not be possible to reprint the bank account in the same order as it is printed on the bank statements.
- No final bank reconciliation report showing the cashbook balance plus/minus unrepresented items and the final bank statement balance (but a report could be set up).
- Automatic Bank reconciliation lets you download electronic bank statements.
- Automatic routine splits the screen vertically into two; the left half shows the unreconciled items in the bank account, the right half imported transactions. GP will then automatically match the transactions. Neat.
- Many criteria for matching - cheque no, amount, reference, date and so on.

### 7. 1. GL structure: Analytical Accounting - EXCELLENT

- Analytic Accounting in version 8 vastly improves GP's reporting abilities
- Unlimited number of dimension codes.
- Type of dimension code can be pre-defined, for example, as a lookup, date or numeric, or Yes/No.
- A hierarchy can be attached to a dimension. Analysing a cost to the dimension analyses it to all the higher codes in the hierarchy. Excellent.
- The hierarchy can be defined and graphically displayed as a tree.

### 7.2. GL enquiry & standard reports - GOOD

- Drill down to GL accounts starts by displaying monthly totals, then transactions.
- In transaction enquiry, the Reference field doesn't show the narrative field. To see this you have to drill down farther to display the details of the source invoice.
- Around 250 standard reports have been created in GP's own report writer, each of which can be amended by the user.
- The quality of the reports is OK, but data layouts are rather spread out.
- Printing reports to Excel brings over all the formatting, which has to be removed.

### 7.3. Reporting: SmartLists - VERY GOOD

- SmartLists is an excellent add-in menu, a recent addition to GP.
- Transactions do not flow on to a second line - which makes them easy to read!
- Good data dictionary allows you to improve upon GP's own screens.
- Can save any View in Favourites and re-use it later.
- Export to Excel opens worksheet with column headings, but no formatting.

### 7.4. Management reporting - VERY GOOD

- Great Plains comes with a free single-user licence for the FRx reporting tool that allowing users to extract balances from the Chart of Accounts and create reports around them.
- The FRx layout is similar to Excel's Row and Column format and allows drill down from Current Assets to Debtors Control to an individual customer account.
- Can circulate FRx reports via email, or publish them on an Intranet.
- SQL Server Analysis Services module includes a set of pre-calculated financial analysis cubes. These can be used with the Excel Pivot Table Creator to make your own reports in Excel. Dynamic links mean you can double click on the number in Excel and drill down to detail transactions.
- SQL Server's Reporting Services module lets you design your own reports. GP comes with 10 readymade templates to get you started.

*David Carter, August 2005*

#### **What's next? Future developments planned for Great Plains (Microsoft Dynamics GP)**

The next release of Microsoft Great Plains, version 9 is due for release in quarter four of 2005. Under Microsoft's new branding, the product will be released as Microsoft Dynamics GP.

Existing and new Great Plains users can look forward to the following functionality within version 9:

- Role based home pages - a user can find all the information they need to do their job on one home page
- Web services integration
- SQL based business intelligence.