

SOFTWARE LAB TEST - TAS Books 3: Management Reporting

Product: TAS Books 3, Version 6.0

Released: July 2006

Reviewed: August 2006

The company

TAS Books was released in 1991 as a £99 package available by mail order and at one stage was claiming over 20% of the entry-level marketplace. But competing head to head with Sage was too much of a struggle for TAS and a few years ago the company sold out to Sage.

TAS therefore is now a part of the Sage stable of products. Unusually, rather than rebrand TAS in its own image Sage allowed it to retain its own identity.

The product

During the DOS days I installed TAS with a dozen or so organisations and they were all very happy with it. One of my oldest customers is a trade association turning over £2 million. They've had TAS since 1994, and in spite of numerous efforts by me to get them to buy something bigger, they are still perfectly happy running TAS.

Unlike many entry-level packages TAS doesn't try to hide the accounting element, but it is organized in such a way that everything makes sense. For me, anyway, TAS has always seemed to be very much the accountant's accounts package. It also makes a very satisfying product for any non-accountant who wants to learn about accounting and is willing to put the effort in.

TAS Books comes in 3 versions (for fuller details see www.tassoftware.co.uk):

TAS Books 1 - £109 (basic accounting)

TAS Books 2 - £349 (accounting and costing)

TAS Books 3 - £499 (accounting, costing and stock control)

This Lab Test assesses TAS Books 3 in the area of management reporting.

Management Reporting - Test Criteria

Every accounts package has to provide management reporting. But it is obviously unfair to demand the same features in a package costing £100 as in one costing £10,000. In addition, different users have different needs.

A good example of this is budgets. TAS doesn't have them! To some people this might be anathema, but in my experience small businesses rarely bother with budgets anyway. At this level the whole concept of a P&L with monthly and cumulative Actual vs Budget is an irrelevance. What users find much more useful is a P&L that shows actuals for the individual months so that they can see trends. This is what they get from TAS.

The point is that when it comes to management reporting what makes a package "good" is an even more subjective question than usual. So when reading this report please work out what you need yourself, rather than simply relying on the "Good", "Very Good", and "Fair" ratings in the test results.

With this in mind, this Lab test is broken down into three sections.

Section One, Data Structure, discusses how the data is organised, what fields are available for analysis etc. What is available here determines the potential of the package at reporting.

Section Two, Basic Reporting, discusses the basic requirements which should be available in any package, irrespective of price.

Section Three, Advanced Reporting, discusses features which would be required by a sophisticated accountant in a more expensive package, but are unnecessary in a smaller package. Again, this is necessarily subjective: for example, I would argue that an ODBC link from Excel to the data is an advanced feature, whereas for some people it would be basic.

DETAILED LAB TEST FINDINGS

1. DATA STRUCTURE

1.1. Dates and Periods - VERY GOOD

Some entry level packages are "date-driven", this date being the date which the user types in when entering the transaction on the computer. This can play havoc with reporting, as late invoices that are dated last month, but have been posted this month, disappear from the audit trail.

TAS however, gets it right: users can type in the date on the invoice, but the date that TAS takes note of is the Posting Date, which is pre-set when you start the session.

TAS also uses period numbers, and these are tied to the posting date. Period numbers make reporting much easier as you simply have to select numbers rather than a date range. TAS also is designed around a unified ledger. In other words, there is a single ledger file which holds all the transactions of whatever type.

To sum up, for reporting purposes TAS is easily the best designed of the entry-level packages. Its reports are always rock-solid and reconcile, and there are no missing transactions because someone has typed in the wrong date.

1.2. GL and Cost Analysis - GOOD

TAS's general ledger structure is fairly basic. The GL code is 10 digits made up of two segments, 7 digits for the GL code and 3 for a department code. A typical GL code in the default chart of accounts is 4625-100, ie GL code is 4625, Department is 100.

The problem with this multi-segment approach is that if you want to analyse costs by department or cost centre, you have to create a GL code for every GL code/department combination. Over the years this can result in a long, untidy chart of accounts with lots of dead GL codes.

TAS does allow you to attach a Tag Code to an invoice which effectively cross-references it to a job or cost centre. This is good as far as it goes, but is still fairly rudimentary in that you can only allocate a tag code to the transaction as a whole. So if you have an invoice containing costs that apply to more than one job, the invoice cannot be split among the two jobs.

What is really needed is the facility to attach Tag codes to EACH LINE of the invoice. This would greatly improve TAS's facilities for cost analysis.

To sum up then, TAS will allow you to create a P&L for the company, and to break down that P&L by department. But it is not really suitable for more detailed cost analysis.

2. BASIC REPORTING - STANDARD REPORTS

2.1. Audit Trails - VERY GOOD

- Audit trail printout for the month pulls in everything entered this month, even if the invoice is dated last month. Good.
- Ability to print report to screen, then drill down on a transaction to see the detail. Good.
- One handy feature, in the new version 6 TAS remembers which selection option you made last time and offers that as default
- Any report can be printed to disk, screen, file or as a PDF document. Good.

2.2. Aged Debtors Report - VERY GOOD

- Available as both Summary and detailed.
- Magnifying glass to drill down to see transaction detail. Excellent.
- No column for Unallocated Cash in Aged Debtors, but available as a separate report.
- Prints in alphabetical order. Would be nice to sort by size of debt descending, but OK.

2.3. Trial Balance - VERY GOOD

- Can choose to print a particular period or a range of periods
- Available columns are: This Period DR-This Period CR-YTD DR-YTD-CR. Good.
- Magnifying glass to drill down on any total to see underlying transactions. Excellent.
- Can choose to display TB of single department or whole company. Good.

2.4. P&L & Balance Sheet - VERY GOOD

- Can print P&L in 12 column formats showing month on month. Very good.
- Magnifying glass to drill down on any total to see underlying transactions. Excellent.
- No budgets are held in TAS, so P&L is actuals only. However, the Export Nominal Values facility allows you to export monthly totals into Excel and compare against budget there. OK.
- Rather fearsome looking Report Generator allows you to create "financial scripts" and design your own P&Ls and balance sheets. Clearly a product from pre-Windows days, but if it does the job - OK.

2.5. Supplier Net Purchases, etc - VERY GOOD

TAS has an Analysis menu option. Click on this and you are offered the facility to analyse everything - Nominals, Customers, Suppliers, Products, Salespersons, Marketing.

Choosing Suppliers-Supplier Group Analysis showed a single month on month figure for something called "Default Supplier Group". Putting the magnifying glass on the YTD total caused all the individual suppliers to appear with their month on month totals. Clicking down on any total takes you down to a transaction list, and you can drill down on that.

This is really excellent, but it is hidden away. I wonder how many users go beyond Default Supplier Group and find out what is here? Clearly, when users set up suppliers at installation time they don't notice the Supplier Group field and leave it empty. It would be best if the Analysis menu didn't rely on these Group fields.

Another small complaint: the window won't spread over the whole screen, so I could only see six months' worth of data. It should be possible to expand it over the whole 12 months.

2.6 Sales Analysis - VERY GOOD

For people who do sales order processing, the sales analysis features of TAS are quite remarkable. Once you realise there is something underneath Default Customer Group and Default Product Group, you can get on-screen lists of month on month sales of individual products and customers, with drill down to detailed invoice level. Excellent.

The Print Sales Analysis by Customer report shows totals of each product that a customer has bought over a period, plus the margin earned. Again, you can drill down onto any transaction line to see the source invoice.

Finally, TAS started out as a company that sold its products via direct marketing. Reflecting this, a separate Marketing menu helps you analyse the resulting sales from individual advertisements and sales campaigns, with customer lifetime value sales reports and so on.

BASIC REPORTING - EXPORT TO EXCEL

2.6. Export of GL account balances - VERY GOOD

- Export Nominal Values facility allows you to export monthly totals into Excel.
- Plenty of selection options at export time.
- TAS will automatically open up Excel for you with the data in. Simple. Good.

2.7 Export of GL transactions - EXCELLENT

Until last year it was only possible to export GL monthly balances into Excel. However in version 5 TAS introduced the facility to export an "Analysis-ready file" of GL transaction data into Excel. This is the basic GL transaction file enhanced with code descriptions, code groupings etc. Everything important seems to be included. Excellent.

2.8. Export of sales invoices - EXCELLENT

- Peculiarly enough, while GL transaction export has only become available recently, it has been possible to export sales invoice transactions details into Excel from TAS for a long time.
- Again, TAS provides an analysis-ready file of about 45 fields which contains the basic sales invoice transaction line, enhanced with additional information such as code descriptions and grouping codes. There are extensive Select options so you can bring over only what you want - details of just one customer, one product, etc. Again, excellent.

3. ADVANCED REPORTING FEATURES

As stated earlier, it is unfair to demand advanced reporting features from a package as cheap as TAS, and in fact TAS has very few to offer, being content to provide the basics rather than cater for the power-user.

There is no report writer in TAS, except the report generator that creates P&Ls and balance sheets. Nor are there any on-screen report writing facilities available,

Nor is there any facility to link Excel directly to the data via ODBC, except via the (expensive) Software Developer's Kit. However, I understand that one is available from third party company Infoplex, who specialise in providing add-ons for TAS.

LAB VERDICT on TAS Books 2, Management Reporting

At the basic level TAS really is pretty good and will be more than satisfactory for most users.

Standard reports are good, and the magnifying glass facility to drill down to transaction level is welcome. The Analysis menu provides a wealth or month on month reports, again with full drill down to individual level. My guess is, though, that the "default group" line stops users from appreciating their full potential.

On the sales analysis side, "basic" is the wrong word. TAS has gone to great lengths to analyse sales by customer, sales by product, sales by marketing campaign - this is highly sophisticated stuff and worthy of a much more expensive package.

Data export into Excel is very good, with the facility to export both balances and transactions in Excel. In the transaction export all the additional codes and groups have been added by TAS so there is no need for the user to make joins, dig around in data tables etc.

A limitation of TAS is that its basic GL structure means it is not capable of sophisticated cost analysis. This is a pity, since the rest of it is so good. If TAS were to incorporate a couple of Tag Code fields at transaction line level, TAS Books would become very attractive to users needing cost analysis.

To sum up, TAS Books does not aim to do a great deal beyond the basics, but what it does do, it does extremely well.

David Carter, August 2006