

AccountingWEB Software Lab Test - *dataflow* v6

Product: *dataflow*

Version: 6.005-3

Date released: 1998

Price: On application

Databases: Microsoft SQL Server; Borland SQL Interbase

Reviewed: June 2005

Introduction

Based in Staines, Middlesex *Dataflow* (UK) Limited has been designing and writing accounting software since 1984. *Dataflow* makes most of its sales direct to end users.

Released in 1998, *dataflow* is a Windows-based accounts product suitable for organisations with between one and 200 users, and turnover between £1m and £500m per annum. *dataflow* Lite is an entry-level version comprising the core set of ledgers and Cashbook. It runs on Borland SQL Interbase for up to six users and up to 10 users on Microsoft SQL Server; the *dataflow* Enterprise version can support up to 10 users on Borland SQL Interbase, and up to 200 users on SQL Server.

Apart from the core set of ledgers and cashbook, there are distribution modules comprising stock, bills of materials, plus sales and purchase order processing. Because customisation is one of *Dataflow*'s strengths, the company has been able to develop a number of specialist applications around the core product such as such as contract costing, property management, education admin, and waste collection management.

Among major users of *dataflow* are Grundon Waste Management, which posts approximately 12,000 invoices per month, the British Heart Foundation, Church House Trust and the British Computer Society.

dataflow v6 at a glance

- **Open period accounting** *dataflow* allows you to post to current, prior and forward periods. You can create adjustments to prior periods in Nominal Ledger and Cashbook, and *dataflow* automatically recalculates all period end balances. The system will even automatically reverse the original entry and save the change into the audit trail.
- **Easy customisation** As well as the ability to change existing screens, new input fields can be added to the database and "dropped" into the screen. Once this is done, any new fields become available throughout the product, for instance within the raw data access tables for reporting. Whenever an upgrade is made to the product, *Dataflow* guarantees that modifications will be automatically reapplied when a new release becomes available.
- **Cost analysis and management reporting** GL structure is excellent, allowing for flexible reporting. *dataflow* makes use of cost centre hierarchies, a feature normally only found in much more expensive packages.

LAB TEST SCORE AND VERDICT *dataflow v6*

		POOR	FAIR	GOOD	VERY GOOD	EXCELLENT
TRANSACTION PROCESSING	1.1 OPEN PERIOD ACCOUNTING					
	2.1 G L UPDATE					
	2.2 ERROR CORRECTION					
	3.1 REQUISITIONS AND ORDERS	Not tested				
	3.2 NOMINAL JOURNALS					
PAYMENTS	4.1 CREDIT LEDGER ENQUIRY					
	4.2 RECEIPTS & CASH ALLOCATION					
	4.3 BATCH PAYMENTS					
	4.4 BANK RECONCILIATION					
MANAGEMENT REPORTING	5.1 MULTICURRENCY					
	6.1 EASE OF USE RATING					
	7.1 GL CODING STRUCTURE					
	7.2 MANAGEMENT REPORTING					

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).

dataflow v6 - Lab Test verdict

dataflow is a very sophisticated piece of software. Out of 12 categories assessed, the software achieved Very Good or Excellent ratings in 10 areas. Though not as widely known as many programs sold through resellers, *dataflow* is equal to the national brands. Dealing with the people who write the software means users benefit from good quality support and are better able to undertake customisations to the code.

Highlights

- **Genuinely multi-company** Unlike most products in this price category, *dataflow* holds all companies within the one database, making inter-company postings and consolidated group reporting very straightforward.
- **Form Designer** makes it very easy to create extra fields within the system. New fields created go automatically into the raw data access tables for reporting.
- **Raw Data Access** In Print Preview, *dataflow* allows you to see all the available fields in the raw data record beneath. Simply choose the extra field you want then copy the whole lot into Excel.
- **Cost centre hierarchies** Entering the base cost centre in the Nominal ledger will pull in the additional analysis codes higher up the tree. If Tom Smith works for June Watkins who works for Peter Jones, entering Tom Smith's cost centre code pull automatically pulls in their codes too.

Issues of concern

- **Boring interface** This is probably the only obvious defect of the software, which is heavy on the battleship grey. *dataflow* would benefit from a Windows XP facelift.
- **Freezing batch payments** Once a payments list has been created, *dataflow* doesn't freeze it, which means changes can take place before the authorised list is returned. Normal practice is to freeze the list immediately it is printed.
- **Print Daybook Listing** can be printed to produce an audit trail for a range either of Transaction dates or of Posting dates. Good, but the inability to print the Narrative field made the report fairly meaningless. However Dataflow says it can easily be added via the form designer tool. Check it out for yourself during your own demo.
- **Analyzer** module allows users to create their own reports, but is a bit old fashioned.

Lab Test Feature Checklist

1.1. System design: Open period accounting - VERY GOOD

- You can set up your own periods with your own period end dates and post to current, prior and forward periods.
- In Nominal Ledger and Cashbook, you can create Adjustments to prior periods and *dataflow* automatically recalculates all period end balances.
- Good old-fashioned "Control Totals Summary" showing Opening balance + Postings = Closing Balance.
- Each transaction type has its own unique number and a batch number.
- You can create a unique sequential series for a transaction type (sales and purchase invoices only). Credit notes don't have their own series: they are included in the sales invoice series.

2.1. Approval and GL update - GOOD

- There is no separate "update" procedure in *dataflow*. As soon as a transaction is entered it is updated immediately to the GL, VAT account and supplier ledger.
- You can set an invoice as being "held" or "to be approved". The ledgers are still updated, but it is not possible to allocate or pay that invoice until it has been approved.
- Unapproved invoices go into an approval table, which can be displayed as a list. The invoices on the list can be amended ("redistributed") any time.
- Audit Trail - Print Daybook Listing can be printed for a range either of Transaction dates or of Posting dates. Good, but the inability to show the Narrative field is a drawback.

• 2.2. Error correction - VERY GOOD

- You can modify any transaction after posting, even if the period is closed. The system automatically recalculates the period end balances.
- Once you've made the change, the system automatically reverses the original entry, and makes a new batch for the audit trail.
- To create a credit note, you highlight the faulty invoice in an enquiry screen, then drag and drop it into the invoice entry window; *dataflow* automatically creates the credit note. Very neat.
- For each GL code or supplier the record is identified by an internal account code as well as the one created by the user. So it is possible to give an account a new account code and bring over all the transactions to the new account code.

3.1 Requisitions and orders

Not covered in this Lab Test.

3.2 GL journals - VERY GOOD

- Nominal Ledger module for Journals; Cashbook module where one side is Petty Cash or Bank.
- Has a VAT Journal that captures VAT for the VAT return.
- Very flexible set of options for recurring journals.
- Auto-apportionment over multiple cost centres.
- Inter-company processing journals are excellent. *dataflow* is a genuine multi-company package since all the companies are held within the single database. This makes it easy to have Company A on one side of the journal, and Company B on the other.

4.1 Credit ledger enquiry - VERY GOOD

- Easy to rearrange the columns to show the important fields to the left of the screen.
- Searching was good - for example to find and display only the Cash Payment transactions in the ledger.
- Easy to view invoices allocated against a payment; easy to de-allocate and re-allocate.

- Ledger includes all transactions including unapproveds. Good.
- You can put an item on to Query, and print the Query Log of all items any time.
- Lots of information held for credit control. You can list customer letters, plus lots of history relating to the account: date sent to manager, date resolved and so on.
- However, you cannot put in a "Next Action" date to create a future To Do list.

4.2 Receipts and cash allocation - VERY GOOD

- Can bank an amount, then allocate separately.
- Easy to allocate cash - present a list of invoices to allocate against.
- Has a Searchlight which identifies unallocated cash or credit notes. Helps to keep a tidy ledger.
- Good automatic Cash Receipts feature.
- System lists the day's cheques received - go in and choose accounts that have money for today.
- System can filter dates "up to" for the invoices, then calculate total due for each customer. Then check list of bankings against list of customer balances. If they agree, tick and all invoices are allocated. If they don't, expand to Detail and untick or change amounts.
- Direct debit facility - if you have customers paying by direct debit (for example club or society members) you can generate a BACS file for automatic collection.

4.3 Batch payments to suppliers - GOOD

- Can create payment runs for suppliers by group or account type.
- Screen presents list of all items due for payment. But some accounts have a red blob indicating they have unallocated credit notes or cash which need tidying up first. Good.
- For BACS output, *dataflow* includes most formats as standard: Hexagon, HOBS, NatWest, Barclays and so on. With many packages this is a chargeable extra.
- Point to check: Once a payments list has been created, *dataflow* doesn't freeze it. So when the list comes back authorised a few days later, things may have changed. Normal practice is to freeze the list immediately it is printed.

4.4 Bank reconciliation - VERY GOOD

- Groups receipts by banking reference. You can then tick the whole lot for one day.
- Good filtering options to find individual cheques.
- Procedure for reversing bounced cheques.
- Option to re-print the bank account in bank statement order is almost there but doesn't quite work. After processing a statement page you type in the Reconciliation Reference and Date against the Bank. It would be better to type it in at the beginning with the statement balance, then *dataflow* could automatically re-print the bank statement page.
- Bank reconciliation is manual only. No automatic bank rec.

5.1 Multicurrency - VERY GOOD

- Software holds values in the original currency plus an unlimited number of other base currencies.
- You can have mixed currencies within the one account.
- Can pay a dollar invoice in yen.
- Clear identification of currencies in mixed currency accounts.
- Can produce separate aged balances and statements for each currency.
- You can set a new rate and revalue - *dataflow* will automatically calculate an exchange rate gain/loss journal.
- Reports can be printed in your chosen base currencies.

6.1 Ease of use - VERY GOOD

- Clear screens. Easy lookups. No real problems.
- However, *dataflow* looks grey and drab compared to the competition. It urgently needs a Windows XP facelift.
- Importing invoices from a separate front-end system seemed very easy. You map the fields to each other on screen. You can map at line level, not just the header - for example with stock codes.
- Customisation was equally easy. The Form Designer was used to create extra fields called "warranty data", which were positioned within a new tab on the customer record. Very easy to do, and any field created goes automatically into the raw data access tables for reporting. Good.

7.1 GL account code structure - EXCELLENT

- Main code up to 20 digits plus a further three analysis group fields.
- Can edit your nominal codes in list mode in Excel, then import them back into *dataflow*.
- Each account record has its own internal code number, so you can easily change GL codes and existing transactions go to the new code.
- For management accounting *dataflow* supplies cost centres. A cost centre can be specific to one account or a ledger, or a group - for example applicable to P&L transactions but not to balance sheet.
- Each cost centre can be at the root of a cost centre hierarchy. Entering the base cost centre will pull in the additional analysis codes higher up the tree. If Tom Smith works for June Watkins who works for Peter Jones, entering Tom Smith's cost centre code pull automatically pull in their codes too. This is a feature usually only found in systems costing £50,000 or more. Excellent.

7.2 Management reporting - VERY GOOD

- The Report Messenger contains a library of numerous pre-canned reports.
- Choose the report you want; press a button to see the report on screen; and press another button to send the report into Excel if you wish. Very nice.
- For the power user, *dataflow* offers "raw data access". For the Cost Centre Transaction detail report, raw data access lets you see all the fields in the report - about 70 of them. You can choose the fields you want to include and save this version as your master report for exporting transactions to Excel. Excellent.
- All reports can be printed for an individual company, or consolidated for a group of companies (because all companies are in the one database).
- Analyzer module lets power users create their own management report from scratch. Dataflow has mapped its data to the Analyzer. Unfortunately Analyzer is a fairly old fashioned report writer. It's not WYSIWYG and you have to go through lots of steps in order to produce the final report. Analyzer does the job, but if *dataflow* offered an Excel-based report tool such as XLCubed, this could become an exciting feature.

David Carter

editor@accountingweb.co.uk

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Software Author's Response

We're very pleased that we've had a good report on our product. Although it's very difficult to get to know the system fully in such a short space of time, David Carter has managed to achieve a very good grasp of the underlying ability of our product.

David has marked *dataflow's* Batch Payment (4.2) capability down because he noted it does not freeze the payments list when it is created. However, the option exists to withhold a payment or a supplier account from payment and this status is maintained until the batch update is performed. If the batch is discarded before the payments list is approved, the withheld status is retained the next time the payment routine is opened.

David also complained about the inability to show the Narrative field in a standard audit trail report (2.1). We will amend the standard report in our next release to make David happy, but the narrative field is always available and can be added to the report via the form designer tool, which is a standard feature in *dataflow*.

This reporting flexibility highlights *dataflow's* customisation ability, which we feel is one of our strongest features. All modifications are automatically reapplied when a new release becomes available so the user is never stuck with the same version should they decide to create a tailored system to suit their organisation.

What's next? Future developments planned for *dataflow*

Scanning of documents - will give users the ability to attachment multiple documents to transactions and accounts.

Look and feel of product - having taken on board David Carter's point about "battleship grey", we are planning a Windows XP facelift.

Automatic bank reconciliation - Development in the pipeline.

***dataflow* Gateway** - Dataflow is looking at developing n-tier *dataflow* server architecture to allow client connectivity using the Internet and XML messages.

Dariusz Mogtader
Managing director, Dataflow Ltd
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