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For Client-Centered Professionals Who Want to Cut Paperwork, Overhead and Wasted Hours

Cabinet NG

by Joel P. Bruckenstein

A few months ago, Dave Leszcynski, who had read our book, contacted Dave and I about a document management system called Cabinet NG (www.cabinetng.com). We're glad he did! I've had the opportunity to play around with Cabinet NG for a short time, and so far I'm very impressed. With Cabinet NG, a firm can file and manage all of its documents and images in one place; in fact, it is often possible to actually create documents from right within the program. In addition, the program makes it easy to share information among employees and expedite work-flows, while controlling and auditing the process every step of the way. As an added bonus, Cabinet NG can be configured to perform some light CRM duties.

The single thing that impressed me most about Cabinet NG is that, for a robust system, it is relatively user-friendly. The convention the program uses for organizing data is a bit more intuitive than some competing systems. There are three levels of virtual filing which mimic the "real" world. There are cabinets, folders, and individual documents within the folders. Because the filing conventions mirror those of the paper world, they are easier to grasp.

Set-up

Without going into all of the details, I'll highlight a few of the chores that must be addressed before a firm can deploy the system.

Permissions

Cabinet NG offers three levels of administrative privileges: local, cabinet, and system. The local administrator has administrative rights for the local drive on the computer; the cabinet administrator has administrative rights over an individual cabinet, regardless of where it resides; and the system administrator has rights over the whole system.

Cabinet administrators can add, edit and delete cabinets. They can create indexes and filing groups. They can copy a cabinet, thereby transferring the structure of an existing cabinet to a new cabinet without having to re-create everything from scratch. They can also designate users and

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assign rights to those users.

Users can be organized into groups for easier administration. For example, if you only want back-office staff to have “read-only” access to a cabinet, you can create a group called “back office” and assign all of them read-only access instead of assigning permissions individually.

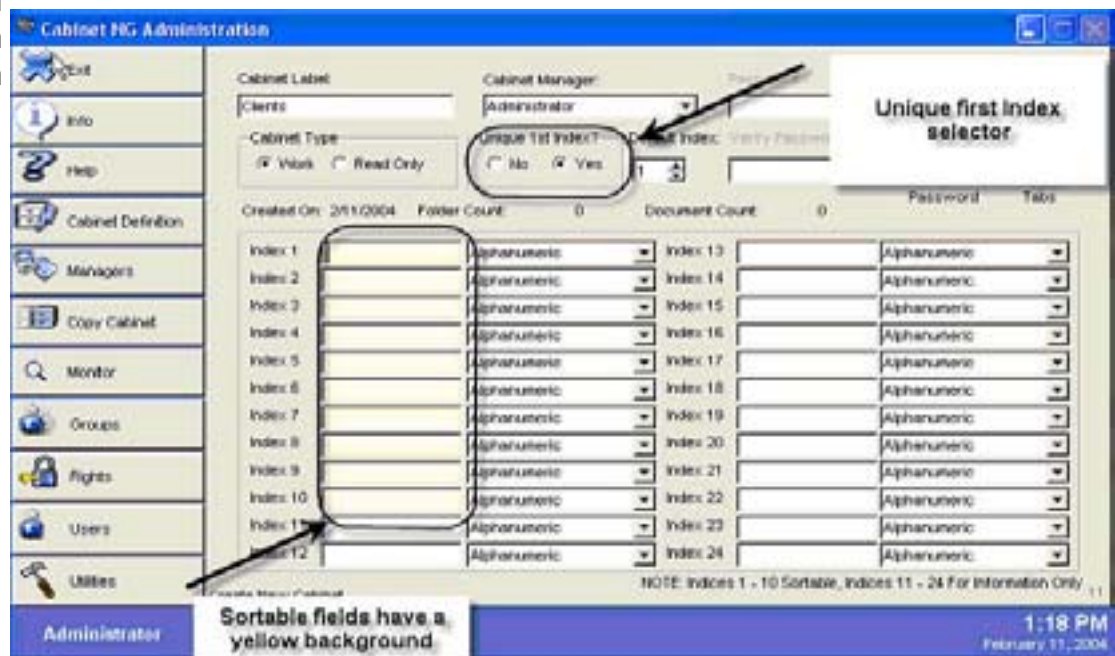
Various levels of permissions can be granted at both the folder and/or the individual document level. Permissions are as follows: None (no access), View (read-only access), Work (read- and edit-only access), Create (read, edit and create new), Delete (read, edit, create new and delete), and Lock (complete access plus the ability to lock a document or folder).

Sensitivity Classes are another way of limiting access. Sensitivity classes can be applied to documents or folders. Sensitivity classes might be useful when you want to control documents or folders by department or task. They allow you to set up additional access levels at both the document and folder level. For example, you might not want you firm’s corporate financials to be available to anyone except the accounting department and the partners. You could easily create a sensitivity class called “Corporate Financials” and allow access to only the accounting department and the firm’s partners.

Indexes

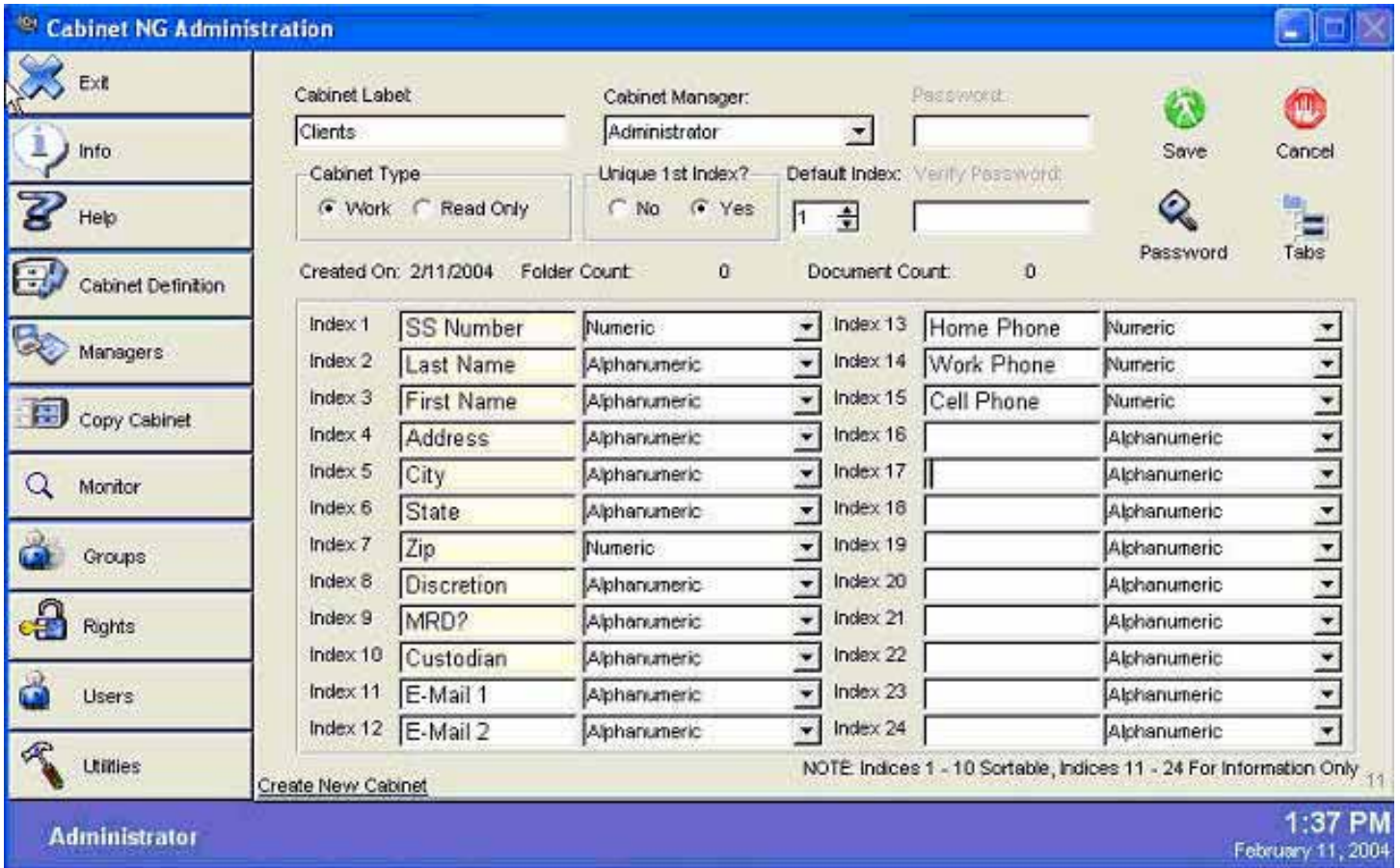
Probably the most important task an advisor must perform on any document management system, including Cabinet NG, is the creation of indexes. Indexes are the tool you will use to find the things you have filed. Cabinet NG provides 24 totally customizable indexes per cabinet, the first ten of which (clearly marked with yellow fields) can be sorted at the main cabinet screen.

When setting up a cabinet, the user can create a rule which requires that the first index be unique. This is particularly useful when creating a cabinet for clients, for example, because it assures that each client will have a distinct identifier (customer number, account number or Social Security number, for example).



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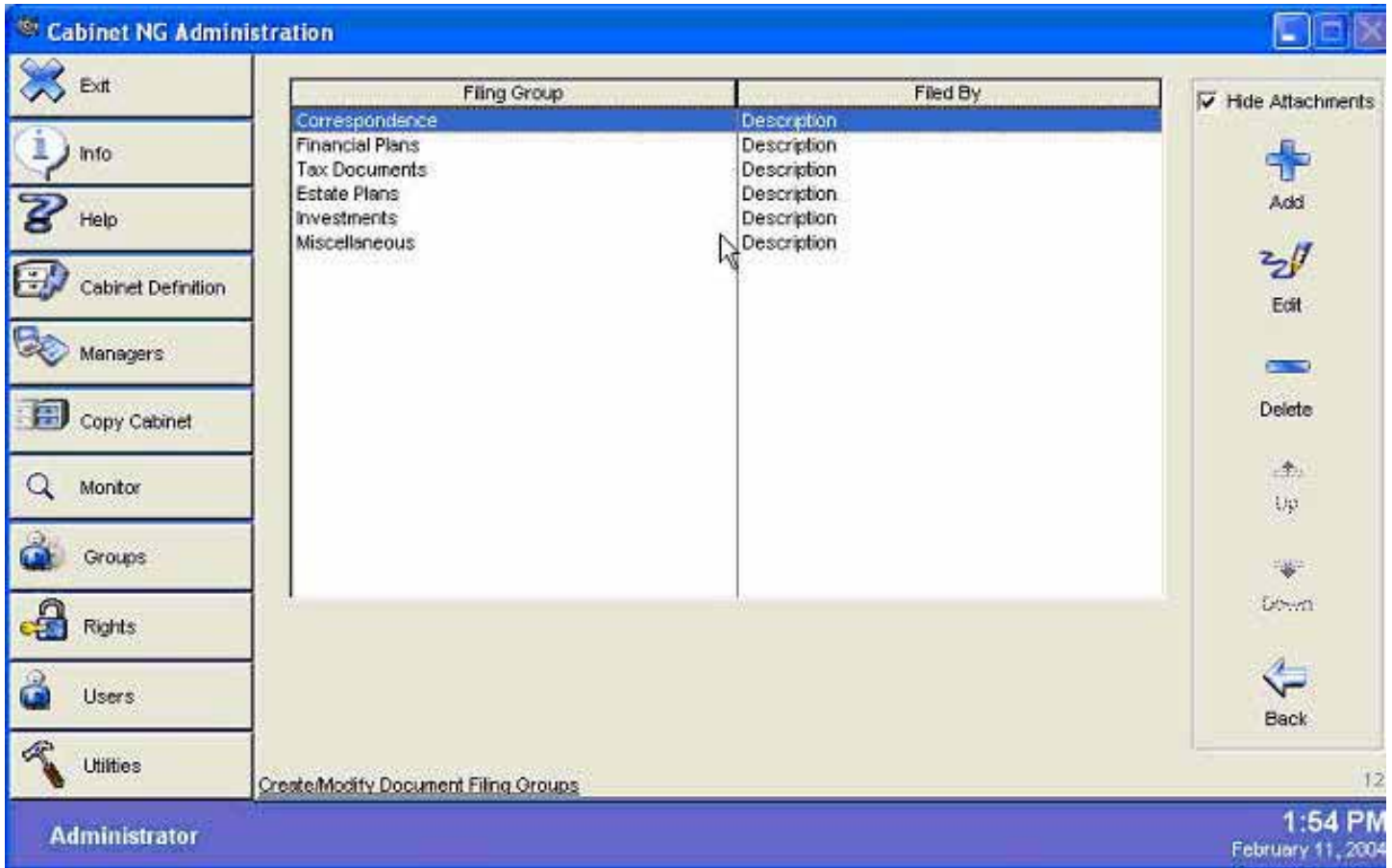
Figure 1, pictured above, is a blank index screen for a Cabinet that I have labeled “Clients.” In this case, I have decided that I want a unique identifier for each folder (each client) and I will use the Social Security number as that identifier. Illustrated below, in Figure 2, are the indexes that I have decided to use for this particular cabinet. In this example, I’ve chosen to group all of my clients in one folder, however, if I wished, I could have set up a separate cabinet for comprehensive financial planning clients and another one for investment management-only clients.



Notice that I have populated indexes 1-10 with identifiers that I might later want to search by. Some, like last name, are pretty obvious. Others, like custodian, MRD? (is the client taking distributions from an IRA or qualified plan), and discretion (is the account discretionary or non-discretionary) may be less obvious. In any event, these are the criteria I will sort by in the future. Each firm must set criteria that are meaningful to it.

Next, I will set up some filing tabs, or sub-folders, within the client folders. In Figure 3, I’ve set up the following filing tabs: Correspondence, Financial Plans, Tax Documents, Estate Plans, Investments, and Miscellaneous.

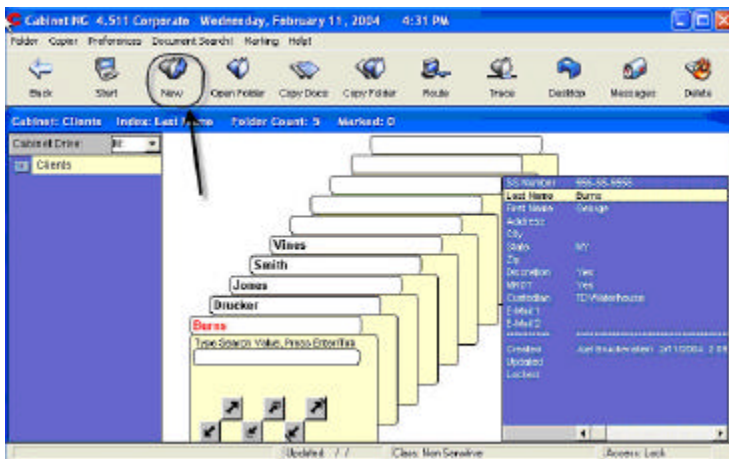
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Now that I have completed my basic administrative chores, I'll exit the administration module, and log in as a user.

Using the System

After logging on to the system as a user, new folders can be created by clicking on the "New" (Create a new folder) button (figure 4).



Up pops the Folder Indexes screen where values are entered for the indexes I created earlier (Figure 5)

After I entered some sample data for five client folders, my desktop looked like Figure 4. Notice that the blue bar right below the buttons provides me with important information including the name of the cabinet (clients), the index currently in use (last

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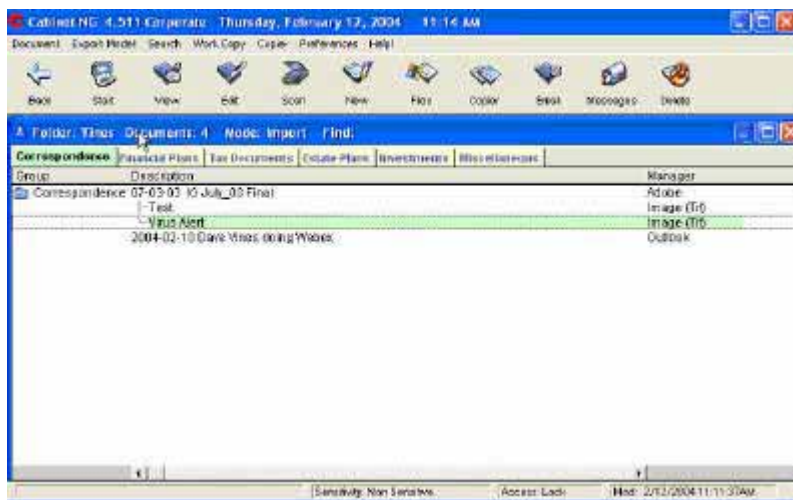
name), the folder count (5) and the number of folders marked (0). Right below that, we can see a visual representation of each folder. The last name of the client folder currently selected, Burns, appears in red.



To the right of the folders, on a blue background, are all the of the index fields for the selected client. The current index is highlighted in yellow. Let's say that I want to search for all clients with assets custodied at TD Waterhouse. I would simply highlight the custodian index in the blue box, and type "TD Waterhouse" into the search field. The folders would resort alphabetically by custodian, and the first folder with TD Waterhouse as custodian would be listed in red.

This simple, easily accessible search capability is a nice usability touch, but it does have its limitations. It can only search the first 10 indexes, and it can only sort by an individual index (last name, for example). For more complex searches, the "Document Search!" menu (above the New button in Figure 4) is used. "Document Search" brings up a screen, which allows users to conduct multiple keyword searches or full text searches. As an alternative, I can click in the "marking" menu in Figure 4, select "Mark for Query", and search by any of the 24 indexes. For each match found, a little red X will appear next to the folders containing a match.

Now, let's open the "Vines" folder pictured in Figure 4 to introduce you to some of Cabinet NG's other functions. The open folder is illustrated in Figure 6 below.



There are a number of different methods of moving documents into Cabinet NG. The "New" button allows users to create certain types of documents, for example MS Office files and Adobe files, right from within Cabinet NG. This requires an initial set-up procedure that we will not cover in this article. Another method of getting things into the program is to move them or copy them by clicking on the "Files" button. I can then select a file type and a location on my hard drive, like the "Vines" client folder on my C drive, and I can move or copy up to 100 files at a time into

the Cabinet NG folder.

In this case, I've inserted a few items into Mr. Vines' folder under the correspondence tab, highlighted in green, which I set up earlier. Next to the correspondence tabs are the other tabs I

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created.

The first document moved in was an Adobe file labeled "Correspondence 07-03-03 IOJuly_03 Final". Notice that there are two TIF files that branch off below that file. The reason for the branch is to indicate that the two TIF images, labeled "Test" and "Virus Alert" are "electronically stapled" to the original file.

If I were working in a larger firm, I would have created "naming templates". Naming templates "force" users to file certain documents according to conventions, so that there is uniformity. For example, I can require that all correspondence be filed by date, time, and subject. Financial Plans might be filed by date, time, author, type, status. Naming templates are totally customizable. Cabinet NG can pre-fill certain information (date, time, for example), and prompt the user to supply certain other fields.

The e-mail button allows users to copy or move e-mail correspondence from MS Outlook into Cabinet NG, a notable feature for compliance purposes. As with other files, users can chose to leave a copy in Outlook, or they can move e-mails to Cabinet NG and delete the file within MS Outlook. I'm told that Cabinet NG can be set up to automatically grab all correspondence and move it to Cabinet NG, but I did not test that feature. If it does work as promised, however, it could be a great compliance tool for many readers.

If you are forced to deal with old fashioned paper instead of a digital file, you can scan it into the system. Right now, Cabinet NG only works with TWAIN drivers, but I'm told that the next release may support ISIS drivers as well.

There's also a "Copier" button, which controls Cabinet NG's internal copying system. This function allows you to copy documents from one Cabinet NG location to another. This function can copy single items or multiple items.

Lite CRM

If you set up your indexes correctly, Cabinet NG can perform some "lite" CRM functions. Odds are that you will populate some of the indexes with contact information, so it will be readily available as you work within the program, and we've already demonstrated how you can sort by some useful criteria. Here's another way it can be used: If you set up an index called "follow up date, you can create a searchable to-do list. Let's say that you talk to five prospects today, and you want make a follow up call to them on 2004-12-03. In each folder, you will enter 2004-12-03 in the "follow-up" field. On the designated date, you would run a search of the field for all instances of 2004-12-04, and a red x would appear next to the file of each person you needed to call.

Some of Cabinet NG's Other Tricks

Cabinet NG offers total control over your documents. You can set permissions, lock down documents or folders, copy, etc. It also provides a complete audit trail. The program offers

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numerous other useful features as well.

Users can “check out” folders, and route them to others, so work flows can be managed and documented. When folders are routed to others, written comments, and even audio remarks, can be sent along with the folder. The system will either store the attached comments as part of the permanent record, or not, at the user’s discretion.

Cabinet NG includes its own internal messaging system. Users can send and receive both written and audio messages. A bulletin board system is included as part of the messaging system. The bulletin board can be used to circulate internal memos and document internal actions. For example if there is a corporate policy change, a folder containing notice of the change can be circulated by way of the bulletin board. Each member of the staff will receive a copy of the folder in his or her inbox. They will be required to read the contents of the folder, sign off on it, and return it. The author of the notice now has acknowledgement that all staff have seen and signed off on the policy change, and it becomes a part of the permanent corporate record.

A forms module is available at an additional cost. Essentially, this module is an enhanced, customized version of ScanSoft’s OmniForm package. This module not only facilitates the creation of forms, it also allows users to “pull” information either from Cabinet NG or an external database to automatically populate forms. Rule based forms can be created too (if certain fields are completed, for example, automatically lock this form).

Advantages

As I stated earlier, usability is probably Cabinet NG’s greatest strength. This is a complex piece of software, and I do not want to mislead anyone into thinking that they can master it in a day, but the interface and the conventions used by the program are more intuitive, in my opinion, than they are in other competing products. The cabinet, folder, document structure is easy to understand, and it is displayed well graphically through the interface. Establishing a filing structure is pretty painless for an industrial strength product such as this, as is moving documents into the system. On balance, I’d say that getting an office up and running, performing basic tasks, should not be all that difficult; however, it may take a while to fully master all of the program’s capabilities.

The level of customization, auditing features, folder routing, abilities and the messaging system are also pluses. The management of work flows within the office can be greatly enhanced by a product such as this, and the work flow management can be expanded to include Virtual Work Partners and others through the use of a virtual private network (VPN).

The service I received was top notch. Cabinet NG support staff set up a WebEx connection and actually assisted me during the installation process in real time. My installation was a little bit tricky, because I was trying to simulate a peer to peer network on a single computer, so there were a few minor hiccups, but overall the installation process was painless. The company knew I was working on a review, so my experience may or may not be typical, but they told me that all new clients are handled in a similar manner.

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Disadvantages

While there's a lot to like here, the system is not perfect. The program includes a 400 page manual, with numerous graphics. I had high hopes for this volume, but I was disappointed. Definitions of terms are often vague to useless. Explanations of terms and features, with examples of how to use them would have been a big help. Unfortunately, these were lacking. Some industry specific examples would be a big plus. In a similar vein, I found the Help screens to be of uneven quality.

Based on my interactions with the firm, they are capable of explaining things very well over the phone; it is troubling to see that they cannot document their wealth of knowledge in writing. Apparently, the company is aware of their shortcomings in this area. Hopefully, they will be addressing them soon.

Cabinet NG can perform full text searches on digital text files. It does not include OCR software. If you are already in a near paperless environment, or hope to be there soon, this omission will probably go unnoticed. If you are planning to scan loads of documents into the system, and some of those documents are not easily classified, you may want to purchase an OCR package so that you can convert some image files to text before adding them to Cabinet NG.

Scanned documents can be saved in numerous image formats, including TIF, and industry standard, but the inability to scan to Adobe PDF format was a bit of a surprise. Upon further investigation, I discovered that there is a work around for those users who have a Full version of Adobe Acrobat (or some other program capable of producing PDF files). The work around entails using the "New" button instead of the "Scan" button, in effect using the Adobe scanning interface as opposed to the TWAIN driver. According to a company spokesperson, PDF scanning through the "Scan" button is coming soon.

The user interface, while friendly and functional, could use an update. While many older MS Windows conventions are supported (like keyboard shortcuts), newer ones, like right-click functionality are used sparingly. In another throwback, some screens require you to hit a "back" or "exit" button to navigate out of them. Sometimes you cannot just close a screen and move on.

Aside from the manual's shortcomings, which are partially offset by the excellent live support I received, I'd rate all of the shortcomings as rather minor.

Pricing

Cabinet NG retails for \$995 per which includes the one year of free automatic updates. After the first year, the optional automatic update program costs \$200 per year per user. An optional, yearly tech support service agreement, covering up to 5 users, costs \$350, \$550 for 6-10 users; the alternative is to pay for tech support on a per call basis. Concurrent user pricing plans, as well as volume pricing information is available upon request.

For the 60 days following the publication of this article, Cabinet NG is offering a 10% discount to

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Virtual Office News subscribers. In order to obtain the discount, you must inform Cabinet NG that you are a VON subscriber! Inquiries should be directed to David Vines. 1-800-621-6501 X113 or 1-256-230-9627 X113. E-mail: dvines@cabinetng.com or on the web at: <http://www.cabinetng.com>

The Verdict

Cabinet NG is a powerful program with a great feature set. It is not the cheapest software package on the market, but we believe it to be an excellent value given its capabilities. Unlike some vendors of corporate systems we've come across in the past, Cabinet NG's support policies are fair and flexible.

For a program of this type, it is easier than average to learn and use effectively. In spite of the rather poor documentation, I feel confident that, with the help of the Cabinet NG staff, readers will be able to configure the software and raise their employees to a basic level of competency in a short period of time. Due to time constraints, and the limitations of the virtual network environment I constructed to test drive the program, I was not able to test each and every function as thoroughly as I would have liked, however, whatever I did test worked well.

Cabinet NG appears to be best suited for offices of five or more employees, since they will benefit most from the work-flow and communications features, but it is equally well suited for those dealing with off site employees and/or virtual work partners. Small firms may end up paying for some features that they cannot take full advantage of, however, if the core document imaging and management system works for you, and you find it intuitive, I would not hesitate to purchase it for even the smallest office.

As regular readers of Virtual Office News are well aware, Dave and I have a strong preference for intuitive user interfaces, because no matter how capable a program is, it is worthless if you and your employees can't figure out how to use it. Based on this criterion alone, we feel confident adding Cabinet NG to our short list of recommended document management and imaging systems.

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