

The Institute of Certified Bookkeepers

Institute of Certified Bookkeepers Software Review

Conducted by Lara Manton MICB

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comma

About you

Lara Manton MICB has been an ICB member for 11 years & runs LJM Bookkeeping Ltd. Specialising in Xero and associated systems, the company's core aim is to offer clients Accuracy, Continuity and Efficiency within their bookkeeping & financial admin processes. These are achieved using all the tools & tech available to bookkeepers & their clients. Multi-award nominated, including nominated for Xero Sole Practitioner of the Year 2020 and 2021 and winner of ICB Small Practice of the Year 2021.

Company Background

Comma was founded in 2019 by Tom Beckenham after realising that small businesses were missing out on the systems and banking facilities that were available to big corporations. Close to £1 trillion a year is transferred through the banking systems by and on behalf of small businesses and a lot of that is done manually by copying and pasting information, so Tom was looking for a way to improve those processes. The offices are based in London and in 2021 they raised \$6m via a seed funding. The team is growing in both operations and support and users have already processed over £10m of payments to over 10,000 suppliers. Comma is fully FCA Compliant and has been nominated for Emerging App of the Year at the 2022 Xero awards taking place later in April 2022.

The Product

Comma is an open banking platform. In its simplest form it is a link between your accounting system and the business' bank account. It works with most accounting platforms and a significant number of banks (the notable exception being Metro bank as it doesn't use Open Banking yet).

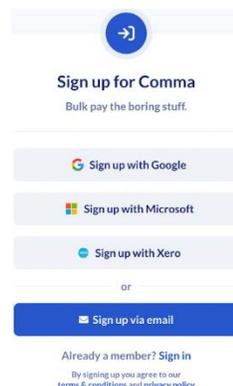
The idea behind it is that for small businesses the process of paying suppliers and employees has not really progressed in the same way that other business processes have. It is still highly time consuming and manual, for something that is one of the most important back-office operations. For any business using an accounting platform, the majority of the key information is stored within that, the supplier details, amounts, references etc., but in order to pay that supplier all that data needs to be rekeyed into the bank. Comma looks to take the benefits of the cloud-based accounting systems and implement the same improvements into paying suppliers and employees.

Signing up

It is very easy to sign up to Comma. There are no fees up front, and you have 4 options for creating an account, including using Google or Xero logins, to reduce the number of passwords you need.

Setting up a client

To set up the client, it is a 5 click process, choose the 'add new company button' and then choose their accounting software. If the software they use isn't one of the 15 currently supported platforms, at the bottom of the list is a button to email the integrations team to request it be added. Then you will need to connect to the accounting software in the same way that you do for most apps for Comma to start pulling through information. Comma will ask you to confirm what you want the company name to be showing as.



Within approximately 5 minutes (it depends on how many suppliers are in the system) all suppliers and the current purchase ledger will be visible in the system.

Link to accounting software

Synchronise payments made with Comma.

- Xero
- QuickBooks Online
- FreeAgent
- Sage 50 (UK)
- KashFlow
- Clear Books
- Exact (UK)
- Sage Business Cloud Accounting
- FreshBooks
- QuickBooks Desktop
- MYOB Essentials
- MYOB AccountRight and Essentials
- Zoho Books
- Wave
- Kashoo

Software not listed? [Let us know](#)

Screens and menus

Once signed in you are presented with the list of businesses you are connected to. From this screen you can go into any of the businesses (which by default takes you to their active payment runs), add a new business or access the settings for each business via clicking the cog next to their name. Any business with a connection that has time out is greyed out, so you will need to reconnect before being able to access their Comma supplier page or pay runs.

Companies

Company ▾

- LJM Bookkeeping Ltd 

The left-hand menu stays in place the whole time and allows you to go back to the Home Screen, access their live chat facility, go to the support and FAQ pages, or log out. When you are in a client the wallet style (top) button takes you to the payment screen and the bill style button (bottom) takes you to their pay runs, defaulting to active, but also allowing you to see completed pay runs.



Creating a pay run

The main page mirrors your supplier ledger from the accounting software. All the bills to pay (note they must be in awaiting payment stage, not awaiting approval or draft) will be pulled through, showing the suppliers, amount, reference, date, and due date. They are sorted in due date order, with the ones needing payment soonest at the top. It lists the number of days till payment is due, and is colour coded to red (overdue), orange (within a fortnight) or grey (due in more than a fortnight). You can search or filter the list of payees, which is helpful if you have a long list, but know you need to pay someone specifically.

LBL LJM Bookkeeping Ltd Payments

£244.65 overdue
15 payments - Select all

£534.08 due within 14 days
3 payments - Select all

£778.73 due total
18 payments - Select all

Company Payment due Total

Payments are categorised one of three ways, bill payments, payroll, or tax. Each payment type has its own colour and icon so you can see at a glance. International payments will also pull through, but these will be greyed out and non-selectable. If you have a part paid an invoice, or there is a credit note allocated, the top value will show the remaining balance, but the bottom value always shows the total of the bill.

To create the pay run, you just tick the circle next to the items you want to pay. This will start to add them up for you. You still have time to review all the information on the next screen before payments is made. If you have the bank connected it will also show you the current balance and what the balance will be after the payments are made.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	V Veriphy Bill Ref: 141513140	9 days ago	£19.20 of £19.20	...
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	L Lara Payroll Ref: Wages	Today	£100.00 of £100.00	...
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	H HMRC Tax Ref: VAT1	Today	£100.00 of £100.00	...
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	S Senta Bill Ref: 2022049802	In 7 days	£334.08 of £334.08	...

Selected subtotal: £553.28

Review & pay 4 now

Removing suppliers

If a supplier is not going to be paid via Comma you can choose to remove them from the screen. This is very helpful for suppliers paid via direct debit, or those pesky Amazon purchases that you know have been paid but haven't been reconciled yet. To do this you click the home button and go into the settings via the cog on the main screen, and to the 'suppliers' tab. All your contacts from your accounting software will pull through to here, not just the ones you need to pay. Choose the supplier and change the drop down from 'Shown in Comma' to 'Not shown in Comma' to make sure they don't appear on the payment list. One quirk is that you still need to put the bank details in on this screen to save. My recommendation is to put all 0 in both fields to avoid any accidental payments.

Payee status:

Not shown in Comma

Grouping & ungrouping

Depending on how your clients like to pay their suppliers you may want to group or ungroup multiple payments to a supplier. For instance, if you are paying a monthly statement as one total. The key one for ungrouping is HMRC, if you need to make 2 payments with different references but to the same account. The default is to group the payments, so to ungroup you chose 'Keep payments separate in payment run'

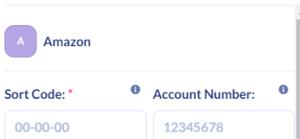
Payee grouping:

Group payments in payment run

Adding bank details

Edit payee information

Any info edited here will be tracked in the audit log, capturing the changes made, time of change and the user responsible.



Amazon

Sort Code: * Account Number: *

00-00-00 12345678

If you have bank details stored for your suppliers in your accounting system, these will pull through into Comma. Otherwise, it is a case of just typing or copying them into the sort code and account number boxes. Be aware that if you click outside the pop-up box it will close without saving & you will need to start again. Once you have entered the bank details it will remember them and will only need changing if the supplier details change. All changes are captured in the audit log for security purposes.

If you don't have bank details for the supplier and you have not gone in to add them, you will be prompted to do so once you get to the Payment Run page.

References

The default reference starts with the company name; however, it does also pull through any references from the accounting system. You can alter this by clicking the 3 dots next to the payee's line on the first page. You can also set default references in the 'Suppliers' tab as well. Do double check the references on the payment run screen, as occasionally they will revert. They can be amended from the screen right up till payment, but for HMRC payments it is worth double checking. Occasionally Comma will slightly alter a reference, to comply with the bank's requirements – i.e., if there are symbols or spaces that would not be allowed.

Adding users

You can add as many users as you need for free, even if they don't have bank access (although you will need the person actually doing the bank payment to have the ability to make payments). To do this, head to settings screen and the 'Team' tab, and invite them. They will need to sign up to Comma using the same email you invited them with, but then will be able to see the whole screen. There are no different user permission levels, everyone has the ability to create pay runs and alter bank details within the system.

Adding payments

Payee: *

Sort code: * Account number: *

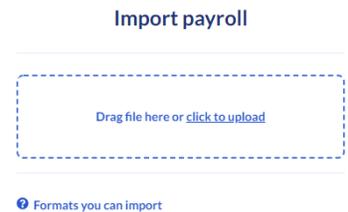
Amount paying: *

Payment reference: *

If there are payments that aren't on the ledger, such as PAYE, VAT, Corporation tax, dividends, payments to foreign currency brokers, etc. you can add them manually. To do this, click, 'add custom payment' from the top options bar and type in all the details: supplier name, bank details, reference, and amount, as well as the categorisations. These payments show up then in the main screen at the date you have set them for, so you still need to select them to add them to a pay run. Custom payments can be deleted from the screen using the 3 dots, however, bills pulled from the accounting system cannot.

Importing Payroll

One of the key features in Comma is the ability to import in payroll information. They have a csv template that you can download and fill in with all the necessary information, or if you have all that information already stored within your payroll platform (and it is one of the main platforms) then they have partnered with several or can accommodate the file type. There is a link to the FAQ and guides from the import payroll screen, or if you have your file ready you can just drag and drop or click to browse. Once imported the employees will be added to your payment list and do still need to be clicked to be added to a pay run.



This is where the filter comes in handy as you can filter by all the payroll payments and select them all using the top circle next to the header line. Additionally, as you can future date payments from within Comma, you can have this all set up at the point at which payroll is processed, alleviating that last minute rush, while ensuring staff are paid on time.

Connecting the bank

All of the above can be done ahead of the bank being connected. Anyone with bank access who is a user within Comma can connect. The process is similar to connecting a bank feed to the accounting software. You choose who the bank is with and connect by logging in to the banking portal. It will default to connecting and making payments from the main current account. Once connected the current balance will be shown at the bottom of the screen. Therefore, you will see the balance before, the amount of the pay run and the balance after those payments have been made. This allows for better planning as you can see exactly whether the payments can be afforded. These balances are visible to all, even if they don't have banking access.



Sending pay runs

Once created, there is a button to be able to share the pay run. This gives you 2 options: a URL copied to the clipboard or to create an email with the link included. Only users for that organisation can open the URL as you need to be logged in. This adds a layer of security in case it is intercepted. No payments can be made from this link, until logged in to the bank, so there is no risk of fraud via that route either. However, it does mean that if you have multiple people that need to be aware of payments you can send one link to them all, even if only one is going to actually make the payment.

Making payments

In order to complete a pay run, all payees must have complete information and the bank must be connected, otherwise the option will be greyed out.

Comma works off the same restrictions as are set up in the bank, so the person making payments will need to have the full ability to do this on online banking. Daily payment limits, the number of payees per batch, and payment limits per payee will all apply as you are still using the bank to pay. For example, if you have more than 50 payees (i.e., for payroll) but you have a payee limit, then Comma will split it into 2 pay runs. However, if you have personalised limits rather than the default, then Comma doesn't currently have the ability to pick up on that.

The 3 dots next to the payees on the payment run screen gives you multiple options. This means that clients can choose to pay a payee individually, remove payments from the run, alter amounts (for instance to part pay an invoice), update the payee information (bank details) or edit the reference.

Once all has been reviewed and any changes made, the person making the payments needs to click the pay now button in Comma. This is the point at which a pop up will appear if the subscription has not yet been activated.

Otherwise, this will then take them to their banking log in (or app if doing it via a device with the banking app installed) for them to log in as usual. Once they have passed the banking security measures the pay run will populate in the banking screen, in the same way as if they had set up a multiple pay run directly from the bank, allowing one click confirmation.

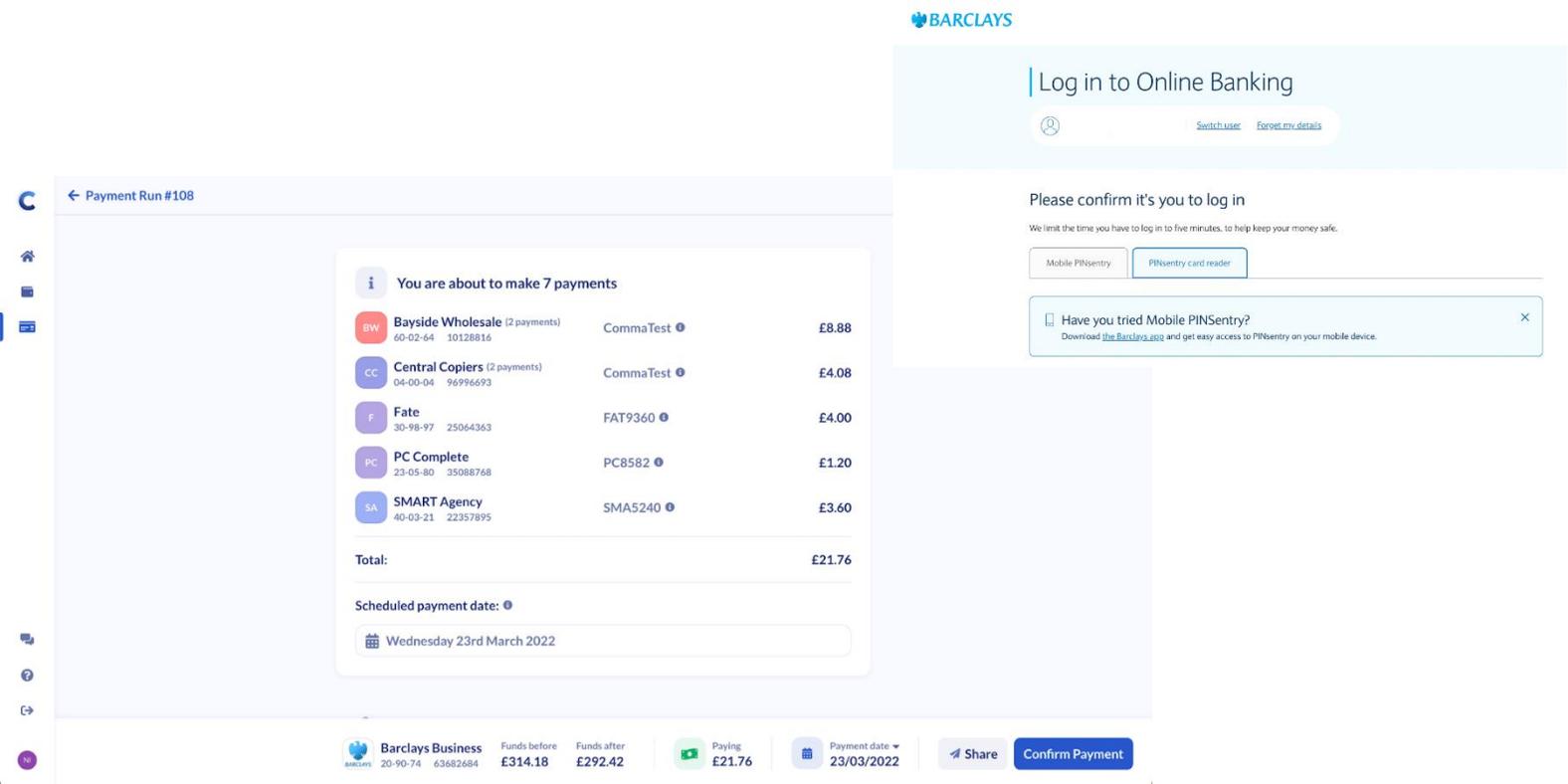
 Pay individually

 Edit payee information

 Edit amount

 Edit reference

 Remove from run



The screenshot displays two overlapping windows from the Barclays Online Banking interface. The background window is the 'Payment Run #108' confirmation screen, which lists seven payees and their respective amounts. The foreground window is the 'Log in to Online Banking' screen, which prompts the user to confirm their identity using a PIN or card reader. A notification banner at the bottom of the login screen asks if the user has tried Mobile PINsentry.

Payee	Reference	Amount
Bayside Wholesale (2 payments)	CommaTest	£8.88
Central Copiers (2 payments)	CommaTest	£4.08
Fate	FAT9360	£4.00
PC Complete	PC8582	£1.20
SMART Agency	SMA5240	£3.60
Total:		£21.76

Barclays Business
20-90-74 63682684
Funds before: £314.18
Funds after: £292.42
Paying: £21.76
Payment date: 23/03/2022

Log in to Online Banking
Please confirm it's you to log in
We limit the time you have to log in to five minutes, to help keep your money safe.
Mobile PINsentry | PINsentry card reader
Have you tried Mobile PINsentry?
Download the Barclays app and get easy access to PINsentry on your mobile device.

Future dating payments

When you reach the final screen in Comma you can decide what date you would like the payments to go out on. This is applicable to all payments within that payment run, but as mentioned above is very helpful in certain scenarios such as payroll. Therefore, if you need to have different payments going out on different days you would either need to choose the pay that item individually, or create multiple pay runs, dated at different points.

Syncing back to the accounting system

Once all your payments have been made, Comma will immediately mark them as such in the accounting system, even if a payment has been future dated. This means that they will be ready to be matched from the payment screen when reconciling. This eliminates any risk of duplicate payments.

Audit trail and logs

All changes within the system are logged, with date, time and linked to a user. All the pay runs have their own sequential number, and you can see a list on both active (not yet actioned) and completed payment runs from the screen. Using the information button next to any pay run will tell you who created it, when, the total and where it was fully or partially paid. If paid, each item on the payment run will have a green 'paid' symbol next to it, meaning you can easily see what has happened. Active payment runs can be deleted, but the number will not be re-used as there is still a log of them in the system. Each company, user and item within the system has its own unique reference. This may occasionally be needed if contacting support.



Support

Laura and her team are on hand via live chat or email support. It is UK working hours only, but they are quick to respond. If there is a particularly tricky issue, I have even done a Zoom call to make sure all is working correctly. There is a comprehensive support article database that is being updated all the time as well. They also send a monthly round-up email of all that has happened on the platform as well as upcoming news.



Key Benefits

As a bookkeeper, the pay run process previously might include exporting an aged payables report to csv, formatting, adding in missing information, emailing, and hoping the business owner pays. Comma streamlines this, reducing the steps and speeding up the actual process of paying. Add in to that the payroll element of being able to import the details from leading payroll software (with direct integration planned) means that one of the most important things to running a business (paying its employees and suppliers on time) is made a lot easier.

Extra benefits include the ability to see whether a payment has been made, even if you don't have banking access or the bank feed hasn't yet updated. Being able to future date payments, and being able to add in additional payments, such as for taxes. This reduces the amount of back and forth needed between the client and bookkeeper, and means everyone involved in the payment process has full visibility.

It connects with most accounting and payroll software as shown above. For payroll they have guides for BrightPay, Xero Payroll, Keypay, Sage, Onfolk, Moneysoft and Liberty accounts.

There are other payment platforms out there, including some embedded within accounting software. However, most of these use a dummy bank account, meaning that the business needs an account with a specific bank or provider and then a payment needs to be made to fund that account. Comma connects directly to the main business bank account, removing any needs for extra accounts or additional steps.

Strengths

- Can use Xero or Google to log in, so no extra logins to remember
- Simple layout with not a lot of distractions
- Clients can still amend the suggested pay run, to alter values or remove payments.
- Only users on the Comma account can view a pay run, even via the link, adding security.
- Significantly decreases time spent on pay runs versus paying each supplier separately
- Doesn't face the time out issues associated with setting up payments with some banks such as HSBC.
- Ability to group or ungroup payments to the same payee is helpful, especially if paying HMRC
- No requirement to open new accounts
- Works with mobile banking apps as well.
- Reduces change of human error as less re keying is required

Areas to improve

- It would be good if when the bank is connected for the first time a FAQ for that specific bank popped up to troubleshoot any small issues
- Slightly annoying that when you want to stop a supplier showing in a Comma (i.e., when being paid by DD) it requires you to put in dummy bank details to save.
- Sage 50 integration is a bit hit and miss.
- Layout is not currently very phone friendly, but something they are working on.
- 2-way sync, so that payees already in the bank could be matches back to payees in the accounting system would be very helpful.

Value for Money

Comma works off an “all you can eat” pricing structure, meaning that there are no limits to transaction numbers or users. The price is £22+ VAT per month per business.

However, bookkeepers and accountants can get a £10 a month per business discount if they pay for the account, rather than the client. This is a free partnership, with no obligations over client numbers. They also happily offer a free one to one demo for anyone that is interested in using the platform.

You only pay when you make the payments, therefore if you have any clients that are nervous about the pay element, but you want to use it as an easier way to produce a pay run (to ease them into the system) this is completely free.

Testimonials

As a fairly new platform, they don't have a testimonial page as such on their website. The reviews on the Xero app marketplace can be found here:

<https://apps.xero.com/uk/search/app/comma/reviews> .

They do however have a press page where they include their blogs, case studies and news about the platform: <https://www.usecomma.com/press>

Summary of Review

Getting access to banking and making payments for clients can be a stressful experience for both the clients and bookkeepers. Not all clients want to give bookkeepers access especially at the beginning of a relationship, and not all bookkeepers want to take on the liability of making payments. Comma is the product to solve those issues. The client still has full access, control, and final sign off on the payments, but in a lot easier way. Bookkeepers or an internal finance team can do everything before then to set up payments, and once checked the business owner can very simply make the payments. The ability to add in additional payments such as payroll and HMRC payments mean that it can be used for all payments that a business might need to make.

It significantly reduces the risk of mis keying or human error, as the details are only being entered once, within the accounting software, rather than multiple places, including the bank. It means that the accounting system can be used as the source of truth, for everything including bank details for suppliers. By marking the invoices as paid back within the accounting system as soon as the payments are made, it reduces the risk of duplicated payments, as there is no need to wait for the bank feed to refresh in the accounting software.

Future plans include international payments and integrations within payroll platforms, which will mean it is a complete solution for all types of business payments.

Disclaimer

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