

**Institute of Certified  
Bookkeepers  
Software Review**

**2016**

**Exact Online Accountancy – Integrated  
Accounting & Job Management (CRM) for  
Bookkeepers**

## *Company and Product Overview*

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Exact Business Software is a powerful financial and ERP (enterprise resource planning) tool. Developed over 30 years ago in the Netherlands as a garage start up by six students, it is now a global player with over 1, 500 employees in 15 countries. Initially it was on-premises software but in 2005 a cloud based platform was introduced, Exact online. Exact Business has been in the UK market since 1992 and introduced the cloud platform in 2014 and has already attracted over 200,000 clients to the cloud. In 2015 they were one of the UK Cloud Awards finalists in 2015 for 'ERP product of the year'.

But what exactly is Exact Online? In their own words they are one of Europe's leading accounting, CRM (customer relationship management) and industry-specific solutions for SME's in the Accountancy, Manufacturing, Professional Services and Wholesale Distribution sectors. It offers core accounting, billing and invoicing, fixed assets, reporting and tax functionalities for both the small/medium enterprise and larger corporate concerns. This is integrated business software which offers the user much more than just accounting, though the accounting function is at the core of all the products offered.

It took me a while to navigate to the right webpage and initially I felt a little lost in the diverse sea of Exact products and global activities. However, the Exact Online webpage for the UK (<http://www.exactonline.co.uk/>) was definitely a safe port of call and I found my bearings straight away. The offer of a free trial in green stands out in the mainly red colour design. Once signed up the log in button is easy to locate at the top right hand side of the web page. Exact Online is similar to other cloud based applications where by you log in from the webpage to access your data. The web page included simple explanations for the main cloud business products on offer, various tours and also the link to the pricing page. While I was playing with the pages a representative of Exact popped up in an Online chat box; some may find this intrusive but I personally appreciated the introduction and offer of assistance.

It was now time to take my pilot on board and in a process known as 'onboarding' an Exact Online expert guided me around the product so until I was ready to cruise on my own.

## *Scope of Review*

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The range of Exact products available is quite daunting at first as it includes Wholesale Distribution, Project Management, Manufacturing and Time and Billing. However, each of these will have the accounting function at the core with the other systems integrated on the dashboard. The main product we will focus on is Exact Online Accounting which is centred on that core accounting function and developed for small and growing business enterprises. Although our clients may use other products, members of the ICB will predominantly use the financial dashboard where the basic bookkeeping entries can be made and bank reconciliations performed.

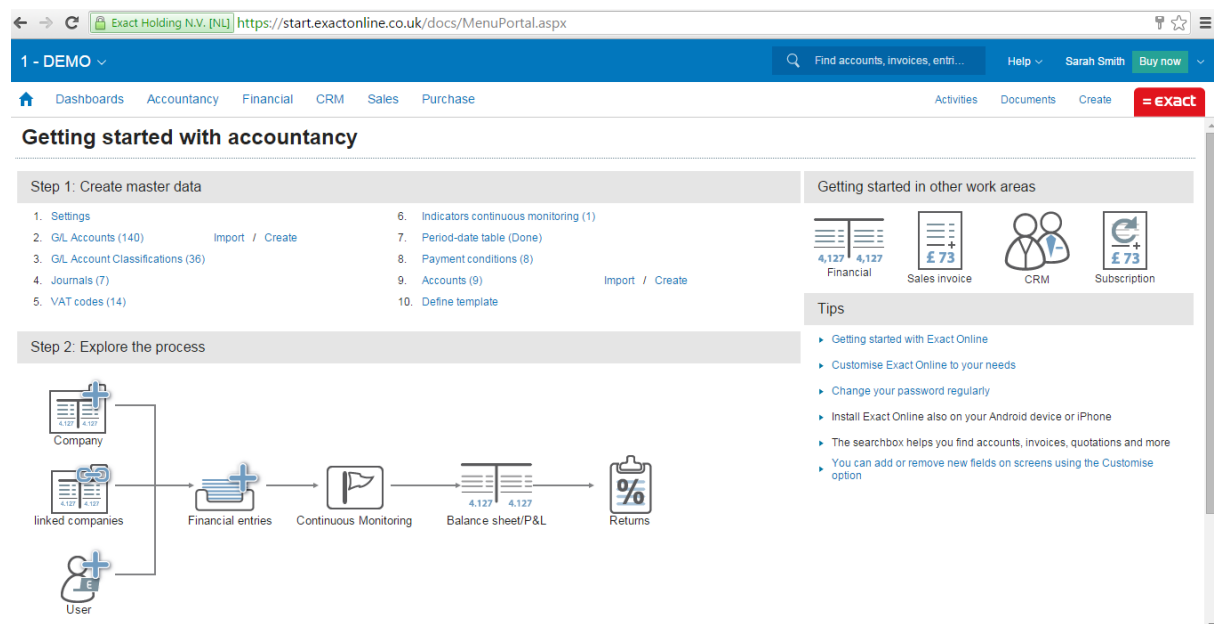
A demo version has been trialled so some of the functions, eg, bank feeds and mail outs, have not been used. However, it can be assumed that these perform perfectly in a working environment. It would also be impossible to cover every aspect of the product in detail but key features and unique applications will be highlighted. The review will give a tour of this product rather than a click by click how to do approach and therefore does assume some pre-existing knowledge of cloud based systems.

There are various cloud based accounting systems now available. This review will not look to directly rate Exact Online with any other provider's application but some comparisons may be made.

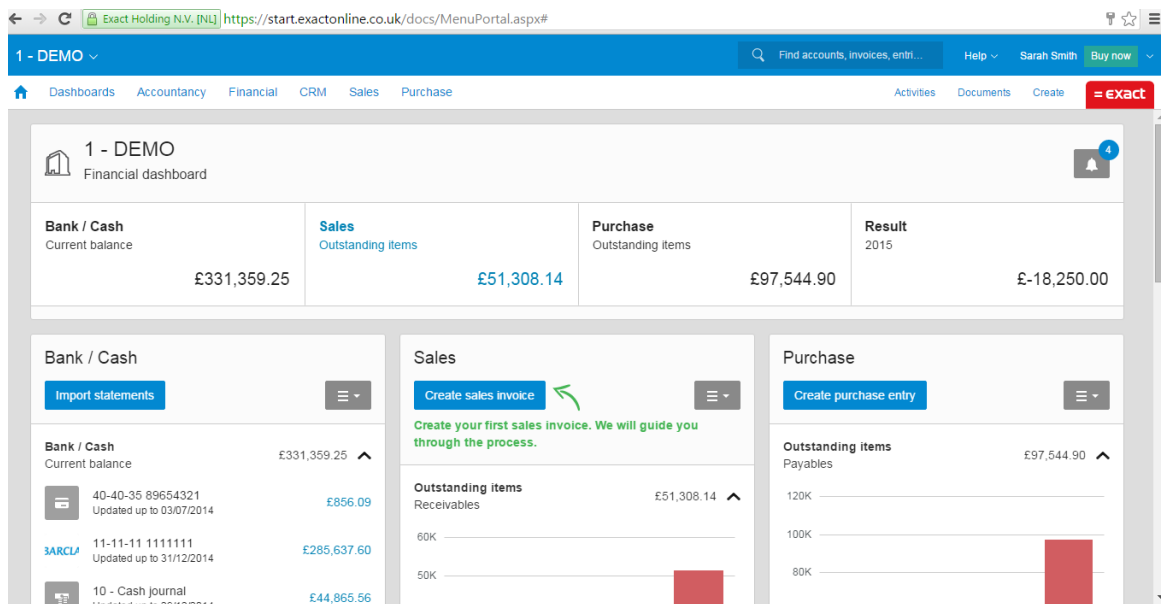
By the end of this review the reader should have a basic understanding of both the company and the product, its strengths and limitations and how this particular cloud system could be beneficial to a bookkeeper with a number of clients.

## The Product

Exact Online is essentially a cloud based accounting product much like any other. Once logged in via your web browser the main screen you will be directed to the 'Getting Started with Accountancy' screen which also is set as the default home screen. From this screen you can view and create master data for a company, create new companies, view linked companies and also set up new users. You can also start various other financial processes from this screen such as the actual financial entries and continuous monitoring of your clients activities, both of which will be explored later in the report.



The menu buttons at the top of the screen will quickly navigate you to the different activity centres and, shown below, is the financial centre where, as the bookkeeper, you have all your key data and can make the entries onto the books.



Drop down menus on the right hand side of each column enable you to enter transactions. Automated bank feeds can be set up in the Bank/Cash book and statements can also be imported. Sales invoices can be raised and we will look at this in more detail. For both sales and purchases digital copies of invoices can be uploaded. It is also possible to create general journals from this page. The main functions of the day to day bookkeeping can be found here and also on the drop down menu under the Financial tab at the top of the screen. You will find further functions here such as VAT reporting, the Asset register and the General Ledger (G/L) accounts.

The bank reconciliation is similar to other cloud based systems that utilise bank feeds. The bookkeeping records are made from the downloaded bank statement lines either by creating the item or matching it with transactions already entered, most commonly sales and purchase invoices. This has proved widely popular in the market as it streamlines the accounting process thus saving bookkeeping time. As you would expect there is a great deal of flexibility with how items can be reconciled and part payments can be easily recorded. There is also the ability to set up rules so that recurring items can be easily reconciled.

My experience of any accounting product, whether desktop or cloud based is that the sales invoicing function is usually highly developed. Exact Online does not disappoint in this area. Most accounting software enables the business owner to raise invoices that can be directly sent to the customer, whether that be via email or post. The ability to customise such invoices is vital so ensure company branding is maintained.

1 - DEMO

Find accounts, invoices, entri... Help Sarah Smith Buy now

Dashboards Accountancy Financial CRM Sales Purchase Activities Documents Create = exact

### Sales invoice

Save + New Print E-mail Send based on account Close

Ordered by  ! Invoice to  !

Order date: 21/11/2015  
 Document:   
 Type:  Invoice  Credit note  
 Remarks:

Description:   
 Exchange rate: GBP 1.00000  
 Payment condition: 30 30 days from invoice date

Item	Description	Quantity	Net price	VAT code	Amount excl. VAT	VAT amount	Amount incl. VAT
1							
Total					0.00	0.00	0.00

This screen is where you raise your sale invoices and please note the screw driver and spanner icon just below the red Exact tab. Clicking on this enables you to completely customise the sales invoice. Multi logos can be embedded which means both your own branding and the ICB crest can be included. The screw driver and spanner icon will be displayed on many of the screens so it is useful to remember that you can customise many reports and forms to suit the business needs. Exact Online also enables quotes to be raised and then converted into invoices which is a very useful feature.

One down point is that for invoices to be raised there needs to be a “stock” item. A “service” item can be created but this does create a further level of administration. By pressing on the company name on the top left hand of the screen, a sub menu comes up for managing the company set up and settings (see below). From here you really make generic changes to all the main elements of the bookkeeping system, effectively creating a bespoke set of books for any given client. It is also here that you can create the items to be used on the invoicing.

1 - DEMO

Find accounts, invoices, entri... Help Sarah Smith Buy now

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### Master data

<b>Financial</b> <a href="#">GL Accounts</a> <a href="#">GL Account Schemes</a> <a href="#">GL Account Classifications</a> <a href="#">Journals</a> <a href="#">Period-date table</a> <a href="#">Cost centres</a> <a href="#">Cost units</a> <a href="#">Entry templates</a>	<b>Accounts</b> <a href="#">Customers</a> <a href="#">Suppliers</a> <a href="#">Classifications</a> <a href="#">Titles</a> <a href="#">Payment conditions</a> <a href="#">Link companies to accounts</a> <a href="#">Accountant roles</a>	<b>Tax</b> <a href="#">VAT codes</a>
<b>Bank</b> <a href="#">Bank feeds</a> <a href="#">Bank reconciliation rules</a>	<b>Assets</b> <a href="#">Assets</a> <a href="#">Asset groups</a> <a href="#">Depreciation methods</a>	<b>Items</b> <a href="#">Items</a> <a href="#">Item groups</a> <a href="#">Assortments</a> <a href="#">Units</a>
<b>Sales</b> <a href="#">Sources</a> <a href="#">Opportunity stages</a> <a href="#">Reasons</a>	<b>Layouts</b> <a href="#">Maintenance</a> <a href="#">Download XML schema</a>	<b>Settings</b> <a href="#">Company</a> <a href="#">Account</a> <a href="#">Classifications: Companies</a>

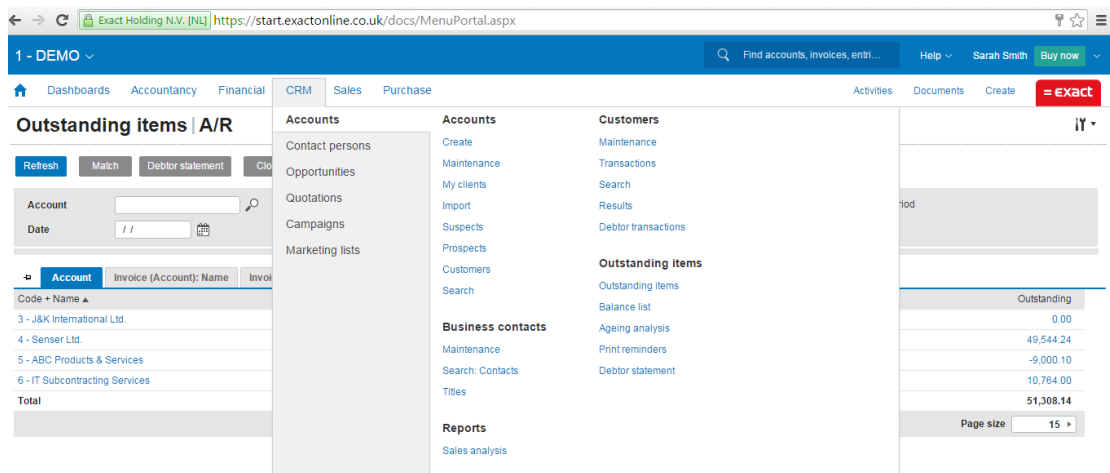
<https://start.exactonline.co.uk/docs/FunctionCategories.aspx?Division=39513>

From the master data page you can also access your chart of accounts, known as the G/L accounts in Exact Online, and create new accounts as well as amend existing ones. Although codes are attributed to each account, what drives how the account works and where it sits on the Chart of Accounts is the Type, please see the below:

The screenshot displays the 'Maintenance | G/L Account' interface in Exact Online. The top navigation bar includes '1 - DEMO', a search bar, and user information 'Sarah Smith' with a 'Buy now' button. The main navigation menu contains 'Dashboards', 'Accountancy', 'Financial', 'CRM', 'Sales', and 'Purchase'. The breadcrumb trail is 'Master data > Overview | G/L Accounts > Maintenance | G/L Account'. The page title is 'Maintenance | G/L Account'. Below the title are buttons for 'Save', 'Delete', 'Copy', and 'Close'. The form is divided into 'General' and 'Specific' sections. The 'General' section includes fields for 'Code' (61036), 'Description' (Telephone - Land Lines), 'Search code' (TEL LAND), 'Type' (Other costs), 'BIS / Profit & Loss' (Profit & Loss), 'Debit / Credit' (Debit), 'Blocked' (checkbox), and 'Compress' (checkbox). The 'Specific' section includes 'Revalue: Currency' (checkbox), 'Matching' (checkbox), and 'VAT code' (input field). The right-hand side features a 'Monitor' section with 'Transactions' and 'Graph' options, and a 'Classification' section with '1 - G/L Account Scheme' and '610' selected, and 'Operating Expenses' as a sub-classification. The 'Cost analysis' section has 'Cost centre' set to 'Optional', 'Default' as an empty field, 'Cost unit' set to 'Optional', and 'Default' as an empty field.

Each of the screens in the product are very similar in look which gives a new user a sense of familiarity and therefore growing confidence in using the wide functionality that Exact Online offers. From the Master Data page it is possible to manage the assets, VAT codes, users, bank feeds and reconciliation rules, just to mention a few; putting it simply it is the engine room that drives the ship forwards. All the processes that you will need to do as the bookkeeper will be driven by the master data set up so it is worth spending time getting this correct to ensure efficiency in the everyday bookkeeping.

Exact Online sells itself as an integrated system and the strength of the CRM is a good example of this. All accounting systems will have some form of CRM as this needed to for sales invoicing and credit control management; however, they tend to be simple in nature and lacking the sophistication of more dedicated CRM packages. The CRM in Exact Online is packed with features that are really usefully when managing clients.



The menu screen above shows the various options in the CRM from tracking opportunities to creating quotations, setting up marketing lists and running proper campaigns. This CRM has mail chimp integrated and so does really offer a versatile and sophisticated tool as part of the accountancy product. Having the ability to creatively use the contact information that has been generated as part of the everyday bookkeeping is definitely a value added feature for any business.

Another value added feature of Exact Online is Accountancy portal, again available from the main menu options. Here you can manage your practice and also your clients with great ease. You can define templates, use the continuous monitoring feature and run a number of useful reports as well as find other useful information relating to your work as the bookkeeper. All your clients are displayed and can be filtered. There is also an overview of workflow so that tasks can be created and progress monitored, as well as client deadlines entered ensuring that VAT and company returns are not made late. Again, there are a large amount of options and menu choices all designed to help you manage your client base more efficiently.

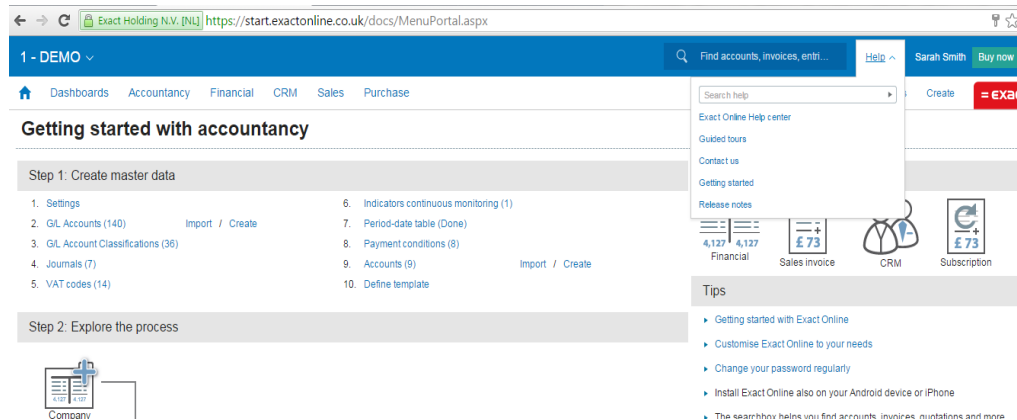
I have aimed to give a broad overview of the product, how to navigate around it and some of the key features it offers. What is clear is that Exact Online offers a high level of integration and flexibility with the operations you can perform. This sophistication is one of its strengths but does also bring a level of complexity for a new user. For me training and support is key in successfully mastering the many features Exact Online has to offer so we will look at this in the next section.

## Support and Customer Care

Exact Online offer an programme to help new bookkeeping practices who have started subscribing to the product; this is known as 'onboarding' and I had the pleasure of a couple of one-hour web-based sessions with an Exact Online tutor. With the technology to share

screens it was easy for him to navigate me around the Exact Online environment and start my learning. There is no charge for this, either for the practice owner or their staff and the e-learning environment means that the training can be done from the comfort of your own office or home. However, learning Exact Online is comparable to learning how to play chess; one can pick up the basics reasonably quickly but to master it takes much longer!

The Help menu can be accessed from any main screen, shown below.



The Exact Online Help Centre is packed with resources to get you going. There is a comprehensive video library and also guided tours available covering a number of topics and the Frequently Asked Questions section will help with more specific learning queries.

Customer support can be contacted by both email and telephone although call support is only available between 9am – 5pm Monday to Friday. Although Exact Online is a global organisation a help desk is based in the UK on an 0800 number which is definitely an advantage. Exact Online webinars are available from their home page and it is also possible to start a live chat there. Further training is available although those on a lower subscription level may need to upgrade at a later date to access these. Onsite bespoke training is also available.

To conclude, Exact Online do make a great effort to get you comfortable in using the product; this is essential as there is a much to learn.

## Value for Money

The pricing plans are displayed on the webpage and a free 30 day trial is available.

For each of the main options there are drop down menus which show the different pricing options and what is included in each. Each of these work on a monthly subscription basis. The Accounting version has a Basic and Advanced level, costing £19 and £29 respectively. The Advanced version includes recurring invoices, multi-currency and assets, budgets and cost analysis. The number of users allowed also increases from 3 to 5.



It is worth noting that Accountancy is free and is aimed at accountants and bookkeepers looking to build a practice on the Exact Online product. Each client would of course have to take out a subscription.

Starter for Accountants at £5 per month is available for practitioners who do the accounts for sole traders but let them invoice and process bank statements. The screen the client can view at this price point is very simplified and uses mainly graphs to show key financial data. This may be welcomed by many smaller businesses as they can quickly gain a snapshot of how their business is performing.

Other popular cloud based systems are on a monthly subscription basis and Exact Online is no different. Lower price point plans are available though I would foresee that with the increased functionality most organisations would upgrade to more expensive plans going forward.

## *Key Benefits*

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- Multi-platform cloud based system which allows both you and your clients to access financial information at any time. This also includes the use of bank feeds which streamlines the bookkeeping process.
- Integrated value added functions such as the CRM and Accountancy section which improve overall client management.
- High level of customisation available across the product. Reports and invoices can be tailored to directly meet the business need and branding.
- Dedicated team in London for support and training for Exact Online users. Exact Training centre offers continual development through E-learning and the Exact Online Accountancy Programme where certification is available by passing exams.
- Data capture is available so that invoices can be stored by Exact Online. The digital mail box also allows quick exchange of data between bookkeeper and client.
- Sophisticated system using inbuilt add-ons to add value to the accounting and bookkeeping process.

## *Weaknesses*

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- **Complexity.** With sophistication and flexibility comes a degree of complexity. Although generally navigating around the system was simply, actually carrying out some of the process seemed “chunky” and overly complicated. For example, bank transfers are not available so transferring funds from one company bank account to another could only be done by using the suspense account which duplicates the number of entries needed.

Also, all invoices are based on an item and it takes a further level of administration is required to raise a “service invoice”.

- I also found some of the language perhaps old fashioned and different to what I am used to, for example the Chart of Accounts being referred to the G/L Account. This is probably due to the original development taking place in the Netherlands and perhaps an update of key basic terms would be beneficial.
- **Change in mindset.** The move to cloud based systems is relatively new in the accounting world and most of us have now taken that leap. Exact Online takes a further step in what a cloud based accounting system can achieve but for many this could be rather overwhelming. The training and support on offer by Exact Online is vital for new users and will assist them in using all the functionality to the fullest potential.
- **Payroll application.** Currently Exact Online cannot offer a payroll application as part of the main product. This would be a great addition to the product and a solution is being developed.\*

## *Summary of Review*

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With a sea of options available in terms of cloud based accounting systems, Exact Online does provide a luxury cruise liner rather than ocean sailing yacht; both are capable of navigating the seas but the experience in each will be very different to the other. The larger liner has much to offer the sailor but the yacht is fast moving and easy to handle.

Exact Online offers an integrated product with a great deal of functionality but will take some time to master while other cloud based products may be easier to pick up and handle. It does take cloud based accounting to the next level by utilising the ERP functionality to extend what can be achieved by cloud based accounting products. However, with the accounting function at the core it is a product that has a lot to offer a bookkeeper.

With the right support and training the Exact Online product will offer a practice the opportunity to not only add value to their clients work but also to grow themselves. As ICB Certified Bookkeepers we look to offer more than just bookkeeping to our clients and the functions of Exact Online will give us the ability to do just that. And personally, I prefer the idea of cruising the seas on a luxury liner . . . preferably with a gin and tonic in hand!

## *Disclaimer*

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The Institute of Certified Bookkeepers having reviewed Exact Online Accountancy software package, December 2015, cannot be held responsible in any way for the actions of the company Exact Business Software or their software. This review is merely an unbiased overview of the software package.

## *Notes*

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Since the completion of this review a payroll function is now available with the launch of Exact's integration with MyPAYE.