Tips & Tricks #44 – Exploring the Unknowns

In the last article, we looked at resources and suggestions for helping with the known problems, questions and issues that you might come across in using PBS or in planning how to better use or expand your use of it. But what about the unknown unknowns, the now famous third leg of the stool in the Rumsfeld matrix that we touched upon last time?

There is an infinity of things we don't know, and it is likely that for most of these things we don't even know we don't know them! So how do we cut this kind of issue down to size and make it manageable?

Except for cyberattacks and sudden radical developments in the business world, there are few truly unknown unknowns for most businesses. In fact, we spend considerable effort in accounting to normalize, and regularize; we smooth the data of business transactions so we can see what is happening. In the case of cyberattacks, probably the best option is to find a firm or someone with a solid understanding of internet and computer security, make an arrangement with them, make a budget and take their advice. It is likely that with the sophistication of the current lot of IT thugs, that preparation will at least mitigate any damage and that is possibly the best you can do within a reasonable budget. But that is something that has to be thought through.

When we don't know enough, we get advice from someone who does know and make a contingency plan for when it happens. In the case of a cyberattack, a rough calculator of damage might involve what would be the cost to be down for between 1-3 days while your system is rebuilt and what would be the cost (lost orders, lost clients) if all the information on your computers was stolen. These two can paint a context for what the ROI will be on the investment here. At the very least, have good (daily, at least) backup (preferably off-premise/network) and periodically be prepared to test these with the help of your network tech.

Since we are talking about the accounting systems, the issue of unknown unknowns is relegated to issues we have trouble deciding on or that we don't have the knowledge of context to know what to do. That means the way out is to either get help or get educated, in other words gather information so you can cut the problem down to size.

Where do we start to tame this gap in context and knowledge? We look to see what things in general might not be right and try to gain knowledge or perspective to help us define the issue or provide context for it. Here are a few suggestions for attempting this. Some of this may seem obvious but it is not necessarily bad to say it "out loud" to get it "out there" and have it be a part of the action plan.

One other point that applies to what we discussed in the last issue, but especially to the issues discussed here, is to have a "play" facility setup in PBS to try things out. We encourage all of you to consider building, or have your Partner or Passport build a "play" company. Call it company "XX" or "TS" (test) or whatever. It should be periodically updated (again a Partner or Passport thing) with reasonably current data. This is usually copied from your live company; and gives you

the same experience in the play company as you would have in the live company. But, since it is an entirely separate entity, there is no fear that any entered data or posted information will go into the live books. With this available you can get up close and intimate with the program features you may not be utilizing and try things out.

## Taming the Unknowns

Documentation

With respect to PBS itself, keep your eyes open while you are using the system for functions within an application that you are not familiar with or for fields on a screen that you might regularly just move through and ignore because "that was the way I was trained" or "I don't think this applies to us" but which you don't really understand. Make a note to check them out. Keep an open and critical mind and take a minute or two to review the familiar screens you use. (This could be part of your 15 minutes per week I mentioned in the last installment.) I would say the odds are in my favor that you will discover something unknown, interesting and possibly useful. For example, do you regularly use comments while entering orders into the Order Entry? Do you know that there are actually 3 kinds of comments – Notes on their own line i.e., line-item notes, notes/comments in the trailer section of the order, and notes you apply at the time you print the batch of invoices and apply to all invoices in the batch? This is a specific example, but it can be duplicated for many of the processes in PBS. As another example, on the manufacturing side of the PBS family of products, there are similar comments and notes with rules available for printing only on internal documents vs. printing on customer/public facing documents. As such, these could range from "Be careful, this customer is very picky about the version number, color etc. of the ordered parts" (internal only) or a general "We wish you a happy holiday and a successful New Year" (public). The PBS documentation is worth exploring to check these out.

There is a well-known rule for those of us on this side of the fence and one version of it is: "It seems easier for a customer to pick up the phone and ask a question of their Partner or Passport than to check in the manual". Sometimes the phone call is entirely proper, especially when the issue is ill defined and needs discussion. There are times the specifics are located in the PBS help function. Virtually every field in the system has a Help entry (graphical screen Ctl_F1) attached to it. For example, a control_F1 while positioned on the "County" field of the vendor maintenance screen, gives you information about the set of name and address fields that defined the vendor. In addition, it gives specifics about the County field, the sizes of each of the name and address fields (so you know if a name is going to fit) and some specifics about printed forms where this data can appear:
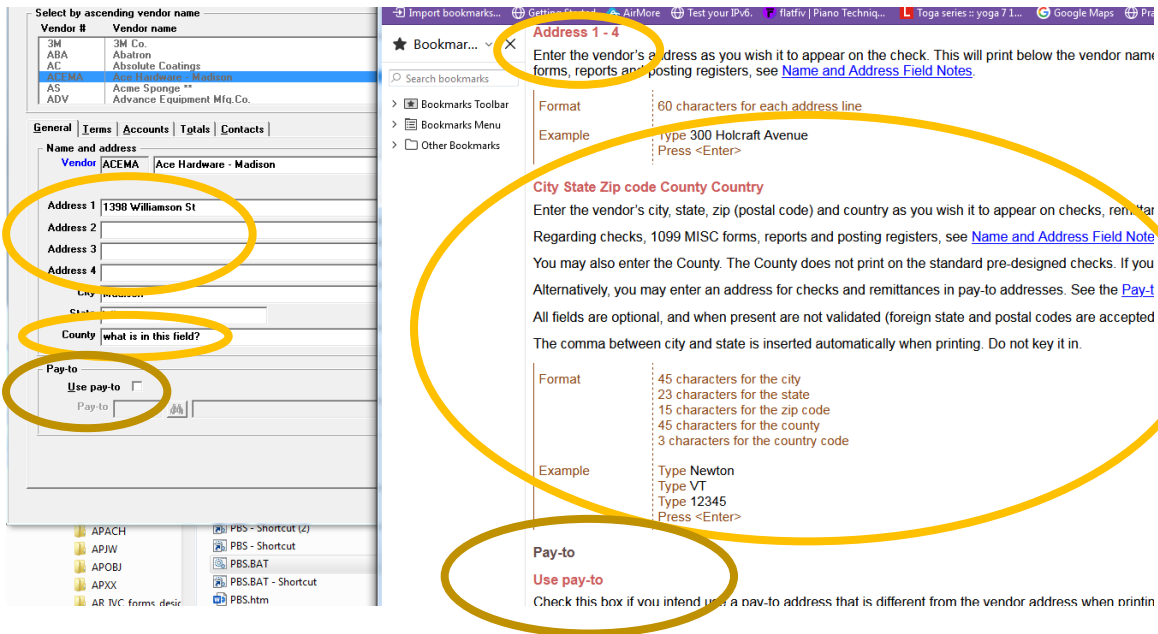
The same applies to the little used "Pay-to" field immediately below.

In addition, scrolling to the top of the page or chapter gives you access to the "Open topic with navigation" which basically opens the page to the complete User Manual for the application with an active index and search capabilities – all without leaving the screen you were on:
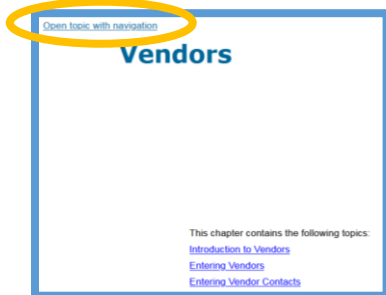
Since we are on the topic of the help functions (which is covered in detail in the Tips & Tricks #4, #5, #6), the full manual can be utilized in a manner to address the unknown unknowns. The subjects in the manual can be read like a book, i.e., the "Introduction" section for each of the major functions within the application and using it with an open mind to see if that function is useful for you or if already in use, or perhaps its usefulness can be expanded.

For example, you could read up on how to set up and use "Memo entries" in AP which facilitate the tracking and control of out-of-state purchases or company credit card expenses. Similarly reading up in AR on progress billing and the ability to recognize revenue on prepaid projects, might be a useful part of your read-through in the AR manual.

The *open mind* is actually part of the taming process because in order to judge a feature/function, you need to bring to it a knowledge of how your accounting system is serving you. And that leads us to supporting applications.

Spreadsheets and Other Crutches

PBS is an integrated system – Order Entry "talks" to Inventory and to Accounts Receivable, Inventory and Purchase Order "talk" to each other and all the financial applications "talk" to the General Ledger. This means information is entered once (or a minimum number of times) and is available where needed throughout the system. A tell-tale sign that the system is not working for you or is not being used properly, is the classic look of a monitor with a dozen or more post-its framing the view of the screens. Assuming these are reminders related to the accounting work (not something related to a pick-up at day-care), then to some degree the needed data is not being entered or is not readily available to the operator – hence the post-its imply some level of failure in the system or its use.

A possibly more profound problem with a similar cause is the extensive use of spreadsheets to supplement what is going into and coming out of PBS. We have had numerous encounters with customers running a PBS report, and then copying the data or a sub-set of it into a spreadsheet so they could re-arrange the data or sort or filter in some fashion that was important to them. Besides taking time, the re-entry requirements, typically part of building the spreadsheet, are invitations to keying errors. So, spreadsheets can be a sign of issues, but they can also be a useful companion – see below.

Pain Points

These last sections have tried to address the unknowns by encouraging observations on what you have but may not be using or using well, or what you don't have but are supplementing with other programs. These two highlight a sort of negative approach in the sense of "what am I missing". These can be described as "pain points" – some level of dissatisfaction related to what the system apparently can't do or do efficiently. This deserves a little more explanation.

Pain points may be specific as in "I don't know of an easy way to book payments I paid online through the bank". Issues like this should be resolvable through documentation or a call to your support people. The pain points can however, be more general – more of a "I can't seem to close the month in less than a week. I should be able to close it in a day or two" or "Making inventory price changes is such a chore and my suppliers are hitting me with updates more and more frequently." In business it is not Pollyanna to say that problems are also opportunities, but these problems, these unknowns, need some definitions before being able to be solved and you may need some help to educate yourself or someone to call to help you define the issues.

Also, the nature of the business can change, and a change in business direction and a change in the software processes that supports it may need to be made. An obvious recent example, when it hit in early 2020, Covid was a very disruptive and an unknown. Over the next two years, some businesses essentially flat-lined, however, we see a rebound occurring and customers are upgrading and expanding their PBS system at a good clip to our SQL version. a

These examples we hope help you circumscribe the unknown and put focus on a problem or issue so that it can be investigated with the help of a Passport professional, to pull you out of the unknowns.

In our next installment, we will look at resources in Passport to help you develop a plan for the future.