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## **Payroll software for the upper classes**

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### **The Bottom Line**

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#### **PAYROLL**

Austin Martin or Hyundai? Vintage Merlot or a box of strawberry zinfandel? Filet mignon or a frozen hamburger? Rolex or Timex? Technically speaking, all these items get the job done, but there is a difference. To some, it's an insurmountable difference.

If you are one who prefers - no - insists on the finer things in life, then Avanti should be your payroll/HR brand of choice.

Is there such a thing as software with cachet? I certainly think so. If you pay the extra money for a state-of-the-art system then you deserve the privilege of bragging rights.

Years ago I splurged on a Dior suit, and you can be darn sure I took every opportunity to mention it. You know, they don't tell you this, but being a snob is kind of fun. Of course the fact I just admitted that clearly dismisses me from the club.

In this case, the payroll/HR solution I am referring to is Avanti Software Inc. (formally Aspen Avanti). Based in Calgary, Avanti came to life in 1980, and currently has 20 employees and around 200 installations.

They originally offered a full ERP solution, but since the mid-1990's they have specialized in payroll and human resources software. Because I truly am crass and crude, I am going to discuss price. I can just see your eyes rolling back in your head - how terribly undignified, darling.

Bare-bones admission to the Avanti Club is around \$20,000 for a single user payroll system, including services (implementation, data migration and training). An all-in solution can easily run up to \$110,000.

Avanti is generally suited to companies with over 100 employees, and they really specialize in companies with 200 or more employees. Some smaller organizations who require specific key features have become users though.

Although they are appropriate for almost any industry type, Avanti have done particularly well in hospitality, energy, manufacturing, health care and banking/finance. Unionized outfits find them a good fit too, and the more complex the better.

Because payroll companies generally specialize in one country only, 99 per cent of their business is in Canada. They did however have to endure the hardship of an install in the Cayman Islands. It seems taxes are not an issue there. Let's take a moment and imagine what that would be like. Hmm, let's see: a beautiful tropical paradise and tax free!

It's time for the fun part. Money can buy you some very sweet modules and features indeed, and to feel less guilty for this particular pleasure, they include some things that you may really need and cannot find anywhere else.

To get my facts right, I was able to interview Avanti's vice-president Stephen Habel, CMA. He categorized his company's offerings into seven main modules: payroll (of course) administration, benefits administration, training/development, position management, recruiting and time/attendance.

For the sake of keeping this article under 400 pages, I asked Habel to just give me a few highlights from each module:

#### Payroll

Where many programs may require extensive (and expensive) hours of customization to suit your needs, Avanti includes user definable fields. Each field can be changed and applied to all entries, or changed further still for each individual employee.

Up to nine date fields can be used per employee versus only the basic 'start' and 'termination' dates. If you need to track contracted labour, their GST numbers get entered in text fields and are applied automatically every time you need to pay them. As is often the case with the finer things in life, there are no extras - everything is included.

#### Administration

If you or your payroll/HR department need to do performance reviews, track attendance history and sick days, this may be something to consider.

My favourite feature tracks consigned property. For example, if you provide your sales force with laptops, each one can have its own history recorded. You can also track car fleets and oil changes, cellphones, office keys, etc. This alone could prove invaluable to some corporations.

#### Benefits administration

Because they are so tightly linked, there are a few modules that must be purchased together. If you want this one, you'll need to invest in the payroll too. This is an expansion of the basic deductions and, among other things, it allows users to export files to their group insurance provider in whatever format they specify.

My wife worked in group benefits for 15 years and believe me, they all seem to specify something different. There is no industry standard.

#### Training/development

Requirements for a skilled labour force change from time to time. You can keep track of what qualifications each employee must have, should have, and which ones they have already obtained.

#### Position management

Does your company often promote from within? If you do, this module defines each job's classifications for recruitment and ties in to the skills/requirements listed in the training/development module. It also has gap analysis to compare current qualifications of workers to see what they will need to qualify for a given job that is up for grabs.

#### Recruiting

Use this with position management to allow staff or prospects to check the corporate website for openings, find out if they qualify, and instantly apply. It can actually include an online check-off list of skills to compare what they need versus what they have.

#### Time/Attendance

A few key features here include employee scheduling that compares actual time to scheduled time through a web self-serve interface or biometric hand punch. You can also track rules, like holidays required by law, with the proper statutory rate to be applied, and what a worker needs to qualify for full-time and overtime by law.

Habel informs me that this has become very popular with their users. Staff can access their own file information online through ESS (employee self -service). They can look up how much vacation pay they have left, make address changes, etc. Workers can only access their personal information, but managers are granted access to the files for their whole department. It certainly saves some time and aggravation for the HR department.

An important point must be made here. All seven modules are developed internally by Avanti Software Inc. There is no outsourcing. The result is slick and seamless integration, and each ties in and utilizes data from another.

Avanti runs on SQL 2005 and is a Microsoft certified partner, and Epicor registered partner. It integrates with Great Plains, Accpac Advantage, Solomon, Sun Systems (Systems Union), and the aforementioned Epicor. What I mean by integrate is that the user can validate GL accounts and export (GL) entries into their accounting program.

Avanti is a seriously powerful system and I am only able to scratch the surface in this article. I can show you what one of their pay statements looks like though. Plug in [www.avanti.ca/payadvice](http://www.avanti.ca/payadvice) and see a typical pay statement for an employee on direct deposit. From there you can surf their entire site too.

Maestro, cue the Baroque String Quartet please. Thusly and in conclusion, should one find oneself in dire need of a powerful payroll and human resources solution with poise, depth, fantastic flexibility and remarkable refinement, Avanti is worth a look. Bragging rights are included at no extra charge.

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