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NextGen is back, and in this issue, we’re talking about all things CPA exam! With a new exam featuring an enhanced focus on assessing candidates’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills launching on April 1, NextGen is relaunching, too, with this special issue that you’ll want to keep as a reference guide, as you prepare for the profession’s test of might: the Uniform CPA Examination.

The CPA exam already has a reputation for being tough— in 2004, it was transformed to include new sections reflecting changes in the business world—and the new version has reduced the number of multiple-choice questions and added more task-based simulations than ever before. If exam takers aren’t confronted on April 1 with a harder exam, they can at least expect it to be different.

In this issue you’ll find an in-depth overview of the new exam and an exploration of how technology—including gamification—is used in exam preparation, as well as useful exam tips and a Q&A with Jeff Elliott, aka the “CPA Ninja” behind the popular CPA exam prep blog, Another71.com.

While we’re relaunching NextGen with a new look, we’ll cover everything from how to work a room at your next networking event to how to dress for an interview. Your NextGen membership also includes the exclusive opportunity to take part in our Mentor Match Program, where the NYSSCPA does the hard work of finding a mentor for you. You tell us what you’re looking for in a mentor, and we tap into our vast network of New York CPAs to find your match. Then, we’ll make the introductions for you. And if you’re studying for the CPA exam, you’ll definitely want to take advantage of our deep discounts on a CPA exam review course. You can save up to $400 when you register through one of our affiliate partners. (Visit nysscpa.org to find out how—and make sure to tell them the NYSSCPA sent you!)

In September, college grads and NextGen members looking for their next job opportunity will definitely want to check out our annual NextGen Accounting Career Fair, where the NYSSCPA will help you get face time with firms that are recruiting new hires just like you! Mark your calendars because some of our Wednesday Workshops will be specifically designed to prepare you for it.

I’m always happy to hear from you, so please contact me if you have any questions or concerns, or if you just want to say hello. I look forward to getting to work with all of you.
"If you stop and think about it, the same concepts are being tested, just in a different way." – Jeff Elliott, ‘CPA Ninja’
Anthony C. Zaccarelli, CPA, financial business manager, St. John’s University

“A significant issue for many working professionals is not having enough time to study, which leads to taking the same parts [of the exam] multiple times until they can pass. This becomes an expensive and frustrating process. While firms have various programs in place to provide their staff with study time and financial incentives for passing, accounting majors who want to become CPAs should make it a priority to pass the exam before they start their first full-time jobs. This way, they won’t have to worry about studying for and taking the exam while working, in particular during their busy seasons, when it’s difficult to find time to study.”

A. Rief Kanan, CPA, professor of auditing and cost accounting, State University of New York at New Paltz

“My opinion is that it ought to all be happening in parallel. Job seeking is a job in and of itself, so that process should occur. Preparation for the CPA exam … finishing their 150 credits, and seeking their first employment should be happening at the same time. That’s an ideal-world scenario, but to the extent that students have done that, they’ve been incredibly successful.”

“We’re encouraging our MBA students for public accountancy to get started on the CPA exam while they’re still graduate students. It helps them coincide their studying habits with the exam-taking process, which I think increases the likelihood of success.”

Lysandra Tetreault, CPA, staff accountant, Sicker, Torchia, Allen & Churchill, CPAs, PC

“I was working and studying simultaneously, and I feel like they crossed into each other most of the time. So, working helped me study, and studying helped me work, especially with the auditing [Auditing and Attestation] section.”

Patricia A. Johnson, CPA, assistant professor of accounting, Canisius College

“I think that’s where a strong internship program comes into play. [So] students don’t have to wait until they’ve finished their senior year. And those internships are definitely where students add value by performing accounting-related work within the company …”

“For our students, audit is a pretty rigorous course, and they want to get that part of the exam over with. And many of them have been successful with getting that section passed before they come back for their fifth year.”

Bethany Metzgar, CPA candidate, senior audit associate, BST & Co. CPAs, LLP

“I’ve really only studied while I’ve been working. Having the ability to apply my clients’ issues and think about them while taking the exam has definitely helped me in audit.”

“I was studying last year for FAR [Financial Accounting and Reporting], and there was a whole section where they talk about when you have to restate prior-year financials, and the very next week I went in and was doing an audit of my client, and we discovered that we had to restate prior-year financials.”

“I would say it’s very symbiotic. It’s just a lot more stress.”
Jeff Elliott, CPA, is the founder of Another71.com, a CPA exam-focused site that attracts more than 100,000 unique visitors a month to its blog, resource-heavy forum, and NINJA CPA Review study courses. There are 35 threads on the front page of the exam forum, and each of them is active on a daily basis; the site averages about 200 posts per day. Elliott lives with his wife and what he describes as his “eight dependency exemptions” in Topeka, Kan. He took the time to respond to questions from NextGen about his company.

What inspired you to enter the accounting field, in general, and to get your CPA, in particular?

When I was in college [Kansas State University], I chose accounting by default because my grandfather earned his accounting degree during the Depression, went on to be CFO of an aircraft manufacturer, and had a successful career. I didn't really know what I wanted to do, so I chose accounting to follow in his footsteps. I decided to pursue the CPA designation because, after I had been in the working world for a few years and had a few tax seasons under my belt, I realized that I was at a huge disadvantage careerwise without it. I started taking night classes while working full time in order to get my 150 hours.

The CPA exam test prep market already has a number of very big players. What inspired you to start your own test prep company? What was missing that you felt you could provide?

I didn't find the market, but rather, the market found me.

I didn't actually intend to start a business when I launched Another71 back in 2008. If I had envisioned it becoming a business someday, I would have named it “passthecpaexamtips.com” or something, instead of after a failing score, which carries some nice irony to it.

You are correct that the marketplaces already had some behemoths in it, so I had to carve out my own niche. Another71 has become the “Facebook of the CPA Exam,” so to speak. It's a gathering place for CPA candidates from a variety of different backgrounds, experiences and review courses. In that regard, I was able to offer something unique to the marketplace.

To this day, Another71 is still the most-visited CPA exam-related site on the Internet, with around 100,000 unique visitors and 1 million page views per month—stats which still surprise me and I'm thankful for. It's the great forum members that make the site what it is.

The popularity of the NINJA materials enabled us to purchase the Bisk CPA Review assets from Thomson Reuters in August 2016, [and] we plan on doing bigger things with [them] in the future.

What was the process of starting this company like? What were the main challenges you needed to overcome?
As I said before, I never intended for it to be a company—it just grew into one by listening to the marketplace and seeing what opportunities exist. Another?I started as a very basic blog. Pretty soon, blog posts had 3,000-plus comments. We said, “OK, we need to add a forum.” There also wasn’t a good audio program out there that would enable people to study during their commute, at the gym, etc., so we made one. There was a huge need for an affordable second test bank for people to study with, so we became an AICPA licensee and launched NINJA MCQ [multiple-choice questions], leveraging some technology that was already in place.

It’s never a good idea to enter a marketplace and offer up a product just because you’ve decided that you deserve to exist. You need to listen and fill the gaps. When there are 10 hot dog vendors along a crowded sidewalk, the last thing people need is yet another hot dog stand.

Instead, maybe you set up a stand with amazing ketchup and mustard to go with those hot dogs, which is what we’ve tried to do. I’ll let other guys roll up with their new hot dog stand and tout the spring water that their hot dogs are boiled in (causing everyone else to start using the same spring water), and stick with serving killer ketchup and mustard and, hopefully, get along with all of the other hot dog vendors in the process.

In what ways did your training as a CPA prepare you for heading this company? In what ways did it not?

Being a CPA definitely helps from the analytical side and for things like cash flow and tax planning. One skill set that I’ve had to learn—and I think it’s one that you can only learn on the job and “in the trenches”—is how to actually run a company, manage vendor relationships, adapt to market changes and deal with increasing competition. For this reason, I don’t think people should get an MBA until they are more seasoned in their careers or have some experience running a company. The education will mean more.

The new version of the CPA exam is set to roll out in the spring. What did you need to change in order to adjust and stay relevant?

The 2017 CPA exam changes aren’t going to be as scary as people think. If you stop and think about it, the same concepts are being tested—and some content is actually being removed—just in a different way. Candidates will see fewer multiple-choice questions, and more simulations on exam day. The multiple choice/simulation ratio will be 50-50 instead of 60-40-ish, as it is now.

BEC [Business Environment and Concepts] is also getting some simulations, but candidates already need to know cost accounting for the MCQ, so a simulation on cost accounting shouldn’t be too bad. It’s still the CPA exam—just a tweak here and there. Pass rates will likely drop as they do whenever there’s a change … but then, things normalize.

How much of an effort was it to adapt your materials to the new test? What were the big challenges?

You’re seeing the big CPA review companies invest a lot of capital into new study software. It’s become an arms race, almost, as they try to out-feature the competition. We are smaller and are adapting accordingly. We’ll be ready.

The new exam is meant to better reflect the sorts of tasks a newly minted CPA is expected to perform in the workplace. Using your own experience as a CPA as a guide, how effective do you think the new exam is in doing this?

It’s difficult for a standardized test to measure something like critical thinking, but the examiners are doing a good job of heading the CPA exam in the right direction. A standardized test adds pressure to the candidate on exam day that isn’t necessarily there in real life, so it’s hard to say if it will effectively gauge a candidate’s competence in these areas. Some really smart people freak out on exam day and wilt under the pressure and do poorly.

From a knowledge-base perspective, studying for the CPA exam is still the most important aspect of the whole experience. In what other setting are you going to force yourself to sit down and learn corporate taxation, unless you actually work in tax? Even then, you learn just enough to do your job, most likely. Exam results aside, it’s the hours and hours of studying that gain you the perspective to be a better CPA.
The CPA Exam According to Exam Ninja Jeff Elliot

Say you were given free rein to design the next version of the CPA exam. What would it look like when you’re done?

JEFF: This is a fun question. Here is what I would do:

**BEC** [Business Environment & Concepts] - Get rid of the IT section and replace it with Excel skill testing.

A shocking number of accountants out there don’t know how to do basic Excel functions like SUMIF [a function for adding cells in a worksheet], VLOOKUP and PivotTables. I would also dump corporate governance and replace it with business valuation. How many newly minted CPAs actually know how to value a business or even what basic valuation metrics are? It sounds absurd, but the answer is “not many,” I’m guessing.

**FAR** [Financial Accounting and Reporting] - IFRS is already being slowly backed down in terms of testing.

I would dump it altogether. GAAP [generally accepted accounting principles] has been adjusted to where the differences between GAAP and IFRS are becoming fewer and fewer. I would drop not-for-profit accounting from FAR. I believe CPA candidates study this just enough to pass and don’t actually retain this information. It’s only relevant to people who work in firms that have not-for-profit clients, and they can learn this on the job. I feel the same way about governmental accounting, but dumping not-for-profit accounting from the CPA exam would be a good start.

Another area would be financial statement preparation. How many newly minted CPAs can put together a set of books?

Sure, they know the concepts, and how to handle a translation gain or loss, but do they know how to create a balance sheet, income statement and statement of cash flows? Again, this sounds absurd, but I don’t think I’m that far off.

More testing on the interstatement flow of information [among] these three financial statements would be good.

I would clear out accounting and replace it with more basic financial statement preparation.

**REG** [Regulation] - I would get rid of a lot of the business law topics in exchange for more tax.

The exceptions would be agency law and contract law. A deeper dive into the minutiae of tax law and actually preparing a Form 1040, 1120, 1065, etc., instead of the business law stuff that people are likely to forget anyway. Under my reign, the REG portion of the CPA exam would look more like the IRS enrolled agent exam.

I probably wouldn’t be very popular with CPA candidates either. 😈

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**EXAMINATION OF A CENTURY**

1896

New York becomes the first state to legally establish the designation of CPA on April 17. The first statewide test is administered by the New York Board of CPA Examiners in December, with three men passing it to receive their CPA certificates.

1917

A uniform CPA exam is administered for the first time by the American Institute of Accountants (AIA) in nine states. It features a mix of multiple-choice and written questions.

1924

President Calvin Coolidge signs the Revenue Act into law, and the CPA profession is officially recognized as a professional classification by the federal government, bolstering the importance of the exam.

1925

34 states administer the uniform exam for the first time.

1952

Pennsylvania is the last state of the then-48 states to discontinue the state exam and adopt the national exam.

1957

The AIA becomes the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA).
THE CPA EXAM TURNS 100 YEARS OLD THIS YEAR. HERE’S A LOOK BACK ON THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE EXAM, AND HOW NEW YORK STATE HELPED LAY ITS FOUNDATION. Edited by Zach Simeone

1994
The CPA exam is restructured, now spanning two days. Students are allowed to use electronic calculators for the first time; they could previously use only paper and pencil, a slide rule or an abacus to do calculations.

2004
The paper version of the CPA exam is discontinued, and the test is computerized. Total testing time: 14 hours.

2011
The exam is administered internationally for the first time, in Japan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

2012
International testing is expanded to Brazil.

2017
Driven by technological advancements like machine learning, and their effects on the day-to-day tasks of newly licensed CPAs, the exam is revised to include a greater emphasis on critical thinking and problem solving.

Historical information obtained from the AICPA; Dale L. Flesher, Gary John Previts and Tonya K. Flesher, “Profiling the New Industrial Professionals: The First CPAs of 1896-97,” Business and Economic History; New York University; the University of Mississippi; and the Journal of Accountancy.

APPs TO HELP YOU STUDY
In this issue, we take a look at how some of the larger exam review providers have incorporated gaming into their updated curricula. Here are some apps that offer interesting ways to study for the exam. By Zach Simeone

Wiley CPA Exam Review
Wiley offers a test bank for each of the four sections of the exam. The FAR test bank offers 1,454 multiple-choice drill questions; the REG test bank features 1,163; the AUD test bank provides 1,032; and the BEC test bank offers 660. Each app costs $59.99. Wiley also offers focus notes for each exam section, which include study cards covering key concepts. Each of these apps costs $34.99.

CPA Mastery
Higher Learning Technologies also offers an app for each of the four sections. The REG app offers 750-plus questions, and the other three offer 800-plus. Each app, which also offers definitions of key terms and a built-in timer, costs $29.99.

CPA Exam Flashcards
Surgent CPA Review’s app allows users to test themselves in two ways: either by looking at a term on one side of the card and recalling its definition (hidden on the other side of the card), or the reverse, using a “Jeopardy!” style of gameplay, as they read the definition and recall the term it’s associated with. There is no charge for this app.

CPA Rivals
For those willing to shell out a modest $4.99, this game allows CPA candidates to compete with other players at schools and accounting firms across the United States by answering questions and uploading their scores to leaderboards.
So, you’ve set your sights on obtaining a CPA license. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to fulfill the profession’s “three Es”: education—in New York, you’ll need 150 hours of it at an accredited college or university; experience—at least a year working under the supervision of a CPA; and the third “E”: exam—you’ll have to pass, with at least a score of 75, the accounting profession’s test of might—the Uniform CPA Examination.

If you’ve decided that you are willing to face seemingly endless hours of study, sleepless nights and feelings of isolation, all in the hopes of being among the 57 percent of candidates who pass the exam, then you’ve come to the right place. You probably also know that starting on April 1, 2017, CPA candidates across the country and around the globe will have a new exam to contend with, one that tests what exam designers refer to as “higher-order cognitive skills,” such as critical thinking, problem solving, analytical ability and professional skepticism.

In order to test these skills, the new exam features more task-based simulations and fewer multiple-choice questions than the previous exam. In order to better illustrate exactly what types of skills and knowledge you will be tested on, and how they are relevant to the tasks that will be expected of you as a newly licensed CPA, the Content Specification Outline (CSO) and Skill Specification Outline (SSO), which are basically what they sound like—outlines of the content and skills tested on the exam, along with how each section is weighted—have also been updated. They are now referred to as “blueprints” attached to each section that are meant to be more informative for candidates, academics, regulators and other stakeholders.

Some things, however, don’t change. It largely boils down to one key difference from the previous exam: more task-based simulations, for a greater emphasis on critical thinking and problem solving. By Zach Simeone

“This was stepping back and saying, ‘What are newly licensed CPAs doing, and how has that evolved?’”

—Richard Gallagher, AICPA director of examination content
you have to pass all four sections of the examination within a rolling 18-month period, which begins and ends at the end of nontesting windows (March 31, June 30, Sept. 30 or Dec. 31). Those who have already passed sections of the previous exam need not worry, as any combination of previous and new sections passed will still count toward licensure, provided they’re taken within the required 18-month window.

Candidates taking the previous exam in March will have to wait only two weeks for their results, while those taking the new exam in April and May will have to wait approximately 10 weeks. This delay is necessary in order to provide sufficient time to statistically validate candidate performance on the new exam, according to the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), the national professional association for CPAs that is also responsible for developing and scoring the CPA exam.

Whether the next section of the exam you take is your first, or you’ve sat for the exam so many times that Prometric could name one of its testing centers after you in your honor, what you need to know about the next CPA exam largely boils down to one key difference from the previous exam: more task-based simulations, for a greater emphasis on critical thinking and problem solving. It’s what the profession needs from new hires, especially now that technology has led to the automation of many tasks that entry-level employees may have been expected to perform in the past.

**A MORE EXPANSIVE REVISION**

The updated exam is the product of careful study by a group of 60 professionals across several disciplines at the AICPA. Along with the AICPA, there are two other parties involved in exam administration: the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA), which represents the licensing authorities in each state and runs the National Candidate Database, and Prometric, the company that runs the testing centers, and delivers and scores the test.

Among the CPAs, psychometricians (professionals who design standardized tests), planning and operations group members, volunteers and Board of Examiners members, was AICPA Director of Examination Content Richard Gallagher, a retired CPA who spent three decades as a partner at Big Four accounting firm Ernst & Young.

“The exam is constantly evolving because standards change, but this was broader,” Gallagher said of this latest revision process. “This was stepping back and saying, ‘What are newly licensed CPAs doing, and how has that evolved?’ So, that was a much more expansive analysis than what had been done prior.”

But is it a more difficult test?

“The new exam, contentwise, has not changed a whole lot,” said Angeline
Brown, director of accounting curriculum at Becker Professional Education, a CPA exam review provider. However, “the shift has definitively been toward more difficult questions, with the purpose being to make sure the exam tests the students’ ability to do the things that are expected of newly licensed CPAs in the modern world.” But Jeff Elliott, the founder of Another71.com—a CPA exam-focused site—and NINJA CPA Review study courses, said that the new exam isn’t going to be “as scary as people think,” adding, “if you stop and think about it, the same concepts are being tested … just in a different way. … Pass rates will likely drop as they do whenever there’s a change … but then, things normalize.” (See story, page 4). Gallagher believes that some people might even find the new exam easier. “I’m not really good at memorizing things, but I’m a good problem solver,” he said. “So, I’d probably do better on this exam.” While task-based simulations are better at testing higher-order thinking, multiple-choice questions provide a greater variety of data about a candidate’s skill level, as well as more data within a testing period, due to the shorter format, said AICPA Director of Psychometrics and Research John Mattar. “With multiple-choice questions, they’re all independent of each other, so they can be on different topics,” Mattar said, while simulations pose a set of questions within a single situation. “So, you can test the same number of questions, but the main difference in terms of content coverage is [that] a simulation is going to be about one fact pattern, and one specific set of facts. A simulation is an integrat ed thing, so you don’t have as much flexibility. You don’t have as many degrees of freedom to cover different aspects of accounting.” As noted above, the AICPA’s CSOs and SSOs for the exam have been replaced with what are now referred to as CPA exam “blueprints.” The CSOs listed the topics covered in each section of the exam, while the SSOs separately described the general skills being tested. “The blueprint brings those both together and, for every topic in the content outline, it gives you two pieces of info: … the skill level for that piece of content and … one or more representative task[s] that a CPA might have to perform related to that topic,” explained Mattar. The top of each blueprint provides the scoring weight for each skill level to be tested in a particular section, before leading into a chart that lists relevant tasks and the corresponding skill level. For instance, the AUD (Auditing and Attestation) section tests understanding of internal controls. At the “analysis” level, exam takers must identify the internal controls most relevant to an audit of a company’s financial statements, or an examination of its internal controls; at the “evaluation” level, they must determine if those internal controls are effectively designed. An increase in the number of simulations requires additional time both to create the simulations and to administer them to students, leading to a longer and more expensive exam. This year’s changes, then, also come with a higher price tag. The total cost for all four sections of the previous exam, including the $150 fee for first-time test takers, was $884.10. But with the BEC (Business Environment and Concepts) and REG (Regulation) sections increasing from three to four hours, the costs for those two sections will increase as well, bringing the total to $923.80, according to NASBA.
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—David J. Moynihan, NYSSCPA President, 2009-2010

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HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING THE FACE OF EXAM PREP

By Zach Simeone

CPA firm owners are integrating—and even reorganizing—their practices around advances in big data and artificial intelligence (AI). Using these technologies, firms can automate data collection and analytics and, ultimately, transform auditing itself, as AI can discover data patterns and identify red flags that only humans had the ability to recognize before.

These benefits aren’t limited to client services. In fact, a number of exam review providers are harnessing the power of AI to incorporate adaptive learning into CPA exam prep, along with gamification. Some of the most recognized names in the business talked to NextGen about how their companies are implementing these new technologies.
GAME-BASED LEARNING

“The concept of game-based learning has been around for quite some time,” said Ramin Nadaf, vice president of course development at CPA exam prep firm Becker Professional Education. “It has been adopted fairly widely in K-12 education, but higher education has been a little slower to adopt it.”

But would it work for a professional-level exam? To find out, Becker’s parent company, DeVry Education Group, began by conducting a pilot test through its program at Chamberlain College of Nursing in Downers Grove, Ill. Pharmacology candidates used the game “Pharma College” to learn about medications by answering multiple-choice questions on which drugs, and in what doses, should be administered to virtual patients at a hospital, based on their height, weight, age and other factors.

The ultimate goal is to get their patients healthy enough to send home, sometimes with a prescription in hand.

“During our pilot, we saw a lot of positive student outcome,” Nadaf said. “Seven out of 10 of our students who participated and used the game said it helped their learning; almost half of them said that it made the class more fun.” The game was also named as a finalist in the 2015 Software & Information Industry Association (SIIA) CODiE Awards.

As a result of its success, DeVry decided to form a company for internal game development: DeVry Play. And in the fall of 2016, DeVry Play produced “Accounting for Empires.” Accounting Today has since named the game as one of the top new products of 2017, and an updated version is to be released in mid-March for the new CPA exam.

Through the traditional top-down, bird’s-eye view perspective found in most real-time strategy games (think “Civilization” or “Warcraft”), players answer increasingly difficult accounting-related questions to gain the points necessary to build banks, universities and markets. As they progress through nearly 140 hours of gameplay, the construction process becomes faster and more efficient, allowing their empire and accounting knowledge to grow, until the candidate’s ultimate moment of glory: passing the exam.

MINIMIZING ISOLATION

Game participation is optional for Becker enrollees, but course leaders encourage candidates as a means of connecting with other students by challenging other players within the game, or even forming alliances. This was intended to help students overcome common feelings of isolation among those who use the self-study modality to prepare for the CPA exam. According to Angelina Brown, director of accounting curriculum for Becker, alleviating isolation was a motivating factor in the creation of the game. Only students enrolled in Becker’s program can access the full game; a free demo version is accessible to everyone, but it does not include the multiplayer component.

“Part of the point of the game was to help them out of that dark place, and since so many of them are isolated, the idea behind a real-time strategy game where students could choose to team up with each other … was a way for our students to minimize that isolation,” Brown said. “The linkage was really the idea that accumulating resources, or the drive to accumulate resources, would help drive our students to work through the questions. Real-time strategy also gave us that form where students could team up, or challenge other students.”

Nadaf noted that choosing the genre for each game is a fairly intensive process at DeVry.

“Our game designers meet frequently with the curriculum team, the faculty and, in the case of the CPA game, our program management team,” he said. “And they try to understand, ’What are the challenges we’re trying to solve with a game?’ And then, they provide some options for gameplay mechanics, and there’s a discussion among stakeholders, and a final decision is made on the game mechanics.”

Meanwhile, Yaeger CPA Review’s adaptive-learning platform, AdaptaPASS, offers its own gaming component, albeit one a bit less strategy focused than “Accounting for Empires.”

By signing into AdaptaPASS from a Web browser and accessing the Gaming Network, “Students earn points for answering questions correctly, and are awarded trophies for various categories—time, speed, accuracy, etc.,” said Sonny Cox, director of support at Yaeger.

INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING

Surgent CPA Review and other review providers are using adaptive algorithms to produce tailored curricula for individualized learning. In order for these algorithms to work, customers take a multiple-choice assessment test, wherein they demonstrate their current body of knowledge by answering accounting-related questions.

“The software figures out what they need to learn next, based on how they answered on that assessment test,” said Sean Mullen, vice president of sales for Surgent. “Then, we know which videos they need to watch, and which parts of the book they need to read. More importantly, we know which videos we can eliminate, and which parts of the book we need to eliminate. So, we’re cutting down on that time.”

Surgent saw the development of this technology, which it has branded A.S.A.P. (Adaptive Study and Accelerated Performance), as an essential means of improving efficiency.

“Surgent is flooded with customers who have used one course or another to pass an exam section, only to lose that conditional credit later because they could not get through the additional exam sections within 18 months,” Mullen said. Mullen bought a continuing-education company called MicroMash in 1993 and built it into
ExamMatrix, which was later acquired by Surgent. “So, we had to adapt a learning algorithm, and now, we use adaptive learning and course mapping.” Following the assessment, the program continues to adapt, based on a student’s progress.

“So, with this new exam, and increased emphasis on task-based simulations, studying for the exam is going to take even longer,” Mullen said. He believes that Surgent’s approach will be more widely adopted by other exam review providers.

Indeed, Yaeger and Becker have adopted similar methods, using adaptive learning for a “one-size-fits-one” approach. After students take an assessment test, Yaeger’s AdaptaPASS software customizes their curricula with questions focusing on the areas where they need work, supported by more than 100 hours of video and audio lectures. Should students prefer to identify their own problem areas, Yaeger’s TestBank exam simulator allows them to create their own test, right down to the number of questions and the specific topics covered.

Becker’s new platform, which includes its cutting-edge Adapt2U software, is the product of a near $3 million investment and more than a year’s worth of work. “We built a really top-class analytics engine, and we introduced new features like preassessments to gain an understanding of each student,” Nadaf said. It’s “highly engaging, highly interactive technology. Taking this one-dimensional study and making it multidimensional and interactive is really among our major advances in our courses.”

Nadaf, who has been with Becker for nearly three decades and working, specifically, with course technology since 1992, called the new program “our most advanced and sophisticated course we will have ever produced so far. Interactive environments, leveraging touchscreen technology.” And, “with the modular design and data analytics, we are well on our way to real individualized learning. It has the voice of the student, from the ground up.”
THREE MONTHS BEFORE THE TEST

Hit the books. “There isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach for studying for the CPA exam. You need to find the approach that best fits your study style and a plan that you can stick to,” said Rebecca Blough, senior manager–college and university initiatives, at the AICPA. [The AICPA, in partnership with the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA), develops, administers and scores the test.]

“The exam will be changing [in April], so make sure you review the exam blueprints to determine what your best study plan would be,” she said. “A good starting point for a study schedule would be to allot 100 hours per section, but you’ll want to adjust that for the topics covered under each section and how comfortable you are with that content.”

For example, if you’re currently working in audit, you probably won’t have to put as much effort into studying for that section as you would for others. The AICPA doesn’t endorse any one review method or course, though it does suggest that test takers ask faculty members or colleagues for recommendations. “Many exam passers recommend treating exam studies like a job,” said Blough. “It wouldn’t be acceptable to show up two hours late for your work shift, and the same should apply to the hours you’ve scheduled for your study time. Your family and friends should also know your study schedule so that they can support you in achieving those passing scores.”

ONE MONTH BEFORE THE TEST

1. Schedule your first section at www.prometric.com/cpa. The AICPA recommends that you sign up for your first section 45 days in advance of your preferred date, for reasons both practical (you’ll have a better shot at getting your requested date) and psychological (it gives you a hard target to shoot for). Testing windows fall within the first two months of each calendar quarter, and the AICPA suggests candidates consider asking for a spot in the first month, if possible, to cut down on any last-minute changes or unexpected events that may come up at the end of a testing window. Another helpful scheduling tip: Consider scheduling your test for a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. Not only will it increase your odds of getting your requested date, but the testing center may also be less hectic at that time.

2. Take the tutorial and sample test (several times, if needed) at www.cpa-exam.org. This exercise may not necessarily help you in terms of content, but it will help you to become familiar with the format, so that you won’t be caught off guard.
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# Pace Yourself

**30 MINUTES BEFORE THE TEST**

1. Ditch your coffee and bagel. No food or beverages are allowed in the test center, so be sure to have a solid breakfast at home.

2. Grab your two forms of ID and your Notice to Schedule, or NTS (you won’t be able to take the test without it), and get to the test center a half hour early. The AICPA suggests that you have your Exam Section ID out (it’s provided on your NTS), once you’re at your workstation.

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**WHAT TO DO DURING THE TEST**

1. Remember, there’s a difference between examination testing time (the time allotted for the examination section) and your appointment time (the extra 30 minutes allotted for entering the launch code, reading the intro screens and taking the exam survey). You won’t be able to tack on any of your appointment time to testing.

2. If you experience any equipment issues, report them right away. For other problems, contact NASBA within five days of the appointment at candidatecare@nasba.org.

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**Is there an ideal time to take the test?**

Opinions vary (see story, page 3), but sooner is usually better. If you take the test soon after college, not only are you likely to have more time to devote to studying, but also, you may be able to better recall what you’ve learned from a wide variety of accounting courses. Once you start working, you will tend to specialize in one area. That may be good for, say, the audit section of the test. But your memory of other subjects may begin to fade–for example, you probably wouldn’t think about international tax law unless you had to. In addition, if you take the test right out of college, you’ll still have a strong set of study skills that will come in handy.

For more info about the test, visit:

- [www.nasba.org](http://www.nasba.org) for information about the exam application process.
- [www.aicpa.org/cpa-exam](http://www.aicpa.org/cpa-exam) for information about the content or scoring of the exam.
- [www.prometric.com/cpa](http://www.prometric.com/cpa) for information about scheduling the exam.
DID YOU KNOW?

“Employees who received mentoring were promoted five times more often than people who didn’t have mentors.” —Forbes

Mentor MATCH

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WHAT IS MENTOR MATCH?
The Mentor Match Program is an exclusive program for NYSSCPA members. The Mentor Match Program pairs early career professionals with experienced professionals across the state.

Mentees receive invaluable guidance and perspective from established professionals. This is the kind of support that gets your career moving in the right direction and sets you on a course to achieve your professional goals.

DETAILS
Mentors and mentees meet at least once each month or eight times during the course of the Mentor Match Program. Mentors and mentees can meet in person, by phone, or by video chat.

Mentoring pairs are given discussion topics and guidelines to help facilitate a productive and rewarding relationship for both parties.

HAVE QUESTIONS?
For more information, please contact Stephanie Doctor, NextGen Program Administrator, at 212-719-8418, or email mentormatch@nysscpa.org.
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» You will study LESS and pass FASTER
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