ABOUT SOFTWARE REVIEWS

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Participants
Jean Pouit (Review Writer)
Southtech Ltd (Vendor)
Customers
(all in Bangladesh):
Anonymous ***
SSFB ****
Anonymous ****
PBK ****

INSTITUTIONAL FIT

- **Size**: Designed for small to large MFIs in Bangladesh
- **Budget**: Inexpensive, USD1,500 per branch + USD 200 per additional user
- **IT Expertise Required**: No expertise required for the end user; database administration is simple for the administrator with SQL server (more complex with Oracle)
- **Functionality**: The full range of microfinance services (client management, savings, loans, deposits, accounting) expandable to Southtech’s own bank solution

SUMMARY

Country of Product Development: Bangladesh
Number of MFIs where the software has been implemented: 4 MFIs in Bangladesh (including BRAC with 4 million borrowers) + 1 MFI in Bhutan (ongoing project)

**Pros**:
- Excellent quality of service, as noted by users
- Serving BRAC, one of the largest MFIs in the world
- Latest Microsoft technology (Dot Net) from a Gold certified partner
- Good knowledge of Microfinance and merging Ascend with their full banking solution

**Cons**:
- Not installed outside Bangladesh, except for Bhutan, which is an ongoing project only
- MFI needs are not necessarily similar to BRAC which stays the priority of the provider
- No interface to the best accounting packages but export in Excel or MS Access possible; and the internal accounting module is satisfactory to most of the users
- Help is very basic and is not accessible from within the screens
Functionality: (∗∗∗) While Ascend has been built primarily to serve group-lending users but it can serve also individual borrowers. The filtering by organization category and project at the beginning of every transaction will not necessarily fit for all MFIs. However, Ascend does not have any major functional gaps. Microfinance: Security Administration, Loan Disbursement, Loan Management, Interest Calculation, Cheque Management, Smart Card Management, Pocket PC Management, Audit and Decision support. Bank (not included in the Microfinance license below): Head Office Central Control Module, Security Administration Module (HO/branch), Accounting Module (HO and Branches), Remittance Module (HO and Branch), Treasury Module, Customer Database Module, Deposit Account Module, Loans & Advances Module, Trade Finance Module, Cash Management Module, Cheque Management Module. The technology and consolidation modules allow any configuration from both offline and online branches. In case of offline branches, only differential data are sent over the network

Ease of Use: (∗) Ascend is fairly easy to use for a MFI with processes similar to BRAC. Unfortunately, online help is not accessible when filling a screen (modal windows). The English operation manual (originally in Bengali) is limited but is currently upgraded for the first foreign customer. However, with the training provided, the interface is very user friendly. The interface is sometimes unpredictable: the same click can often return a fail screen with no consequences and work 2 seconds later. Some bugs are present in the demo version used for the evaluation but none have been noticed by users.

Management Reporting: (∗∗∗) There is a good set of reports that are clear and well-conceived. Crystal reports provides a complementary report generator at the administrator level (not included). Does not include reporting to central banks outside Bangladesh.

Services: (∗∗∗) Southtech has been ISO 9001 certified for the third consecutive year. The firm provides very good service to its current customers but is not fully prepared to serve customers abroad.

Technical Capabilities: (∗∗∗∗) Instead of choosing an open architecture, Southtech has a high level of expertise in a promising, low-cost, web-enabling Microsoft technology (Dot Net). Southtech Ltd even provides the ability to choose Oracle instead of SQL server as a database. This architecture requires powerful PCs (PII 500 at least, preferably with 256 MB RAM). Ascend has demonstrated its ability to serve the largest MFIs through BRAC.

INSTALLATIONS (BY REGION)

South Asia (5)

See Product Specifications (RFI) for installations by country
COST SUMMARY

- License: USD 1,500 per branch (plus USD 200 per additional license) with a 15% annual maintenance. Cost per transaction: USD 0.66 cent over 3 years.
- Training included per branch license: 4 days for 4 users + 7 days for 1 system administrator.
- Programming: USD 25 per hour.

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