Buyer's Checklist for Workflow Automation

Does your firm need workflow automation?

This white paper was created in partnership with Joseph P. Manzelli Jr. CPA.CITP, Director of Operations

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Overview

As public accounting firms move to a more efficient digital environment, workflow automation has emerged as an essential category of technology to manage work processes. A good workflow automation platform also helps employees at all levels of the organization work more effectively. Key benefits can include increasing efficiency, productivity, and work flexibility; improving employee and client satisfaction; and ensuring greater control and compliance.

The key drivers of a firm's decision to investigate workflow automation generally involve one or more of the following factors:

- The need for management reports that provide data for planning, resource balancing, and client service.

- The need to standardize and automate daily work processes within a particular practice area and across all departments.

- The need to effectively "route" work in a digital environment.

- The need for real-time access to actionable knowledge and work status.

- The need to empower staff to manage and prioritize their individual deliverables.

- The need to empower managers, supervisors and partners to manage teams, meet deadlines, and deliver responsive client service.

Checklist Overview

Specific capabilities or attributes in some or all of the following areas will be important to most firms:

- ☑ Process customization, standardization, and automation
- ☑ Knowledge management
- ☑ Accountability
- ☑ Individual work management
- ☑ Resource management and team collaboration
- ☑ Compliance and quality control
- ☑ Ease-of-use and scalability
- ☑ Implementation and training
- ☑ System consideration, integration and management
- ☑ Cost

When you're ready to research workflow automation…

Before you begin evaluating vendors, evaluate your firm and your existing processes. Identify the goals and objectives of your workflow automation initiative. Determine your resources and budget, including the staff you'll need to oversee the effort in various stages.

About the Author

Joseph P. Manzelli Jr. CPA.CITP, is the Director of Operations at New York City-based Fuoco Group, where he is responsible for leading the firm's information technology consulting group (**Fuoco Technology of NY:** www.fuocotech.com) and Fuoco's internal strategic IT initiatives. Mr. Manzelli has successfully managed the firm's move toward a completely digital operation, a key strategy that has helped Fuoco Group achieve rapid growth over the past five years. He is a frequent speaker and consultant on paperless initiatives and **virtualization for better use of cloud computing.**

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Evaluate what you already do that can be automated immediately and which point tools (or spreadsheets) you already use that could be bundled into an automated solution. Consider which capabilities you'd like to acquire, and determine in which areas such a solution could have an immediate positive impact (note: some firms will automate high volume processes, while others will automate an entire department first). Consider your firm's culture as well in determining the best approach to standardizing and automating workflow (see Building Your Bullet-Proof Plan for Paperless Practices).

When you've determined your organization's objectives, requirements, and opportunities, you're ready to evaluate solutions and vendors.

A checklist for evaluating workflow automation solutions

Fuoco Group has compiled a checklist to assist you in comparing features and evaluating vendors. We hope it assists you in making the best decision for your firm.

Sample Automation Goals

- Reduce time spent on non-billable activities and value-less process steps

- Realize efficiencies and time savings at all levels; improve overall productivity

- More effectively manage resources and identify opportunities to develop talent

- Improve process control and compliance

- Establish a completely digital work process

- Proactively identify and address potential bottlenecks to effective processing

- Streamline management reporting and analysis

- Improve employee satisfaction through better balance and work flexibility

- Gain insight needed for more responsive client service

1. Process customization, standardization and automation

Firms can significantly boost productivity with a consistent, streamlined workflow that's automated according to your firm's established procedures and user roles.

☑ Does the system provide a pre-defined list of statuses for each department that can be easily turned on or off to suit your needs?

☑ Can your firm define your own statuses in the system?

☑ Does the system allow for both linear and horizontal processes?

☑ Does the system enable you to map workflows, and have the capability to lock or allow deviations for individual project types?

☑ Does the system allow you to set quality control alerts?

☑ Can you automate the creation of regularly occurring projects according to a pre-defined time table (i.e., bookkeeping work)?

☑ Can you move more than one project at once, for easy work re-assignment or for bulk processes such as e-filing?

☑ Does the system have the ability to automatically set up a new project for the next fiscal year upon completion of the current year's work?

2. Knowledge Management

Centralizing project-specific knowledge and information reduces time wasted searching for data essential to work completion. A real-time view of all work firm-wide is essential to effective client service, and project and resource management.

☑ Does the system feature robust reporting capabilities, including both standard and firm-defined reports?

☑ Can the system generate exception and/or bottleneck reports?

☑ Can staff easily access project-related files from within the workflow system?

☑ Does the system allow you to search and act on data related to work management, resource management, and client service (the whole client base or individual client)?

☑ Is there a place to store client or project specific information that's easily accessible when the project is being worked on?

☑ Is there a place to post questions and review points and the responses?

☑ Can you choose to carry specific project information forward for access the following period?

☑ Is there an easy way to permanently delete project notes you do not wish to keep?

☑ Is it possible to search on more than the current year's work to perform annual comparisons to measure the firm's, a department's, or an individual's progress?

3. Accountability

The ability to easily view the status of projects helps to establish and reinforce individual accountability, which helps management develop staff.

☑ Does the system automatically capture status information related to a project – who worked on it, when, how long did they have it, what did they do with it, etc.?

☑ Can management view the status of a specific job, all work in progress, and open items or questions?

☑ Does management have the ability to define system user rights at the individual or group level to restrict certain views or actions?

4. Individual Work Management

Workflow systems empower users to gain greater control over their individual workload – helping users to effectively manage and prioritize their work to improve productivity.

☑ Does the system allow you to organize, assign difficulty level and prioritize work on project-by-project basis?

☑ Does the system allow you to see who has open hours for more effective work assignment or scheduling?

☑ Can you define roles, skills and expertise on an individual or group basis within the system to easily assign work according to the individual's abilities?

☑ Does the system feature a personalized view of assignments for each user?

☑ Does the bystem aid the user in compiling his/her daily time summary?

5. Resource Management & Team Collaboration

By its nature, a workflow system should facilitate team collaboration, and by automatically capturing information about the process it can also empower more effective resource management.

☑ Can users share information and move assignments to colleagues easily within the system?

☑ Does the system allow for easy cross-team collaboration?

☑ Can users easily post and address questions and review points related to a specific project in the system?

☑ Does the system support real-time workload balancing? Can you re-assign or move several projects at once?

☑ Does the system have the ability to incorporate or integrate scheduling data?

☑ Is it possible to assign work based on open hours and/or calendar-based availability from within the system?

☑ Does the system have the ability to incorporate or integrate budgeting data?

6. Compliance and Quality Control

Standardizing and automating processes helps firms ensure compliance with both internal and fiduciary deadlines and requirements, as well as maintain quality control.

☑ Can the system automatically track the status and path of projects?

☑ Does the system feature full due date management capabilities, including support for statutory and firm-specific deadlines?

☑ Does the system have Sign-Off capabilities? Are they customizable by department and/or type of project?

☑ Does the system allow you to set up quality control checks and exception alerts?

☑ Does the system allow you to also set internal deadlines and anticipated delivery dates?

☑ Can users easily track the extension process?

☑ Does the system support e-file management, including the ability to track and monitor the e-file process?

☑ Can users easily define checklists that are automatically generated for different project types?

☑ Can firms set up the system to automatically roll, retain or purge project-related notes according to firm policy?

7. Ease of Use and Scalability

Though effectively addressing change management issues is a key component of any successful technology initiative, systems that are too complex or hard to use simply won't get used. True usability is the result of building a platform from the ground up with ease of use as a key design principle; it reflects the vision and purpose of the vendor's leadership. Things to look for include:

☑ A clean, simple, intuitive interface

☑ The platform is designed in a logical manner

☑ The learning curve is small, and value is derived quickly by all users

☑ Easily adaptable to your current processes, with the ability to enhance and improve those processes over time

☑ The platform is flexible and scalable to allow you to easily build on your initial roll out to add new processes, departments, or entire offices

☑ Strikes a good balance between out-of-the-box function and the flexibility to customize

8. Implementation and Training

A complex workflow automation system can take a significant amount of time to implement, and may involve significant IT resources. Similarly, the more complicated it is, the more likely that you'll need extensive training, further lengthening your roll out. Factors to consider include:

☑ The complexity of infrastructure deployment and administration

☑ Customary implementation times: Does it take the average firm weeks or months? Does your environment fit a common implementation profile?

☑ The need for heavy IT involvement, in both implementation and maintenance

☑ Training required for users to gain facility and actually manage projects – does it take weeks, days or hours?

☑ Is there ongoing training to promote usage and best practices? Is there an online user forum, or other best practice sharing opportunities (i.e., conferences, seminars)?

☑ Is training only offered as a one-size fits all? Or, are there options designed to fit your firm's unique needs?

☑ Will your team have access to live vendor training and support options?

☑ Are there dedicated support resources for the workflow software? Or, do questions get triaged through a larger customer service pipeline?

☑ How often are features upgraded or new features added? Is there training available, and will it cost or is it free?

☑ What's the vendor's reputation? Talk to existing clients to gauge third-party credibility.

9. System Considerations, Integration and Management

Availability, performance and the ability to manage all types of processes easily from one platform are critical components for most firms. Considerations:

☑ Does the vendor have a proven track-record on security, performance and system up-time?

☑ Is the system easy to maintain? What time or resources are required on the firm's part to manage enhancements?

☑ How accessible is the system? Does it support remote users easily?

☑ Does the vendor offer mobile access to some or all of the system's functionality?

☑ How time-consuming is system/process set-up? Does the vendor offer services to help facilitate or guide this function?

☑ Can the firm easily add new users? Can the firm control user access and permissions?

☑ Does the system support a multi-office environment (as distinct from simply providing access to remote users)?

☑ What's the system's reputation as a whole firm solution? Does the system support all practice areas' project needs out of the box?

☑ Does the system support a completely digital work environment?

☑ Are there integration points with the firm's document management software or electronic filing system?

☑ Are there integration points with the firm's practice management software? Is it easy to upload client and project data?

10. Cost

The total cost of a workflow automation system can't be accurately calculated until enough time has passed so that return on investment can be measured against acquisition and maintenance costs. That said, there are issues involved in the total cost of acquisition that can be calculated and weighed before purchase. Factors to consider include:

☑ Base-product pricing; purchase or subscription; controllable, predictable factors

☑ Length of contract

☑ Availability and price of optional capabilities

☑ Administrative costs, including internal IT costs, support contracts, or consultants

☑ Training costs

☑ The potential effect on head count and overtime

☑ The potential effect on departmental efficiency and user productivity

Summary

There is no one-size-fits-all "best" workflow automation system. Organizations vary in culture, size, structure, processes, technology investments and resources, among other things. The best choice is usually the platform that fits your firm's culture, empowers you to meet your current goals, while being scalable enough to meet your firm's needs as you continue to grow and evolve.