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Jan. 01, 2008

From the Jan./Mar. 2008 Issue

Practicing public accountants wear many hats, providing small businesses and individuals with services ranging from tax compliance, to corporate establishment, payroll, business management, financial planning and generational wealth transfer. Along with dozens more traditional and niche services, another common client need has played a large role in shaping the services many professional firms provide: technology consulting. And although helping a client determine the best or most appropriate tech solution to their business needs may not immediately synch with many people's definition of a professional public accountant, it often makes perfect sense.

For the owners of many small and mid-sized businesses, their public accountant acts essentially as a CFO, providing all of the hardcore financial analysis and planning advice, while also managing write-up and other reconciliation activities.

In short, these business owners know the intricacies of their particular industry and may even be experts in their field, but very few are as skilled with accounting and financial subjects. They value their professional accountant when it comes to these functions and, naturally, also turn to their financial advisor for advice on selecting and implementing their financial applications.

Benefits of the Tech Advisor Role

In addition to strengthening the relationship by helping clients to more effectively and efficiently run their own businesses, several other benefits come from recommending and helping them implement these technologies. Foremost for many practices,

especially for write-up and tax clients, is the advantage of integration. In

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- Data integration saves time, improves client service
- Strengthened client relationship
- Free or discounted software from vendors
- Free or discounted training from vendors
- Additional revenue stream

As familiarity with these client-side programs increases, and often through free or discounted training provided to professional accountants, practices often grow to specifically offer consulting and implementation services. In many larger practices, this has evolved into separate departments for these functions.

Of course, every accountant and every firm has a different level of interest in providing any tech consulting services. So a variety of options are available, from recommender-only, to program reseller, to certified consultant programs, with each offering different benefits to practitioners.

Programs Available for Professionals

Not surprisingly, technology vendors have recognized the important role that accountants play in advising small businesses, and many have established programs specifically geared toward accountants. Sure, these companies are looking to expand their sales bases by going through the professional accountant, but financial motivation often drives great innovation, and these programs generally provide benefits to all parties: clients, professional practices and the vendor.

The kinds of programs and specific benefits available to professional firms vary greatly depending upon the type of software and specific vendors. The major off-the-shelf bookkeeping programs for small businesses all offer advisory-level programs. These include the ProAdvisor program for Intuit's QuickBooks,

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Examples include reseller programs from the likes of AccuFund, Blackbaud, Management

Information Systems Inc., Open Systems, Red Wing Software and Serenic Software. Business consulting programs and risk and control management partner programs are also available through vendors like Transition One, who provides compliance and performance management solutions to help organizations identify, manage and monitor business practices to ensure Sarbanes-Oxley compliance.

Finding the Right Solution

As a small or mid-sized business' most trusted financial advisor, finding the solution that meets a business' specific needs the best is always the primary consideration. But making the decision to recommend specific programs to clients can help a professional practice provide clients with better service, while also improving workflow in the practice. The bottom line is that through reseller, partner and advisor/recommender programs, accounting professionals have increased training and support resources, and they can also develop a new revenue stream. This helps serve the client and can also strengthen the practice.

Advisory • Technology

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