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Voltaire, the eighteenth century French philosopher, once penned what's now morphed into a 21st century management maxim — "perfection is the enemy of progress." Unfortunately, many tax and accounting firms today (actually many, many, many, but that sort of repetition wouldn't be good writing, so I'll avoid it) cling to old business practices while defending that modern, updated systems "aren't perfect" so "we'll wait." And wait. And wait. Meanwhile, those in the industry that provide tools to our profession move faster and faster, and whole new genres of products and services become available every year. And while smart firms adopt these new systems and adapt their business rules to take advantage of them, the majority of firms [sigh] seem to avoid change at all cost. Thus, we have the old, "How many accountants does it take to change a light bulb?" joke, and its stinging punch line, "Change? There'll be no change, we're accountants!"

One veteran software publisher executive recently included his updated version of Voltaire's often-quoted thought. Thomson Tax & Accounting's Jon Baron opined in his User Conference keynote that "first is best," further explaining that his vision includes delivering great tools in a timely fashion. His example: Creative Solutions' Practice CS, a completely new, redesigned from the bottom up practice management product that takes full advantage of Microsoft's new .NET secret sauce and clearly the first of what promises to be a new genre of product for those practicing public accounting. Practice CS provides highly customizable "digital dashboards" and promises to forever change the old "time and billing" paradigm. Another "first

to market" leader in the practice management space is Commercial Logic's

CCH's CEO Kevin Robert has repeatedly demonstrated his group's penchant for acquisition and quick integration. But when they bought ePace several years ago and rolled it out as ProSystem fx Engagement, the product met a similar adoption rate. Very clearly first to market, it provided its users with tremendous efficiencies. Yet, to date, this and its few-years-later-to-market competitor from Thomson, Engagement CS, have yet to claim even a quarter of the market. The rest of the firms, it seems, are content to pass on good and continue to wait for perfect. And wait. And wait.

And what does the wait cost? Well, for those early adopter firms, it costs nothing. In fact, for them, their peers' reticence to move forward is actually a competitive advantage! The 2006 PCPS/TSCPA MAP Survey recently concluded its 2006 data gathering phase, and the results are being tabulated as I write this column. My prediction is that, once released, they'll again demonstrate an ever widening divide between the upper quartile of highly productive (read highly profitable!) firms and "the rest." I first looked at these numbers four years ago and found the gap astonishing. Two years ago (the survey is biannual), much to my amazement, the gap widened. The upper quartile practitioners actually work slightly less (3 percent — not huge, but it's an extra seven or eight days of vacation, and heading into my 35th busy season that sounds pretty nice to this old bean counter!) than their colleagues in the "average" pool while earning a spectacular 65 percent more money!

So why the great divide? I submit that it's both nature and nurture. As conservative and cautious beings, we're led to the profession (nature) where we're taught skepticism, suspicion and wariness (nurture). And while our clients often value these traits, they usually don't serve us well

as business people because, as a group, we tend to lag in implementation. But

they hear about and covet when you send them to training sessions. (Wait a minute. You DO send them to training sessions, right?) Ask you peers. Ask your suppliers. Our profession is blessed to be served by truly excellent vendors that understand practice. Ask them what you might be missing.

I recently attended annual user conferences of ~600+ CCH users, then ~800 Thomson Creative Solutions users, and finally >500 Intuit QuickBooks users. I found that all three groups were engaged and excited and were taking in all the training and instruction the respective vendors could provide. And in return they were pushing and challenging those vendors to provide more and better solutions.
It's a virtuous circle. Together we're better and smarter than any of us is alone.

P.S. — A couple more thoughts: If you're not employing a true practice management system, make it your first priority after busy season. And if any of your engagements entail a trial balance, you really should look at engagement software. Really!

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Mr. LaFollette is Executive Editor of The CPA Technology Advisor. He was a Tax & Technology partner in a large local firm for 23 years, and VP of Product Strategy for a major tax and accounting software developer for five years. He is the President and CEO of Accounting Technology Resource Network, LLC and can be reached at greg.lafollette@cygnuspub.com. He also publishes the tax and accounting blog at www.TheTechGap.com.

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