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*From the Sept. 2009 Issue*

Today's business world continues to drive towards "less paper" technologies for every aspect of customer service and product delivery, which is being pushed even further with today's environmentally friendly "green" initiatives. Tax and accounting firms have gotten on board by providing digital copies of tax returns and financial reports, as well as receiving client source documents electronically by using a variety of solutions including email, digital faxes, CDs, USB flash drives, and Internet-based file transfer tools. Each of these solutions has unique administrative, technical and security challenges, so firms must work to standardize their digital delivery approach to a solution that can be used effectively by all departments.

According to a Client Transfer Survey conducted by the [Association for Accounting Administration](#) (AAA) last year, 77 percent of firms emailed their clients confidential documents, but only 41 percent used any kind of encryption or passwords. With privacy regulations getting tighter and requiring more administrative processes to utilize email, firms are looking for secure and easy-to-use solutions to transfer files to and from clients, which points towards utilizing today's client portal solutions.

A client portal is a secure file directory that can be accessed via an Internet-enabled workstation so that files can be viewed and/or transferred between the firm and the client. Firms can use a portal in a variety of ways, such as publishing a tax return to the portal and then providing the client a link (usually via email) so they can access it after putting in a password. The portal can also be setup to allow the client to upload working documents such as a QuickBooks file that is too large for their email system to handle, which is often referred to as an FTP or File Transfer Protocol site. The latest versions of portals

can be set up to link to “live” information, such as those used

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document management system (DMS) that already has an integrated portal solution, which would be our first choice for a firm portal. Firm personnel are usually comfortable with the menu structure of the DMS, and adding the portal usually requires the least amount of administrative time to setup and train all end users.

The second “bucket” would be the Internet-hosted solutions, which would cover stand-alone and hosted solutions. Stand-alone providers such as ShareFile ([www.sharefile.com](http://www.sharefile.com))

and LeapFile ([www.leapfile.com](http://www.leapfile.com))

allow firms to integrate a link from within the firm's website or go directly to the provider for transferring files. These commercial products are among the most secure, but they can take a higher level of technical skill for the firm to set up and the client to utilize. Within this group is also the accounting vendor hosted providers such as Thomson Reuters and CCH, a Wolters Kluwer business

(which are usually integrated with their web-based DMS), and the outsourced tax and accounting firm website hosting companies that provide firms with content, calculators and often a portal.

Firms can go to [websites4Accountants.com](http://websites4Accountants.com)

to see a listing of these providers that include portals. These solutions are usually the most cost effective from a firmwide view and can be scaled up from a few users to hosting a portal for every client in the firm. Please note that the firm should take a look at the anticipated volume of clients and data capacity needed for the portal as the cost is very dependent on these factors. The 2008 AAA Study found that the vast majority of firms with portals had set up individual sites for less than 10 percent of their overall client count (though this was expected to grow).

The final portal bucket is for those larger firms that have sophisticated

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or prior to making a selection.

**Ease of Setup:** What does it take to set up a client for the portal the very first time? Two-thirds of AAA firms in the survey utilized administrative personnel, while the remaining third had to have the IT department set it up. For firms that are short staffed from an IT perspective, a delay in setting up the portal could impact client service adversely.

**Ease of Publishing Documents:** What steps are necessary to put a document into the portal? With an integrated DMS, it is usually a matter of designating the document be made available on the portal, determining how long it should be available, and who to notify. Stand-alone portals often require more steps to publish the document, which means more confusion and training.

**Ease of Client Access:** What steps does the client have to go through to access the portal and logon? Most firms will make the portal accessible through the firm website where they would have a logon (such as their email address) and a password. The AAA survey found that three-fourths of firms would email the password or instructions on what the password was, and 38 percent would telephone the client, which takes additional administrative time. Firms will also want to ask how clients with multiple business entities

would logon to each unique portal and how many other people within the

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**Notification:** Does the portal notify the client and the in-charge for that client when the portal has been accessed and a file uploaded or downloaded? This is an important feature to keep firm personnel aware of when there has been a change so they don't have to guess the status of a file.

**Audit Trail and Security:** Does the portal monitor activity? Some of today's portals also document who placed which files in the portal, who accessed them and if there were new versions, which helps the firm comply with their confidentiality and document retention policies.

**Cost:** What does it cost to set up, maintain annually and add more clients? Firms should be aware of the overall cost per client as well as space allocated for each client, and the cost if this space is breached. Firms transferring very large QuickBooks files and not cleaning them up can find themselves in a situation where the additional storage space makes certain portal options cost-prohibitive compared to others.

The fact is accountants live in a digital world and need to transfer documents in the most convenient and secure way for clients. These needs point to accounting firms adopting client portals, and the time to do it is right now!

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