where new technologies can improve their practice.

Roman Kepczyk • Jun. 27, 2012

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There's no doubt that information technology impacts every aspect of today's accounting firms and most firms do a pretty good job of identifying opportunities where new technologies can improve their practice. These items eventually find their

way into the firm's strategic plans, but unfortunately very few firms do an

proposing the adoption of information technology to each group:

Management: Most accounting firm owners grew up in an era where knowledge of business and tax laws were the primary reason for success and technology was something that was very expensive that the staff used to get work done. It's often said that accounting firm partners are all for technology as long as they don't have to change anything that they are doing.

To communicate with management, it is important to point out that all of the firm's future strategic growth and retention plans rely significantly on information technology, and by adopting the right tools, the firm will develop a competitive advantage.

When communicating with owners it is important to minimize their risk of making a decision to select a specific technology. Owners want to see that they are not adopting unproven, "bleeding edge" technologies. By sharing industry benchmarks on adoption and well interviewed references from peer firms, the IT team will find that owners are much more open to considering a solution, particularly if there are quotes from other owners about the time savings, improved productivity, and an obvious return on the technology investment (ROI) as most partners are not adverse to investments, when they are presented profitably.

Communicating with owners one on one or as a partner group to explain how a technology works, what the process changes would be, and who would be impacted is also very important for the owners, so they can ask questions freely from a management perspective without having to do so in front of staff (which may create embarrassment).

As financial justification is very important to owners, having a well-managed budget that monitors the IT investment is critical. Best practices point to having all ongoing

expenses listed out at least two years into the future, so the owners understand the

technology so that they can be involved with product evaluation and selection, as well as the pilot program to verify the tool works as it is supposed to. Designating your most effective tax or audit professional as the champion will help get the rest of the staff to buy-in, particularly if their pilot program results in obvious, tangible improvements that the champion can articulate to team members.

The advantage of using product champions to communicate IT initiatives is that they can differentiate the firm's current processes from those proposed by the technology, as well as identify training needs and processes that need to be documented. Sending product champions to vendor User's Conferences and exposing them to industry information such as the AICPA Top

Technology Initiatives or AAA Paperless Benchmark Surveys gives them more information and resources to bolster their recommendations and promote successful adoption. Being part of a peer accounting firm association will also allow the firm to network with peer firms that have already adopted a technology and may have tips or other documented resources to reduce the time the firm needs to adopt a specific process or too.

Best practices also point to firms allocating hours to product champions for research, training, and documentation of specific firm processes in a written format, and that the champions are given chargeable credit for working on firm initiatives. It is important that this work be seen as being just as valuable as client work, otherwise it will always have a lower priority and never be completed. Some firms allocate at least four hours per week to the champions so that they regularly utilize 10% of their time focused on improving firm production.

Technical Personnel: While firms traditionally have their own internal IT personnel, the trend in recent years has been to outsource all "one shot" implementations such as Security, WTS/Citrix, Firewalls, etc. to a subject expert

which is usually a local network integrator or application specialist. As more

having the IT team reprioritize items in writing and explain why certain items have a priority will help the external IT team work on those projects that are most important at any given time.

Since IT personnel tend to speak more "Technise" and management personnel tend to speak more "ROI," best practices point to the IT team developing an IT "flash report" which lists all the key IT performance indicators on a single sheet and the changes from the previous period so that the firm can identify trends and talk to IT on a pre-determined basis. This also provides assurance to management that all key IT maintenance items are also being looked at regularly since they may not always be sure of what IT personnel do all day in their "little back rooms."

By understanding what the needs of each audience is, and communicating in that group's language, the IT team can move towards "exceptional" implementations on a firmwide scale and have a better chance of adopting their firm's strategic technology initiatives.

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Technology

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