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TECHNOLOGY

In the Groove

Column: Accountant Tech Talk

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In a continuing effort to educate my readers on the upcoming new software blitz coming out of Redmond, a.k.a. Microsoft land, I wanted to include some information on another of the components of the Office 2007 Suite now in Beta 2, but expected to release before the end of 2006. So by the time you are reading this, it may be available. Groove Networks, the brain-child of Ray Ozzie, whom you may remember

as a co-creator of Lotus Notes, was acquired by Microsoft about a year and a half ago. Ozzie became a 'chief technical officer' reporting directly to Bill Gates. Enough history; let's dive into what Groove is and how it might apply to accountants.

First, let's review a few of the reasons Groove might benefit your practice:

No IT department required. Groove is just desktop software. It's a single installation and begins to work as advertised with what you already have. The only real requirement is a PC and an Internet connection. Well, okay, you may need an IT department to get that set up, but I suspect most of you have already crossed that bridge. The point is that you don't need to worry about servers, firewalls, network security or VPNs.

- Share files, manage projects and hold virtual meetings all from within virtual workspaces. Anyone with the Groove software becomes your workspace ‘partners,’ including staff, clients, suppliers and contractors. With these synchronized virtual workspaces, you don’t have to worry any longer about file-size restrictions or working off the wrong version.
- You don’t have to have an Internet connection to work. Just remember that you’re working offline, and changes won’t synchronize until the connection is restored. But if you have to take the laptop to the beach, you can still get some work done.
- Who’s home? Groove gives presence information so you can see which of your workspace partners are available, in another room or in another country. You will see if they’re online, what they’re working on, and you’ll get notified when things change. This means you’ll send fewer “are you there?” e-mails or IMs.
- Pre-built solutions. Groove has a number of pre-built solutions to manage your projects. And if the canned solutions don’t work, you can build your own without software development skills.

So how might this work in an accounting practice? Well, in these modern times, you probably do less of the detail work for your clients and more of the review, adjustment and management consulting work. For the most part, clients are finding their own solutions to get the data processed in some accounting software.

QuickBooks

leads the way here, but at some point they have to get those QuickBooks data files to you so you can review and adjust, do the financial statements and tax returns, and help them make sound financial decisions.

What is the method you use to get those mostly large data files from your client’s location to yours? And what can your client do while you have the files? The troubling answer most likely is that your client puts the data files on a disk and snail mails it to you. And while you’re making the adjustments, the client puts further accounting entries on hold.

So you’re probably thinking that if this Groove technology really works as advertised, you can load Groove on your desktop and convince your clients to do the same so that the QuickBooks data files placed in your shared workspace will always be synchronized and large files will transfer quickly and securely. Quickly because once the file is present in both locations, only the changes have to go across the wire. And securely because Groove uses 192-bit encryption

to move these changes back and forth across the public network. This level of encryption is used by the government, and, while it isn't the best, it is above average and it is at a level at which you can feel comfortable.

What if your client won't fork out the dollars for their copy of Groove? That's easy. You should buy it for them and install it for nothing. Why? Because you'll be more efficient in the future, and you will recapture the costs of the solution through this increase in efficiency. One small firm practitioner did just this and reported the following benefits:

- 15 percent increase in service requests
- Increased productivity
- More clients, same staff
- Virtual "awareness"
- Greater employee satisfaction

If you can't wait for the Office 2007 version of Groove, you can still get a trial version any time from the Groove website at www.groove.net. Consider how this technology solution might make your life a little easier, which is what technology is supposed to do. And, like the Emperor, you might find yourself with a new Groove, as well.

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