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PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Professional Networks & User Communities Let Pros Turn to Their Peers for Advice

Special Feature

Isaac M. O'Bannon • Nov. 01, 2009

From the Nov. 2009 Issue

Tax and accounting professionals are inundated every year with new and complex tax laws, rulings and other issues that can affect how they provide client services and can even pose liability concerns for non-compliance or improper treatments.

While physicians might argue that their profession faces similar complexities regarding keeping up with the latest treatments, rarely do they face such dramatic rewritings of their body of knowledge and changes in their core knowledge. Yes, they face an evolving profession that requires extensive continuing education, too. And most people would probably agree that the potential consequences of their actions are more significant: After all, the life and well-being of their patients is at stake.

But how often are the basics of human physiology reinterpreted? Certainly not every year, which is what tax and accounting professionals are often faced with when it comes to federal and state tax laws, the impending move from GAAP to IFRS, and the increasingly important role that technology plays in the modern

practice. And even these practice-essential technologies change from year to year, adding to the crunch of information overload.

YOU CAN'T KNOW EVERYTHING

Even the most seasoned tax and accounting professionals can't learn everything there is to know about their field, or even memorize all of the obscure parts of the tax code that may come up during a client engagement. Therefore, one of the most valuable traits shared by successful practitioners is that they know what they don't know, and they know where to turn if they need information on something with which they are unfamiliar.

For taxation issues, professionals generally turn to tax research systems such as those that will be reviewed in our December 2009 issue. These systems offer users the ability to quickly search through various primary resources like the IRS Code, Treasury rulings, legislation, court documents and state law. Some also provide expert advice, case studies and other insight into tax treatments.

But taxation isn't the only area in a professional's life where they need occasional guidance. This isn't new, of course. Professionals have been networking with each other for decades, adding specialists to their staffs to strengthen the overall firm or finding a non-competitive professional in their area with whom they can exchange strengths. There are also some fortunate professionals who have a mentor to whom they can turn, while others may partner with third parties to send clients for specific services.

FINDING THE RIGHT NETWORK

In the digital world, many professionals also turn to online networks or user communities. These groups, many of which originally started in the early days of the Internet as message boards, are usually offered by companies that offer technologies to the tax and accounting profession. All of the larger developers of professional tax and accounting suites offer such options. So for most professionals, finding a trusted resource should be very simple. Start with what and who you know: Your vendor.

ARNE – THOMSON REUTERS

One of the first of these networks was/is the still popular ARNE community, which was developed by Creative Solutions in the mid-1990s. Now a part of the Thomson Reuters family, the network allows users of Thomson Reuters CS Suite

of professional accounting and practice management software to interact with each other through online forums, blogs, groups and other discussion tools. Forums are divided into practice areas, such as tax, accounting, business management and web services, which lets users find answers to questions they might have regarding program usage or appropriate strategies. Examples of recent topics include how to treat sole proprietors or partners who are treated as employees and receive a W-2, how to put reports on client portals, and a professional seeking advice on adding a partner to his practice.

QUICKBOOKS LIVE COMMUNITY – INTUIT

The other major technology vendors in the tax and accounting space also offer online communities geared toward helping their users get more from their programs and collaborate. For QuickBooks users, Intuit offers the QuickBooks Live Community, a website where professionals interact and discuss program usage, engagement strategies and business topics in forums that are divided into groups for the type of user and the program. The Community is accessible from within QuickBooks Premier Accountant Edition, as well as from Lacerte, ProSeries and Pro-Line, Intuit's new web-based professional tax compliance system. It allows users to seek advice and receive answers from other users or support staff while still working inside the program. Intuit also has the free online tax research website TaxAlmanac.org, which offers a Wikipedia-style reference and collaboration system for tax professionals.

CCH Community – CCH, a Wolters Kluwer business

Immediately after the deadline for the print edition of this issue, CCH announced the creation of its new CCH Community, an online resource for users of CCH's systems that provides these tax, accounting and audit professionals with resources and the ability to interact with their peers. Visitors to the CCH User Community will be able to share problems, solutions and best practices in discussion forums, receive information and analysis from thought leaders, take advantage of network capabilities and give feedback and receive updates on CCH products and services.

PEACHTREE ACCOUNTING USER COMMUNITY – SAGE

Sage offers an online community that doesn't require usage of their accounting products, which can be helpful if a professional is using Peachtree in his or her own practice or even if they aren't using it but have clients who use the system and may need some support when it comes to program functions.

The site also provides links to forums for practice areas, blogs and advice for practitioners and business owners.

DRAKE SOFTWARE FORUMS – DRAKE SOFTWARE

Users of Drake Software's tax, practice management, document management and client write-up systems can access and participate in online forums moderated by Drake staff. Users frequently share program tips and business strategies, and can ask questions of support staff or of other users.

ACCOUNTANTSWORLD COMMUNITY – ACCOUNTANTSWORLD

While AccountantsWorld offers a suite of web-based and traditionally installed programs for professional accountants, the vendor's website also offers a large array of free research, tools, white papers, best practices, tax and accounting news, and discussion groups divided into categories for various practice areas. Additional sub-groups allow users to discuss specific issues involving taxation of various entities, HR, payroll and practice management.

MyATX & TAXWISE TV – CCH SMALL FIRM SERVICES

Online user communities are also offered by CCH Small Firm Services for users of its ATX and TaxWise professional compliance systems. The sites provide similar forums for users to get tips and advice from other professionals, along with access to training and support resources. Through TaxWise TV, professionals can also watch brief educational videos that cover important taxation issues and program tips.

NETSUITE USER COMMUNITY – NETSUITE

The provider of the widely used on-demand (web-based) accounting, CRM and e-commerce

NetSuite offers an online community for its customers, solution providers, developers and employees. By bringing all of these groups together, the NetSuite User Community

provides them with the ability to interact and share their wealth of deep product knowledge and extensive technical expertise. Members of the community also share best practice ideas, discuss third-party solutions and participate in other networking opportunities. With a worldwide user base, the community also offers users the ability to connect with potential international partners.

TAXWORKS FORUMS – REDGEAR TECHNOLOGIES

TaxWorks offers a company blog and user forums for its registered users, with topic-specific forums for general product information as well as support and

message boards for e-filing, document management, training and other topics. Through the company's blog, TaxWorks staff offer additional tips and product advice, from data input sheets and generation of financial reports, to invoicing and using the tax program's built-in scheduler.

OTHER SOFTWARE VENDORS/PROGRAMS

In addition to these larger developers of professional tax and accounting suites, many developers of programs not limited to the profession also offer user communities.

Whether using a program in-house for client services or seeking advice on a program in order to help a client who uses it, these online resources offer additional means for a professional to find the answers he or she needs.

INFORMAL COMMUNITIES

Many independent user groups for the above programs and other software have also found their way online. Generally created by individual users on social networking websites such as Yahoo! Groups, Facebook and others, these message board-style groups are unaffiliated with the product vendor, providing users with potentially more anonymity while discussing programs, treatments and practices.

PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS

In addition to these peer-to-peer networks and communities, many of these vendors also offer programs that provide professionals with free or discounted software, advanced training and other features. The most notable of these are the Sage Professional Accountants' Network, the QuickBooks ProAdvisor program and Microsoft's Professional Accountants' Network. The Sleeter Group is another option for professionals, providing education, training and support opportunities for all of the major small business bookkeeping solutions on the market, as well as many of the third-party "add-on" systems that enhance those programs.

OTHER WAYS TO NETWORK WITH PROS

Professionals are increasingly turning to [Facebook](#),

[Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#)

and other social media websites for day-to-day interaction with potential clients and with their peers. Several blogs are also available for professionals, allowing them to discuss news, software and other topics. Check out www.CPATechViews.com as a great example.

THE ANSWERS YOU NEED

You know what you know. Hopefully, you also know what you don't know and have the knowledge to find that information if you need it. Just as tax research systems are essential in the modern tax and accounting practice, online user communities are just as vital.

By offering professionals a place to interact, collaborate, learn and help others on a wide range of topics from using specific features in a program to specific tax law discussions and business matters, these networks can help strengthen the capabilities of all professionals who use them by drawing on the collective knowledge of professionals across the country and the world who've encountered the same challenges and can offer their own insight and expertise.

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