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What did we do before technology and the Internet? Does anyone reading this article remember *that* far back — way back to the late '80s — when we interfaced with our professional peers in person, and received assistance to accounting questions and research solely by phone?

The Baby Boomers might show their age when they talk about "help desks," and although these still exist with every software provider, online accounting communities have made the dial-in version virtually extinct to some extent.

Accountants cannot deny the immediate benefits associated with online accounting communities, and no matter what format the online exchange might resemble, the convenience of interacting with peers and getting questions answered by experts in almost real time is just too tempting to resist.

If you were to analyze the "why" behind accounting communities, from a vendor perspective, they exist to provide users and visitors an additional experience that extends the brand. In fact, many providers now offer sites that go beyond simple bulletin board user forums to present news, opinion and interactive features.

Here's a summary of some of the more popular accounting communities, divided by "open" versus "restricted" categories. Open communities invite anyone in, while restricted sites allow only users to visit. This is by no means a complete list so if readers have any communities to add to this list, please send an e-mail to my attention at scottcytron@cpata.com, and we'll post your comments on our CPATechViews.com blog.

## Open Community Forums

**ARNE — Thomson Reuters (cs.thomsonreuters.com/community)**

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Thomson Reuters had this to say about ARNE: "We're pleased to report that the new ARNE is a hit; over the past year we've seen a substantial increase in new users joining the ranks of the forum. Groups have formed quickly, allowing like-minded users to have discussions based on shared interests, and the marketing Mondays blog, which offers users access to a wealth of marketing tips and advice, is another popular feature."

**AccountantsWorld (www.accountantsworld.com)**

AccountantsWorld includes news, in-depth articles, research, tools and several other resources, all geared to the accounting profession rather than just users of AW's products and services. There are also 12 discussion forums presented by category. Traditional areas include Tax and Accounting, as well as niche topics, such as Profit From the Internet, Fixed Assets, Security and even Canadian Taxation. A daily news bulletin helps drive traffic to the site.

**CCH Community — CCH, a Wolters Kluwer business (community.cchgroup.com)**

The CCH Community launched just about a year ago in October 2009 and is comprised of a discussion forum on technical issues such as tax, accounting and audit. The most prominent postings (as of this writing) are updates called "Tax Chat From the Hill," in which professionals discuss the latest news in tax legislation from Washington, D.C. Also featured are other discussions, including one on healthcare reform.

**Intuit Community & Intuit ProLine Blog — Intuit (community.intuit.com)**

Intuit's Live Communities — for users, accounting professionals and resellers — have always been one of the more active of online communities in this space, and with good reason. One of the most dynamic sets is the community for QuickBooks

Certified ProAdvisors, many of whom enjoy participating in online discussions

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Based on initial feedback from Intuit, the blog is a convenient and quick vehicle to post updated news and information on how to use Intuit solutions.

**Sage Accountants Network Community (http://community.sageaccountantsnetwork.com), Sage MAS Community Forums (community.sagemas.com), Sage ACT! Community (community.act.com) & Sage Peachtree Accounting User Community (community.peachtree.com)**

The Sage Accountants Network is a valuable resource for professional accounts who support multiple clients, offering access to information, software and support for Sage products. SAN also provides a community offering to its members that allows them to network and exchange ideas with their peers. (You can read more about the new benefits of SAN at www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/2960) Sage also offers several other online communities for its users, each one customized to a particular product line. The largest is the Sage MAS site with its focus on Sage MAS 90, 200 and 500. Sage ERP X3 is not featured, but most likely will be added at a later date or may, perhaps, have its own site. All of the Sage community sites offer interactive features with discussion forums and blogs. Sage products are featured, as well.

## Restricted Online Communities

**ATX Community & TaxWise Community — CCH Small Firm Services**

CCH Small Firm Services maintains company blogs and community forums that are accessible through its customer support site, which is secured by client ID, username and password. ATX and TaxWise customers can post freely at the respective community boards, and the Customer Care VP blog alerts users of industry news, program updates and seasonal issues.

**Drake Software Forum — Drake Software (www.drakesupport.com/Forums)**

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providers, developers and employees. The Community provides the ability to interact and share knowledge and expertise, best practices and information on third-party solutions.

**TaxWorks Forums — RedGear Technologies (forums.taxworks.com)**

The TaxWorks' Forums offer company information and discussion forums on one concise website. Users need to register in order to see the postings and participate. Software-specific areas include TaxWorks, 1040Works, ArkWorks and E-File Center.

**Social Networking Online Communities**

Many accountants want to know how they can participate in social networking to enhance their practice, add to their knowledge or simply network. Although the big three — LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter — vary in format and deliverables, LinkedIn provides the best semblance of accounting communities through its "Groups" feature.

Groups focus on like-minded topics, and there are an unlimited numbers of groups in which accountants can get involved, including vendor-sponsored groups. Simple searches by the name of the vendor display groups associated with general vendor communities, as well as specific-software titles.

For example, a search for "Sage" on Groups presented Accpac, ERP X3 and other titles, as well as "The Sage Network." That community alone had 662 members at the time of this writing. Once you subscribe and are approved to join a group, you can receive immediate messages with discussion items almost immediately after they are posted or you can opt for a daily digest. Obviously, the more a member is active in a group, the greater the likelihood that the member will increase his or her exposure, thereby receiving referrals and building business.

*For more than 20 years, Scott H. Cytron, ABC, has worked with CPAs and accountants,*

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