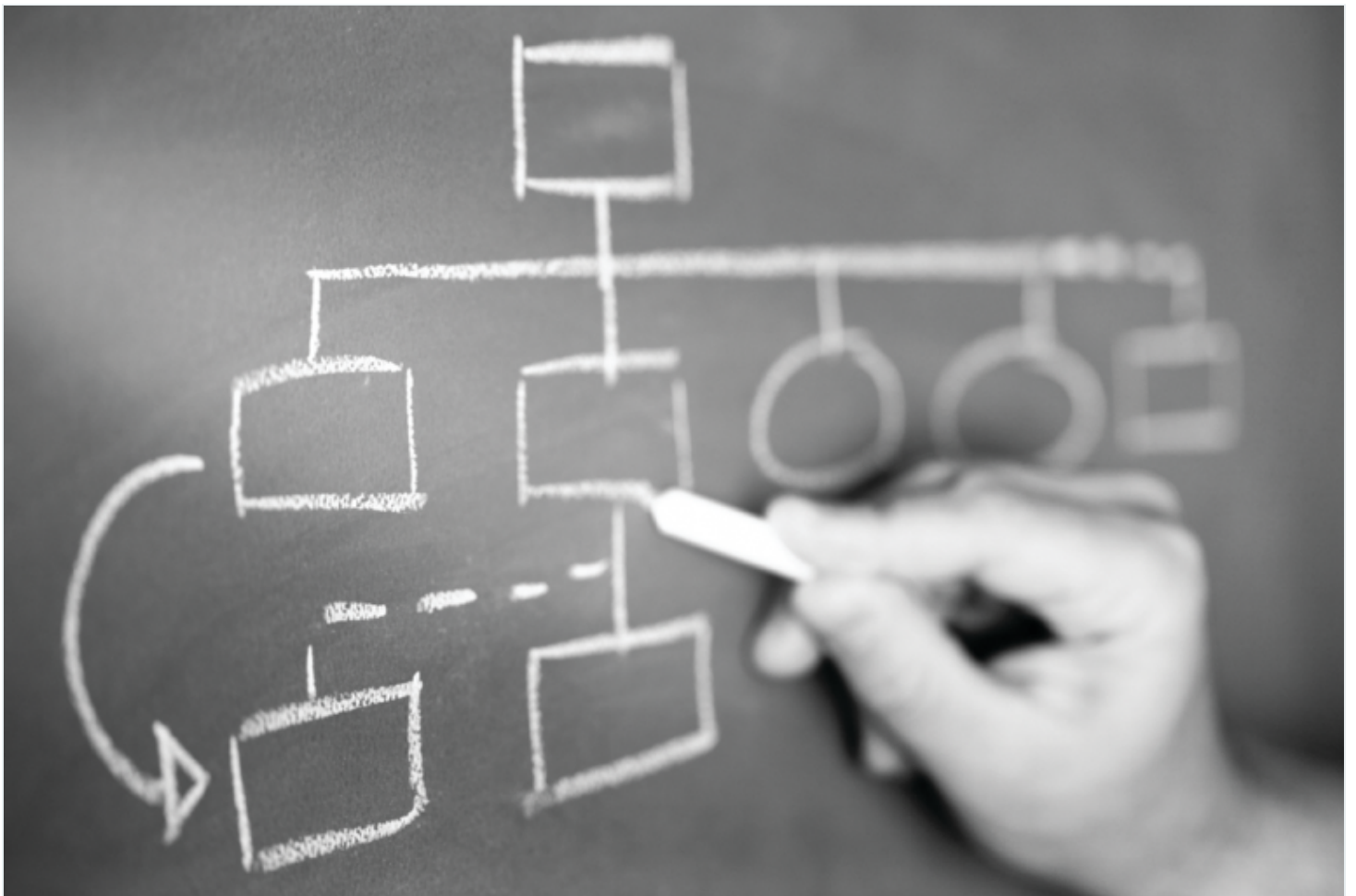


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improve realization. Using the right workflow tools can make a paperless implementation work so much better.

Randy Johnston • Oct. 18, 2012



A Top Technology Initiative Article — From the November 2012 Issue.

Workflow remains one of the biggest incremental opportunities in most firms to improve realization. Using the right workflow tools can make a paperless implementation work so much better. Implementing workflow will not solve operational issues in your firm without management involvement and attention.

However, when workflow is implemented correctly, the technology helps things

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steps less because they “know” them. The documentation and steps are often handed to new firm members to teach them “what we do”. However, the documentation is often incomplete, out of date, too detailed or too complex to be a practical guide for day to day work. Plus handling the exceptions of the workflow is frequently hard to recognize and document. To overcome this problem we often react by saying things like: “just do what is best”. Workflow should be our guide on the best way to accomplish a series of tasks. Workflow improves document management by providing a logical and controlled sequence of processing for documents.

What have we done historically? Most firms have used one of a few methods: logs of work checked in and out, cover sheets, piles of work moved from place to place, envelopes or expanding folders on shelves or in file cabinets, and often all of this was capped off with experience and observation trying to avoid any dropped balls. As our firm converted more of our work from paper to paperless the “markers” of paper disappeared. We couldn't see the piles of paper on the floor or on shelves, and it became hard for us to know when a particular firm member was assigned too much work and another one too little until we discovered work not completed in a timely fashion or reviewed time sheets well after the fact. Most significant, many professionals do not want to be told when or how something should be done. They want to do it their way, not necessarily a consistent way or using a method the firm has decided is the best or the easiest.

What has to happen with our firm culture? All partners have to buy into using workflow for the methodology and products to work best. This is truer in workflow than almost any other technology or service implemented in the firm. The idea behind workflow is to have a consistent methodology to complete a project, set reasonable estimates of the time required to complete each step, assign this task to any team member with adequate skills, easily monitor progress and mark completion and move the project to the next step until all tasks are completed. If any

firm member chooses not to do their part the same as everyone else, trust in each

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several publishers including: Office Tools Professional, Doc.It, XCM, Thomson FirmFlow, CCH Workstream, OpenText (formerly Metastorm) and Anydoc. Most of these products have been in the market for over five years and some for more than ten. They have evolved to include tax workflows, bookkeeping workflows, audit workflows and other routine items like due date monitoring, notice processing and routine financial reviews. Each of the publishers offer implementation services and will provide what they have learned to be CPA Firm best practices while implementing their products. You will want to follow their initial advice and grow with the product to evolve your own implementation.

Where can we use workflow? Most workflow systems were designed to run in a web browser and can now be used from tablets and smartphones as well. When your workflow system is implemented properly, there are no geographic limitations on where you can check status and make approvals. If people in your firm are frequently out of the office, workflow is the key tool to communicate the status of a project. Workflow has the potential to reduce the amount of internal email traffic if used properly. Workflow is critical to profitability of a multi-site firm if work is to be shared between locations.

How long does workflow take to implement? Implementation times vary widely. Most publishers have standard workflows that can be adopted. Implementations with standard workflows can take less than 60 days. If the firm has no consistent methodology, and the partners are willing to change, the standard workflows will typically serve as a good starting place. Our best practice implementation strategy involves mapping the 15-20 processes that most firms currently have (As Is). After review, changes are made eliminating unnecessary steps, modifying and improving the existing processes to produce a new set of documented processes (To Be). Good workflow implementations evolve over a 2-3 year period and are updated at least annually.

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How does workflow resolve partner differences? It usually doesn't! However, if workflow becomes the basis of discussion on the best way to serve a client and complete work correctly with the least amount of steps, most partners will agree that workflow is a good thing. You may build your system to "agree to disagree" and set up multiple workflows to accommodate a difficult partner. As long as you understand the increased cost and potentially have a way of allocating that additional cost, you should be no worse off than before.

The Legend

What is the impact of workflow on the firm? More profit per partner and less time worked are the two most common outcomes. Better client service, faster turns of work, and few dropped projects internally are other frequent benefits.

How often do workflow processes have to be updated? Clearly processes and workflows should be reviewed at least one per year from the As Is process map (which is the new To Be processes from last year). There are changes in software, regulations, team members and services offered by the firm in addition to steps where some have discovered easier processes. You want to keep simplifying and making the process steps better and easier in the firm. Additionally, schedule time to retrain all involved on the new (To Be) processes.

One key benefit of workflow is helping to transfer the knowledge of best practices. If you are concerned about how your firm will work in the future, capturing the knowledge of your very best accountants and other firm members, providing superior client service, and minimizing hours worked, then workflow is definitely an option.

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