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Ever-Changing Tax Laws Require Professional Research Solutions

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As changes are made to tax laws and technology, the business owners interact with their customers and tax and accounting professionals change. Many tax professionals find themselves moving from the role of tax return preparer to year-round consultant. Their clients have tax questions both during the busy season and "off season" and professionals need to be able to deliver the answers their clients need when they need them. Many tax professionals turn to tax research software to help them deliver the correct answers in a timely fashion.

With tax research software, professionals can get the answers they need by searching the software for information on court cases, tax laws and regulations and practice areas. There are several options available for tax research solutions. Some vendors offer direct integration into their existing tax preparation solutions, making it easy for professionals to attach research documents to client tax returns. However, many of the solutions that exist today are web-based and accessible from anywhere with an active internet connection.

To aid in providing anywhere, anytime access to their solutions, many vendors have created mobile versions of their websites and/or mobile apps, allowing professionals to gain access from their phones and tablets. Most of the mobile sites contain access to the same information as the full site, including search history and saved folders. However, the website has been formatted for a cleaner look and feel on the smaller device.

Some mobile sites even offer the option to view the full site on the mobile device. While the mobile apps may have a different user interface or limited capabilities compared to the full version of the solutions, they are designed to complement the software and provide access when professionals are away from the office or a computer. As businesses continue to focus on mobility, the mobile apps are expected to gain even more functionality over time.

The tax research solutions give users access to analyses and explanations provided by experts and educators in the profession, as well as the vendor's editors. Other content that may be available includes access to the Internal Revenue Code and Regulations, federal, state and international cases and tax laws.

Users generally have several methods available to them for searching content. The most common two methods are keyword search and a browse tree. The keyword search works similar to most search engines – users type in a word and search results are generated. Most times, the keyword search comes with an "AutoComplete" feature that “guesses” the word or phrase users are looking up. This is useful for new staff who may not be as familiar with the terminology or a specific area of practice.

The browse tree works similar to an index, with topics grouped under certain categories and practice areas. Users click on a topic to expand it and display its subtopics. Users continue until they find the topic they were looking for. This method is generally used by senior staff or professionals who know exactly where to look for certain practice areas and topics.

The choice of which tax research solution is best for a practice depends on the needs of that practice and its clients, as well as what tax preparation software they already use. Some professionals may find that it makes sense to go with a solution that is directly integrated within the software their practice currently uses, while that integration may not be as important for others. Regardless, as the tax research programs in this review demonstrate, there is a solution available for everyone.