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There are a number of strategies being promoted as the latest, easiest and/or best way to run your practice. Current thinking includes value billing, recurring flat billing, niche strategies, international, and so on. Most of us have limited resources or bandwidth, and frankly, just want to take care of clients and have a reasonably good life.

We're not after world domination or running the biggest firm, but we're not lazy either. We do want to get paid a reasonable value for our knowledge, effort and time. A good practice management (PM) system can help us do that job well, or a bad PM system can get in the way and make our client experience worse or at least more difficult than it needs to be.

There are relatively few accounting firm centric billing products. We maintain a list of them at: http://www.cpafirmsoftware.com/software-solutions#practice and this publication frequently reviews many of these offerings. The bigger question is what are you trying to accomplish and what are you trying to measure? Historically, most accountants ask for and receive without question more detail and reporting than they ever really look at.
So, What Are Your Needs?

Before any systems or application replacement initiative, it is wise to reflect on your needs before entering the sales process. For billing and practice management systems, you understand your pain points better than any article or sales person can describe them. But as noted before, what are you trying to accomplish? Based on your

professional fees is a fairly new phenomenon in the accounting profession and many of us would prefer to not accept them, some clients are quite insistent on using their credit cards to pay firm bills. When you look at the cost of handling checks plus assess the risk of non-payment, accepting a credit card may not be a bad thing. It might be even better if you are supporting payment systems such as Sage Payment Solutions, Intuit GoPayment or one of the many providers who can provide your clients with reduced clearing fees while integrating into your accounting system and providing the service at reduced charges to your firm. Our favorite transaction though, is the ACH (Automated Clearing House) entry since the money moves from the client's bank account into the firm's with minimal transaction fees.

3. **Portals** – your firm's portal may be a function of your document management system, a stand-alone portal or one implemented using a technology strategy. Really productive portals should be integrated into your billing system to provide client information, automated payment support and the ability to secure, publish or withdraw a portal.
4. **Simple Recurring Billing** – if you have converted the majority of your client base to fixed fee billing that is supported by an invoice, then you will need to look for a recurring billing feature. It is even better if the system has the ability to email the bill or simply not send a bill to your client at all. The key is to get a transaction in the system with minimal effort so you can receive a payment.
5. **Simplified Timekeeping** – some systems have made time entry so painful, it has led to the cry of taking away the time sheet. Tracking time can give you the cost basis for services performed and even if you only use value billing, the time information can provide useful management reporting. You will certainly want time entry to be simple and not particularly granular.
6. **Business Development**– many PM systems are weak in the area of business development. There is rarely enough contact, activity, sales pipeline or marketing

campaign information within PM systems to do business development well. You

team members or in certain classes of engagements. Your system should easily produce this level of reporting.

9. **Integration into other systems** – we have a long standing preference of the suite approach including PM, Tax, document management, portals and the like. If your PM system is not part of an integrated suite, be particularly careful to identify how integrations are made to your key operational systems.
10. **Scheduling** – this function may or may not be included in your PM system, but you do need to understand how this job will be done. Your PM system should have enough information about team members to select people by skill sets, interests and prior engagements with clients.
11. **CPE Tracking** – you may have access to external systems from your State Society that perform CPE tracking. If not, having this capability in your system will let you build a career path, do a better job of scheduling people in and out of the office, and fit the right skills in team members to the right engagements.
12. **Integration into email systems such as Microsoft Outlook** – it seems automatic that your practice management system should tie into Exchange, Outlook and your smartphone, but don’t count on it. Some systems have integration from the PM system into many other systems and some PM systems seem to be completely independent. Think about integration into your phone system as well.

This list is not intended be comprehensive, but merely reflective of features available in products that are in the market today. Publishers like AccountantsWorld with PowerPractice, CCH with Practice Management, Intuit Practice Management, Thomson with Practice CS, Practice Engine, APS, TPS, and Office Tools Professional all have offerings that offer many of the capabilities above.

But That’s Not All!

Billing or Practice Management is much more than the features or the system. Implementation of a new billing or PM system takes planning and directly affects everyone in the firm. Training sessions must be held for all levels of personnel, and procedures that were second nature while using an old system, become new and

analysis, selection, implementation experience, approach and correct completion will make your next business project easier to manage.

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