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FIRM MANAGEMENT

Rising Above ... By Moving Your Firm to the Cloud

Spending more time with clients reveals more service opportunities— leading your firm to higher growth. Yet you might spend more time than you'd like just managing your growing firm, trying to understand what's really working and struggling to adapt as the business changes. Join me on one firm's journey to address these challenges— and to put itself in a better position to serve clients.

Drew West • Mar. 13, 2014



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An Island Nation? If yours is like most CPA firms, one thing holding you back could be several different practice management systems spread across your firm. [Goldstein Schechter Koch](#) (GSK,) a 100+-person firm serving south Florida for the past 60 years, found itself in a similar place. “We were using a myriad of different systems, as most traditional CPA firms do. One of the immediate challenges was that we had islands of data within our firm,” said GSK’s Chief Financial & Chief Administrative Officer, Mark Guthrie. Maintaining multiple systems creates a lot of overhead, and separate data islands complicate reporting. “Our systems were not integrated, and it was difficult to extract data. It was very time-intensive,” continued Guthrie.

Guthrie knew growth would come by focusing more time on the firm’s *clients*— not on maintaining the systems running the firm. “At the end of the day, it really hindered our growth,” observed Guthrie, GSK’s CFO/CAO since February of 2012.

A Bridge to the Mainland. You probably guessed that getting connected is one way to address the poor insight and cumbersome maintenance that such a fragmented environment create within your firm. GSK came to a similar conclusion. Recalled Guthrie, “We felt strongly that we needed a different approach— an integrated type of infrastructure that automated our revenue cycle. We started with the premise that we need to go with more of an enterprise-type solution.”

Bringing your firm together on a single practice-management system resolves many of the issues hindering *your* firm’s growth:

- **Reporting.** A single system avoids the data inconsistencies that make reporting so difficult, and a start-to-finish workflow means you can understand what actions or decisions led to each result.
- **Responding.** Suppose you need a new approval process, to set up a new service line, or simply on-board a new user. Without having to modify multiple systems or maintain brittle interfaces among them, a connected system helps you respond easily in a world of constant change.

But That Sounds Complicated. Yet for many firms, a more connected practice-management approach may still sound burdensome. Hardware must be purchased and software deployed— then kept current. And a mission-critical practice-management system must be available whenever it’s needed— a point not lost on GSK. “Being a south Florida firm, one of the things we’re concerned about is hurricanes,” commented Guthrie. So how can a growing firm gain the visibility and discipline of a connected, comprehensive practice-management system— without an even greater IT burden diverting focus away from clients?

A Single Cloud. For GSK, the answer lay in trusting practice-management to the cloud. **Cloud systems** are deployed *outside* your organization, typically accessed through the Internet. Software and hardware are completely external, although users experience these “software-as-a-service” (SaaS) applications pretty much the same as systems *inside* your firm. You gain the efficiency you want, but can leave security, hardware administration, and software maintenance to someone else (typically a provider with dedicated expertise in these areas.) These advantages are probably why 46% of respondents to an **Accenture survey** feel the cloud will enable them to do business more quickly, while 58% of those in a **Forbes poll** say the cloud gives them better control of their data.

Cost and reliability advantages stood out for GSK: “It became very evident that a cloud-based solution was a better fit, especially as we considered the start-up cost

and business continuity,” commented Guthrie. “We could be more focused on the firm’s clients and the growth of the firm, rather than how we secure the infrastructure.” Like GSK, consider the cloud if you want your firm focused on financial and accounting services. Avoid investing in a hurricane-proof data center, and leave hardware and software administration to someone else.

Sunny Days Ahead. Of course, trusting software and hardware administration to *someone* else also means your IT team can focus on *something* else. In freeing its IT team from cumbersome system administration, GSK found tremendous upside in bringing more insight to their staff, translating into more value for their clients. As GSK’s senior IT leader, no one is more pleased by this than Mark Guthrie. “Our traditional focus is shifting to more of a strategic role, better servicing our end clients. It really has allowed us to bring more value to our clients— and in offering better service.”

Making the Move. Don’t spend any more time trying to make sense of bad data, or more money trying to maintain the systems behind it. See how cloud-based practice-management solutions can quickly bring your firm together on a single system. Leave maintenance to someone else, so you can focus on serving clients— and growing the firm.

Drew West is Solutions Director for [Deltek](#), Inc., a provider of practice management systems for professional accounting firms.

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