can do in the next few weeks is to take time to formally debrief the past few months, acknowledging what worked well and identifying where there were bottlenecks that could be improved upon.

Roman Kepczyk • May. 12, 2014

Another busy season is under our belts and one of the most productive things a firm can do in the next few weeks is to take time to formally debrief the past few months, acknowledging what worked well and identifying where there were bottlenecks that could be improved upon.

The summer months provide time to explore solutions by reviewing accounting vendor options, networking with peer firms, and attending conferences where these solutions are discussed, but these efforts should be made with a concise, prioritized plan focused on the key areas where the firm wants to improve.

In addition to the traditional exploratory process of walking through each tax

taking a LEAN approach can improve your firm processes, as well as your client interactions this extension season.

Source Document Accumulation: What is the firm's process to get all of a client's data accumulated in one place and is it the most convenient method for the client? With today's portals and secured email solutions, firms should be educating clients on how they can deliver scanned documents electronically and almost instantaneously instead of taking the time to drive to the firm or placing the documents in the mail. Most business clients have access to a scanner within their office and are finding the use of PDFs and digital delivery more convenient to them as well.

Many of today's entrepreneurial clients and the children of existing business owners (who may someday become clients) prefer to do all work digitally on their tablets or smartphones, so the firm should be proactively promoting digital solutions, particularly those that are integrated into the firm's tax processing, document management, and portal applications. For clients that physically deliver documents, centralized scanners for production scanning and desktop scanner access for preparers is a must.

Standard Client File Organization/Annotation: Most clients don't care how their source documents are organized, so the firm should ask "what is the most effective way to organize data for firm production?" The obvious answer is to have all firm tax files organized in the exact same "firm standard" format so that everyone can organize and append files, and so everyone knows where to look at the source documents onscreen, as they have all been trained on it.

The automated tools such as CCH FxScan, TR Source Document Scanning, Copanion GruntWorx, and SurePrep, not only force this standardized organization, but they can import the information from the most commonly recognized client tax forms

directly into the firm's tax program. This saves time in both the preparation and

access to the most current information, so the response to the client can be an outdated answer or even delayed until the employee has access to that list. Utilizing a workflow tool (XCM, CCH Workstream, TR Firm Flow) or projects in practice management allows the employee access to that data immediately on their computer screen, including the status and providing notifications of approaching deadlines with warnings so they can't be missed, and with the right infrastructure, can be viewed on a tablet or smartphone so updating clients is at their convenience.

Return Preparation: Clients have no idea who is preparing their return so it is more important that the return be stratified by complexity, managed effectively with other returns in process, and routed to the appropriate level person. This can be done more effectively with any of the workflow/project tools listed above than with individual manually updated spreadsheets. By utilizing firm standard organization/annotation tools and having an appropriate number of monitors to view all necessary data, personnel can be trained to optimally prepare a return onscreen to a single firm standard.

One area that clients do care about is the accuracy of the data in their return. Having the preparer trained on how to verify the data that has been input, by completing a verification routine and checklist of most common reviewer corrections builds quality control into the preparation process that reduces the amount of rework at the reviewer level (so returns are completed at a lower cost).

Return Review: The tax return review process is often one of the firm's biggest bottlenecks holding up the completion of tax returns. Firm's need to ask the question as to whether the client really cares if a specific person reviews their return out of tradition, or if there are other personnel that can do so at an appropriate level or area of expertise. As mentioned above, most returns can be stratified by complexity before busy season and put on a pre-determined workflow path to be

routed to a specific person or tax return pool-level which can also warn management

work with your firm. From a LEAN perspective, using secure, automated, digital processes that all firm personnel have been trained on is the most effective way to service clients.

Communicating with Clients/Personnel: Many firms forget to ask: "Do your personnel know how clients want to communicate with your personnel and how firm personnel communicate amongst themselves?" While telephone and email were primary communication means for traditional clients, many technologically astute personnel and clients prefer texting, instant chatting, and even video calling (Skype, FaceTime). Having all your personnel trained on using these different media and documenting each person's preferred communication method in the client's contact file will ensure communications get through (and be sure to incorporate those methods for employees also!)

Annual tax debriefings can be a wonderful process to improve the firm's production processes. As you go through the process this year, make it even better and more effective by prioritizing those items that will make it easier for your clients to work with your firm and take the time to dive into "why" you are doing things and whether there are digital tools that have replaced that process.

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