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communications activity with a customer, client or prospect, or anyone you do business with.

John Higgins • Mar. 13, 2015

So you might be asking yourself, "What the heck is CRM and why should I be interested in it?" That is a perfectly legitimate question. Let me start by defining what it is and then discuss why you might want it. The CRM acronym actually refers to "Customer Relationship Management." However, since we are all professionals serving clients, I always refer to it as "Client Relationship Management." It can also legitimately represent "Contact Relationship Management."

Whatever we choose to call it, the nature of a CRM system remains the same: To

might be, "How much CRM do you need?" We all have CRM systems. The most basic is the old Rolodex file with your notes scribbled on the cards. Chances are you also have a little "black book" of sorts with contact information and notes for the people you do business with.

The most popular CRM system in use today is Microsoft Outlook, even though most people don't think about it as a CRM system. That is why I felt it was important to include Outlook in this review. I think the biggest mistake that organizations make when it comes to CRM is that they want it to be too much. By that I mean that management likes the idea of having every touch point with a client or prospect recorded for easy access. But that comes with a hefty price in terms of the effort that is required to populate the information. And once you have such an abundance of information to sift through, the truly important information gets lost in the pile.

Let me be clear, I am not negative on CRM systems, rather I want to make sure you go in with your eyes wide open and don't try to make it be more than you need. If ever there was an application that demanded simplicity, CRM is it. So let me identify what I believe to be the most important attributes of a CRM system for accounting and tax practitioners.

- Simplicity
- Customizable
- Cloud based
- Direct integration with Outlook
- Direct integration with your practice management system
- Direct integration with MS Office applications

Let's start with **simplicity.** We don't need to make our work any more complicated and most of us don't have a great deal of tolerance for having to learn an entirely new application. So as you start looking at different CRM systems, the first question you should ask yourself; “Is the system intuitive and easy to use?” If the answer is no,

mileage to and from your office to theirs so that every time someone needs to make a mileage reimbursement entry on their expense form they don’t need to run a map program to calculate it.

I like and strongly believe in the value proposition of the cloud. When it comes to CRM, a **cloud-based** system offers a particularly compelling value proposition. You want access to important contact information wherever you are: office, home, traveling, etc. So a cloud-based system is going to give you that capability out of the box. By their very nature, cloud-based systems work with all types of devices: laptop, tablet, smartphone and who knows what is next.

The emphasis on **integration with Outlook** is because much of the information you store in Outlook is what you would want in a CRM system. So you certainly don’t want to have to enter the information twice. I’m not just referring to contact information stored in Outlook. You want to be able to link or move certain email messages and appointment information to the CRM system. CRM should be looked at as an extension of Outlook where you store and access the additional data that you cannot get from Outlook.

If you have a practice management (PM) system in place, the first question you should be asking is, “Can I get what I need from it?” The primary purpose of a PM system is to manage all of your client WIP and billing activity, due date tracking, engagement management, contact information and more. In fact, if you have a PM system and are also using Outlook, chances are pretty good that you have 90 percent of what you need within those two systems. If you find that you are not able to get what you need from your PM system, then a CRM that directly **integrates with your practice management system** is pretty important.

One last key feature to look for is **direct integration with MS Office applications.** This can be extremely powerful because so many of the documents we create and work with originate in MS Word and Excel. Some examples include: proposals,

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CPA Practice Advisor examined five Customer Relationship Management systems. Follow the links below to see how they rated.

- **CCH iFirm Small Firm Manager**
- **Microsoft Outlook 365**
- **Office Tools Pro**
- **Results CRM**
- **Zoho CRM**

For each solution we review the simplicity of the interface, core product features / functions, customization options and integrations.

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John Higgins, CPA.CITP is a strategic technology advisor to accountants and tax preparers on workflow automation, cloud accounting and other applications of technology to increase productivity and profitability. His company, CPA Crossings LLC (www.cpacrossings.com), has recently launched a new Cloud Accounting Learning Center.

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