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Jan. 20, 2020

For years accounting firms stored client documents on paper, and later this shifted to shared folder systems within Windows. Windows and other file-sharing/storage systems like ShareFile, Dropbox, Box and Google Docs are great for broad general use in storing and sharing documents. But as document storage systems, they simply hold content in a commonly accessible area. DSS systems do not provide the productivity gains a firm can enjoy when employing a document management system specifically designed for accounting firm workflows.

A *CPA Practice Advisor* article on "Do your Best Document Management," says that

with email, Windows, and Office apps – report that their staff are more organized, productive and better able to respond to client requests.

The idea of implementing a new software system to manage all documents, communications and tasks in your firm might seem daunting, but it may be easier than you think. First, let's discuss *why* you should move from simply storing files to efficiently managing information within a document management system. Then we'll outline a straightforward path to realizing the benefits of a DMS.

Efficiency

Have you ever searched for a document, but found it took too long? Rifling through filing cabinets, drawers, Windows folders and even colleagues' desks is a great way to waste precious minutes on what should be a simple task.

Storing documents in digital form makes them easy to hold on to, find and share. Powerful search tools eliminate wasted time searching filing cabinets. Gone are the days of paper cuts and the anxiety of missing documents!

In addition to optimizing document searches, workflow rules help you assign and track tasks, deadlines and responsibilities. A digital workflow keeps firm members in the know, while reducing time spent tracking projects in Excel or on paper.

A document management system can retrieve items from your tax software and then files them in an organized manner. You won't have to jump between applications in order to transfer your files. This saves you time by reducing your manual processes and keeps your firm organized.

Security and Compliance

Some firms and clients still share documents through the mail or via fax and/or

"You aren't truly paperless if your office still has filing cabinets." —Ward Blatch, Partner, K2 Enterprises Canada

Your filing cabinets likely take up a great deal of floor space in your office. By going paperless, you can eliminate the need for them – reducing clutter and saving space and storage costs.

Now that you know why your firm should go paperless, let's discuss *how*!

How to Implement a DMS in Your Firm

1. Identify Inefficiencies.

Inefficiencies in your firm could be the time spent retrieving documents, missed deadlines, lack of transparency in projects, insecure document submissions, insufficient retention policies and more. Engage colleagues to identify the weak points in your current work processes. After evaluating the firm's needs, compile a report outlining the productivity costs. Calculate potential annual savings in employee time, paper and office supplies and postage. A document management system can pay for itself with a strong ROI.

2. Be a Change Leader.

Rally your team for the change and present your findings from the inefficiency identification phase. People are often resistant to change, especially if inefficient processes have been the standard for years. As a change leader, you must emphasize the benefits. Create a customized plan to assure that all employees receive the communications and training they need to be ready when the new system goes live.

Get buy-in from the decision-makers – typically firm owners, partners and/or management. This is critical to implementing the change and achieving pure

efficiency.

evaluate a software company's support team by asking for references. Review referrals from other accounting firms. Look at online product reviews and industry awards.

4. Convert Your Data.

Scope the data to be moved to the new system. Some records stored on paper may require scanning to digital format. Data stored in Windows or an older document management system may need to move to the new DMS. Talk with the DMS provider about the assistance it will provide with migration.

5. Become an Expert (Training).

Start training on the software and use your change leader status to get the team involved. The better prepared you are to use the software before fully implementing, the more beneficial it will be in the long run.

6. Inform Your Clients of Changes.

Let your clients know of your leap to efficiency and about any alterations in the document-handling process. Set up your client portals and explain the submission process via portal or encrypted email links to your clients.

7. Enjoy the Fruits of Your Labor.

It's time to enjoy a more efficient, steadfast and organized office. You've earned it.

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