CPA Practice Advisor

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Working in 2020 has been anything but business as usual. Since the spring, regular business processes and workflows have been upended as a global workforce has been forced to operate from home and the demand for remote solutions has skyrocketed.

Most accounting firms were able to react quickly, implementing temporary solutions to keep their remote employees up and running. As the year has stretched on, though, most of us are realizing that we won't be back in the office anytime soon, at least not in any way that looks like what we were used to. Temporary solutions have given

Working remotely has forced accounting firm employees and their clients to be more flexible toward everything from time zone gaps to at-home interruptions, and factors like time and location have far less influence on when or how work is getting done. Asynchronous tools like email, Slack, Google Docs and cloud-based practice management systems are more popular than ever, since they offer fluid information sharing and the ability for one person to easily pick up a project or activity where another left off.

The key to making the most of these tools for collaboration, though, is having effective workflows built around them. Workflows offer much-needed structure at a time when many employees may feel they’ve lost control over their daily routines and the ability to connect with others. Whenever the business environment shifts, workflows need to be reevaluated and adjusted. Implementing systematic workflows throughout the practice management lifecycle is crucial for accounting firm efficiency in the new normal.

Practice Management Lifecycle: Remote Workflow Examples

The practice management Lifecycle model identifies 12 elements that represent the sequence of core activities that firms take on to support clients and manage business, from new client prospecting through final reporting and analytics. In current times, accounting firms need to focus on being able to handle each of these aspects remotely or in a virtual environment with the help of the right practice management and cloud solutions.

A complete introduction to the 12 workflow elements can be found here. The following is an overview of how to update workflows for the entire project management lifecycle in remote times.

1. **Client Intake.** How is the current onboarding experience for new clients and for your team? Firms need to have centralized systems for inputting and updating

client contact information, so no one has to ask for or provide the same

document management system that makes them accessible, organized and searchable in an intuitive way. Centralized document management tools ensure that all information is available to all employees whenever they need it and wherever they happen to be working.

4. **Staffing.** Managing your staffing needs can be a challenge when your workforce is scattered. In order to properly assess your staffing requirements, you need to be able to view your resources, budgeting and pipeline all in one place. Cloud-based tools are critical for being able to accurately forecast workloads, track assignments, gauge resource availability and properly staff matters and projects, especially during shifts from the busy tax season to slower times.
5. **Workflow:** Workflow is the centerpiece of a successful practice, and it needs to be constantly defined, reviewed, revised and applied. Workflow affects every person in the firm, so it's crucial to garner team input and emphasize employee responsibility for achieving end goals. Automating workflows through cloud-based solutions is key when you have a remote workforce.
6. **Reminders.** While most people are used to working remotely by now, your employees are still likely juggling a number of distractions in their daily lives. Your processes should include notifications based on workflow needs to remind them of crucial tasks. Avoid tools that rely on pop-ups – you want your reminders to stay where your employees will see them and acknowledge them.
7. **Time Tracking.** Keeping track of time is valuable to more than just billing. It gives your firm insights into utilization, realization and profitability. You should select time tracking tools that are painless for your employees to use, populate automatically and integrate with your other systems.
8. **Billing.** Your billing systems should be integrated across all your workflows and applications, so that tasks completed are easy to track from wherever your employees are working. You also need to be sure that your system is comprehensive enough to address all your billing needs and requirements.

9. **Portal Delivery.** Document delivery looks different when you're not working in

11. **CRM.** Client relationship management is more critical than ever when you can't directly interact with your clients. Cloud-based CRM tools that offer custom fields and integrate across your different systems allow you to address the specific needs of both your firm and your clients.
12. **Prospecting New Clients.** With meetings and conferences on hold, landing new business now happens via remote tools. The right tools will allow you to organize your contact information and apply your specific prospecting strategies with the help of KPIs and reporting.

The good news is that refining workflows for the new normal doesn't need to happen all at once. The various elements of the practice management Lifecycle model can be viewed as your road map for continuous improvement.

If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that things will continue to change. Breaking your workflows and processes into discrete elements will enable you to address specific needs as new challenges arise, allowing your firm to not just survive, but thrive in the new normal.

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Firm Management