CPA
Practice Advisor

clients is a significant friction point for many firms. Possibly because of the COVID-19 pandemic, client collaboration, workflow, and document management systems (DMS) came to ...

Randy Johnston • Mar. 15, 2021

From the March 2021 Issue.

Effective Document Exchange, gathering, management, and distribution with clients is a significant friction point for many firms. Possibly because of the COVID-19 pandemic, client collaboration, workflow, and document management systems (DMS) came to the forefront in 2020. Unfortunately, many firms were not ready for the extraordinary conditions of stay-at-home orders. While I have spent most of the last year assisting firms overcome technology issues, with the common issues involving collaboration, workflow, and DMS, four more technologies were

replacement for whatever portal was in use by the firm.

Our K2 partner meeting's other unexpected outcome was our Paperless Office course's exceptional popularity, ranking among our top ten course offerings. Feedback from our attendees also tells us that it is time to move to a new strategy for document management, which I have concluded I will call Document Management V5.0 for the moment. Unfortunately, many firms are still running DMS V1.0 or V2.0 because they implemented the technology early and then never upgraded again. We will need to discuss DMS also this year. But for now, let us look at document exchange, collaboration, and client experience.

How Do We Exchange Documents with Clients?

For ten years, we have suggested that firms use portals as the "front door" of your practice, as noted in my August 31, 2011 column and again on December 17, 2013. This thinking evolved as we were working through the RootWorks organization's design with Darren Root and Wade Schultz, the web designer and innovator behind their efforts. Traditionally, portals were built in one of several ways. These methods included integration with a practice management system, like Thomson Reuters Practice CS and NetClient CS or GoFileRoom Portal, evolving to Onvio Firm Management.

During my 2020 review of practice management systems, I discovered by my count that 37 systems have portals and there are 23 features of portals. While I could name all of these features and products, we are excited to review most of them in our new podcast, The Technology Lab. Other portals are integrated with DMS systems like Wolters Kluwer CCH Document and CCH Portal, CCH Axcess Document and CCH Axcess Client Collaboration Portal, Doc.It Web Portal, and Conarc's iChannel Client Portals. You can also use utilities like Citrix ShareFile and Microsoft SharePoint.

However, more familiar to CPA firms, when Practice Management, DMS, and utility

- Prepared by Client (PBC) list?
- Portal?
- Organizer?
- Monthly checklist for bookkeeping services?
- Email?
- Calls (sometimes as a desperate last resort)?

And how do you keep track of it all?

- Document Management System (DMS), document storage system (DSS), DIY
- Workflow
- Spreadsheets
- Task lists in practice management

What do you want the client experience to be?

- Provide the firm what they have
- In the format they have
- Firm requests that are easy to do
- Legal eSignature easy to do
    - Sign off on new projects
    - Complete requirement paperwork
- One place to track everything

And how do you want your clients and your team to use the documents?

- Right content, right format, right time
- Complete, correct, concise
- With these attributes
    - Easy to read

- Easy to find

get through the busy season and not go crazy, you need the following things to be true:

- Clients need to send you documents on time
- The staff has complete visibility across clients
    - Who owes us what?
    - When did we request it?
    - Did they send that document?
- These things need to be true in tax season and throughout the year

It would be best if you look for a secure, invite-only tool where no one else but your firm and your invited clients can access the platform. Look for a clean, organized workspace with every message, client task list, and all files feeding into one place where everyone can find them without being cc'd on anything. Make sure everyone in your firm can see all the files and messages. That way, no matter who interacts with the client, every authorized person in the firm can see the documents and transactions, enabling proactive client service. Clients use cell phones frequently today, so consider obtaining a fully featured mobile experience that lets you be in contact with your clients wherever they are at so that you are never stuck waiting to get work done again.

2021 and beyond is a time of improved document exchange, client collaboration, and client experience. What type of experience are you going to create for your clients?

Firm Management • Technology