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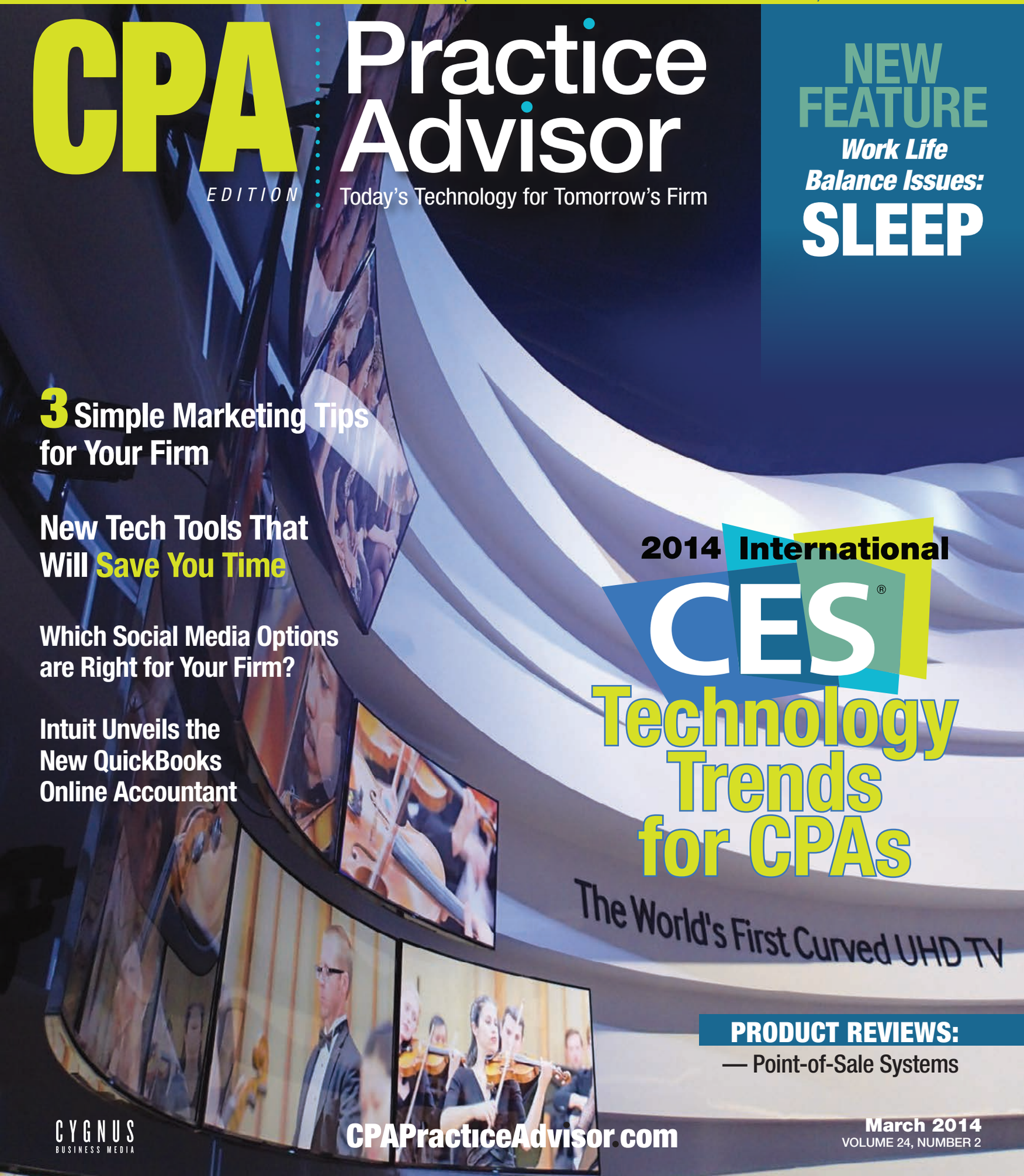
Technology Trends for CPAs



PRODUCT REVIEWS:
— Point-of-Sale Systems

CYGNUS BUSINESS MEDIA

CPAPracticeAdvisor.com

March 2014
VOLUME 24, NUMBER 2

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800-547-7377 • www.CPAPracticeAdvisor.com

Practice Advisor, (ISSN #2160-8725 (print), ISSN #2160-8733 (digital); USPS #017-576) is published eight times a year (April/May, June, July, August, September, October, November and December) by Cygnus Business Media, Inc., incorporating two editions known as *CPA Practice Advisor* and *NSA Practice Advisor,* 1233 Janesville Avenue, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin 53538. Periodicals postage paid at Fort Atkinson, WI 53538 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in the U.S.A.
Send all subscription inquiries or change of address to:
Practice Advisor,
PO Box 3258, Northbrook, IL 60065-3258.
Phone: (877) 382-9187 (toll free); (847) 559-7598 (local)
Fax: (847) 564-9453
Email: Circ.CPA@omeda.com
Subscription Rates: The basic annual rate is $3, based on qualifying associations of 10,000 or more public accountants that may also subscribe for all their public accountant members (certain restrictive covenants apply) for a basic subscription rate of $9 per member for a three-year subscription.
One year subscription for all others: USA - $48; CAN $70 GST; INT'L $99 GST #131910168.
POSTMASTER, please send address changes to:
Practice Advisor, P.O. Box 3258, Northbrook, IL 60065-3258.
Canadian address changes to:
Canada Post PM40612608. Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to: *Practice Advisor,* PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2.

CYGNUS BUSINESS MEDIA
BPA WORLDWIDE
PRINTED WITH SOY INK

By M. Darren Root, CPA.CITP, Executive Editor

Get in the Habit of Planning for Your Firm's Success

The book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,* by Stephen R. Covey has had a profound impact on both my personal and professional life. Of the seven habits that Covey presents in the book, the second habit, "Begin with the end in mind," is my favorite. This habit is directly connected to planing, because once we have the end in mind for how we want our firms and our lives to be, we must devise a plan, or a roadmap, to make it a reality.

The ironic thing about planning is that although as accounting professionals we often espouse the importance of it to our own clients, many of us find it difficult to spend time planning for our own benefit or that of our firm. All too often we find ourselves too busy driving to stop for gas. We keep moving on in our work day doing the work, but not paying enough attention to exactly where all of our activity is taking us. The problem is, if we don't create a plan for our firms—and implement it, then sooner or later we will find ourselves driving down the wrong road far from the end that we had in mind. This is why I encourage you to create some regularly scheduled time for yourself (and other key people in your firm) to create a plan that will give you a roadmap you can use for achieving your objectives.

I know, it's the busiest time of the year, so taking some time out of your schedule to devise a plan for your firm's future is probably pretty far off your radar screen. Yet, because planning is such a component of your firm's success, I ask you, "If not now, when?"

I am certainly not proposing you drop everything right this moment to devise a strategic plan for your firm, but I am proposing that you carve out some time on a regular basis to plan how you are going to fulfill the vision and objectives that you have for your business. As you consider what your planning process will look like, keep in mind that to be effective, planning should not be a singular event.

"IF NOT NOW, WHEN?"

Regularly scheduled, ongoing planning is required to keep you moving forward; and second, accountability within the planning process is crucial. Simply having a plan doesn't ensure that you will take the action required to implement it.

In my firm we do our planning based on 90-day increments which allows us to evaluate our progress, recalibrate our objectives, and celebrate our successes each quarter. It also allows us to provide ongoing feedback to staff about the areas where goals are being met or where improvement is needed.

While there is no arguing that planning takes time upfront—and we all know how scarce time is—imagine how much time will be lost in your firm if you don't plan and you veer badly off-course. Devoting time to not only creating a plan, but to conducting an ongoing planning process gives you the direction and structure you need to develop and implement a business model that will allow your firm to be more productive, more profitable, and more efficient. ●

Darren is the Executive Editor of CPA Practice Advisor. *He remains in public practice as the principal of Root & Associates, LLC, in Bloomington, Indiana, and is president of his consulting practice, RootWorks. He formerly served on the Board of the AICPA's CITP Credentials Committee and is a former member of the Board of Directors for the Indiana CPA Society. He speaks at dozens of professional organizations each year and frequently serves as a guest lecturer at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business.*

By Brian Tankersley, CPA.CITP, Technology Editor

Digital Plumbing Tools Work to Sync Data Across Multiple Cloud Apps

A new class of "digital plumbing" applications are helping many firms and small businesses solve another seemingly "impossible" task – automated synchronization and universal exchange of data between applications written by different software publishers. Third party digital plumbing providers like OneSaaS, ITDuzzIT, and Zapier provide preconfigured interfaces to exchange data between multiple solutions.

Just as Nintendo's digital characters (and plumbers) Mario and Luigi changed the way our society thinks about entertainment by helping us become heroes in an epic adventure, these emerging "digital plumbing" tools automate the process of synchronizing data between multiple cloud-based business apps so we can be heroes to our clients.

Integrations between major applications like SalesForce.com, QuickBooks Online, FreshBooks, and Xero are plentiful, but many second and third tier solutions are not as likely to be supported with free integrations. Historically, many companies had to purchase expensive custom programming solutions or some data fields had to be entered more than once and reconciled between multiple systems. These custom development projects use software development kits (SDKs), which are created by publishers like Intuit, CCH, Sage, Bill.com, CCH, and Xero.

Digital Plumbing Applications like ItDuzzIt, Zapier, and OneSaaS provide third party synchronization tools for a wide range of cloud-based applications.

Digital plumbing applications like Zapier, OneSaaS, and ItDuzzIt provide managed fee-based simplified toolsets for use by small business cloud architects and sophisticated users in designing, configuring, and maintaining connections between a wide range of applications.

Like the cloud applications, the interfaces are maintained on an ongoing basis, and are adjusted to compensate for changes in the underlying applications. The products are value priced, and recurring monthly subscriptions for these toolsets can cost $99 per month or more per company. Security is also a fear mentioned by some users.

Since the digital plumbing application can get data from all connected accounts, a hack on the digital plumbing provider could theoretically give access to most, if not all, of a company's data across all connected applications. Finally, not all data fields in an application are available for synchronization, and consultants should not make any promises about how effectively information can be interfaced between applications until they confirm the representations in the sales materials.

Third party digital plumbing providers like OneSaaS.com (pictured above) allow accountants and small business users to synchronize data between many popular cloud applications

Some digital plumbing providers interface with hundreds of applications. The graphic above shows some of the over 250 web apps which can be connected using the Zapier service.

The digital plumbing landscape is moving very quickly, and at this point, the existing products support data synchronization between literally hundreds of applications. Digital plumbing providers offer hope for those who are constantly working to enter data into multiple cloud applications, but they are not a panacea. Just as carpenters are trained to measure twice and cut once, aspiring digital plumbers and small business cloud architects should have a good understanding of what will happen with each interface before they are connected to live production data.

If used effectively, these tools can save hours of entering and reconciling data between multiple applications, however, if not used carefully, data could be easily corrupted and/or duplicated. While we recommend that you evaluate these tools in the near future if you or your clients are using multiple cloud applications, we also advise you to proceed with caution, back up your information, and test using sample data before going live with any of these new and innovative toolkits.

Brian Tankersley is a Knoxville, Tennessee CPA and consultant whose practice is focused on technology consulting and training for accountants. Brian is a nationally recognized speaker with K2 Enterprises (k2e.com), and blogs on accounting technology at CPATechBlog.com. Comments, suggestions, and errata are always welcome, and should be e-mailed to brian.tankersley@CPAPracticeAdvisor.com.

This is the first installment of a new column, "The 21st Century Accountant", which aspires to highlight significant, emerging technologies that affect your practice. This month's installment discusses "digital plumbing" applications, which are third party interfaces used to synchronize data between multiple cloud applications into a small business cloud architecture.

REVIEW SECTIONS

BASIC SYSTEM FUNCTIONS
- Installation Ease
- General Navigation & Ease of Use
- Industry-Specific Templates
- Industry-Specific Features
- Platform Support

CORE ACCOUNTING CAPABILITES
- GL/AP/AR Functionality
- Sales Tax Functionality
- Payroll Functionality
- Audit Trail
- Multi-Currency
- Multiple Language Support
- Multi-Location Support
- Multiple Users

DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS
- Sales/Point-of-sale/Shipping
- Customer/Vendor Employee Management
- Inventory/Purchasing
- e-Features
- Remote Access

MANAGEMENT FEATURES
- Dashboard Overviews
- Reporting
- Security Features
- Integration/Import/Export
- Data Transfer
- External Integration
- Online Accountant Transfer Tool

HELP/SUPPORT
- Built-in Support Features
- System Updates
- Support Website/Documentation
- U.S.-Based Support

Mary Girsch-Bock
Mary began her career as an accountant in the property management industry, later moving into the healthcare industry. She is now a freelance writer specializing in business and technology issues and is the author of her first book, several HR handbooks, training manuals, and other in-house publications. She can be reached at mary.girschbock@cpapracticeadvisor.com.

2014 Review of Point of Sale Systems

By Mary Girsch-Bock

As of the end of 2013, there were over 5 million retail and food services businesses operating in the U.S. While all of them are not in the market for a point of sale (POS) system, many are looking to upgrade their current system, or perhaps migrate from their cash register system to a POS system. The fact is that even small retailers can reap the benefits of a POS system, which not only processes sales, but also tracks inventory, tracks employee time and produces excellent sales reports.

Most large retailers already utilize a completely integrated POS system. Go into a large chain drugstore, and the pharmacy can access your prescription whether you're in Chicago or Los Angeles. But in 2014, many small to mid-sized retailers are considering moving beyond their reliable cash register system and don't know where to begin.

So where does a retailer start when looking for a point of sale system? Just like there there is a variety of types of retail businesses, there are also a lot of POS systems on the market, with some geared for smaller markets looking to automate for the first time, while others are designed for larger retail businesses that process thousands of transactions each day.

View the full reviews of the following programs:

- **CAM Commerce - Retail Star**
- **Cougar Mountain - Denali Point of Sale**
- **Intuit - QuickBooks Point of Sale**

Some of these products are best suited for single-location retailers or food service businesses; others can easily handle multiple locations and multiple inventory warehouses. Some are designed specifically for brick and mortar retailers exclusively, while others easily integrate those same stores with an e-commerce solution, a necessity as more retailers begin to expand their online presence. More retailers are looking at offering customer loyalty cards as well, which would necessitate purchasing a system that supports that option.

Of course the needs of your retail clients will differ, perhaps a little, perhaps a lot. Either way, you're likely to find the following reviews helpful as you sort through all of the available options to find a POS product that will suit their business.

In the POS review, we look at key software features. In basic system functions, we take a long look at product functionality and the availability of features.

- **Is the product easy to use?**
- **Can it be up and running fairly quickly?**
- **Can cashiers customize the POS user interface?**
- **Are there additional modules you can purchase, or is it an all-in-one-system?**

We also look at specialized features such as:

- **Does it work with touch screen monitors or do you need to use a standard keyboard to navigate the system?**
- **Can cashiers process more than one transaction type at a time (e.g. sales, layaway)?**
- **Can the retailer use loyalty or rewards programs?**
- **Can customer data be tracked for marketing purposes?**

Reporting is also a key piece of any POS system, so we look at reporting options available including inventory reports, customer demographics, POS reports, and whether there is a good audit trail system in place. Integration issues such as whether the product integrates with key modules or other third party software is looked at as is whether there are integrated shipping options; a must for those with a vibrant mail order business.

Finally, we look at one of the most important aspects of a POS system, and that is Help and Support functions such as whether there are built in support functions, automatic systems updates, and perhaps most importantly, live product support options – which are key if your system locks up during the busiest part of the day.

While the products we are looking at in this point of sale review offer a wide range of features and functionality, the final decision rests between you and your client. Looking at the reviews is a great place to start.

READ THE FULL REVIEWS ONLINE AT: WWW.CPAPRACTICEADVISOR.COM/11321628

Cougar Mountain Software Denali Point of Sale

Read the full review and see expanded ratings for this product online at: www.CPAPracticeAdvisor.com/11321643

2014 OVERALL RATING

4.75

BEST FIT

With the addition of three versions of its software, Cougar Mountain can prove to be a good fit with its traditional audience of small to mid-sized businesses as well as larger specialty retailers.

STRENGTHS

- Affordable for retailers of just about any size
- Available in server/cloud editions
- Modular design allows users to scale the system to suit their needs
- Solid reporting options
- Customizable, user-friendly interface

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- Not available as a touch screen product
- Not well-suited for processing large numbers of mail orders
- Does not support membership programs

SUMMARY & PRICING

Users can structure Denali POS to suit their needs, purchasing only the modules they need. With Denali's POS module is designed to integrate with other system modules. Extremely flexible, each Denali module can be purchased separately, with modules starting at $595.00, with license fees additional. The cloud version of Denali starts at $83.00 per user per month.

www.cougarmtn.com

CAM Commerce Retail Star

2014 OVERALL RATING

5

BEST FIT

Retail Star is a completely integrated system originally designed with larger specialty retailers in mind, but with the availability of Retail Star Lite, even smaller retailers can reap the benefits of this fully customizable system.

PRODUCT STRENGTHS

- Modular design provides excellent product scalability
- Two versions – Regular and Lite put the product within the reach of all but the smallest retail businesses
- Product offers complete accounting system along with POS functionality
- Complete brick and mortar – web integration
- Excellent system customization capabilities for just about any type of retail business

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- Complex system setup that requires significant time and manpower investments
- System pricing may place it out of the reach of smaller/less established retailers

Read the full review and see expanded ratings for this product online at: www.CPAPracticeAdvisor.com/11321633

CAM Commerce Solutions™ A subsidiary of CELERANT TECHNOLOGY CORP

SUMMARY & PRICING

With Retail Star now available in a 'Lite' version, retailers large and small can reap the benefits of utilizing this excellent POS system. Currently, Retail Star Lite is available for under $100.00 per month. Retail Star pricing is available directly from CAM Commerce upon request.

www.camcommerce.com

QuickBooks Point of Sale

2014 OVERALL RATING

4.5

BEST FIT

While known as a staple for the small business community, Intuit has gradually been upping the playing field by creating products designed to suit mid-sized businesses as well. QuickBooks Point of Sale 2013 is one such product, available in three distinct editions; Basic, Pro, and Multi-Store, and suitable for retailers with up to 20 locations.

STRENGTHS

- Scalable, with three editions now available
- Available as a desktop or cloud-based solution
- Availability of apps such as Go Payment and SalesForce for QuickBooks offers more user flexibility than in the past
- Affordably priced for even the smallest retailer
- Quick product setup and solid help functionality is available throughout the product

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

- Not suitable for those processing high numbers of transactions
- Limited product expansion capabilities available
- Some retailers may require more custom report capabilities

Read the full review and see expanded ratings for this product online at: www.CPAPracticeAdvisor.com/11321654

intuit QuickBooks®

SUMMARY & PRICING

QuickBooks Point of Sale 2013 is available in three distinct editions. The Basic edition retails for $1,199.95, the Pro edition is priced at $1,699.95, and the Multi-Store edition, which supports up to 20 locations, is available for $1,899.95. QuickBooks Point of Sale can be used as a stand-alone product, or integrated with QuickBooks financial products for a complete front/back office management solution for small to mid-sized retailers.

quickbooks.intuit.com

By Kristy Short, Ed.D and Gaynor Meilke, MS

Marketing Tips for the Self-Proclaimed "Not-so-Creative" Accountant

Accountants tend to fall in the analytical–left brain–thinker camp. This makes it difficult for some practitioners to make the transition to right brain creative thinking when the time comes to get a marketing program up and running. Additionally, many accountants still cling to the misconception that everything they put out into the market must be stoically professional—and that tends to rule out creative marketing communications.

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Times have changed. The stuffed-shirt accountant image is a thing of the past. Quite frankly, the old-school-all-business approach is more likely to scare off potential clients because today's progressive prospects associate the hardline professional with the guy in the outdated office, who bills for every minute of time, and is utterly inflexible. People like creative… so give the people what they want! Here are a few tips to help you get your *creative* on…

Tell a *Different* Story About Your Firm

It's time to get more intimate. Clients and prospects want to view their accountant not just as an advisor, but as a trusted friend as well. Show a little more of yourself to really create a unique brand—one that sets you apart from all the other firms with the corporate blue logo and power ties. Take your marketing communications to a new level of cool and unique. Explain who you are (in your own style), why you do what you do (say it with passion), and how your services help clients succeed (clients love to hear how you can help them). Try not to spew out a dry resume when you tell your story. Instead, give it some creative color.

Once you've found your new voice, spice up your marketing initiatives even more by adding engaging images and graphics and eye-catching colors. Don't be afraid to be quirky… this is a surefire way to set your communications apart from everyone else who follows a boring blue template.

Sass Up Your Website

If your website looks like a generic template and reads like a CV… it's time to reevaluate. You really have to get into the brand mindset—that is, how do you want visitors to "feel" about your firm. Take the time to create custom content that properly relays your exclusive story (lose any generic boilerplate), and design a site that is aesthetically compelling and easy to navigate. Also be sure that your site is not a static brochure of information, but instead serves as the new "front door" to your firm—where visitors can interact and do business. You'll want to consider client portals, helpful educational downloads (white papers, fact sheets), and videos.

If you are a firm that strategically serves certain niche markets, equip your site with related content. Add custom industry pages to your website, and within them use the right language and ask the right questions to start a dialogue with prospects. For example, if you serve veterinarians, indicate your understanding; that is, either it's complex or—there's more to a vet practice than a clinic. It also includes a hospital, pharmacy, elaborate inventory, etc. Also indicate your participation in supporting associations such as the American Animal Hospital Association or VetPartners. The more detail, the more you position yourself as an expert from the start.

Revamp Your Office Space

Don't fool yourself into thinking that your physical office doesn't speak volumes. If your space looks outdated, people will drive right by. We live in a world where beauty has replaced function. Take Apple for example… it's not enough to offer products and services that perform well, consumers want them to be aesthetically pleasing as well. Design trumps function. Consider updating the interior of your office—pick a new brand color, one that is updated and bold—and go with it. Update exterior signage as well using new fonts and colors. Again, be creative.

Creativity is King! And believe it or not, we all have some creative skill. Take some time to review your communications, website and office, and make needed creative enhancements. You'll be surprised at how a few tweaks can bolster your brand image. Trust your inner creative. ●

By Randy Johnston

New Tech Tools that Will Save You Time

This year is a great year to watch for improvements in procedures and processes supported by maturing technology tools. We can look for revolutionary changes to make in our practices. However, evolutionary change can be taught and assimilated in day-to-day work.

As part of a mission to provide you the latest in technology tool insights, watching the trade press, attending events like the annual Consumer Electronic Show (CES), and accounting shows, and speaking with vendors creating products provides the chance to vette products for your consideration. This year is starting off with some interesting new tools for your consideration.

So, What's New?

Changing software is hard, and most of us avoid this unless we have no alternatives. Because of that, we often wind up using a suite of related products and choose supporting software tools to complete the tasks at hand. On the other hand, hardware gets old and wears out, much like cars do. Some of us routinely change cars, not because we need to, but just because we want something different.

Others have a plan to replace cars at 60,000 miles, 200,000 miles or at the end of the lease. Unfortunately, sometimes cars unexpectedly get replaced because of accidents or other items beyond your control. Computer hardware is much the same way. We choose to replace the hardware at 3 years, 5 years or when it fails and it is too expensive to repair. When we make hardware changes, we are often forced to make software changes to support the new hardware.

For example, touchscreen hardware works much better with Windows 8.1 than it does with Windows 7. On the other hand, we can change the way our hardware works by replacing the software, much like replacing the standard engine by putting a high performance engine in a car. We sometimes do this with our computer hardware by updating the operating system and installing more RAM or a Solid State Drive.

What are some of the technology tool changes we should consider now?

- Scanners
- New generation wireless access points
- Upgrades for writing technologies, such as the Livescribe 3 Smartpen
- Conferencing displays for our conference rooms and offices
- Touch screens in formats from desktops to laptops to slates to wall-mount displays
- 4K support for computers and TVs
- SaaS-based personal finance document management
- Battery recharging capabilities for smartphones and tablets
- Many more…

What technologies from this list can you use almost immediately? The mainstream scanning vendors of Fujitsu and Canon have all introduced new products with improved features this year. For most of you, you should be buying different models of scanners in any of your replacements or new acquisitions from these vendors. An example of a single product that has an impact on QuickBooks, QuickBooks Online, Xero, and FreshBooks is the NeatConnect Cloud Scanner and Digital Filing System. This product is $499, available now, and also allows scanning directly to generic services like Microsoft's OneDrive (formerly called Microsoft SkyDrive) as well as NeatCloud, Evernote, Box, Dropbox, Google Drive, Email, FTP, SD card, and Neat's Desktop Software.

After scanning, the product performs optical character recognition (OCR) on the documents. It can then map the results at a field level in several popular accounting products named above. Installation and operation are simple, because the product is connected wirelessly and has a single button to perform the scan function. One concern for the product is the recurring cost of cloud storage and the introduction of yet one more document management system for these accounting products.

Wireless technologies are being delivered to support the new 802.11ac gigabit standard. While major vendors like Cisco and SonicWALL should deliver their products by mid-year, the home technology vendor, Belkin, has introduced the Linksys WRT 1900AC Home Router, which has a retail price of $299. This product uses the new gigabit wireless network standard 802.11ac and can send and receive at 1.3GBps wirelessly, more than

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double the speed of 802.11n and 24 times faster than 802.11g.

The software included with the unit can perform more sophisticated SSL VPN (Secure Sockets Layer virtual private network) functions and represents a wide array of new wireless products with radically greater speed. Belkin acquired the Linksys division of Cisco in early 2013 and is using the intellectual property acquired to innovate during the past year. Many of you should replace your wireless access points (WAPs) this year.

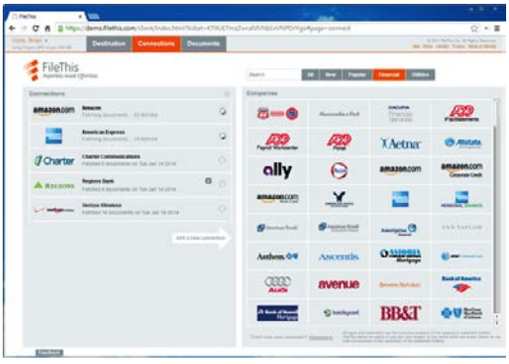
In past columns, we have described the benefits of the LiveScribe pen. This product traditionally required special paper and allowed you to take notes while recording speech. Later your notes could be used to play back specific speech that had been recorded. The new LiveScribe 3 version supports the Apple iPad with handwriting recognition and integration into note taking tools like EverNote. Even without the handwriting recognition and interfaces, the way this product now works on paper and on the iPad make it a technology tool worth trying.

Upgrading your conference room or office for productivity is possible with new touchscreens and conferencing software provided by many different vendors. In addition to connecting Apple TV and McTivia units for smartphone, tablet and computer wireless connections, video conferencing is more practical than ever between offices and between a firm and its clients. Besides the inexpensive video conferencing possible through Skype, Lync, Facetime, Oovoo or Vidyo, vendors like Samsung, Citrix and Cisco have made conferencing easier with their eConferencing products , GoToMeeting and WebEx.

It is probably one year too early for 4K TV, but 4K will become more common for our computers this year. DisplayLink 4K is a new USB 3.0 adapter that can support 4K monitors. Add-on vendor Targus had developed a universal docking station for 4K, the ACP7101 USZ.

This USB 3.0 universal docking station and power supply device supports the following connections: Integrated gigabit Ethernet and 5.1 audio, up to a 90W laptop power supply, the device supports dual 2560x1600 displays over DisplayPort or DVI-I, and is compatible with HDCP 2.0 encryption. The product is now available with a retail price of $169.99. These types of devices will allow 4K monitor to be connected to laptops and desktops alike. Further, vendors like Toshiba showed their 4K laptops at CES in 2014.

Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) has made innovation on a large scale possible for small and large publishers alike. One of the interesting technology tools using this technology is FileThis. FileThis.com is an automatic statement retrieval and storage product, according to CEO Brian Berson. Consider using this product

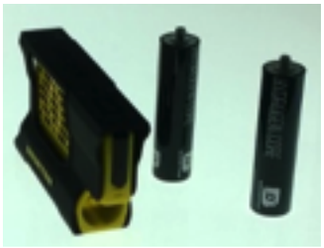


in firms that serve high net wealth individuals or for yourself.

The product is designed to retrieve all statements, automatically, on a reliable schedule, 24/7. FileThis securely fetches your online statements, bills and other documents from companies like American Express, Chase, Anthem, Amazon, and many more without you having to log in to every site individually. In effect, FileThis is your personal assistant that gets the job done. It is an online app that gets statements online from vendors and works with cloud storage tools. The pricing is free for up to 6 accounts, used weekly, with 500MB storage. There is a premium version for $2/month, for up to 12 accounts, used weekly, with 1GB storage, and an ultimate version for $5/month, for up to 30 accounts, used daily, with 10GB storage.

Another change to watch for is battery recharging capabilities. For example note the Fuel Cells in this picture from CES:

Also available is the Upp Personal



Energy Device, which is $199 at Brookstone, available in the first half of 2014. This technology is already being deployed in Africa. Although the pricing of refills is unknown at this time, Upp™ conveniently powers and charges all your compatible hand-held electronic devices via USB. Just connect the Upp fuel cell to a replaceable Upp fuel cartridge and experience instant energy gratification from replaceable fuel cartridges. Stay connected with your favorite device on the move and liberate yourself from the wall socket forever.

Pictured is Ron Rabinowitz, CEO

of Duracell PowerMat (picture by Brian Tankersley). Duracell Powermat Charging coming to Starbucks. You will purchase a power receiver (colored loops) and put on the table, which will transmit power to your phone wirelessly. This wireless charging uses the BMA standard (which is different from the Qi standard currently available on many devices) and will be available on 5+ phones on AT&T in 2014. Power charging units can be monitored remotely and non-functioning units can be identified via wireless diagnostics.

But remember, please…

Just because a new technology is introduced doesn't mean it is right for you. Do you have the business need? How will this technology tool help your personal productivity? What does it do for others? How much training and maintenance is needed to support this technology? Will the vendor remain in business? How long has the product been available?

New technology products can be intoxicating and invigorating, but you should not purchase while under the influence of a great sales pitch. Step back and understand your needs, application and the return on investment before spending your hard earned cash. It is perfectly fine being an early adopter, but try technologies out on a limited number of users, in effect, sandboxing the idea. If the sandbox works and the business case is there, adopting the latest technology tools can give you a competitive advantage and help you provide better client service while giving you more time for the things you like to do, too. ●

By Roman H. Kepczyk, CPA.CITP

CES 2014: Technology Trends for CPAs

The year 2014 started off awesome with my annual pilgrimage to the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas where future trends and bleeding edge products are announced. Many of these products will make it into the consumer market this year impacting us and our clients in our homes, and some will eventually impact the accounting profession and make their way into our firms.

My three-day mission with my team was to canvas through the massive show floor (3,200 vendors spread out over an area about the size of 35 football fields) to identify key technology trends and comb through all the gadgets that could impact accountants someday. Below we highlight Ten Trends worth watching and the products that may some day change our world.

Roman H. Kepczyk, CPA.CITP, is Director of Consulting for Xcentric, LLC. and works exclusively with accounting firms to implement today's leading best practices and technologies. Roman recently updated his "Quantum of Paperless: A Partner's Guide to Accounting Firm Optimization," which is available at Amazon.com and a Certified Lean Six Sigma Black Belt.

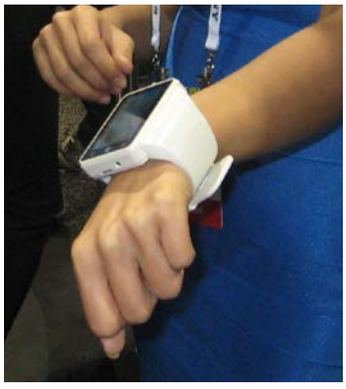
TABLET/PC COMBOS

This year, 45% of all U.S. homes will have tablets, making them one of the most ubiquitous Consumer Electronic devices around. While the traditional tablet is great for reading or "consuming" information, accountants spend most of their time working on PCs with keyboards, inputting and editing information. One trend that will give accountants the best of both worlds will be devices such as Dell's XPS12 which has a keyboard that folds under when you need it and ASUS's Transformer Book Duet that has a detachable keyboard.

Lenovo's Thinkpad 8 Windows PC may become a viable competitor to Microsoft's Surface 2 ProTablet, as they have the potential to make it the "single" device needed for the next generation of accountants. One of the most interesting prototypes displayed was Toshiba's "Shape-shifting Concept PC" which could be used in five different configurations ranging from the traditional laptop, to tablet, convertible, canvas mode, and entertainment mode, allowing us to use the device in whatever format is most suitable for the work at hand

CURVED SCREENS

This year's trend in high definition displays is curving them to optimize the viewing angle, including flexible **screens from LG and Samsung that bend on command**.While the first round is too expensive for office/PC use, it won't be long until multiple desktop displays "wrap around" our desks with ultra-high definition optimizing our view of spreadsheets and tax source documents on our desktop and turning our desktops into a CPA cockpit. These could be used in five different configurations ranging from the traditional laptop, to tablet, convertible, canvas mode, and entertainment mode, allowing us to use the device in whatever format is most suitable for the work at hand.

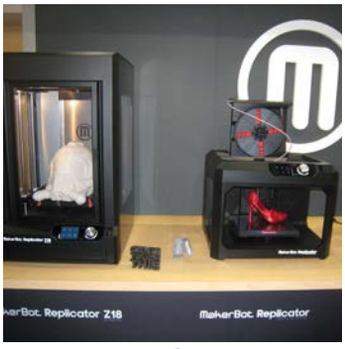


WEARABLE TECHNOLOGY

Since most of us are carrying a smart phone with Internet connectivity, why not use that to integrate with wearable devices that can notify us of events such as upcoming meetings, inbound emails, or incoming calls. These features are being integrated into jewelry (FashionTEQ Zazzi) and watches (Galaxy and Burg Smart Watches) allowing us to keep our phone holstered. The amount of micronization that is happening in Internet-enabled devices is phenomenal and smart phones such as the Neptune Pine Smartwatch have so much built into them that they are actually billed as the world's smallest tablet that you can wear on your wrist!

CORDLESS POWER

One of the frustrations of getting ready for a trip is packing all the different cords for the different mobile devices we carry with us. While there are shared chargers like the Kensington AbsolutePower, it would be great to get rid of power cords all together. CES featured a Wireless Power pavilion that showcased conductive power products such as the PowerSound speaker system which recharges your smartphone battery by lying it on top of the speakers, while simultaneously allowing you to listen to music pumped from the phone.



3D PRINTING

While there is a lot of hype around "additive" or 3D printing, based on the number of vendors and products at CES, there is definitely a consumer market developing at the home "prototyping" market with devices such as the da Vinci 3D printer starting at $499 and industry leader MakerBot delivering "Cube" units at close to a $1,000 price point. While creating small plastic prototypes is one side of the 3D market, tasting custom "printed" sugar candy from 3D Systems' ChefJet was a new CES experience.

HEALTHTECH

Another popular pavilion at CES was the Health technology section where biometric devices that monitor your heart rate, movement, and speed are being linked to your smartphone giving you a recap of your daily activity. Approximately one-third of all smartphones and tablet users already have a health-related application loaded (my personal exercise favorite is the 7 minute workout), showing that the market for integrated biometric tracking devices is huge. On a more practical note, I've heard of firms providing masseuses during busy season to help people relax so they could be more productive. Inada, maker of massage chairs was one of the most popular booths at CES and we would guess this would be extremely popular in any firm's break room.

ROBOTICS

Most of us have heard of personal robotic devices such as the iRobot Roomba vacuum or Scooba floor scrubber that automatically clean up when no one is looking. Well, they now have window cleaning robots such as Ecovac's WinBot that cover your windows as well. For those of us wondering how robots can help run your practice more effectively, there was a product from Double Robotics that lets you see what is going on, even when you are in another office or at home. Their Telepresence Robot for Telecommuters allows you to "move around the office and talk face to face" to your personnel, from the comfort of a remote site.

INPUT DEVICES

Ever wonder why computer keyboards are laid out the way they are? It was the easiest way to ensure the most commonly used keys didn't stick together when struck, and there has not been much innovation since then. While most of us grew up using IBM Selectric Typewriters, the next generation of accountants have grown up in the age of ergonomic input devices such as game controllers and smartphone. These personnel are definitely faster and more accurate on their ergonomic devices than on our current clunky keyboards, so the next generation may well use "controller" type ergonomic keyboards like the TrewGrip or Twiky input devices.

AUTOMOBILE AUTOMATION

Verizon and AT&T are developing partnerships with the major automotive manufacturers to integrate digital 4G capabilities within your car to make them one more component of the "Internet of things" which will keep us connected with information resources in real time. With three states now allowing driverless cars, commute time can become work time (if you chose it to be).

NEW SCANNING TECH

No CES review would be complete without looking at Fujitsu's scanning tools which have been a favorite of auditors for a long time. While last year's wireless ScanSnap ix1500 made it easier to transfer scanned images without the cord, this year they added the SV600 which is a book scanner with auto-flattening technology to quickly capture images such as historical ledger pages without having to take them apart!

VIRTUAL REALITY

Finally, the world of virtual reality is closer than ever, particularly with devices such as Occulus Rift's High Definition Prototype Goggles we were able to experience, twice! Imagine future auditor training by being able to look in any direction and move with Virtuix's Omni device. Training trends are moving towards the concept of gamifcation and could be a way to optimize auditor training such as client interviews and inventory observations.

Well, that concludes another round of cool technologies from the annual Consumer Electronics show; we hope you are having a productive and profitable busy season.

Which Social Media Options are Right for Your Firm?

By Scott H. Cytron

When I educate CPAs and accountants on social media marketing, I get two questions more often than any others. First, which application they should be on, and second, how they operate or participate in social media to get results.

Both are simple enough questions, but kind of hard to answer without spending some time analyzing what it is they really *want* to do or what they want to accomplish. After all, you wouldn't buy new tax software for your firm without first evaluating what it is you want to do with that software.

At its core, social media is about creating conversations through an online, two-way discussion. Most people who don't understand social media think something like Twitter exists only to post status updates about what you're doing. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

You will first want to determine where you want to spend the most time and the most resources, and then match that social media application to your goals. Social media is free, for the most part, but you could experience quite a few non-billable hours, depending on how deep you want to go.

You Want to Network and Prospect for New Clients

I believe the best way to think about social media is to refer to Linkedin, Facebook and Twitter as the Big 3 or the "Holy Grail" because they are the most popular. However, there are others that are can be just as important and meaningful, including YouTube, Pinterest and even Instagram.

If you want to network and prospect for new clients, then LinkedIn is where you'll want to be. Long considered the most professional of the social media Holy Grail, any professional who is *not* on LinkedIn must be living on the side of a mountain without access to daylight. However, there is a key difference between merely having an account and working that account to generate referrals. Those who are on and not spending at least 10 minutes a day participating in LinkedIn are not using it properly.

What can you do in 10 minutes? Quite a bit:

- Connect to five new people a day.
- Peruse your connections' updates and send a direct message with an observation about an update. Example: new title or position. Congratulate the person.
- Explore new networks to join. If you're already on a network, read the updates and respond appropriately.

You Live on the Edge and are Spontaneous

It isn't a question of liking or understanding advanced technologies; it's a case of being a bit more flexible with how you spend your day on social media. If you like to pepper your day with social media or just want to take a few breaks from demanding clients, then check out Twitter.

Twitter is probably the easiest of the Big 3 social media to be to be on, yet a lot of professionals might think otherwise until they dig in and tweet. Twitter is simply a way to send a message to a group of followers to let them know what you're doing or how you're feeling about a certain topic. Once you get a "handle" (@scytron, for example), you can begin composing messages that have a maximum character count, with spaces, of 140. Twitter is smart! If you use Twitter itself to compose tweets, the message window will tell you how many characters you have left.

What you want to avoid is tweeting about what you just ate for lunch. Instead, here are three examples of real-life tweets I just picked up at random by going to my own followers' feed:

- @finanicalforce: Guide to Cloud Accounting. Download this quick guide and learn the benefits of cloud accounting solutions: http://ffce.bz/meFSf
- @tameraloerzel: Nonequity partnerships have their advantages and pitfalls. Explore both related to five management attributes here: http://bit.ly/NttJ2t
- @menswearhouse: When you get the right fit, you look great. Pronto Blue Jeans - just $9.99, today only. Enjoy this online exclusive: http://mensw.com/1fIfooS

What these tweeters have done, successfully, is get their point across in a very succinct format. That's meaningful because it reinforces that they are a trusted content provider, and it helps get their name "out" to their followers and is in front of them on a regular basis.

However, what I find with Twitter is that it's not very effective to jump in and out of it on a non-frequent basis. Otherwise, you can't keep up with what others are doing or thinking. In a future article, I'll talk about how to get followers and follow others.

You Meld Your Professional and Personal Life

I'm talking about Facebook, of course. If you haven't yet discovered Facebook, you should! It's a great way to keep up with what others are doing, or thinking – much in the same way Twitter does – yet with a more personal touch.

I am a bit sour, however, when it comes to having a business presence on Facebook. It takes an inordinate amount of time to maintain and refresh your corporate page, let alone get friends to "like" your page. Maintaining a corporate page on Facebook, to me, is like maintaining your own website – and let's face facts: that takes time!

Still, if you have the means and the time to participate in Facebook on a corporate level, that's fine. I've yet to encounter one accountant who told me he or she was able to get new business from a corporate page.

Instead, what I suggest is one page that blends your personal and professional lives. Your Facebook page should be an extension of your personality. If you are a more serious kind of person, keep your status updates businesslike. If you enjoy creating a more fun environment, then update your status with something more whimsical, but avoid posting anything distasteful. Again, you'll know inherently when you've crossed a line.

Why Not Try all Three?

Why not? What's stopping you from trying each one of the Big 3 or even any of the other social media out there? All it takes is a time commitment and a positive attitude. Do not, by any means, think that working on LinkedIn for a month will generate instant referrals. It doesn't work that way.

The point is to have fun, yet meet your goals. If you've had some success with social media, share your story so other readers can benefit from your experience!

Scott H. Cytron, ABC, is president of Cytron and Company, known for helping companies and organizations improve their bottom line through a hybrid of strategic public relations, communications, marketing programs and top-notch client service. Contact him at scott@cytronandcompany.com and visit his blog, www.absolutecytron.com.

Intuit Unveils the New QuickBooks Online Accountant

By Taija Jenkins, Associate Editor

Last year, Intuit created true harmony among its products and services, rolling out one look and feel that would make it easier for users to work with different products. The financial management solution provider has now extended that harmony to its QuickBooks Online Accountant solution. In February, Intuit debuted its enhanced QuickBooks Online for Accountants.

In addition to boasting the same look and feel as other Intuit products and services, the enhanced version of QBOA now also features wholesale billing, unlimited users and a new notes and tasks function. QBOA, which launched in October 2012, is one of the company's most popular products worldwide with more than 124,000 accountants signed up for the service.

One key enhancement to this new version is the capability for users to set up wholesale pricing and billing for new QuickBooks Online clients, currently only available in QBOA. Wholesale pricing and billing allows for clients to be put on one bill managed only by the accountant and supports the accounting practice moving to a value billing model more efficiently. With the new wholesale pricing capability, accountants can now purchase new QuickBooks Online subscriptions at a 30 percent discount and get a unified bill for all the subscriptions.

Another enhancement includes seamless integration with Tax Online. Previously, users had to access the original QBO file in order to launch Tax Online in another window. With the new QBOA, accountants can work seamlessly from the same program, accessing QBO files and Tax Online files directly from the QBOA home screen.

"Users will notice this version has a much closer integration to Tax Online. Currently, no one else has a rich cloud-based accounting and tax solution. We've been able to bring both together in a way no one else can," said Samir Khosla, director of product management, Intuit Accountant and Advisor Group. "The market for rich accounting and tax solutions is there and we will continue to see a need as more accountants look to take their firms to the cloud."

The new version also features improved support for multiple users. Previously, everyone used the same login and password, leaving no audit trail. It was hard to restrict user access and determine who was responsible for which tasks, changes and errors. Now, users can create information for employees and add new ones. In addition, users can designate employees as users or owners – giving them authority to add other employees.

"We have received a lot of requests to add multiple user capabilities. It has been the number one requested feature and now our customers are able to create multiple logins for an unlimited number of users and assign roles to each user. This new feature makes it even easier for staff to collaborate," said Khosla.

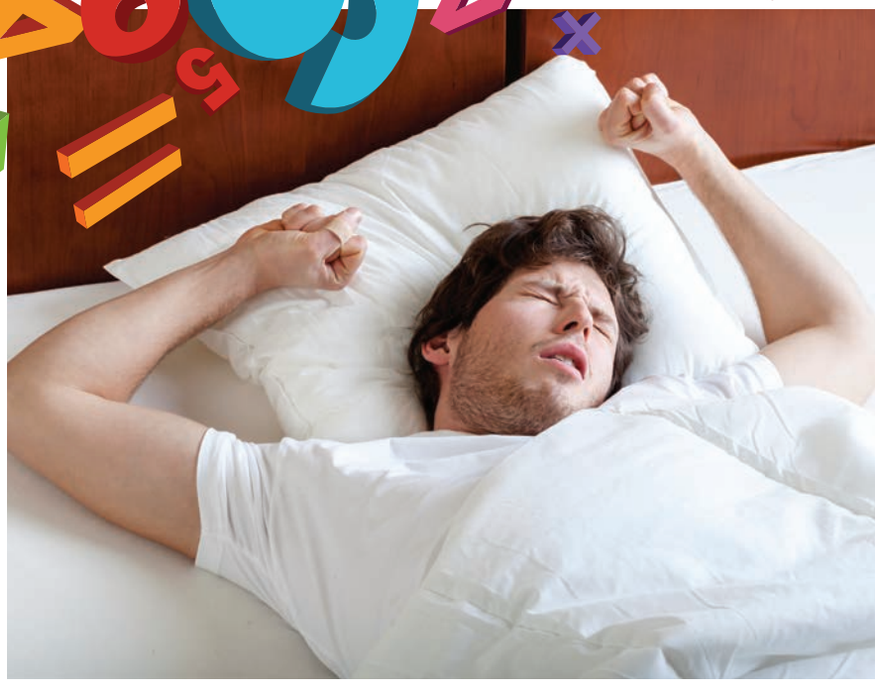
The notes and tasks feature will make it easier for users to collaborate seamlessly with each other. In the program, users can add quick notes to clients or assign tasks to other users. Any user can create a task or note and assign it to someone else.

Intuit rolled out the new version of QBOA in phases. During the initial phase, select users tested the solution in beta before it was eventually made available to everyone.

"We received lots of customer input and researched design and technology trends to create a new user interface and pattern. As a result, we learned a lot this last year about how we can continue to take our products to the next level," said Khosla.

Taija Jenkins is an associate editor for CPA Practice Advisor.

By Jeff Davidson



Work Life Balance Issues

SLEEP

It's 2014 and no one can say exactly what will take place in the course of the year. One thing we do know, however, is that society seems to be moving so fast that none of us has a handle on all the changes taking place.

In this illuminating new feature, author Jeff Davidson, offers a month-by -month look at trends in society that affect us all, including a "by the numbers" snapshot of sleep patterns, distracted driving, computers and the Internet, clutter, nutrition and health, leisure, stress and health, cell phone use, yet and money, multi-tasking, distractions, and spending habits.

To kick off the feature, here is a look at emerging sleep patterns, some of which you may have already sensed and others, which will be completely new to you.

Sleep perchance to dream. Just how well, however, do we sleep? Do we get enough each night? Do we awake refreshed? A quick look at the numbers tells us that apparently not all is well in slumberland.

Women are **twice as likely** as men to have trouble staying and falling asleep.

Delta Sleep Labs

Percentage of adults who have insomnia at any point throughout the year:

30%

sleepfoundation.org

ONLY 31% *of high school students report sleeping at least 8 hours each night.*

CDC

BY THE NUMBERS

Number of classified sleep disorders:

84

Delta Sleep Labs

POOR SLEEP HABITS CAN CAUSE A NUMBER OF PROBLEMS, INCLUDING:

WEIGHT GAIN

DEPRESSION

IRRITABILITY

POOR MOTOR SKILLS

DECREASED CONCENTRATION

MISSING WORK

insomnia.net

Adults who say they have struggled with the following activities due to lack of sleep:

Concentration	Memory	Driving
23%	18%	11%

CDC

18 MILLION

Americans suffer from sleep apnea.

Lauber

40,000 NON-FATAL CAR CRASHES EACH YEAR ARE ATTRIBUTED TO SLEEP DEPRIVATION.

National Department of Transportation

Humans spend **ONE THIRD** of their lives sleeping.

Sleep Disorders

In terms of worker productivity, sleep deprivation annually costs companies:

$63.2 billion

Harvard

1/3 of U.S. adults sleep fewer than **six** hours each night.

Center Disease Control

During a baby's first 2 years, each parent misses nearly 912 hours of sleep, equal to 6 months' worth of sleep at 5 hours per night.

Delta Sleep Labs

40 million People or 13% of the U.S. population have a sleep disorder.

National Sleep Foundation

10 DAYS IN A ROW WITH NO SLEEP CAN KILL YOU

bettersleep.org

By Drew West

Rising Above ...

By Moving Your Firm to the Cloud

Spending more time with clients reveals more service opportunities– leading your firm to higher growth. Yet you might spend more time than you'd like just *managing* your growing firm, trying to understand what's really working and struggling to adapt as the business changes. Join me on one firm's journey to address these challenges– and to put itself in a better position to serve clients.

An Island Nation?

If yours is like most CPA firms, one thing holding you back could be several different practice management systems spread across your firm. Goldstein Schechter Koch (GSK,) a 100+-person firm serving south Florida for the past 60 years, found itself in a similar place.

"We were using a myriad of different systems, as most traditional CPA firms do. One of the immediate challenges was that we had islands of data within our firm," said GSK's Chief Financial & Chief Administrative Officer, Mark Guthrie. Maintaining multiple systems creates a lot of overhead, and separate data islands complicate reporting. "Our systems were not integrated, and it was difficult to extract data. It was very time-intensive," continued Guthrie.

Guthrie knew growth would come by focusing more time on the firm's *clients*– not on maintaining the systems running the firm. "At the end of the day, it really hindered our growth," observed Guthrie, GSK's CFO/CAO since February of 2012.

A Bridge to the Mainland

You probably guessed that getting connected is one way to address the poor insight and cumbersome maintenance that such a fragmented environment creates within your firm. GSK came to a similar conclusion. Recalled Guthrie, "We felt strongly that we needed a different approach– an integrated type of infrastructure that automated our revenue cycle. We started with the premise that we need to go with more of an enterprise-type solution."

Bringing your firm together on a single practice management system resolves many of the issues hindering *your* firm's growth:

- **REPORTING.** A single system avoids the data inconsistencies that make reporting so difficult, and a start-to-finish workflow means you can understand what actions or decisions led to each result.
- **RESPONDING.** Suppose you need a new approval process, to set up a new service line, or simply on-board a new user. Without having to modify multiple systems or maintain brittle

interfaces among them, a connected system helps you respond easily in a world of constant change.

But That Sounds Complicated

Yet for many firms, a more connected practice-management approach may still sound burdensome. Hardware must be purchased and software deployed– then kept current. And a mission-critical practice-management system must be available whenever it's needed– a point not lost on GSK.

"Being a south Florida firm, one of the things we're concerned about is hurricanes," commented Guthrie. So how can a growing firm gain the visibility and discipline of a connected, comprehensive practice management system– without an even greater IT burden diverting focus away from clients?

A Single Cloud

For GSK, the answer lay in trusting practice-management to the cloud. Cloud systems are deployed *outside* your organization, typically accessed through the Internet. Software and hardware are completely external, although users experience these Software as a Service (SaaS) applications pretty much the same as systems *inside* your firm. You gain the efficiency you want, but can leave security, hardware administration, and software maintenance to someone else (typically a provider with dedicated expertise in these areas.) These advantages are probably why 46 percent of respondents to an Accenture survey feel the cloud will enable them to do business more quickly, while 58 percent of those in a Forbes poll say the cloud gives them better control of their data.

Cost and reliability advantages stood out for GSK: "It became very evident that a cloud-based solution was a better fit, especially as we considered the start-up cost and business continuity," commented Guthrie. "We could be more focused on the firm's clients and the growth of the firm, rather than how we secure the infrastructure." Like GSK, consider the cloud if you want your firm focused on financial and accounting services. Avoid investing in a hurricane-proof data center, and leave hardware and software administration to someone else.

Sunny Days Ahead

Of course, trusting software and hardware administration to some*one* else also means your IT team can focus on some*thing* else. In freeing its IT team from cumbersome system administration, GSK found tremendous upside in bringing more insight to their staff, translating into more value for their clients. As GSK's senior IT leader, no one is more pleased by this than Mark Guthrie. "Our traditional focus is shifting to more of a strategic role, better servicing our end clients. It really has allowed us to bring more value to our clients– and in offering better service."

Making the Move

Don't spend any more time trying to make sense of bad data, or more money trying to maintain the systems behind it. See how cloud-based practice-management solutions can quickly bring your firm together on a single system. Leave maintenance to someone else, so you can focus on serving clients– and growing the firm.

What the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights Movement Means to Tax Professionals

By Stephanie Breedlove

What began as a modest bill in the 2010 New York state legislature has swelled into a full-fledged movement. As of this writing, three states – New York, Hawaii and California – have passed formal Domestic Worker Bill of Rights (DWBOR) legislation protecting household employees and 10 more states have bills currently under consideration.

Most experts believe that domestic worker legislation will pass in some form in most states within the next couple of years.

Even in states where a bill doesn't yet exist, the movement has gained traction among workers and stimulated an outcry for basic employment rights. A large workforce that has been quietly operating in the shadows for generations is now pushing its way into the limelight. Certainly, this has implications for tax professionals.

About the DWBOR Legislation

The primary thrusts of the legislation are 1) wage and hour protections such as minimum wage, overtime and paid time off, and 2) formal employer communication around potentially-abusive aspects of employment – e.g. compensation agreements, hourly pay tracking, formal paystubs, pay frequency and termination.

To be clear, many of these basic employment protections have been covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act since 1938. But, up until the New York passage in 2010, there were very few statutes at the state level that recognized and protected domestic workers.

Notably, neither current nor proposed DWBOR legislation call for any changes to the payroll tax system for household employers. The federal and state employer obligations have not been part of the discussion, except to the extent that they have brought attention to the industry's poor compliance rate. Most experts estimate that roughly four out of five families pay their employee illegally – either misclassifying them as an independent contractor or simply paying under the table.

As a result, core worker protections and benefits like Social Security, Medicare and Unemployment Insurance are not available to many domestic workers. The lack of these financial safety nets, combined with heightened awareness of worker rights created by the DWBOR, has led to a growing demand for legal pay.

The "off-the-books" culture is changing.

And we anticipate that change will be further fueled by two other major market forces: 1) proposed Immigration Reform bills, which affect many domestic workers and mandate that they show proof of work history and tax payments in order to gain provisional citizenship status, and 2) the aging of the population and the resultant growth of in-home senior care.

THE "OFF-THE-BOOKS" CULTURE IS CHANGING.

What does it all mean to tax professionals?

As the industry marches toward legitimacy, more and more families with domestic workers will be confronted with compliance as a condition of employment. In turn, more and more tax professionals will be confronted with advising clients on this portion of their tax situation.

From both a tax and a labor law perspective, it's very important that legal pay be addressed at the time of hire. Payment of taxes is required. In addition, the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights requires clear communication of compensation, formal paystubs, and in some states, obtaining a Workers' Compensation insurance policy and/or a Disability insurance policy.

These employer obligations need to be handled properly from day one or else the family is exposing itself to financial and legal risk. Most families are under the impression they can drop this on their CPA at tax time and all will be fine. Unfortunately, by then, chances are they will have made numerous tax and labor law mistakes that will be costly and time-consuming to resolve. Additionally, they will probably have overlooked numerous opportunities to save money through dependent care tax breaks and non-taxable forms of compensation. Handled correctly, the tax breaks can offset most – if not all – of the employer tax cost.

The Opportunity

We believe tax professionals will see the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights movement as an opportunity. By proactively addressing these issues with their household employer clients, they will be helping these families

- Eliminate risk from audits and labor disputes
- Save money
- Eensure that their worker gets the benefits and protections he or she deserves.

Families, often ill-equipped to address all the payroll, tax and HR aspects of employment, should welcome strong guidance in this area – at the time hire, before they've made expensive mistakes.

It's the kind of stewardship that is the hallmark of the profession.

Stephanie Breedlove is head of Care.com HomePay, formerly Breedlove & Associates, a household payroll specialist. Care.com helps connect families with care providers, whether a babysitter for an occasional date night, care for seniors, pet companions or housekeeping.

By Jim Boomer, CPA.CITP

Should Your Firm Make an App for Clients?

We live in a mobile world that is becoming increasingly so every day. Expectations are growing among mobile users that they should be able to do anything and communicate with anyone (including your firm) from the convenience of applications on their mobile devices. So what is your firm doing about the development of mobile apps for your clients and employees?

Mobile Apps in the Profession Today

The number of firms that have explored developing mobile apps is still relatively small and the number that has successfully completed this initiative is even smaller. However, the interest and level of discussion is growing. While a mobile app can be a costly initiative (especially if you haven't done your up-front planning), it can also be an excellent differentiator for your firm. And it is going to become more important as your client base becomes more dependent on their mobile devices and their expectations start to include the ability to easily interact with your firm through those devices. Before you make the decision to pursue a mobile app though, there are a number of questions you need to ask yourself.

Jim Boomer is a shareholder and the CIO for Boomer Consulting, Inc. He is the director of the Boomer Technology Circles™ and an expert on managing technology within an accounting firm. He also serves as a strategic planning and technology consultant and firm adviser in the areas of performance and risk management. In addition, Jim is leading a new program, The Producer Circle, in collaboration with CPA2BIZ and the AICPA.

Important Questions

The ultimate goal of the list of questions below is to ensure that you have clear objectives for your mobile app initiative and a plan/budget for meeting those objectives.

- ***What is the purpose? What need are you filling?*** – Start by asking yourself the purpose of the app you want to develop and be weary of scope creep. All successful mobile apps address a pain point and make completing a task or set of tasks more convenient for the end user. So start by identifying the need you are trying to fill. If you are thinking of providing information that is already on your public website, you probably need to keep exploring the purpose.
- ***Who is your audience?*** - Will your app be client facing, internally focused or both? Knowing the answer to this question will impact not only the purpose but also the amount of time and money you are willing to invest into the project.
- ***What is your budget?*** Understanding the amount of time and money you are willing to spend on a mobile app is very important to determine on the front end.
- ***Native vs. Browser-Based App?*** – There is a difference between developing a mobile app that can be downloaded in one of the app stores and creating one that adjusts formatting when viewed on a mobile device's browser. As with anything, there are pros and cons to each but you'll want to make this determination early in the project.
- ***Which devices will you develop for and will you list in the app stores?*** – Will the app be for iOS, Android or a combination of devices and platforms? Distributing your app through the app stores can add complexity in terms of additional requirements so you'll want to know your options for getting your apps into the hands of the end-users.
- ***How will you develop the app?*** – Depending on the internal development resources you currently have in the firm (if any) and the budget you've set, you can choose from any of the options below.

Custom Development - If you want to create a unique app that addresses an unmet need for the end-user, you'll probably want to explore custom development. This will require that you either hire in-house developers or source the project to a third party. This approach tends to come with a higher price tag.

App Builder Tools – If you want to provide some relatively basic and standard functions, there a number of pre-built tools out there that can get you up and running with very little time or money invested in the project.

- ***Existing Software Vendors*** – Do your current software vendors already have apps to accomplish the purpose you've set forth and do they offer white-label options? If so, this is definitely the easiest and least costly option.
- ***What is your Quality Assurance Process?*** – Having measurements outlined and a process for ensuring that the end-product meets your success criteria is something you should outline prior to starting instead of making it an afterthought.

Getting Started

The first step in the process is to ensure that mobile app development is a priority in terms of strategic initiatives for your firm. If not, it won't get the attention it needs and it may drag on endlessly. Next, start your exploration with the easy solutions – apps from your existing software vendors and app builder tools. If neither meets your needs, then you'll want to look into the custom development route.

What you don't want to do is turn a blind eye to this trend. There will be significant and rapid developments over the coming years as more firms develop their own apps and software vendors continue to progress on executing their mobile strategies. It won't be long before mobile apps are no longer a differentiator but rather an expectation. Don't get left behind. Start developing your mobile strategy today.