



(c. Online)
December 1, 2008

Automating Workflow: The Dos and Don'ts

Here's what works, what doesn't, and what adjustments need to be made to improve workflow.

Efficiency has never been more important. And firms are finding that improving the workflow process is the quickest route to accomplishing that.

"An automated process puts everyone in every office on the same page and brings together a coordinated and streamlined workflow," says James Bourke, shareholder in charge of internal technology at Red Bank, N.J.-based WithumSmith+Brown.

"Firms that have analyzed how they deliver audit, tax and advisory services have a definite competitive advantage over other firms," says Timothy Barnhouse, state and local tax practice leader for Los Angeles-based Stonefield Josephson. "If a competitor is offering tax services for half of your fee quote, it may be because you haven't analyzed how to do the same thing more efficiently." Firms offer these dos and don'ts.

Close Examination and Analysis

Do question your current processes. Says Laura Barooshian, tax principal at DiCicco, Gulman & Co., Woburn, Mass., which went paperless with the 2003 tax return filing year, "We took a hard look at why we were doing things the same year after year and were realizing value and efficiency at each step in our process. We began with a blank piece of paper and asked, 'If we were going to develop a workflow process for tax return preparation using today's technology and our group's experience, what would it look like?'" she says.

Do gather wide input. DG began by assembling a committee the members of which ranged from administrative support to partner, with varying levels of experience with technology. "We didn't want to develop workflow that half the firm wouldn't or couldn't use," Barooshian says. "We each contributed ideas. For example, when our audit group was in the field, they wanted to have access to client information in the office. A number of individuals who worked part time wanted access when checking in from home. Our partner group wanted to reduce storage costs by reducing the amount of paper we hold in the office and at an offsite storage facility. Our tax group wanted to spend less time looking for files and more time adding value to our client's tax situation.

Do diagram with detailed descriptions. "Once we had our goals in mind," Barooshian says, "we were ready to develop the paperless workflow. We went through many drafts, and in the end had a flowchart that diagrammed our process and an accompanying written detailed description for each step along the way. We realized that some members of our firm were visual and others were more detailed, so we had a one-page flowchart that gave an overview of each step and then provided a detailed description of who did what at each step in the process."

Implementation

Don't start thinking streamlining can't possibly be worth the time and trouble. "The biggest advantages are consistency and ease of training, says Barooshian. "Since we are all using the same products and basic tools you know what to expect when you prepare or review a tax return. The biggest obstacles are getting everyone to make a change and trying to do too much at once. The workflow has grown with us because we built it for where we wanted to be and not where we were," she adds. "We rolled out our initial workflow and every year since have made modifications. The tax rules change, the technology changes, our firm changes, and so should our process."