Leverage Technology to Spend More Time with Clients

By Jason L. Ackerman

The best way for a CPA firm to become successful is to build long and lasting relationships with clients. The more time CPAs spend with clients, the more trust they build, and the more loyal they become. The best referrals a CPA firm can get are from clients. If CPA firms focus on spending time with their clients, their businesses will thrive.

In order to spend more time with clients, firms must leverage technology to become as efficient as possible at the compliance tasks that CPAs have traditionally spent most of their time completing manually. This seems like common sense, but it is often not easy to implement. There are many barriers, including cost, buy-in from staff, change management, and not knowing what's available. The following suggestions can help firms find and leverage the best technology, so that they can spend more time building client relationships.

Map Processes to Find Inefficiencies

The place to start is to find the pain points, bottlenecks, and least efficient tasks. Processes like Lean Six Sigma can do this, or management can simply sit down and talk about the problems with the team. Once the weak points are found, the next step is to fix those problems with technology.

Attend a Technology-focused CPA Conference

AICPA Engage, Digital CPA, Xerocon, and Accountex are just a few conferences with a focus on technology. These conferences allow practitioners to compare notes and learn more about available products.

Designate a Technology Beta Tester

Most firms have at least one employee who is tech savvy and is willing to try out many different technology options in order to figure out what is best for the team as a whole. This person should be someone who understands the firm's processes in order to recommend the best options.

Don't Get Trapped in One Ecosystem

With the emergence of application program interfaces (API), it is now much easier for CPA firms to connect unaffiliated programs. This means it is now possible—and in this author's opinion, the best option—for firms to select "best of breed" software instead of implementing one provider's entire suite of products. For example, using CCH for their tax software no longer locks a firm into using their portal or document storage solutions instead of better products, such as Dropbox or ShareFile.

Understand the Technological Learning Curve

The worst thing a firm can do is give up on good technology because people are frustrated with learning how to use it. There will always be change avoiders who want to do everything the same way they always have, but the rest of the firm cannot wait on them. When a firm decides on a new technology, adoption must be mandatory. Nevertheless, it is important to have a proper plan for the rollout, and that includes understanding that full adoption will take time. The most important metric on whether a new technology will be adopted or not is partner adoption; if the partners are not willing to learn the technology, no one else will feel like they need to do it either.

Make Sure Clients Are Using the Best

If clients are using old desktop accounting programs, tell them it's time to upgrade to a cloud accounting system; this makes the accountant's job much easier. Many CPAs balk at telling clients what accounting system to use, but CPAs are, after all, the trusted advisors. Use that influence to help the client and the firm.

Make Technology Innovation Part of Firm Culture

The best firms make technology a focal point. This means everyone at the firm understands that change will take place frequently because it is the only way to stay on top. This doesn't necessarily mean changing tax software every year, but it does mean making little improvements all the time. If the team knows the firm is trying to stay ahead of the curve, it is more willing to adapt.

Don't Lose Sight of the Goal

It is important to understand that the goal of getting the best technology is to improve processes and allow partners and staff to spend more time with clients. Some firms try to turn themselves into tax return factories, cutting out client interaction all together. This should not be the goal of technology. Technology, at its best, is used to automate compliance tasks so that CPAs can spend their time advising clients and building long-lasting, trusted relationships. ❑

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