

7 Steps to a Successful Portal

by Roman H. Kepczyk, CPA.CITP (October 20, 2009)

Today's business world continues to drive towards "less paper" technologies for every aspect of customer service and product delivery, which is being pushed even farther with today's environmentally friendly "green" initiatives. Accounting firms have gotten on board by providing digital copies of tax returns and financial reports, as well as receiving client source documents electronically by using a variety of solutions including email, digital faxes, CDs, USB flash drives, and Internet-based file transfer tools. Each of these solutions has unique administrative, technical, and security challenges, so firms must work to standardize their digital delivery approach to a solution that can be used effectively by all departments.

According to a Client Transfer Survey conducted by the Association for Accounting Administration last year, 77% of firms emailed their clients confidential documents, but only 41% used any kind of encryption or passwords. With privacy regulations getting tighter and requiring more administrative processes to utilize email, firms are looking for secure and easy to use solutions to transfer files to and from clients, which points towards utilizing today's client portal solutions.

A client portal is a secure file directory that can be accessed via an Internet-enabled workstation such that files can be viewed and/or transferred between the firm and the client. Accounting firms can use a portal in a variety of ways such as publishing a tax return to the portal and then providing the client a link (usually via email) so they can access it after putting in a password (usually the last 4-6 digits of their taxpayer ID). The portal can also be setup to allow the client to upload working documents such as QuickBooks file that is too large for their email system to handle, which is often referred to as an FTP or File Transfer Protocol site. The latest versions of portal can be setup to link to "live" information such as those used by the wealthcare providers tying into brokerage accounts for clients to look up their investment valuations. While the technology behind the various portal solutions is slightly different, the key to having a successful portal is the ease of use for both the client and firm members so it appears seamless.

We place today's portal solutions into three "buckets" to consider based on the technical capabilities of the firm and the applications they may already have in place. Many firms today have implemented a comprehensive document management (DM) system that already has an integrated portal solution which would be our first choice for a firm portal. Firm personnel are usually comfortable with the menu structure of the DM system and adding the portal usually requires the least amount of administrative time to setup and train all end users.

The second "bucket" would be the Internet-hosted solutions which would cover stand alone and hosted solutions. Stand alone providers such as ShareFile and LeapFile allow firms to integrate a link from within the firm's website or go direct to the provider for transferring files. These commercial products are amongst the most secure, but they can take a higher level of technical skill for the firm to setup and the client to utilize. Within this group is also the accounting vendor hosted providers such as Thomson Reuters and CCH/Wolters Kluwer (which is usually integrated with their web-based DM systems), and the outsourced ACCOUNTING firm website hosting companies that provide Accounting firms with a content, calculators, and often include a portal. Firms can go to Websites4Accountants.com to see a listing of these providers that include portals. These solutions are usually the most cost effective from a firmwide view and can be scaled up from a few users to hosting a portal for every client in the firm. Please note that the firm should take a look at the anticipated volume of clients and data capacity needed for the portal as the cost is very dependent on these factors. The 2008 AAA Study found that the vast majority of firms with portals had setup individual sites for less than 10% of their overall client count (though this was expected to grow).

The final portal bucket is for those larger firms that have sophisticated IT capabilities and resources and choose to build their own portal. The most common solution for this group is Microsoft SharePoint which requires extensive programming skills, as well as personnel with in-depth security experience so it is relegated to a very small number of firms. There are also liability concerns in the event the site is breached or inaccessible during a critical time.

When evaluating solutions it is very important to narrow them down based on ease of use and administration, and not just focusing on cost. Below we have summarized features that firms should walk through a demonstration of prior to making a selection:

- **Ease of Setup:** What does it take to setup a client for the portal the very first time? Two thirds of AAA firms in the survey utilized administrative personnel, while the remaining third had to have the IT department set it up. For firms that are short staffed from an IT perspective, a delay in setting up the portal could impact client service adversely.
- **Ease of Publishing Documents:** What steps are necessary to put a document into the portal? With an integrated DM system it is usually a matter of designating the document be made available on the portal, determining how long it should be available, and who to notify. Stand alone portals often require more steps to publish the document, which means more confusion and training.
- **Ease of Client Access:** What steps does the client have to go through to access the portal and logon? Most firms will make the portal accessible through the firm website where they would have a logon (i.e. such as their email address) and a password. The AAA survey found that three-fourths of firms would email the password or instructions on what the password was and 38% would telephone the client, which takes additional administrative time. Firms will also want to ask how clients with multiple business entities would logon to each unique portal and how many other people within the client's business could also have access.
- **Ease of Client Use:** What steps do clients go through to copy down or move files up to the portal? The portal solution should be easy and intuitive for novice users or your accounting personnel will spend a lot of non-chargeable time walking clients through the steps until they become comfortable.
- **Notification:** Does the portal notify the client and the in-charge for that client when the portal has been accessed and a file uploaded or downloaded? This is an important feature to keep firm personnel aware of when there has been a change so they don't have to guess the status of a file.
- **Audit Trail and Security:** Does the portal monitor activity? Some of today's portals also document who placed which files in the portal, who accessed them, and were there new versions which helps the firm comply with their confidentiality and document retention policies.
- **Cost:** What does it cost to setup, maintain annually and to add more clients? Firms should be aware of the overall cost per client as well as space allocated for each client and the cost if this space is breached. Firms transferring very large QuickBooks files and not cleaning them up can find themselves in a situation where the additional storage space makes certain portal options cost prohibitive compared to others.

The fact is accountants live in a digital world and need to transfer documents in the most convenient and secure way for clients. These needs point to accounting firms adopting client portals, and the time to do it is right now!

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