



The Value of Client Portals

By Christopher M. Colyer, CPA, Wiss & Company, LLP



The year is 1977, and it's time to file your income tax.

You contact your tax preparer on the avocado green rotary dial phone, gather your tax papers, hop into your Pinto, put an eight-track in and drive to the accountant's office. Little did we know then, but 1977 was a very important year in the advancement of information technology. The first

personal computers, the Commodore PET, the Apple II and fiber optic lines had arrived. The beginning of the technology era was underway.

Fast Forward

In the 30-plus years that followed, technology has clearly made great strides. Instead of physically gathering and delivering paper tax files, you can now take a few minutes to scan and upload your tax data, e-file it and have a PDF copy of your tax return waiting in your client portal to download and view on your iPad – all without leaving the comfort of your favorite chair.

The term “client portal” generally means an electronic gateway – accessible over the Internet through a

web browser – between a company and its clients to enable the sharing of digital files, services and information. Never mind the next 30 years, in the next three years technology is going to vastly improve, thus enhancing the user and client experience even more.

How and Why

A company researches and then deploys a client portal whether it's an integrated solution part of a full document management system (DMS), a stand-alone product, or a software-as-a-service product. The portal services are secure, web browser accessible and easy to use. The portal lets clients log on to an area where they can view, download and upload private information. Client portals are used to exchange sensitive information, files that are too large to e-mail, or files blocked by filtering. By law,

certain types of information exchanged over the Internet must be done so securely, and transmitting unencrypted personal data over the Internet by means of e-mail does not comply with current laws.

Bridging the Gap

The advantages of client portals are numerous. They offer low maintenance, are cost effective and provide efficient self-service access from anywhere to a private repository. Portals are highly secure, can handle copious amounts of data and provide faster communications.

At Wiss, we decided to implement an on-premise all-inclusive system featuring a Document Management System (DMS), customer relationship management, portal, secure file transfer, mobile device application, scan routing and print routing, to name a few. Previously, we had separate solutions that were loosely connected – a few entirely disconnected – making internal

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procedures and workflow laborious and costly.

When we implemented an internal DMS, electronic files were received more rapidly, turn-around times increased, and internal communications and efficiencies improved dramatically. While client use of the system has decreased some face-to-face time, the portal has saved travel time and costs, as well as shipping fees. It pays for itself several times over, especially when it comes to overseas clients. One large international client hired us to perform work on a short timeline. We realized a key component to success would be quick access to the client portal. Once we instructed the client in the portal's use, we received hundreds of files, e-mail notifications

and discussion notes. In the past, information was sent by e-mail, CDs, USB drives or mail. If we were to receive and send files by these methods, we would still be working on this project, the profitability would be substantially lower (and frustrations substantially higher), and the client might be a client no longer. Thankfully, the client's portal experience and subsequent feedback was very positive, which led to repeat business.

The Moral of the Story

Having a client portal is becoming a necessity, rather than a luxury. Data transfer laws are only going to get tighter, and client demand for real-time access is only going to grow. Before changing an existing

portal or implementing a new one, it is important to do your due diligence. What policies will need to be in place? What workflows need to be established? Who will be involved internally and what will they be responsible for? How will employees be trained? How will use be communicated to clients? Your client portal is a reflection of your firm and another aspect of the client relationship. Make it the best one it can be.

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