

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Accountancy firms can use online accounting systems to streamline their administrative processes, save time and money, work more closely with clients, and provide improved services.

Accountants have always been close to the leading edge in information technology (IT). They adopted the earliest business systems, popularised the first spreadsheet, and have utilised myriad other developments to automate and streamline the processes they undertake and the services they provide, so that they can use their time as efficiently and effectively as possible – and exploiting online accounting systems is the obvious next step.

The necessary infrastructure is in place and businesses are increasingly comfortable with all things internet. Fixed and mobile broadband is widely available, access devices are prolific, electronic communication is the norm, and the internet is being used to deliver 'on-demand' access to an ever-expanding range of software and services. So accounting systems, and the associated data, can now be quickly and easily accessed by any authorised individual with internet access and a browser.

It's an approach that can offer numerous advantages over more traditional on-premise systems. These include easier access, greater flexibility and scalability, minimal-up-front investment, more predictable costs, faster implementation times, the elimination of system upgrades, a reduced need for in-house IT expertise, and levels of information security that far exceed those within the reach of many small businesses – and practitioners are uniquely well-placed to exploit all of these.

Get closer to clients

Because of the close working relationships accountants and bookkeepers have with their clients they need to be able to share accounting data, and online accounting systems support this collaboration particularly well. Client accounts can be worked on when and where it is most convenient: the firm and its clients can share data effortlessly and efficiently, without worrying about whether or not they are using the same version of the accounting software.

The accountant can log onto the clients' accounts at any time, so it is easier to spot if they are falling behind or doing something wrong, and offer advice on key transactions; the accountant and client can simultaneously view financial information, so more queries can be dealt with over the telephone, and problems are less likely to escalate; the need to repeatedly record, re-key and merge amendments, or deal with the associated errors and misunderstandings is eliminated.

Not all online accounting systems offer the same levels of functionality, but Liberty Accounts provides all of the features that you would expect from a small business accounting system, plus some you wouldn't, which can result in some exceptional back-office efficiencies. Because it offers integrated payroll and P11D preparation, for example, a lot of the related tasks are less time-consuming and more straightforward for everyone involved – and P11D returns can be produced instantly, using the base accounting data.

Streamline administration

Liberty was designed with the aim of making it easier for accountants and bookkeepers to work with their clients, so it also offers extensive administration features, which enable firms to manage the accounts of multiple clients from an 'accountant control area'. This provides access to cross-client views and a range of reports, as well as highlighting key tasks and event dates – which helps members of the firm to handle their work efficiently and effectively.

Data entry can be speeded-up via batch processing, global account settings can be enforced (for NIC and P11D classification, VAT rates, and nominal codes for export to statutory accounts packages, for example), and the practitioner can access all of the available accounting features. But they can also restrict the menu options for clients, so that the needs of a diverse range of businesses can be met without any increased administrative burden on the firm.

Because Liberty Accounts can be tailored to reflect the needs of individual clients, they can do whatever they are comfortable with, whether this means inputting invoices and leaving everything else to their bookkeeper or accountant, or doing their own bookkeeping and payroll. It's scalable enough to handle a range of clients from freelance service companies and partnerships to not-for-profit entities and audit threshold sized manufacturing companies.

Develop new revenue streams

Clearly, online accounting systems can facilitate better bookkeeping support, visibly improve client services, and streamline many of the associated processes, but the benefits to firms do not end there. Online accounting software can also create a basis for all sorts of revenue-generating opportunities, such as providing real time transaction and tax planning advice, producing timely management accounts from clients' raw accounting data, and offering a range of virtual FD type services.

Because Liberty Accounts provides a free co-branding service to bookkeepers and accountant partners, the system can be tailored to reflect the firm's branding – right down to logos and colours – and offered to clients in a way that makes it look like an extension of the firm's website. All of which combines to help reinforce the bond between the firm and its clients and strengthen their relationships.

So by working with Liberty Accounts firms can reinvent themselves. Instead of being the sort of accountant who is associated with 'grudge' compliance services such as quarterly and annual tax returns, you can take a more personal and proactive role, interact with clients more frequently, and be seen to add value, by actually helping clients with their business.

As up-front investment in online accounting is minimal, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain from investigating the possibilities for your firm and its clients.

Monthly charges for accountant and bookkeeping partners of Liberty Accounts start from £15 per client business, and firms determine the price they then charge clients as part of a professional services package. There is no minimum contract period, and monthly subscriptions can be stopped at any time. You can even sign up for a one-month free trial on the Liberty Accounts website. So why not visit www.libertyaccounts.com, phone 0845 230 9803 or email sales@libertyaccounts.com for more information.