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Confessions of a Workflow Designer

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It's funny, when I attended the last FPA Business Solutions conference, I was struck by how often I heard comments from advisors such as: "Wow – I thought we had pretty good technology – we were well ahead of the curve when we implemented XYZ technology. It's been a couple of years since I've been to a conference, and I'm just amazed at how far things have come; we actually have some catching up to do."

In *Financial Advisor* magazine, Joel Bruckenstein cited statistics from last year's FPA Practitioner Technology Report that although 61% of respondents answered they used electronic document management, when asked for specifics, the majority were using Adobe or PaperPort. Bottom line -- of all respondents, less than 31% of the firms actually use true document management software.

In other words, scanning documents does not equal document management, nor does it come close to living up to the moniker of "efficient workflow."

So, what's the big deal? If you've been scanning files for years, and that's been working well for you, what kind of difference would electronic document management really make? What's the trade-off in cost versus benefits? If you considered document management at one point and didn't pursue it, 2010 is a great time to revisit. You would be amazed at how much has changed in a short time.

So, let's get caught up.

A savvy workflow designer knows:

People interact with software systems differently depending on not only their job role, but more importantly, their natural inclination. Specifically, advisors (the "relationship" people in the firm) interact with technology very differently than detail-oriented staff. A savvy workflow designer deploys technology in a way that embraces this difference.

Let's provide a concrete example.

When a surgeon begins a heart by-pass and says "scalpel," that's precisely the tool that should be placed in her hand.

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As an advisor who is meeting with a client, you need to call up precisely the information you need to provide the client answers and recommendations. If you cannot access the information readily enough, regardless of whether you or your proxy (e.g., surgical assistant) is retrieving the information, then your technology is not serving your unique abilities the way you naturally work. Your system or process has failed you.

A savvy workflow designer knows:

There are enormous productivity gains from integrating document management software with contact management software.

I am *not* referring to a documents "tab" within a contact management application. While that has some use, the functionality is pretty limited. What I'm talking about is the following:

Many of you have developed the good habit of going to the client's record in your contact management software when a client calls to capture notes about their call.

Should the client have a question that prompts you to consult a document, the integration between document management software (such as Worldox), with your contact management software (Junxure, Redtail, etc.) allows you to click a single button from the client's record in your contact management software to pull up precisely the files you require from within the document management software. In other words, depending on your need at the time, a single mouse click could bring up the client's asset allocation or their most recent performance report or their cash flow statement.

Bottom line: If you cannot pull up *precisely* the information you need at the moment of need, your system or technology is not serving you the way it should.

A savvy workflow designer knows:

The same person thinks about the same information differently, at different points in time.

Why then, in the age of searching the entire world's library via the Web, are the masses stuck in a linear, hierarchical system of classifying information in their practice, then trying to recall which folder a document may have been filed in, then sifting through a list of files?

Let's use another analogy: You have an iPod® with 2,000 songs loaded on it. You can find a single song any way you want – by artist, by genre, by song title – even by searching on lyrics such as "cloudy day." Do you need to know where the song is filed on your iPod® in order to locate it? Absolutely not. Because the song is "indexed," you can find it however you naturally happen to be thinking about it at that moment in time.

Does this mean all documents are thrown haphazardly into a filing system and an advisor just has to fish for key words to find the information? Absolutely not.

A savvy workflow designer knows:

In an electronic filing system, there should be enforced filing rules so that all of the same type information is filed consistently, each and every time, no matter who is doing the filing, so that your search returns results that are contextual to your need. More important, however, is that your staff should be able to access files the way they naturally think.

In electronic document management, advisors should not have to think through where something is filed to find it. If they want a client's asset allocation, then that's precisely what should be handed to them (like a surgeon stating "scalpel" in our heart operation cited above).

The savvy advisory firm collaborates with clients. Elisa Buie delivered an excellent presentation at the 2009 FPA National Conference on how to create effective presentations for clients. As she noted, many advisors are moving towards more interactive work with clients.

One trend we see among financial advisory firms we serve is that retired clients are incorporating adult children into their financial affairs sooner so they can actively enjoy the wealth with their children and educate them on principles such as wealth preservation and stewardship.

As such, we increasingly see firms transitioning toward more collaborative meetings that engage cross-generational participants and other advisors.

Just ask Michael Grossman, president of Advice One LLC of Glastonbury, CT. Grossman's purpose for implementing document management was to achieve his ultimate vision of more collaborative meetings with clients. All of the "back stage" work is now performed by his meeting preparation team. As the meeting team prepares financial analyses, they electronically link all files to be referenced in the meeting to the meeting agenda.

During the financial portion of the client meeting, the analyst works collaboratively with clients on financial planning and investment models from a large plasma display monitor in the conference room. Should other files require consultation such as a tax return, everything is available on a meeting toolbar for easy reference. Grossman's approach has accomplished his primary goal. Senior advisors now spend the majority of their time each week engaged in their natural abilities — that is — celebrating and setting goals with clients.

Because of his transformative meeting preparation process, Grossman anticipates his advisors spend more face time with clients than at most firms in the country.

Gary Klaben, partner at Coyle Asset Management of Glenview, IL, has also put together a very visual and collaborative client meeting experience by integrating mind-mapping software with Worldox document management.

For example, when going over complex concepts with clients, a staff member in the client meeting performs the following from a large computer screen:

- Selects a button that brings up a mind-map of a complex concept they plan to review in the meeting (see mind-map at the end of this article depicting a real estate transaction reprinted with Klaben's permission)
- Clicks on any portion of the mind-map that has a paperclip icon, which launches documents specific to that item (e.g. closing statement, mortgage paperwork).

The process is seamless, instantaneous and, also, natural to the way meeting participants think, which is not always linear. Says Gary, “Most people are very visual. Many times, I go through a mind-map with the family and their other advisors in a meeting, and the clients’ reaction is, ‘Wow - I really get the whole picture now and how it all ties together.’”

That’s powerful stuff.

The savvy advisory firm automates any process that is not value-added.
While performance reporting is certainly value added, the process of preparing reports is not.

If your firm’s performance reporting process takes longer than a couple of hours, then you should automate it. Consider this idea:

You open Assemblage™ (document assembly software created by Trumpet, Inc.) that loads report definitions for all report recipients based on pre-defined sets of rules and exceptions to rules. You click a button that automatically and electronically assembles all of the documents in the order they need to appear, the way you want them to appear (e.g., cover letter has letterhead, each page is numbered, market commentary is always upward facing, etc.).

For clients who want electronic delivery, you send the reports to your client portal and the files parse into clients’ individual lock boxes. For clients that want paper delivery you send reports to the printer, and they spool off pre-collated, so all you need to do is grab and stuff into windowed envelopes.

Next, documents are automatically filed by client, by quarter. An hour later, a client calls with a question on page eight of their report that was posted to their portal. You click a single button which brings that report up on your screen to answer their question.

So, why wouldn’t you automate a painstaking process that quickly pays for itself? A large advisory firm using Assemblage™ recently shared this experience: “No one worked late, no harsh words were exchanged. We only had two people working on it, and they were done in two hours. The peace of mind knowing everyone received what they were supposed to is phenomenal.”

The savvy reader knows:

Bottom line: technology without process is not transformative. Think of it this way - output from your financial planning software (the “technology”) is useful, but it becomes meaningful in the hands of an experienced financial advisor.

Likewise, technology in the hands of an experienced workflow designer will transform your practice. Your technology and processes should absolutely support the way you naturally work with your clients and with one another. If you are not achieving the results you desire, then engage a savvy workflow designer to address the natural workflow component of the equation to achieve thrilling transformation.