

## accountingTECHNOLOGY

### Case Studies: Portal Technology

Four firms share their experiences with online client portals

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Primarily used for trafficking client tax returns, portals are becoming the chosen method of document delivery and communication for accounting firms and their clients. The security benefits of electronically sending encrypted files instead of mailing hard copies is also accelerating the standardization of portal technology. We spoke to four firms that are leveraging client portals to streamline their service and workflow.

#### Force works

Firm: Alfred A. Cohen CPA

Firm users: 2 seats for 3 users

Product: Thomson Reuters NetClient CS

Commencement date: 2015

On record: Owner Alfred Cohen

**Process:** Cohen, who set up cloud accounting through Thomson Reuters' SaaS for CS Professional Suite two years ago, saw the company's portal offering as a necessary extension, especially after attending Thomson's annual user conference last November.

The firm sent out the notification e-mail to clients, scanned all their 2013 source documents into Thomson Reuters FileCabinet, and uploaded them to the portals. A few days later he sent a Thomson-generated invitation e-mail instructing clients to register their portal. Overall, the process took 10 days. Though portals were presented as optional, Cohen eventually instituted a fee for clients who want a hard copy of older documents: "Basically, I'm trying to force everyone in the portal — and it's worked." He also uploads tax returns prior to 2013 if clients request it. There are the expected holdouts, but of the 500 individual returns he processed this year, 50 to 70 percent had at least established a portal. Those who didn't had the expected reasons of not trusting the cloud or preferring a hard copy, though the demographics were a little surprising. "Senior citizens accepted it faster than young people," Cohen reported.

Overall, the transition was less difficult than the last technology conversion the firm made, from hard copy returns to CD-ROMs. "It was successful for us," Cohen said. "I'm very happy with [the transition] this year."

**Advantage:** The biggest advantages portals hold over CDs are the lack of compatibility issues with certain operating systems (not to mention the fact that many modern computers no longer have CD drives), and the extra step of remembering to carry and load CDs.

The firm's preparedness, beginning the transition last November, helped tax season go "very smooth." Communication was also streamlined, as documents uploaded to the portal could be discussed in a few minutes instead of over e-mail, according to Cohen.

**Challenges:** With the initial data migration complete, client acceptance remains a small hurdle. "The biggest problem is explaining to them security," he explained. "I said, 'Thomson Reuters is a major company.' Everything is encrypted. I can't tell you it's 100 percent hack-proof, but nothing is."

Otherwise, challenges are procedural — helping clients reset passwords or reminding them to hit the "Submit to preparer" button after scanning in their documents.

**Next steps:** While the firm will continue pushing reluctant clients to the portal, the savvy ones might even graduate to the mobile app. Cohen is not sure exactly how many clients are bringing up their returns on tablets, but he does expect increased interest.

In the meantime, he is a proponent of the portal and how it integrates within his office's suite: "For a small firm, it works very well."