



# Running your CPA firm remotely? How accountants work from home successfully.

WHITE PAPER



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## Running your CPA firm remotely? How accountants work from home successfully.

### Can accountants work from home? The short answer: Yes!

Remote accounting work is on the rise. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, CPA firms had begun embracing the benefits of cloud-based practices, empowering their accountants and staff to perform their duties and tasks from practically any computer, tablet, or mobile device. Advancements in technology have resulted in remote accounting work increasingly becoming the norm, as employee expectations and desires shift, and firms discover the benefits that exist when working outside the constraints of a traditional bricks-and-mortar office. In fact, accounting jobs have been some of the most popular remote roles available for the past few years.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly half<sup>2</sup> of all accounting firms had already been building a work-from-home culture into their practices before the global crisis and mandatory quarantine gripped the world. Now, we can expect those numbers to increase significantly, as the entire globe adapts to a new way of conducting business remotely — now and in the future.

#### In this white paper, we will review:

- 1) Why accountants need to be able to work from home
- 2) How to establish a strong virtual infrastructure to support remote accounting work
- 3) How to ensure collaboration amongst team members and clients virtually
- 4) What to consider for data security and internal protocols
- 5) How to create a work-from-home culture within your firm (including myth-busting some stale preconceptions!)
- 6) How to identify the best remote employees
- 7) How to encourage a healthy work-life balance
- 8) How to work in a shared home environment with your children and spouse



## Internet connectivity tips

*It is important to ensure that your accountants and staff working remotely have a quality internet connection. In some instances, they may need to upgrade their service package or router for faster speeds.*

*There are several sites available that can help associates test their home internet speed connection. Keep in mind that there are ideal speeds for different tasks, such as video conferencing or uploading and downloading large documents.*

## Why is it critical for accountants to be able to work from home?

For starters, it ensures your firm's continuity, regardless of where your employees are physically located. This is important not only as more people seek a greater work-life balance but is also critical should your firm encounter an unexpected disruption like a fire, flood, or a global event like COVID-19. It is important to be prepared and be able to adapt to unexpected change.

A Gallup poll conducted from March 30 to April 2, 2020 found that 62% of employed Americans had worked from home during the Coronavirus crisis, a number that had already doubled from mid-March. As Gallup accurately noted, the COVID-19 pandemic may not be an issue forever — but remote work will be.<sup>3</sup>

A remote work environment also enables your accounting firm to maintain its edge in a competitive job market and provide the flexibility that many of today's professionals are seeking in an employer. According to separate Gallup data, more than half (54%) of workers said they'd change jobs for the option to work remotely.<sup>4</sup> Under ordinary circumstances, work from home flexibility drives staff engagement, which means happier employees, more satisfied clients, and ultimately greater profitability for your firm.

While remote accounting work is becoming more commonplace and firms that are unable to adapt risk placing themselves at a significant disadvantage, that's not to say that accountants' work from home doesn't present its share of challenges.

Building and maintaining an effective and productive work-from-home environment (whether it is temporary or permanent) involves such steps as establishing a strong infrastructure, nurturing the right culture, and ensuring a healthy work-life balance. To help you and your accounting staff succeed, here are some actionable tips and insights to help ensure your firm can keep working in every scenario.

## The three keys to remote accounting work

1

**Establish a strong virtual infrastructure with the right tools**

2

**Create an accountant work-from-home culture**

3

**Encourage a healthy work-life balance**

### 1 Establish a strong virtual infrastructure with the right tools

You wouldn't want to live in a home that has an unstable foundation. The same thinking holds true for your accounting firm's remote work capabilities. Whether you have one staffer or your entire team working from home, it is essential to first establish a strong technical infrastructure for business continuity and security.

By leveraging the right technology and having the proper internal protocols and security measures in place, you can better protect your firm and client data while also ensuring productive remote accounting work.



*“With the way documents can be added to the system and shared with other applications such as Dropbox or Google Drive, Onvio Firm Management takes document management to a different level.”*

— David Stenseth, CPA

## Leverage cloud-based software for remote tax work

For tax and accounting firms, cloud computing has become a critical component of effectively doing business, enabling both employees and clients to seamlessly collaborate from wherever they are. Cloud technology supports simple, secure file sharing and communication.

Has your firm already adopted a centralized, cloud-based suite of tax and accounting tools? If so, you’re ahead of the game. Ensuring that accountants working from home have access to your firm’s core applications and real-time client data is essential. With centralized data management and real-time updates, your staff will always stay in sync and working together, regardless of where they are.

Hosted software applications operate exactly as if they were installed locally, except that the solution provider handles software maintenance, updates, and data backups. This leaves you and your staff free to concentrate on what’s most important — your clients. All you have to do is log in and go to work.

There are a number of benefits for cloud-based software that enable accountants to work from home, including:

- Easy access to real-time data
- 24/7 access and availability
- Multi-user access to the same data at the same time
- Automatic software updates
- Infinite storage capabilities
- Faster and better collaboration with clients
- Simpler recovery and back-up options

One of the biggest benefits of the cloud is seamless data sharing. Both Bob and Jane can work on the same client file at the same time. They won’t need to check-out and check-in their workpapers, tax return worksheets or any other client data when they’re using cloud-based software.

Partnering with a solution provider that hosts software on secure data centers provides your team access to tax and accounting software and client data anytime, from anywhere. This helps ensure business continuance — no matter what the situation.



## Ensure data and employee synchronization

To effectively manage a remote accounting workforce, it is imperative to leverage an integrated suite of products that are designed to work together, rather than trying to parse together disparate systems. This enables you to automate your workflow and raise the level of service you provide your clients from any work environment. The benefits of an integrated cloud-based tax and accounting workflow include:

- Reduced data entry because client data flows through in real time across all software programs
- Real-time access to current trial balances, payroll, financial reporting and client data
- Secure remote access by clients to tax returns, payroll information, financial reporting and other documents
- Improved practice management with due date tracking, task management, budgeting tools, realization rate projections, time and billing entry and oversight, and more
- Peace of mind that your client data is secure and encrypted, whether in transit or saved on the provider's servers
- The ability to manage both clients and staff from a single, user-friendly administration module

Working from home in accounting obviously means that there's much less face-to-face interaction among both team members and with clients. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that there's functionality in place for efficient collaboration.

When all of the products you use for research and compliance work share the same database, there's no manual syncing required. Whether you're uploading client documents, recording employee time, entering client billing items, or updating a project status, you never have to worry about keying information in multiple places. By leveraging a single, universally-accessible platform, your firm can easily create, modify, and share documents, manage your firm, and stay synchronized with colleagues and clients — even from the comforts of home.

For instance, with 24/7 access to the messaging features in Microsoft® Exchange, employees can schedule meetings, stay in contact, and manage tasks quickly and easily. Plus, Microsoft Outlook email, calendar, and contacts can be accessed from any smartphone using ActiveSync. And Microsoft Teams enables staff and clients to chat, meet, call, and collaborate all in one place. As many accounting firms use the Microsoft suite, these tools are readily available to implement for a productive work-from-home environment.

And if the workflow solution your firm chooses also works with popular document-sharing solutions, like Dropbox or Google Drive — or better yet — comes with a secure client portal, it will be easy for your clients to exchange documents and collaborate on edits with your staff. You can even “assign” tasks to your clients that require their action, such as uploading necessary documents or completing e-signatures.

Clients expect the accounting firms they do business with to provide them with an efficient and secure way to collaborate and exchange information, regardless of your staff's location.

## Impose internal protocols and security measures

Concerns over cybersecurity and data breaches for both CPA firms and their clients has vaulted “managing privacy/security risks” to the top of the list of concern for firms of all sizes.<sup>5</sup> And for good reason.

As gatekeepers to a treasure trove of sensitive client data, you must ensure that client data remains secure. For remote workers, this means having the right tools in hand and taking the proper steps to protect both your firm's and your clients' data.



*“Remember; when disaster strikes, the time to prepare has passed.”*

— Steven Cyros

*“I chose Virtual Office CS to ensure all of my data was secure and that under no circumstances could a computer issue, virus, impropriety, or weather issue jeopardize my business or my ability to work.”*

— Sonya L. Laney, CPA



If you haven't already, one of the first steps you should take is to develop specific policies and procedures for information security. These policies and procedures, which should be readily accessible to employees, identify acceptable practices and expectations for business operations. They should be reviewed and updated at least annually, as well as whenever there are changes within the organization or its technology and include specific guidelines for when accountants and other employees work remotely.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, you should also have a written plan for disasters and information security incidents. This will help to contain or reduce the impact of an event, should one arise. The plan should include a step-by-step response that addresses what to do, who should do it, and how. It should also address employee safety, client communications, and the preservation of data.<sup>7</sup>

To help mitigate risk, review your firm's internal controls and consider taking the following security measures:<sup>8</sup>

- Always use the highest multi-factor authentication available
- Install anti-malware/anti-virus security software on all devices (laptops, desktops, routers, tablets, and phones) and keep software set to automatically update
- Use strong passwords of eight or more characters, use different passwords for each account, use special and alphanumeric characters, use phrases, password protect wireless devices, and consider an encrypted password manager program
- Encrypt all sensitive files and emails
- Do not use a public Wi-Fi (for example, at a local coffee shop) to access your firm's network, programs, or data
- Establish an encrypted Virtual Private Networks (VPN) to allow for a more secure connection (especially from home networks)
- Keep your web browser software up to date so that it has the latest security features
- Delete web browser caches, temporary internet files, cookies, and browsing history on a regular schedule

## 2 Create an accountant work-from-home culture

As the accounting profession evolves and new, innovative technologies change the way in which people work, it is often said that one of the biggest challenges for firms is change management. For a growing number of firms, this includes creating a work-from-home culture that works.

As discussed earlier, it is important for firms to ensure that associates have the right tools and technologies in place to work efficiently and collaboratively, whether in the office or at home. But technology is only part of the equation.

Those in leadership roles must proactively foster a positive work-from-home culture. This involves dispelling commonly held misconceptions on working remotely, building trust, and fostering effective communication and collaboration.

It is no secret that leadership can be hesitant to embrace remote work for their employees. This is often because they have a hard time getting past popular myths about accountants who work from home. Let's take a closer look:



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### Myth #1: Remote employees are unproductive

**Myth buster:** Research suggests that the opposite holds true. In fact, an annual survey conducted by FlexJobs found that 65% of respondents said they are more productive in their home office than at a traditional workplace. Why? Fewer distractions and interruptions; less stress from no commute; minimal office politics; and a personalized, quiet environment. Furthermore, 85% of businesses confirmed that productivity increased in their company because of greater flexibility.<sup>9</sup>

### Myth #2: Remote employees are unengaged

**Myth buster:** The reality is that the majority of remote workers are happier in their jobs and experience less stress. An Amerisleep study found that more than half of respondents (57%) were more likely than the average American to be satisfied with their job when they had the opportunity to work remotely. Plus, nearly 80% of respondents reported significantly less stress when working from home.<sup>10</sup>

### Myth #3: All remote employees are introverts

**Myth buster:** People may often assume that all remote workers are introverts, but research shows that flexible work appeals to a wide variety of professionals for different reasons. According to a FlexJobs survey, pet owner, entrepreneur, living in a rural area, stay-at-home mom, and caregiver were among the top 10 self-identifiers.<sup>11</sup>

Successfully creating a work-from-home culture also requires that accounting firm leaders must trust employees' ability to perform and execute work outside of the traditional office setting. The reality is that you can't micromanage every minute of every day; you have to give employees a level of autonomy and trust that they will put in the hours to get their work done.

Encouraging greater collaboration and communication among staff can help strengthen that trust and further drive employee engagement. This could include:

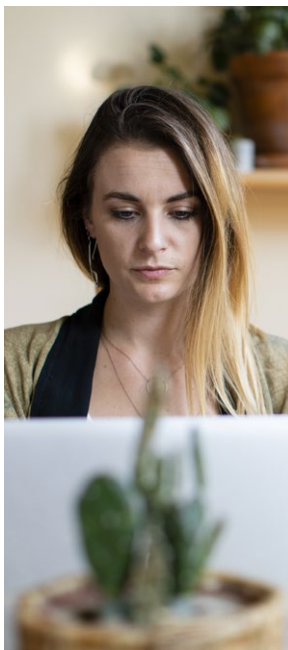
- Requiring schedule setting
- Sharing calendars for transparency
- Instant messaging and video conferencing for check-ins
- Being mindful of communication timing (i.e., Are there any times team members should not be disturbed? What's the expected response time to messages? Does that vary depending on what the message is, or the channel in which it is delivered?)<sup>12</sup>
- Starting each meeting with an icebreaker question. Informal communication is important for relationship building among staff, so even if you've been working together for some time, this can help you learn even more about your team.<sup>13</sup>

### Tapping the best remote accounting candidates

Not everyone thrives in a remote work environment. That's why it is important for management to identify and recruit the best candidates for a remote workforce, whenever possible. For example, an employee who needs a lot of handholding may not be the best fit to handle remote accounting work. To help identify the ideal candidates, consider the following skill sets:<sup>14</sup>

- They are not afraid of technology and are comfortable navigating common cloud-based solutions.
- They understand the importance of digital security and will take the proper steps to protect your firm and client data.

- They are self-starters. They can see a need and then take the appropriate actions without having to be told what to do.
- They are problem solvers and feel confident troubleshooting an issue before escalating it.
- They have strong communication skills in any format, including email, phone, video conference, and instant message.
- They understand the importance of strong collaboration. In fact, in a remote work environment, a sense of collegiality is especially important.



Identifying your current staff who will be best suited to work remotely may be relatively easy. After all, you already know them, their skills sets and their personality traits. When hiring new associates for remote work, however, it is important ask the right questions. In fact, staffing firm Robert Half considers adding the following to your list of interview questions:<sup>15</sup>

- What is your history of working remotely?
- How do you stay focused and on task when working from home?
- How do you stay engaged and motivated over long periods without in-person interaction with co-workers?
- Tell me about the platforms you use (or have used) to collaborate with off-site colleagues.
- What do you do to minimize miscommunication in emails and instant messages?
- What are the three attributes that make you an effective remote worker?
- What are the greatest challenges of working off site?
- What is your approach to work-life balance when your job is remote?

You may even want to consider conducting the interview via video conference. This allows you to see how they present themselves, and you can gauge their equipment's and bandwidth's suitability for remote work.

### 3 Encourage a healthy work-life balance

Establishing and maintaining a healthy work-life balance when working from home can be harder than you think. It's very easy to let work infringe on your off-hours when your office is in your home, and technology like smartphones makes you easily accessible and likely feeling as though you're "always on."

In fact, research suggests that unplugging from work is one of the biggest challenges for accountants working remotely — or anyone working from home, for that matter.

Falling victim to being "always on" very often leads to employee burnout, which can negatively impact both individual and organizational performance. Consider this: Gallup research indicates that employees who say they "very often" or "always" experience work-related burnout are:<sup>16</sup>

- 63% more likely to take a sick day
- Half as likely to discuss how to approach performance goals with their manager
- 23% more likely to visit the emergency room
- 2.6 times more likely to leave their current employer
- 13% less confident in their performance





*CNN reported that Microsoft tested a program in Japan during the summer of 2019 called the “Work Life Choice Challenge,” in which it closed its offices every Friday and gave all employees an extra day off each week.*

**The result: Productivity jumped nearly 40%.<sup>18</sup>**

Unfortunately, employee burnout is not only real, but is also all too common. A survey from staffing firm Accountemps, a Robert Half company that specializes in staffing service for temporary accounting, finance, and bookkeeping professionals, found that nearly all senior managers (96%) believe their team members are experiencing some degree of burnout. In a separate survey, 91% of workers said they are at least “somewhat” burned out.<sup>17</sup>

This growing threat is not going unnoticed as more and more companies look for solutions to improve work-life balance, such as greater flexibility and compressed work weeks (working four days versus five days per week).

Trimming the work week down to four days may not ideal for your firm, but providing accountants and staff the ability to efficiently work remotely and encouraging them to maintain a healthy work-life balance in the process will go a long way toward greater productivity, employee morale and ultimately, firm profitability.

To help your employees maintain a healthy work-life balance and boost productivity consider the following tips:

- Create a workspace and work in the same place each day (avoid working from your kitchen table, if possible).
- Set a daily routine — and stick to it. This means having a consistent start and end time each day.
- Check in with co-workers via instant messaging/chat, phone or video conference to maintain connections and relationships.
- Schedule time for breaks, whether it’s to grab a snack, make personal phone calls, or brew another cup of coffee.
- Get some fresh air and exercise.
- Keep a to-do list.
- Plan your next workday.





*As employee expectations and desires shift, and Americans conform to what is becoming the “new normal” in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, those firms that are unable to maintain an efficient and productive remote work environment risk placing themselves at a significant disadvantage.*

## Tips for successful shared work/home spaces

Working from home doesn't always mean you're alone. Sometimes, it might be that more than one person is working from home and/or there are children in the house. In fact, this has become the reality for many Americans, as states issued stay-at-home orders, and businesses and schools shut their doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As many people have discovered firsthand, having children and significant others all sharing the same space, at the same time, is not easy. Consider the following tips to help remote accounting employees navigate the complexities of share spaces:

- Establish separate work areas.
- Have a rotating schedule between the adults to “watch” the kids.
- Create spaces for the children so that they are occupied in their own space while you're working.
- Post your schedules on the refrigerator, or somewhere easily accessible by all family members, so that everyone knows who is doing what and when, and when “do not disturb” status is needed.
- Inject a little fun and creativity by having your kids create a “do not disturb” sign for you to hang on your chair or office door.
- You may find it's necessary to work during “off hours” (i.e., after the kids go to bed) in order to get your daily work done. If that's the case, be sure to update your calendar and schedule and let your manager/co-workers know.
- Establish clearly defined “play time” with your kids (and spouse) and build it into your schedule.
- Don't forget to take care of yourself! (Self-care is important, especially critical during stressful and uncertain times. Drink plenty of water, eat healthy, meditate, listen to music, dance, take walks, etc. — whatever helps you maintain your sense of calm and sanity when everything feels out of your control.)

## Conclusion

Remote work environments are not only on the rise, they are here to stay. And thanks to advancements in technology, working remotely as an accountant and tax professional is no exception.

**The good news:** It's not too late for change. By taking such critical steps as establishing a strong infrastructure, nurturing the right work-from-home culture, and ensuring associates maintain a healthy work-life balance, you can set yourself on the path to success. Select a workflow solution that offers robust data sharing, project management, document management, and client collaboration functionality that works just as well from the office as when you and your staff are working from home.

And always remember that you're not alone. To help ensure that your team has the right tools and resources in place to successfully work anytime, from anywhere, turn to a trusted solutions provider like Thomson Reuters. Thomson Reuters can provide your firm a wide range of innovative solutions to help ensure that your staff maintains efficiency and productivity whether working in the office or remotely.



## Here are some resources you might find useful:

### UltraTax CS +

UltraTax CS® automates your entire business or individual tax preparation, delivering powerful, timesaving tools. You'll access a full line of federal, state, and local tax programs including 1040 individual, 1120 corporate, 1065 partnership, 1041 estates and trusts, multi-state returns, and more. UltraTax CS seamlessly integrates with other Thomson Reuters solutions, including CS Professional Suite® and Onvio® cloud software so you never lose any billable hours to manual processing. Meet all of your tax workflow needs with a customized, end-to-end solution built on cloud computing, advanced data sharing, and paperless processing.

### Onvio Firm Management +

Onvio® Firm Management is a comprehensive, cloud-based software that lets you run your accounting practice more collaboratively than ever — from anywhere. Your firm can create the perfect client communication hub by combining document storage with secure online client accounts. Your staff and clients will always stay in sync with centralized data management and real-time updates. Plus, you'll be able to work from anywhere using the convenient mobile apps.

### Virtual Office CS +

Virtual Office CS is a cloud-based environment that lets you do your tax and accounting work from home. The software is hosted on Thomson Reuters secure servers, but the remote accounting solution operates and integrates your programs exactly as if they were installed locally. Thomson Reuters handles the maintenance and data backups; you just log on and get to work.

### Checkpoint Edge +

Built to deliver the latest in artificial intelligence, cognitive computing, and machine learning technologies, Checkpoint Edge™ is a tax and accounting research tool that provides you with a more fluid and intuitive user experience, and enables you to find fast, accurate answers. This means you can spend less time on tax research and more time doing what really matters most to your business.

### Cloud Audit Suite +

The cloud audit suite helps accounting firms future-proof their audit capabilities through real-time digital collaboration, engaging employees with progressive technologies, and greatly improving client retention by delivering actionable insights and value-added services beyond the audit report.

## Footnotes

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