ENGAGEMENT CS®

Best Practices for Deploying Engagement CS in a Fieldwork Environment

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Overview

Engagement CS,® which is part of the CS Professional Suite® Accounting Products, assists you in managing critical aspects of your practice – paperless workflow and collaboration. This powerful application integrates fully with other applications within the suite as well as with other leading applications such as PPC's SMART Practice Aids,™ PPC's Checkpoint Tools® suite, RIA research on Checkpoint,® and Microsoft® Excel® and Word.® A key component of Engagement CS, built-in collaboration tools enable staff in the field to work simultaneously to complete an engagement in a timely manner. Before you begin working with Engagement CS in a collaborative environment, it is important to consider some key factors that will help increase efficiencies in the engagement workflow.

Field site considerations and early decision requirements

As technology has advanced in today's accounting practices, decisions about when and where to dispatch resources have become critical to the profitability of those enterprises. Just as you would normally plan and budget for your firm's use of human resources, you should also include technical assets in your firm's engagement plan and budget.

The fieldwork environment no longer simply includes people and paper. Instead, today's accounting fieldwork often employs a myriad of assets — from servers, scanners, and multiple monitors to portals, remote networking, and online access to applications and data. Thus, before your firm can adequately determine engagement timing, staffing, and even fees, it is essential to understand the actual environment in which your staff will be working. Your workflow processes for a client that provides high-speed access to the Internet may differ entirely from those required for another client without such access and where there may be a frequent need to return to the accounting office to conduct research, to download guidance, or to transfer data files.

If optimal resources are not available at the client's site, you may have to adjust fees, staffing, and procedures. Practitioners sometimes find it necessary to increase fees to compensate for costs incurred when Internet access is not available. Interestingly enough, many practitioners find their clients understand the expense and are often happy to provide Internet access in lieu of paying higher accounting fees.

Profitability depends in large part on being able to ascertain what resources are available in the client's environment and routinely using that information as part of your planning. Furthermore, being able to work in a terminal server or "virtual office" environment supported by an Application Service Provider (ASP) can provide the optimum condition to expedite your workflow with efficiency and thereby enhance profitability.

Networking and connectivity factors

Employing a network and Internet connection in the field can expedite workflow significantly as these tools help to alleviate much of the time required for file manipulation, access to research, and access to guidance. The benefits of employing a network in the field are identical to those that prompt many accounting firms to rely on networks in the office — they provide centralization, security, consistency, and efficiency, and they simplify data backups. It is advisable to obtain high-speed Internet access whenever possible and to set up a remote access to your network to leverage performance and data security.

Where high-speed Internet access is not available, field networks have been shown to provide a considerable level of efficiency. Many mobile teams of Engagement CS users have found that assembling a field network that utilizes the third-party application Colligo Workgroups™ makes setting up an ad hoc field network a simple procedure. In either remote or field network environments, further efficiency can be gained by using the unique functionality in Engagement CS that permits users simultaneous multi-staff access to the Master Client Data (MCD).

Engagement CS integrates fully with PPC Tax and Accounting & Auditing Libraries. Built-in collaboration tools increase efficiencies for collaboration in the field.

Assess the fieldwork environment early during the initial stages of engagement planning to optimize profitability.

Take advantage of your existing network capabilites to expedite collaborative workflow, or set up an ad hoc field network to gain efficiencies.

Most practitioners find it necessary to adjust their fieldwork configuration based upon resources available at the client's site. Unfortunately, one configuration may not apply to all field engagements. As such, it is often necessary for your staff to become familiar with a variety of field configurations. Engagement CS utilizes the following fieldwork configurations:

- **Using Engagement CS in the Virtual Office CS™ environment.** This configuration, in which Engagement CS is accessed using advanced ASP technology via ultra-secure servers at the Thomson Reuters data center, provides great advantages. When using this configuration, your team has anywhere-anytime online assess to Engagement CS and to an assortment of other applications. Being able to run the software in the Virtual Office CS environment requires access to an active Internet connection while at your client's office. The multi-staff functionality available in this configuration enables simultaneous access to engagement files by all staff members assigned to the project.

  Because Engagement CS is accessed via the Internet and information travels through an Internet connection, the performance of the software is subject to the same speed variations experienced when using the web. For this reason, the bandwidth used when accessing the Internet has a significant impact on the performance of the software. To achieve optimum product performance, we recommend using a persistent Internet connection with a minimum bandwidth of 128 Kbps for up to four users and 32 Kbps for each additional, concurrent user.

- **Terminal server networking.** This configuration enables you to provide your staff with access via the Internet to Engagement CS running on your firm's own servers, primarily utilizing the multi-staff functionality to control workpaper workflow and data files.

  Similar to running Engagement CS in the Virtual Office CS environment, this configuration relies on information transfers via Internet connection, so the performance of the software is subject to the same speed variations experienced using the web. For this reason, the bandwidth used when accessing the Internet has a significant impact on the performance of the software. To achieve optimum performance of the application, we recommend using a persistent Internet connection with a minimum bandwidth of 128 Kbps for up to four users and 32 Kbps for each additional, concurrent user.

- **Peer-to-peer networking via network hub.** This configuration enables you to use the multi-staff functionality in the field. To use this effectively, you must set up the proper workgroups and map network drives to the laptop and/or local workstations. If three or more computers are working in the field, we recommend establishing a single workstation or laptop as the dedicated server in the field to maintain network efficiency. Note that Colligo provides a third-party workgroup application that simplifies setting up an ad hoc field network, and that can be especially helpful for less technically savvy team members.

  Best network performance will be achieved when the fastest workstation or laptop is utilized as the server. Application performance relates directly to your hardware's processing speed and memory and to the size of your client data sets. Thus, to experience higher levels of performance, we recommend increasing your hardware processor speed and memory.

- **Send and Receive client data to and from the Master Client Data and between staff members in the field.** This configuration is the most appropriate method to use for transferring engagement data when there is no network connection available in the field. Removable media devices such as CDs, Flash drives, or memory cards provide a simple and portable way to transfer and retrieve data among staff members in this field configuration.

  Performance relates directly to your hardware's processing speed and memory and to the size of client data sets. Thus, to experience higher levels of performance, we recommend increasing your hardware processor speed and memory.

Use the resources that are available at the client's site to your advantage.

Use Engagement CS in a Virtual Office CS environment available at the highly secure Thomson Reuters data center.

Take advantage of access to Engagement CS via an Internet connection within a terminal server environment.

Note: Bandwidth plays a critical role and can have a significant impact on software performance.

Overview of the fieldwork process

The following diagram is designed to guide you through some of the scenarios you and your staff will encounter while multiple staff members are working in an engagement outside of the office.

Steps

1. Back up the client data from office network and mark the client as checked out.

2. Ensure that the laptop/local installation of Engagement CS is at the current version and has the correct system data from the network.

3. Restore the client data from the backup to your laptop/local installation of Engagement CS.

4. Enable Engagement CS multi-staff functionality (in the Client Properties dialog).

5. Send workpapers from the MCD.

6. Receive workpapers in to the LCD.

7. Back up the LCD.

8. Send workpapers from the LCD.

9. Receive workpapers in to the MCD.

10. Back up the data and then restore the data on the firm's network and clean up obsolete versions of the data from laptop/local installations and from any removable media.

If you have access from the field to your firm's terminal server, there is no need to perform steps 1 and 3.

In the field, only wired networks are supported. Thomson Reuters does not support wireless network environments.

If three or more staff members are using multi-staff functionality on a peer-to-peer network while working in the engagement, we recommend that you use a dedicated server.
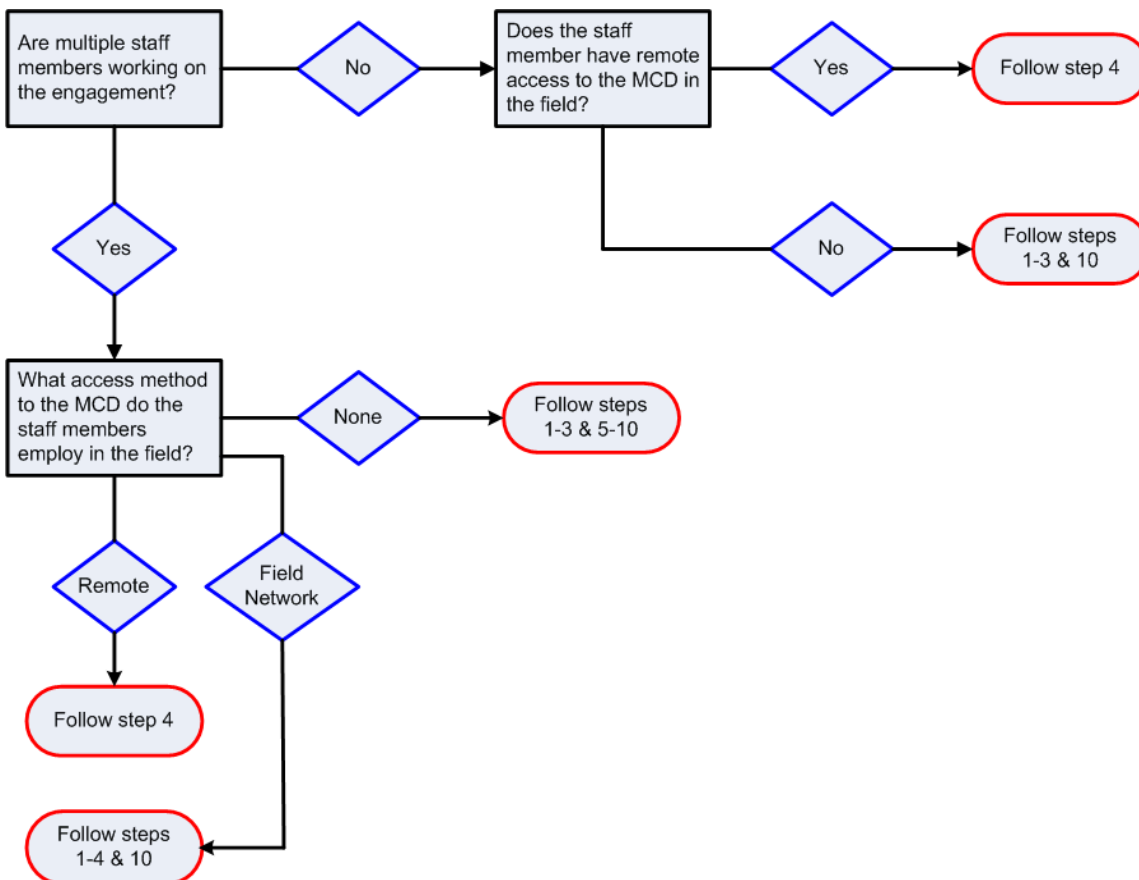
Using the multi-staff option in Engagement CS

The multi-staff option in Engagement CS is unique to the CS Professional Suite and is designed to provide you with maximum flexibility when multiple staff members must work in the same engagement. The feature enables you and others working in the engagement to make simultaneous changes to workpapers (including signoffs and notes), optimizing the engagement workflow and reducing the overall time spent to complete engagement tasks. In a typical engagement workflow scenario, specific tasks are assigned to multiple staff members throughout the various stages of the engagement.

Using the multi-staff features on a network drive, all engagement team members can access the data. Staff can work on assigned workpapers within the same engagement simultaneously. In addition, staff can add or edit workpapers, create review notes, and sign off documents when complete. A user can add, edit, or delete review notes while a document is currently open — regardless of whether that user or another staff member opened the document. Senior staff can review and sign off workpapers without interfering with the workflow of junior staff members. In addition, senior staff can access and perform multiple workpaper signoffs and create notes for other engagement staff, which are refreshed automatically in real time for the entire engagement team.

Using the Send and Receive features

The Send and Receive features of Engagement CS permit engagement staff to create a transfer file that consists of workpapers and documents from the Master Client Data (MCD) or from the Local Client Data (LCD) for use by assigned staff members on the engagement team. The transfer file is sent or created in either a shared network location or on removable media such as a read/write CD or USB drive to be received by all staff members working in the Local Client Data in the field or at another workstation in the office.

Staffing and access considerations

According to the AICPA 2007 survey, one of the ten most important recent technology initiatives has been firms' ability to identify, authenticate, and manage the rights and privileges of their practitioners. To ensure that the appropriate staff members have access to Engagement CS and corresponding client data, a firm should establish and utilize a unique ID for every individual accessing the application. The practitioner should also establish a "strong password" to assure their work is authenticated by the engagement system. A strong password generally includes alphabetic, numeric, and special characters such as commas, exclamation points, or ampersands.

Practitioner access should be controlled by a high-ranking and trusted individual in the practice to secure the integrity of your firm's evidential documentation.

Critical controls — access rights and privileges

Engagement CS and the CS Professional Suite Accounting Products software provide you with the opportunity to set staff privileges at a number of levels — on a global group privileges level, on an engagement properties level, and at the workpaper properties level. Typically, staff responsibility will vary between engagements based upon the individual's experience and the size and/or complexity of the project. The multi-level security feature accommodates this variance with the flexibility to customize staff rights at the engagement and workpaper levels. It is important to understand the tiered levels of security and how they interact with one another. For example, staff security privileges are dependant upon the group security privilege settings.

- **Global group privileges** enable you to establish representative security rights typical to each staff level within your firm — for example, partner, manager, senior, in-charge, and staff levels. Among other things, global group privileges regulate overall access to client properties settings, client passwords, client backups, global report editing tools, engagement properties, and engagement controls (including engagement deletion, journal entry controls, sign-off, roll-forward, and wrap-up functions), and workpaper and file deletion or transfer.

- **Engagement property privileges** provide an opportunity to adjust the staff privileges denoted by the practitioner's group privileges on an individual engagement level. Critical access items (such as deleting the client data or modifying the client properties) cannot be changed at this level. However, engagement-related access can be adjusted — for example, to enable access to journal entries or workpapers and the ability to check in and check out documents.

- **Workpaper property privileges** can be controlled at the document level. The foremost function here is the ability to assign staff access according to any of three levels: no view, read-only, or full read-and-write access. You can also specify security settings related to editing the roll-forward treatment, name, and reference for an individual document. Engagement CS records the history of each document, noting both the creation and update activity — including the date, the time, and the individual performing the activity.

Multi-staff capability enables you to work simultaneously with other staff working in the same engagement to increase efficiencies.

Send and Receive transfer files that consist of updated client data to others on the engagement team – whether in the field or back in the office.

We recommend using "strong passwords" to ensure that work is authenticated by the program.

Engagement CS provides extensive security options that include the following multi-tiered levels.
- Global
- Engagement
- Workpaper

To achieve the greatest level of security and efficiency, we recommend that you utilize all three of the multi-level privilege tools provided in Engagement CS. For attest engagements, it is important that you understand the program's access controls, especially where such controls relate to Auditing Standards. As an example, regulation of access to the Wrap-up function is essential to comply with the 45/60 documentation standards.

Overall control of your engagement workflow

The accounting profession continues to encounter a significant increase in demand, while personnel resources have continued to decrease considerably. As we consider the most profitable firms in the profession, it is apparent that technology is being used to reinforce the diminishing workforce and to leverage efficiency. A key component in the engagement profitability equation is managing your workflow productivity. The following diagram provides an overview of the processes involved in creating, organizing, reviewing, and completing an engagement using Engagement CS.
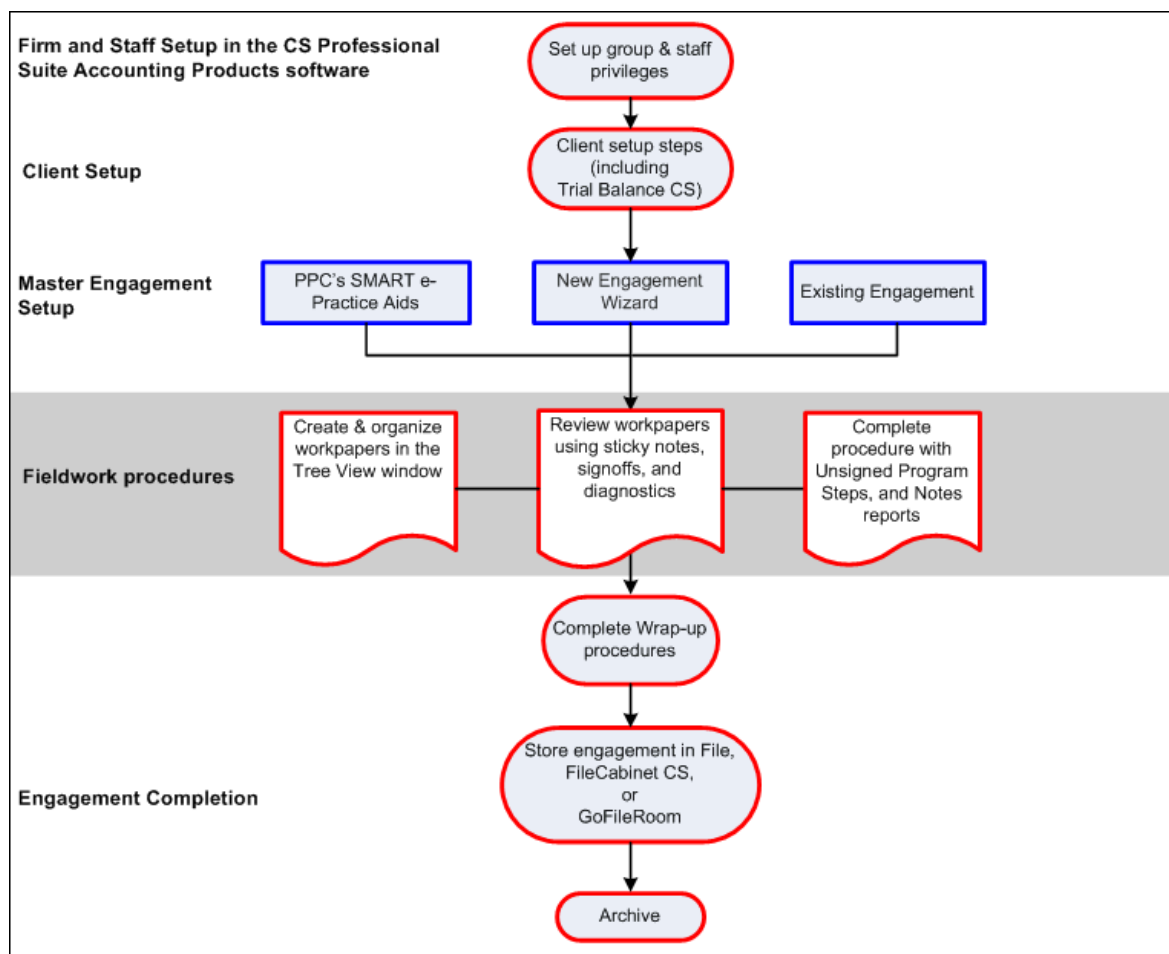
Conclusion

Obtaining a comprehensive understanding of your firm's engagement workflow and the field environment prior to the start of fieldwork is a critical component to profitability. The technological resources you employ during fieldwork can provide benefit as well as profits to you as long as you include them in your engagement plan and budget just as you would for other firm assets. Employing best practices under such circumstances can augment the performance and success of the individual engagement. Sharing information electronically between engagement team members improves staff productivity. Standardizing your documentation decreases production time. Managing rights, privileges, authentication, and identification for each user can give you peace of mind that your firm's work is protected.

Relying on best practices in controlling the engagement workflow ensures increased profitability for your firm.

Whether you have a question, concern, or just a comment about our products and services, we want to hear from you.

Thomson Reuters/
Professional Software & Services

CS Professional Suite
7322 Newman Boulevard
Dexter, MI 48130

Sales
Phone: 800.968.8900
Fax: 800.326.1040
Email: CS.Sales@ThomsonReuters.com

Customer Service
Phone: 800.968.0600 (press 1 and then follow the Phone Queue menu prompts)
Fax: 734-426.5946
Email: CS.Service@ThomsonReuters.com

Support
Phone: 800.968.0600 (press 2 and then follow the Phone Queue menu prompts)
Fax: 734.426.5946
Email: CS.Support@ThomsonReuters.com

CS.ThomsonReuters.com

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