Using technology to improve efficiency in audit, tax and advisory for accounting firms

Contents

Introduction

Audit and accounting practitioners face increasing challenges in their daily work, from changes in complex tax legislation to changes in accounting and auditing requirements.

This comes on top of managing demanding client needs and keeping on top of workloads in busy practices. All these demands create the need for a swifter and smoother approach to managing the expectations of clients and regulators.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, technological advances have accelerated in pace – particularly in accountancy and audit because of the instantaneous need at the time to change the way in which firms carry out their work. This rapid change in the working environment that was enforced on us all is here to stay, but the 'traditional' challenges of dealing with a large volume of documentation efficiently and securely are still very present.

Clients need to supply a variety of information to enable the completion of their financial statements or tax returns. It can be frustrating on the part of the preparer when they get to a certain stage in preparing those financial statements or tax returns to find there is something missing (for example, a bank statement) and the assignment cannot be completed with incomplete records.

"These demands create the need for a swifter and smoother approach."

Traditionally, the client would have to ask the bank to resend the bank statement; or the client would have to arrange for a third party to send the missing pieces of information – all of which takes time. Accountants sell time so any increases in their time will invariably increase costs for the client; or impact on profitability for the accountant if they can't (or choose not to) pass those additional costs on.

"Any increases in their time will invariably increase costs for the client; or impact on profitability."

Legislation such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has been in place in the UK for several years and restricts the sharing of client information. Indeed, the need for security over sensitive information effectively limits the use of email as a document exchange mechanism, or means of sharing that information. This challenge becomes even greater when you are working with multiple clients across larger practices.

This is where tools such as Suralink can help.

What is Suralink?

Suralink is a market leader in request list and document management. Utilising the latest cloud technology, Suralink creates efficiencies for accounting firms because it reduces the need to go back and forth trying to chase up client requests.

This simplifies the document exchange process and, at the same time, improves the client's experience as less time is spent asking the client to send in various pieces of information. Your team is able to access documents and engagements from anywhere with a cloud-based platform that includes the highest levels of enterprise-grade security.

Nowadays, the one thing that accountancy firms and their regulators are concerned about is security. With Suralink, all documents are uploaded and secured with AES-256-bit encryption. Information such as client names, engagement team member names and comments between users are all treated as sensitive with the same security encryption.

Suralink is backed up offsite daily and a two-stage 'click and confirm' deletion system prevents accidental data deletions. All activity within Suralink is logged through an audit trail by username and IP address.

You can also set up a customisable user portal by creating a custom sub-domain that has your firm's name and logo on the login page and in system emails. This helps deliver a better experience for clients and helps users feel more secure.

PKF

CASE STUDY

PKF Littlejohn

PKF Littlejohn implemented Suralink in early 2019 with the objective of improving their audit process and client experience.

We all know how much documentation an audit generates, and previously PKF Littlejohn used a combination of different software for data collection. With increasing regulatory requirements over audits, PKF Littlejohn wanted clarity over the status of all audit requests, the ability to identify issues early, and to provide strong data governance and information security. This is where Suralink came in.

The Suralink set-up process was quick and user-friendly – no additional software was needed. Client data requests are streamlined and Suralink provides the client with a single view of requests and expectations. All queries are dealt with in the system itself, so everything stays in one place.

One of the key benefits seen by PKF Littlejohn is the ability to allocate requests within their team and set appropriate visibility to team members. This avoids 'bottlenecking' in communications and provides a clear view of the status of all audits.

Karen Egan, Partner at PKF Littlejohn, says:

"Suralink adds clarity to requests for information – particularly when we ask the client for quite specific data or there's room for misunderstanding."
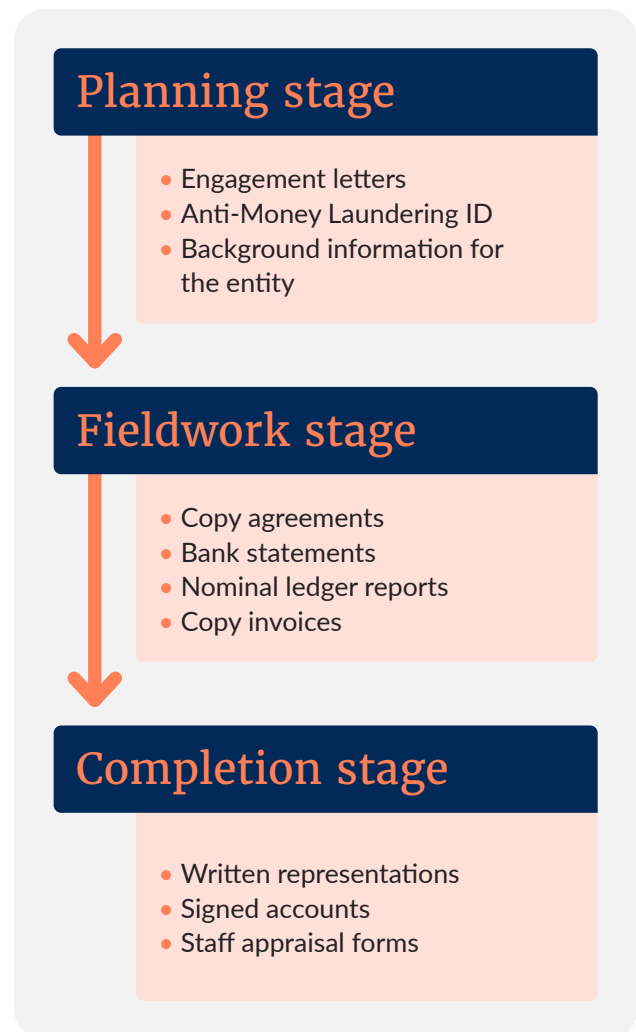
Efficiencies within auditing

Audits are huge exercises nowadays and are expensive assignments to carry out. The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) is striving to restore confidence in the auditing profession following some high-profile corporate collapses (Carillion, Patisserie Valerie and BHS to name a few).

Attempts to restore trust by the FRC give rise to new and/or revised auditing standards and that usually means more work on the part of the auditor.

Broadly, there are three stages to an audit:

- Planning
- Fieldwork
- Completion

At each stage of the audit, various documentation will be needed, for example the diagram to the right outlines these stages:

Planning stage

- Engagement letters
- Anti-Money Laundering ID
- Background information for the entity

Fieldwork stage

- Copy agreements
- Bank statements
- Nominal ledger reports
- Copy invoices

Completion stage

- Written representations
- Signed accounts
- Staff appraisal forms

All this information can easily be collated within Suralink. Data requests become streamlined and clear – indeed Suralink can give the audit team insight into which clients may be slow to respond because the system can track client responses and flag potential delays. All your client requests are in one place, updated in real time, and accessible by everyone working on the engagement.

You're able to receive instant notifications of any new activity in the system. You can even log in after the work is done and see exactly what happened while you were away.

You can have approval workflows that let you effectively manage the lifecycle of each request. So you can accept requests that have been fulfilled properly and send back requests that aren't complete with individual notes.

Emily Bavin, Audit Manager at PKF Littlejohn, says:

"All of my clients love Suralink! It has provided greater oversight of information requests both from our clients' and our audit team's perspectives. It has made the PBC list process less of a chore."

Improved visibility across engagements

Leads to a better client experience

Suralink allows practice leaders, partners and managers to have a clear view across the whole firm to check the status of engagements.

You're able to track each individual engagement and how far along it is which helps your firm with resource allocation if an engagement is ahead of track, or behind.

You're able to get immediate insight into projects and engagements. It's also possible for different levels of access to be given to different people with the practice, for example, a manager is able to oversee multiple engagements and identify what is outstanding on each audit. You can also ensure clear accountability by assigning firm and client users to specific requests. Or, when you need to transfer sensitive information within engagements, you're able to make private requests that are accessible only to specific users.

With dashboards within Suralink, you can get an overview of the document gathering process in real time. So you'll know exactly which documents have been requested and submitted. A timeline of engagements provides a clear audit trail and accountability of all activity. Automated status updates let you schedule and send updates on an engagement automatically at the time and date that works for you and your clients.

"Our team uses detailed Suralink reports to track client responses and flag potential delays affecting audit bookings. This helps the team plan and optimise resourcing."

– Emily Bavin, Audit Manager, PKF Littlejohn

Being able to have templates for engagements, and import your existing spreadsheet lists, means you can have an ultra-fast setup when starting to use Suralink. You're also able to create templates to reuse when adding new clients.

To further improve efficiency, you're able to roll engagements over from year to year and capture all additional requests that came up during the engagement.

"Suralink was a clear choice for us. It has optimised document sharing with our clients during engagements, and we are pleased with the visibility Suralink provides into staffing and resource management."
– Scott Wilson, Audit Innovation Leader and a Principal, RSM US LLP

Benefits across your practice

The days of handling physical paper documentation and files are very much on the way out.

Most accountancy firms in the UK have some sort of technology in place that assists with the servicing of clients – whether this is as simple as SharePoint or an in-house bespoke data management system, most accountancy firms will handle client tasks through some form of digital or practice management software.

Indeed, with the move to Making Tax Digital in the UK on the horizon in the next few years, firms are already looking at software solutions to help their clients make the transition to digital records. Companies House reforms in the form of The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 will require all accounts to be filed digitally so this is another avenue where we are seeing paper-based documentation being phased out.

Requesting clients to send in various documentation can be a challenge. Practitioners are often frustrated when clients send in wrong information (e.g. the wrong years' bank statements) – especially in busy seasons such as January when the self-assessment income tax return deadline is approaching or a Companies House filing deadline is imminent.

Traditionally, when the client sends in the wrong information, a follow-up email or phone call would be made asking them to send the right information. Clients might become frustrated and blame the practitioner for not being clear or specific. The Suralink solution provides statuses and comments to provide context which the client can see. This cuts out the need for several emails back and forth and phone calls.

CASE STUDY

Aronson LLC (part of Aprio LLP)

When an employee who had used Suralink in a previous role joined Aronson LLC and recommended Suralink, Azunna Anyanwu, Chief Technology Officer at Aronson LLC, decided to look into it, as well as some other comparable solutions.

Anyanwu performed his own analysis, but the final decision was left to a cross-sectional committee of tax and audit team members.

After evaluating several potential solutions, the team chose Suralink.

Initially, Suralink was only rolled out in the audit department, but the firm's tax department also started using Suralink within a year. Anyanwu commented:

"Suralink is our only supported platform for clients who need to share files with us. Some of my guiding principles are simplicity, cloud-first, security, and avoiding duplicate tools. So I made the call that we would not support both Sharefile and Suralink."

While Aronson does not track metrics specifically around how much time the firm has saved by switching to Suralink, Anyanwu does track usage. They currently have 2,300 of their approximately 10,000 live clients on the platform and around 90% use it weekly, if not daily.

Besides improved security, simplicity and collaboration, the firm has also benefited from having less data stored on its local network as Suralink offers unlimited storage. Prior to implementing Suralink, people had to download files from Sharefile to the network, and then upload those same files to CCH

Axcess, Caseware or another cloud-based system. Now, with Suralink's 'drag and drop' functionality, people do a lot less downloading.

Suralink can handle any file size and type, so whether it's an obscure compressed file, a giant QuickBooks backup, or something else altogether, you're able to use Suralink to share it.

Streamlined onboarding, tax and advisory processes

Onboarding a new client involves a lot of documentation. Anti-Money Laundering Regulations (AMLR) in the UK are arduous and firms must ensure they comply fully with the rules to avoid running into difficulties with regulators and professional bodies.

Suralink's dynamic request list and workflow solutions deliver time-savings in client onboarding processes. There are many features that speed things up and make processes more efficient including:

- AMLR identification such as passport/driving licences and utility bills can be received via the portal;
- Signed letters of engagement can be returned swiftly; and
- Electronic security checks can be uploaded quickly.

These efficiencies enable the initial onboarding process to be completed swiftly and easily, allowing the firm to do what it is being engaged to do – delivering accounting services and carrying out engagements such as tax returns and other business advice including valuable advisory services such as cashflow forecasting or supporting funding applications.

For practices of all sizes, keeping tax documents organised is difficult, and transferring that sensitive information securely can be even harder. With dozens of documents per engagement, many of them being submitted by clients throughout the year, it's easy to lose track of what you have, or haven't, received. Whether you're preparing a few complex engagements for corporations with hundreds of documents or a plethora of individual engagements with a few documents each, you need a simple, secure way to request and track tax documentation.

Conclusion

Automation is clearly the 'order of the day' where UK accountancy firms are concerned.

Increasing legislative and regulatory requirements now require firms to create as many efficiencies as possible to ensure they can cope with the daily demands of the profession. As regulators, such as the Financial Reporting Council, continue in their quest to restore audit confidence, firms will find that automating as much of their processes as possible and having better visibility over the document-gathering process will lead to efficiencies.

Suralink's secure data collection system enables these efficiencies to allow firms and their staff to devote more time to their main role – looking after the client and making sure the client is happy.

"Firms will find that automating as much of their processes as possible and having better visibility over the document–gathering process will lead to efficiencies."
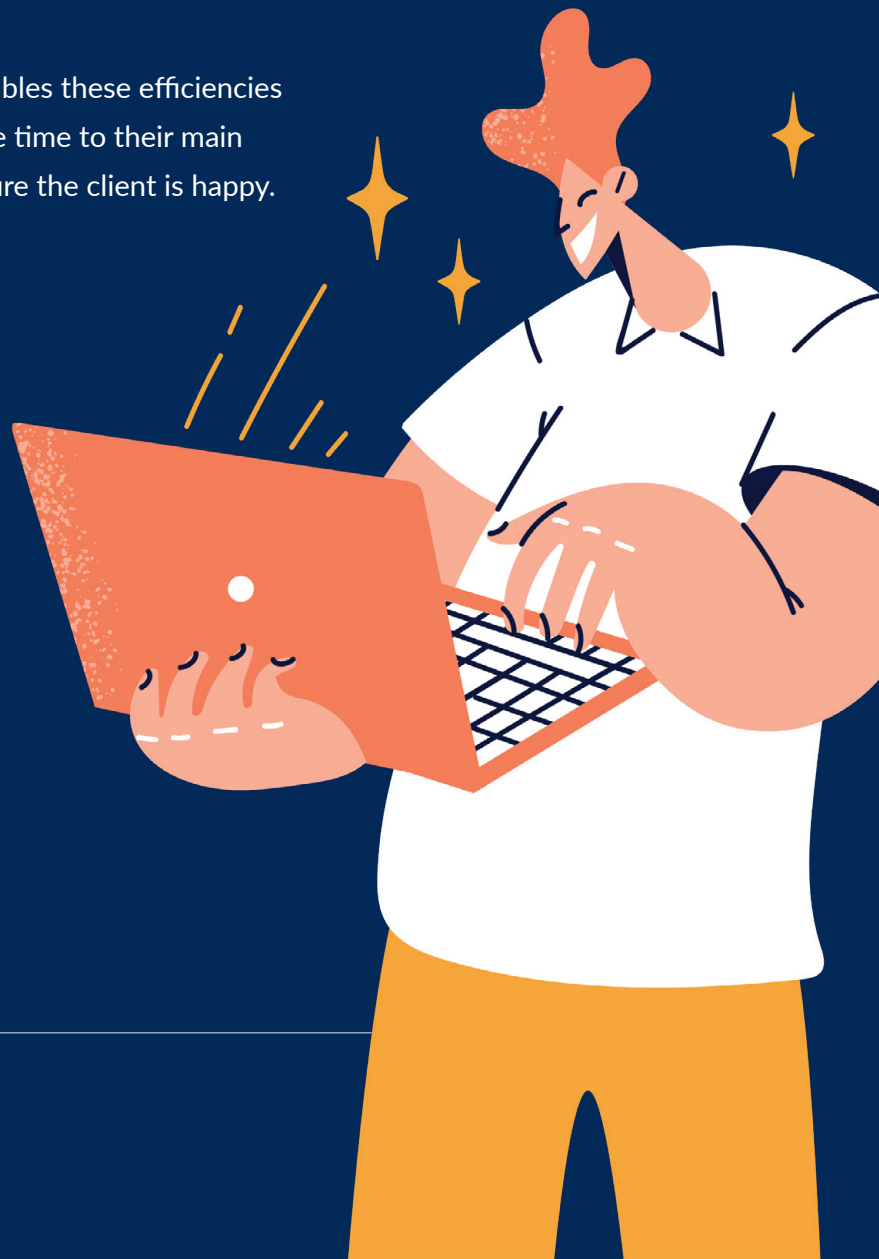
About

Suralink
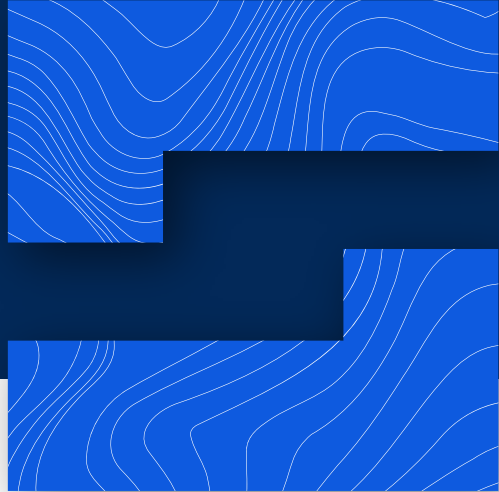
Suralink provides professional services firms with a single, secure platform to collaborate with clients, exchange documents at scale, and track the progress of engagements.

With enterprise-grade security and an easy-to-use interface, Suralink's award-winning client interaction portal helps businesses simplify the document workflow process while improving the client experience.

ICAEW TECHNOLOGY ACCREDITATION

GDPR

ISO

FAST 50

Inc. 5000

900+
Firms Total

550K+
Users Total

150M+
Documents Securely Transferred... and Counting

TRUSTED BY

MOORE BELGIUM

PKF

MNP

SIKICH.

WIPFLI

bakertilly INTERNATIONAL

The Next Step...

Get in touch with a Suralink platform professional today to learn more about how our technology can save time, optimize our workflow process, and meaningfully improve client relationships!

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