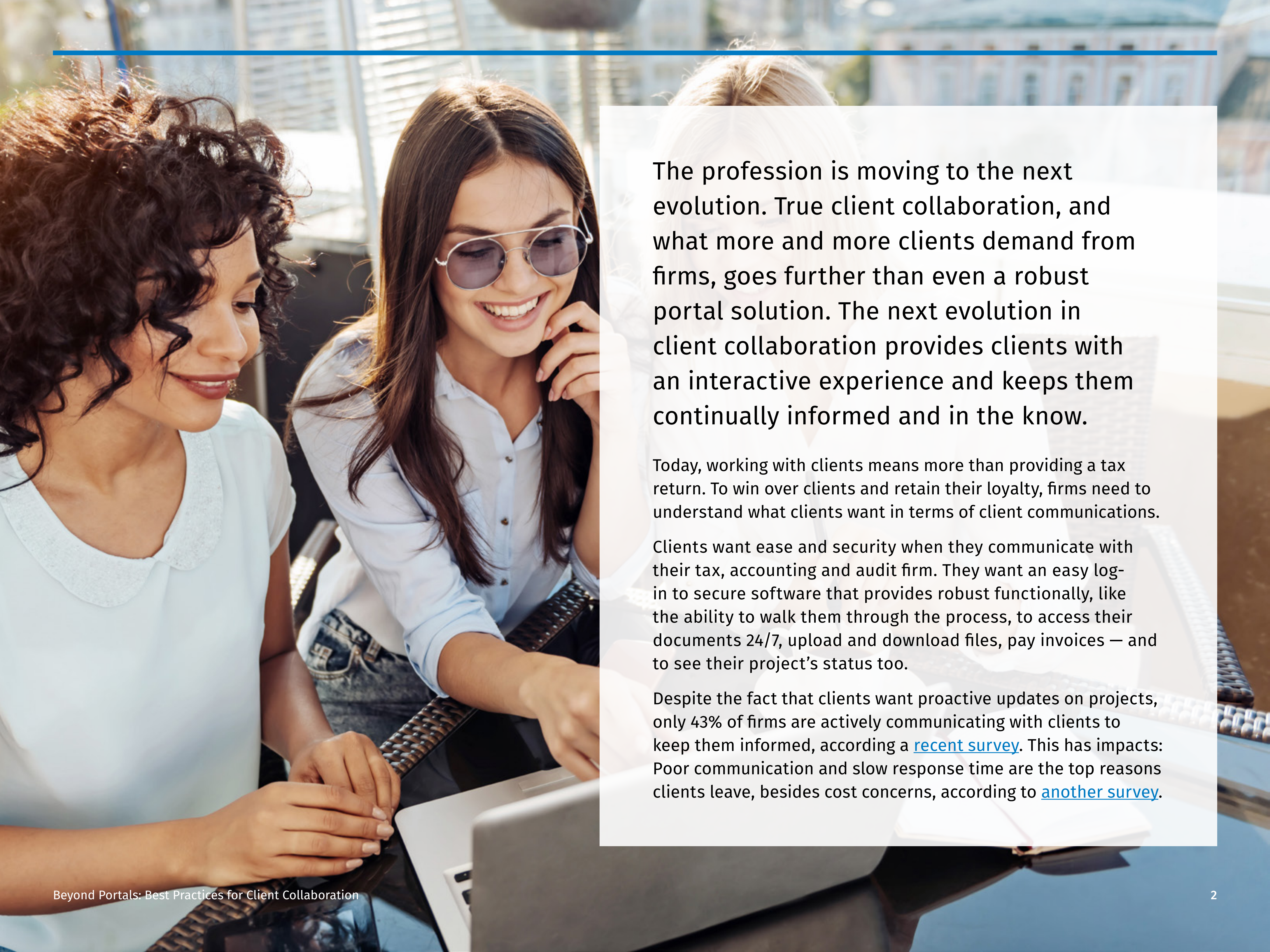
Tax & Accounting

Beyond Portals: Best Practices for Client Collaboration

Wolters Kluwer

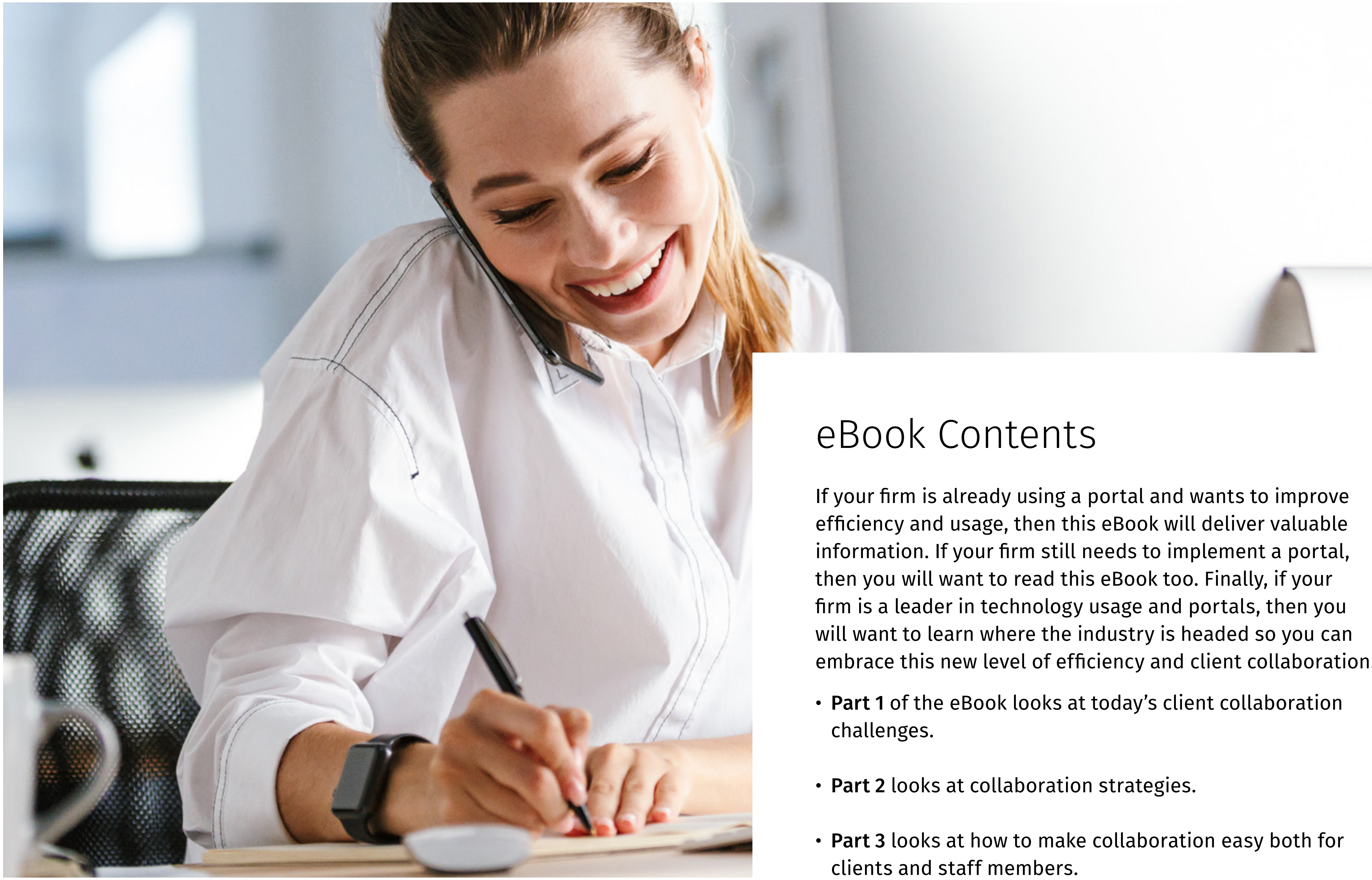


The profession is moving to the next evolution. True client collaboration, and what more and more clients demand from firms, goes further than even a robust portal solution. The next evolution in client collaboration provides clients with an interactive experience and keeps them continually informed and in the know.

Today, working with clients means more than providing a tax return. To win over clients and retain their loyalty, firms need to understand what clients want in terms of client communications.

Clients want ease and security when they communicate with their tax, accounting and audit firm. They want an easy log-in to secure software that provides robust functionally, like the ability to walk them through the process, to access their documents 24/7, upload and download files, pay invoices — and to see their project's status too.

Despite the fact that clients want proactive updates on projects, only 43% of firms are actively communicating with clients to keep them informed, according a [recent survey]. This has impacts: Poor communication and slow response time are the top reasons clients leave, besides cost concerns, according to [another survey].



eBook Contents

If your firm is already using a portal and wants to improve efficiency and usage, then this eBook will deliver valuable information. If your firm still needs to implement a portal, then you will want to read this eBook too. Finally, if your firm is a leader in technology usage and portals, then you will want to learn where the industry is headed so you can embrace this new level of efficiency and client collaboration.

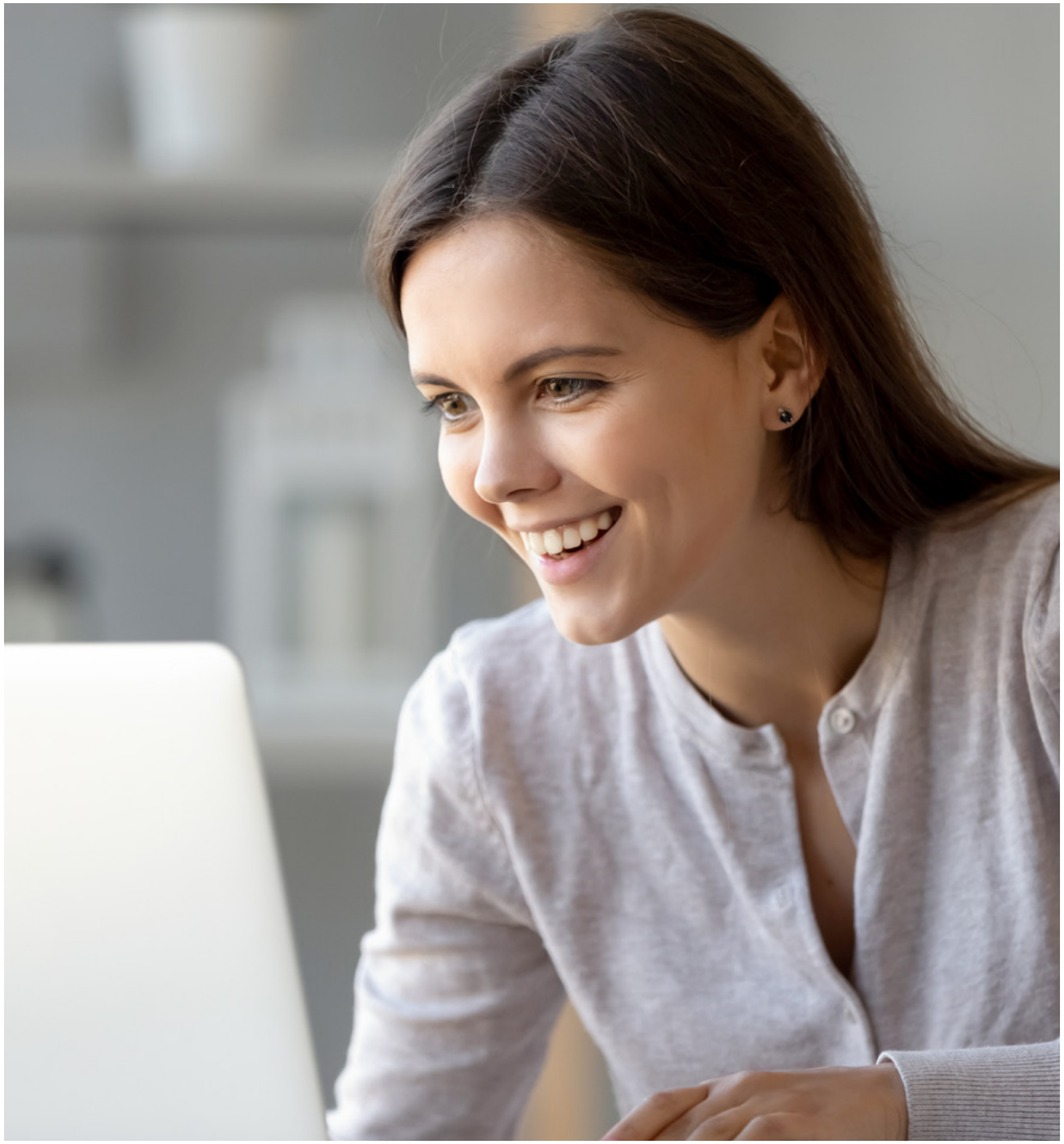
- **Part 1** of the eBook looks at today's client collaboration challenges.
- **Part 2** looks at collaboration strategies.
- **Part 3** looks at how to make collaboration easy both for clients and staff members.

Part 1

Collaboration Challenges

Common client collaboration challenges include:

- Emailing of sensitive documents, which puts both firm and client at risk.
- The mailing of documents, which is time-consuming and also incurs postage and paper costs
- Clients calling or emailing requesting copies of their tax returns or other documents, resulting in time-consuming interactions and additional time spent fulfilling requests, as well as frustration on clients' part.
- Back and forth with clients about project statuses.
- Back and forth with clients about missing information needed to complete their work.



Even Tech-Savvy Firms Struggle with Some Client Collaboration

Most firms, even those that have implemented portals, have at least some collaboration challenges.

Seventy percent of accountants in the 2017 Accounting Firm Operations and Technology (AFOT) survey reported that their firms still deliver some tax returns to clients via email. This may be because the firm has not adopted portals; more often it's likely because the firm has outlier clients not using the portal.

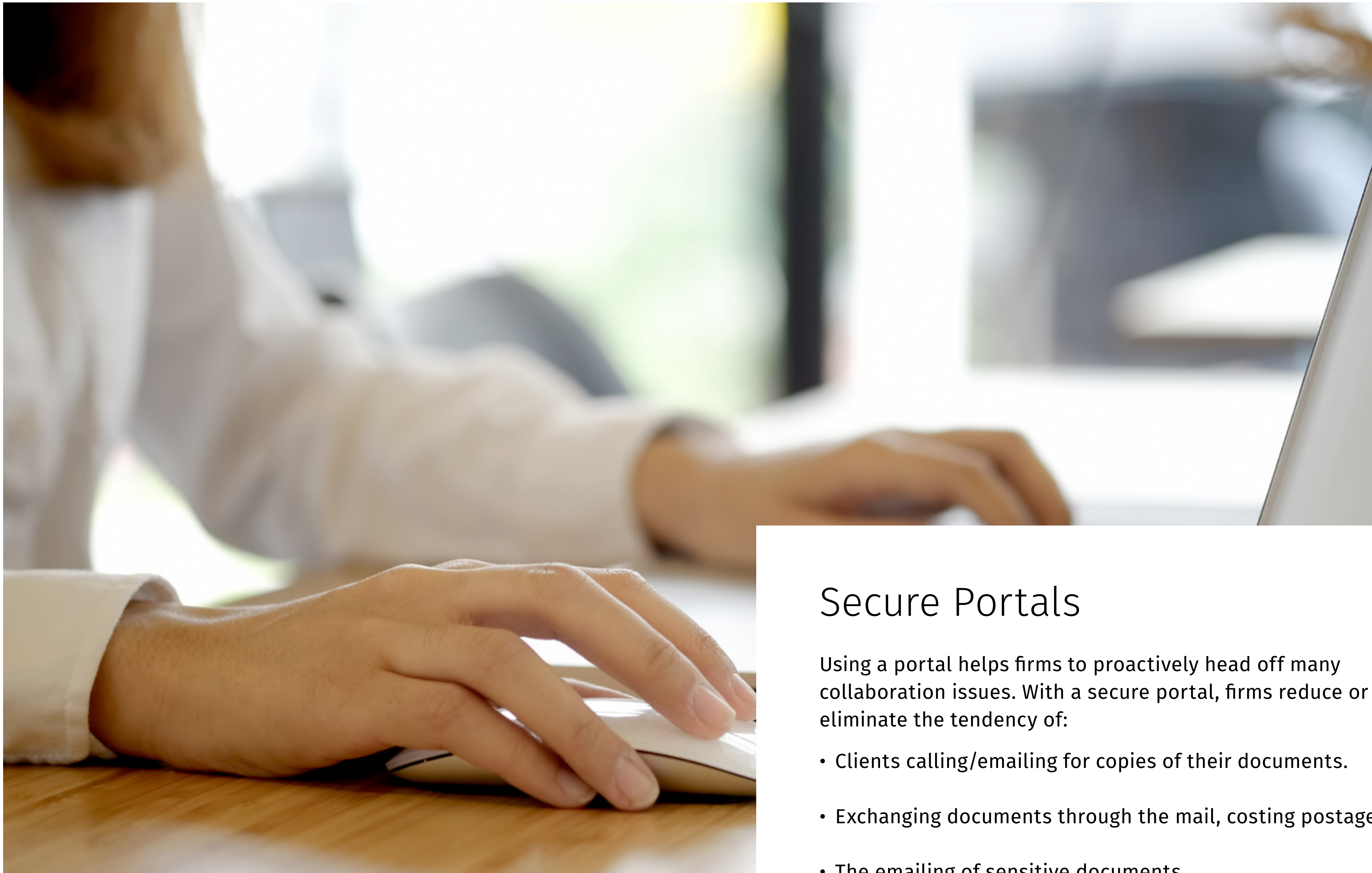
Where is your firm? Is there room to improve your firm's and your clients' use of portals to gain efficiencies and security? Do you still face some common client collaboration challenges?

Part 2

Collaboration Strategies

Firms who are looking for ways to improve client service while saving time are:

- Using a secure portal.
- Strategically choosing what kind of firm they are.
- Choosing to become future-focused in order to attract the next generation of clients.



Secure Portals

Using a portal helps firms to proactively head off many collaboration issues. With a secure portal, firms reduce or eliminate the tendency of:

- Clients calling/emailing for copies of their documents.
- Exchanging documents through the mail, costing postage.
- The emailing of sensitive documents.

Additional Benefits

The use of a secure portal also means time savings for firms of all sizes. A CPA at a small three-person firm told the Journal of Accountancy that he experienced enough time savings in just three months to make up for the software's cost.

Larger firms can save even more time. Barry C. Brown, CPA, director of technology at Moore Stephens Tiller LLC, a four-office, 150-employee Georgia firm, started using CCH Axcess™ Portal several years ago. Before, the firm burned copies of returns to CDs, but clients would still call to ask for their documents. Now clients can access documents 24/7 at their convenience, which saves the firm numerous hours per year.

	Traditional	Contemporary	Future-Focused
Client service	During office hours	Response within a few hours	24/7 self-service
Tax return	Signed in-office	Signed, then scanned	E-signed
File exchange	Mail, in-person	Email	Portal
Storage	Paper, file cabinets	Windows, file folder	Document management system
Clients	Appreciate high-touch, personalized service	Value efficient, hassle-free service	Prefer frictionless, on-demand service or self-service tools

Past, Present and Future Approaches

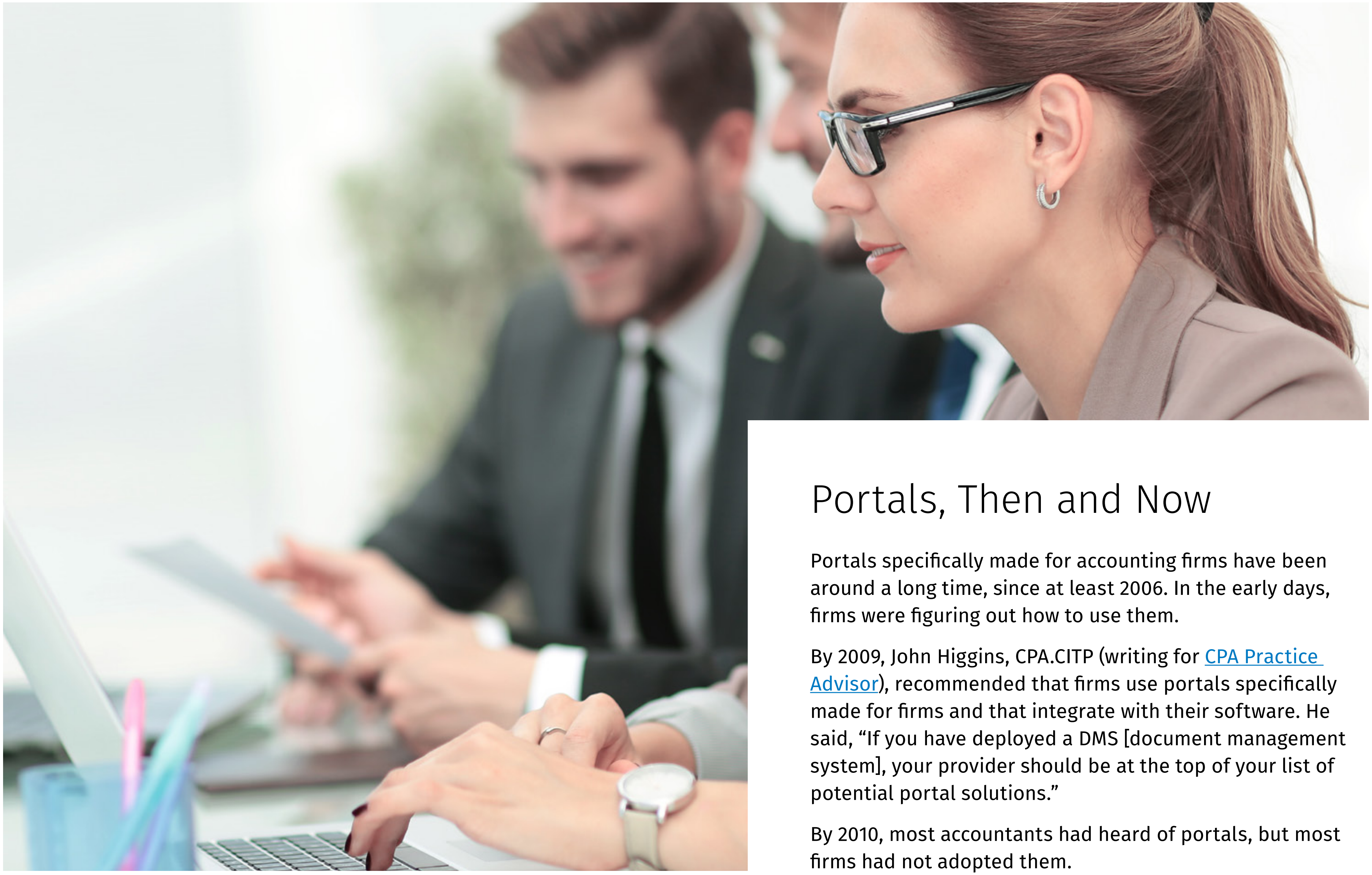
How you approach collaboration challenges says a lot about your firm and the types of clients you attract.

Traditional firms take a very slow approach to technology, doing business today much like yesterday, with all meetings taking place at the office and clients coming into the office not only to meet, but usually to deliver documents or sign forms too.

Contemporary firms use digital technology to some extent, including scanners, email and perhaps electronic file storage.

Future-focused firms utilize technology to enable 24/7 on-demand client service and take advantage of the convenience afocused firms not only attract like-minded clients who demand convenient, efficient service and technology, but they also attract clients who aspire to learn about business technology from their trusted advisor.

Although not all firms will want to adopt future-focused client communication strategies right away, as the number of traditional clients decreases, growth-minded firms will need to offer more self-service and full-featured access to collaboration tools, including a multi-featured portal and the next evolution in client collaboration.



Portals, Then and Now

Portals specifically made for accounting firms have been around a long time, since at least 2006. In the early days, firms were figuring out how to use them.

By 2009, John Higgins, CPA.CITP (writing for [CPA Practice Advisor]), recommended that firms use portals specifically made for firms and that integrate with their software. He said, “If you have deployed a DMS [document management system], your provider should be at the top of your list of potential portal solutions.”

By 2010, most accountants had heard of portals, but most firms had not adopted them.

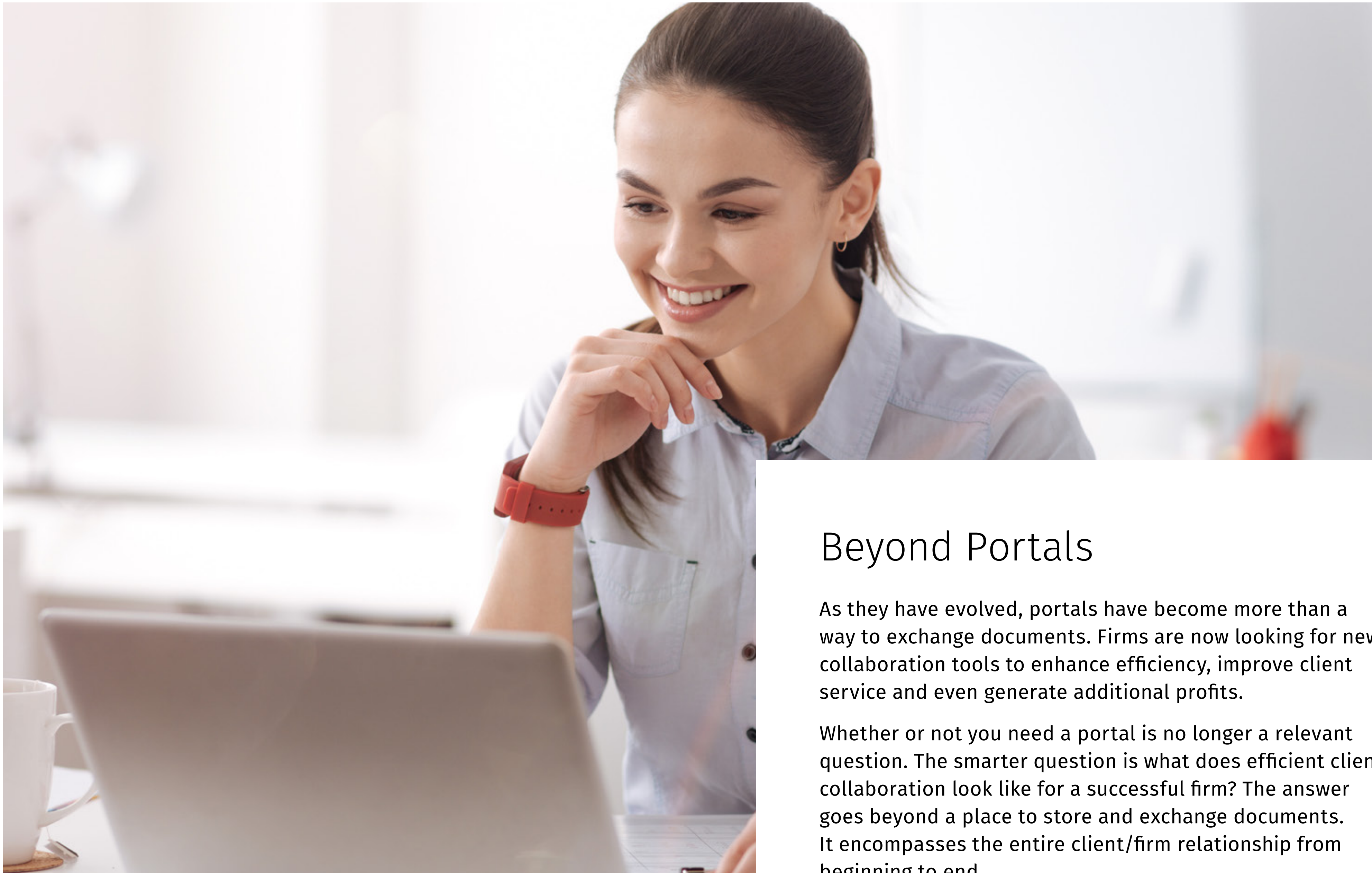
The Era of Portals

By 2012, the discussion around portals became less about whether or not to use portals and more about how to use them more efficiently.

In 2014, Accounting Today offered ideas for how to improve client adoption of portals. "Getting tax prep clients to use your tax practice's portals can be a serious challenge, but communicating the familiar benefits of portals is an excellent first step ..."

We've since added additional best practices for increasing client portal adoption, including:

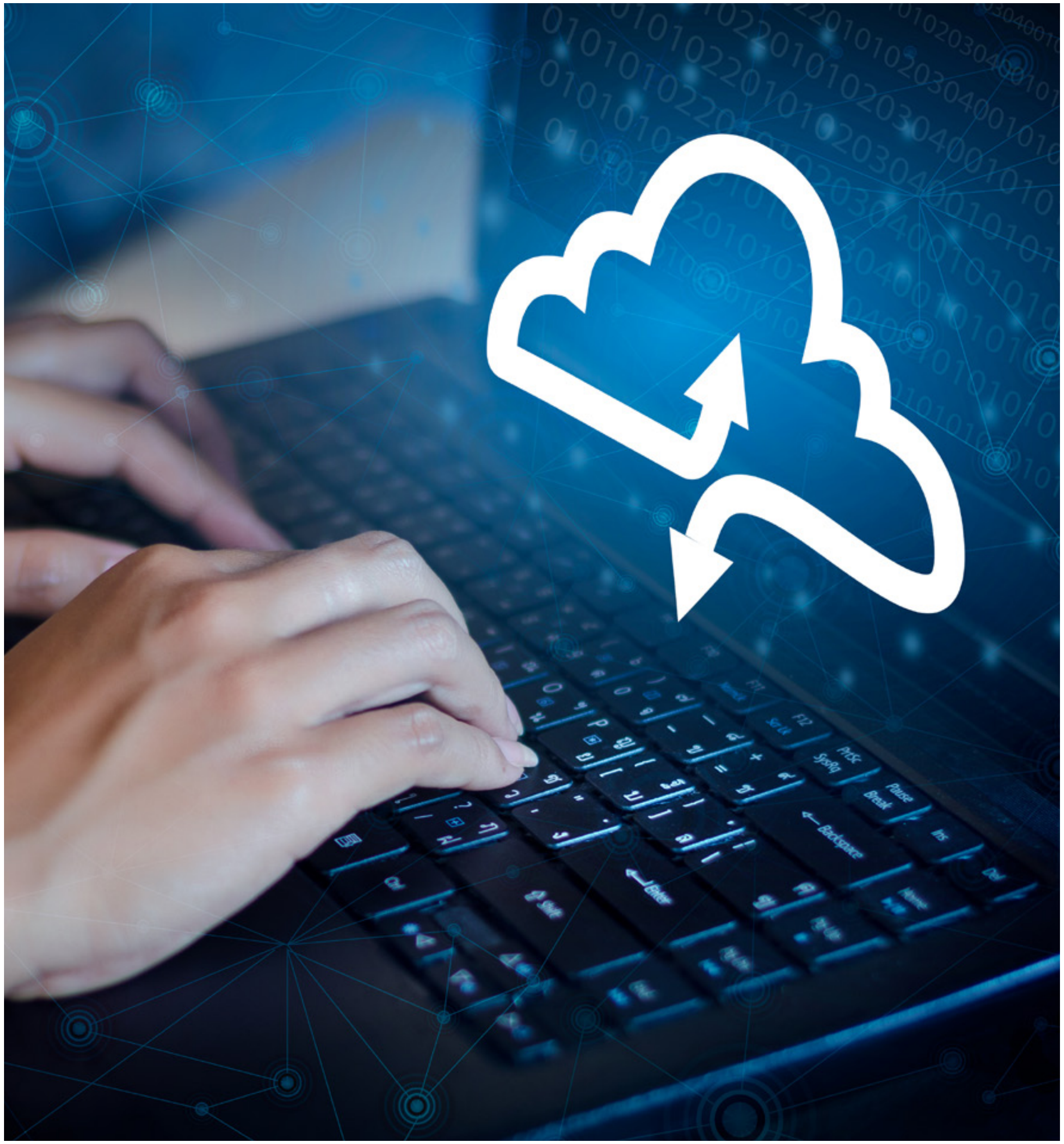
- Ensure staff members are using portals consistently; your clients won't if your staff doesn't.
- Use portals for a wide variety of documents; this increases client familiarity with the technology. Logging in once a year is not likely to bring success.
- Choose a portal that is easy for clients to find and easy to use with a portal log-in button right on your website. Brand your portal with your logo and other information.
- Provide clients with easy-to-find comprehensive documentation, including online help and instructional videos.
- Integrate with a document management system to save time publishing and retrieving client documents. Integration also helps to reduce errors like duplicate clients, out-of-date contact information and sending files to the wrong client.



Beyond Portals

As they have evolved, portals have become more than a way to exchange documents. Firms are now looking for new collaboration tools to enhance efficiency, improve client service and even generate additional profits.

Whether or not you need a portal is no longer a relevant question. The smarter question is what does efficient client collaboration look like for a successful firm? The answer goes beyond a place to store and exchange documents.
It encompasses the entire client/firm relationship from beginning to end.



The Next Phase of Collaboration

Interactive and automated collaboration solutions can help firms move towards more effective client collaboration. Some features to look for include:

Real-time tracking — Keep clients and staff informed about project status so they are all on the same page about who needs to do what.

Automated reminders — Minimize the amount of time staff spends following up with the client.

Automated data collection — Reduce the headaches of collecting client documents by automating data collection directly from its source when possible.

End-to-end digital workflows — Digitize formerly paper-based processes like engagement letters, e-signatures and invoicing/payments.

Intelligent set-up and administration — Reduce time spent on administration by enabling single or batch engagements, with the ability to tailor engagements automatically based on client needs.

Part 3

Making Collaboration Easy for Clients and Staff Members

In order to fully utilize technology, and in order to help clients adopt client collaboration tools, firms should:

- Choose a robust collaboration tool with full integration with the firm's other tax, accounting and audit software.
- Follow best practices for implementing a collaboration tool.
- Look beyond portals to a higher-level of collaboration.

Best Practices with Client Collaboration

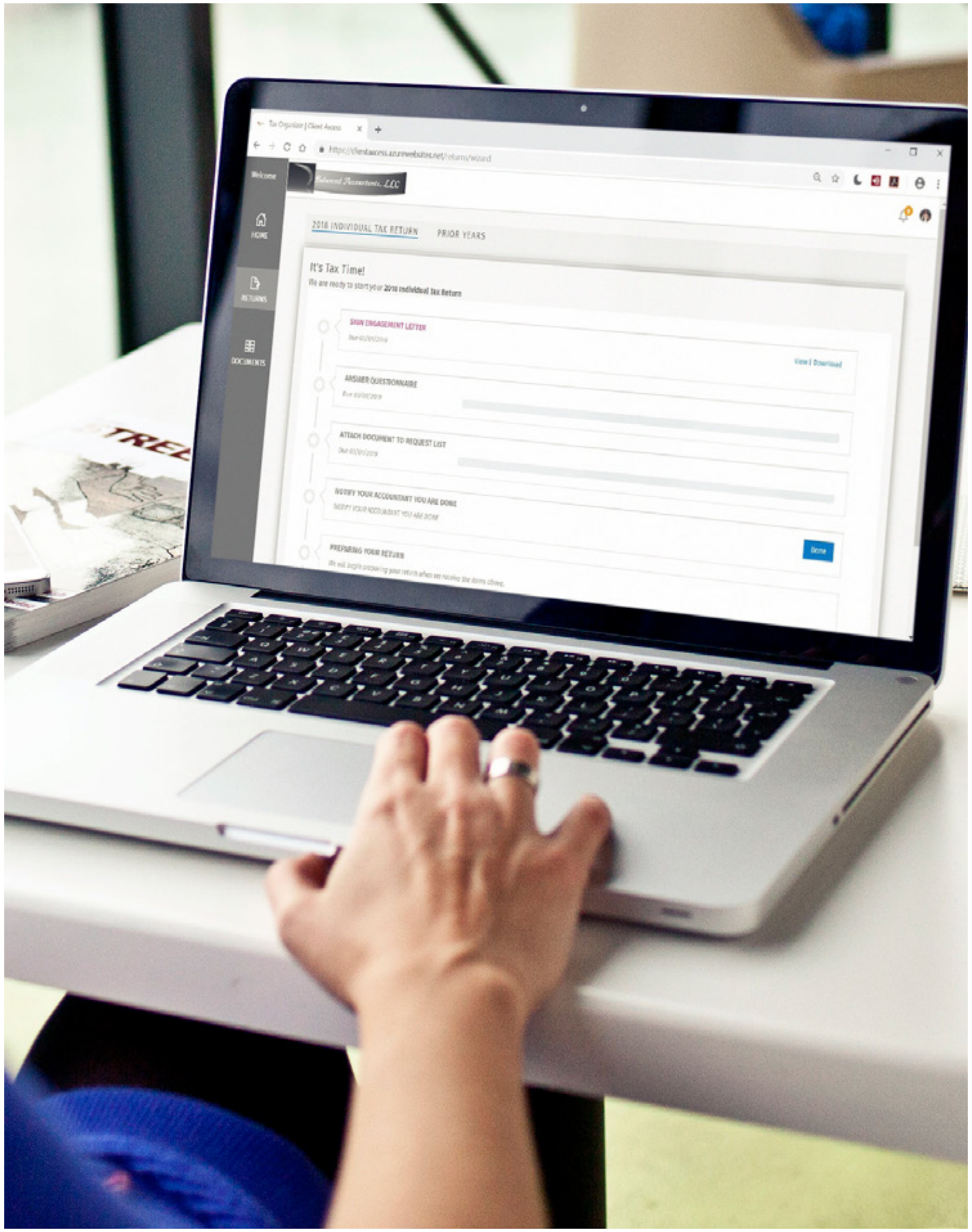
To make the most of your collaboration technology:

1. **Get your staff on board.**

   While every firm has change-averse employees, it's critical to make sure they don't set the tone for technology adoption in the firm. Firms should find the technology champions on staff, and seek their input and assistance with rolling out the new technology. Using digital collaboration tools consistently improves the client's experience and creates more standardized processes within the firm.

2. **Choose a solution made for tax, accounting and audit firms that integrates with the rest of the software.**

   General-use file exchange programs have drawbacks. Some are simply for sending one-off files and can't store a client's library of documents for long-term collaboration. They lack features like customization and role-based permissions. Conversely, a solution designed specifically for accounting firms does all of that, while also integrating with the firm's other software.



The Next Step: CCH Axcess™ Client Collaboration

The newest module for the CCH Axcess™ platform, CCH Axcess Client Collaboration offers firms a better way to move client work through workflows. A unified collaboration hub for firms and their clients, CCH Axcess Client Collaboration is the next evolution of a secure portal.

- It tracks client workflows from beginning to end in one convenient place.
- Firms can send and receive engagement letters, request info, review and deliver returns, obtain e-signed 8879 forms and send invoices.
- Clients can review, sign and return engagement letters; respond to a simplified organizer questionnaire and document request list; import their W2s, 1099s, 1098s and other year-end financial documents directly from the source; and track the entire process from one centralized interface.
- It guides clients through the process from engagement letter through bill payment. Today, CCH Axcess Client Collaboration focuses on the 1040 workflow. But we will add a business return workflow, audit workflows (reviews, comps, preps), and general workflows in the future.
- It provides a frictionless experience between firms and clients for all communication, including source document collection and organization and e-signatures.

What Clients Want

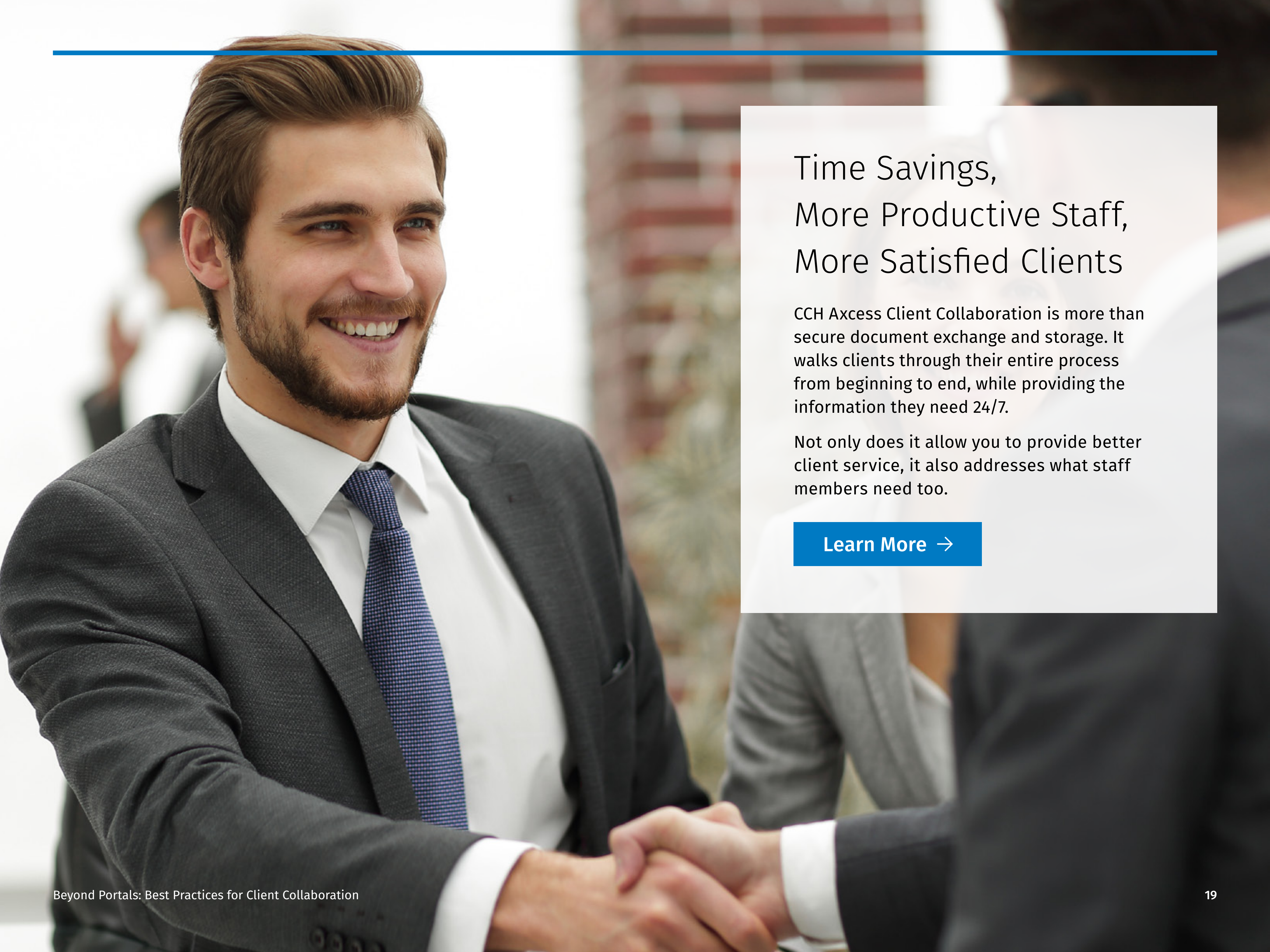
Clients want to be able to easily log in from your firm's website, see their documents, and have robust tools to take actions. They want interactivity, ease and convenience. In sum, they want to:

What Clients Want	CCH Axcess Portal	CCH Axcess Client Collaboration	CCH My1040Data
Step-by-step guidance to walk through the entire process interactively		●	
View and sign an engagement letter		●	
Upload their source documents	●	●	●
Create automatic data connections between sources of financial data (W2, 1099, 1098, etc.) and the accounting firm		●	
Download any record they need when they need it	●	●	
Status updates and notices of any outstanding information needed		●	
Review and Sign documents through e-signature functionality		●	
Ask and answer questions about a project		*Coming soon*	
Pay an invoice	●	*Coming soon*	
Customizable organizer, questionnaire and document request list		●	

What Staff Members Want

Clients want to be able to easily log in from your firm's website, see their documents, and have robust tools to take actions. They want interactivity, ease and convenience. In sum, they want to:

What Staff Members Want	**CCH Axcess Portal**	**CCH Axcess Client Collaboration**	**CCH My1040Data**
Create single or batch engagements	●	●	●
Create and manage engagement letters		●	
Track client progress		●	●
Tailor engagements automatically based on client needs		●	
Less time spent on administrative and clerical tasks	●	●	
Less time spent following up with clients on missing documents		●	
Fewer delays in communication with clients		●	
Easy integration between software solutions	●	*Coming soon*	●
Automated reminders sent to clients for engagement letters and organizer		*Coming soon*	



Time Savings, More Productive Staff, More Satisfied Clients

CCH Axcess Client Collaboration is more than secure document exchange and storage. It walks clients through their entire process from beginning to end, while providing the information they need 24/7.

Not only does it allow you to provide better client service, it also addresses what staff members need too.

Learn More →

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02/23 2022-0668

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