About this Article

More agency owners/managers will see a higher return on investment in technology systems if they help employees approach workflow in a new way. Employees must understand how to fully utilize the management system. And they need training and a defined path of work. In this article agency consultant Patricia Alexander gives practical advice on leveraging technology and workflow. Most agents won't need to invest in yet more technology to make these changes!

Enhance Your Bottom Line with Technology

By Patricia Alexander, Agency Consultant

For years agencies have been arming themselves with more and more technology. Technology is an essential tool to enable you to accomplish your daily tasks, accumulate data and provide the agency with critical information about its business. However, many agents feel little satisfaction with their systems and do not see their return on investment. In my work, I have found the common reasons for this to be lack of full utilization, neglecting to clearly define for employees how the systems are to be utilized, and failing to have the proper systems in place.

If the use of the technology is not defined and not used properly, then the agency does not have the information it needs and desires. My goal in this article is to discuss what you currently have and how to better use it. Each of the areas I will discuss requires minimal investment but will give you a big return. In many cases you have already made the investment; it is just a matter of using the technology to its fullest potential.

Agency Automation Frustrations & Time Wasters

Everywhere I go, I hear from agency owners, managers, and staff – as well as read in agent surveys – that the two major agency automation frustrations are learning and using insurance carrier proprietary systems and multiple user IDs & passwords. I am also told that the two primary agency automation time wasters are duplicate data entry and proprietary programs/software products.

These issues are real and cause a ripple effect throughout the agency. I consider the two "frustrations" time wasters as well. Time wasters cause backlog and inefficiencies. It seems the backlog is always looming. Juggling backlog and the daily demands of servicing customers and marketing business causes missed details and deadlines.

Your customers increasingly expect immediate answers to their questions. Most direct writers have this capability and use it to compete against you. Meanwhile, it often takes your staff well over an hour to secure quotes at carrier Web sites on the simplest of risks.

Use Real Time

Utilizing Real Time can help level the competitive playing field for you. Real Time is the ability to click on a button from a client file in your agency management system or comparative rater for immediate access to carrier information on that client. The transaction may be a quote, billing inquiry, claim inquiry/loss runs, policy view, endorsements, or a request for information. This approach provides a single workflow for servicing or quoting.

Visiting the insurance carrier Web site and entering information there, and then entering information in the agency management system is duplicate entry, a costly "time waster" and a huge drain on the staff's valuable time. In the case of securing quotes, the user is often visiting multiple carrier Web sites and re-entering information numerous times.

Real Time from your agency management system is typically about twice as fast as doing the transaction on a carrier Web site. Using Real Time gives your agency back time – time that you can use to provide pro-active customer service, round accounts, sell new business or grow without adding staff. Real Time allows you to respond to customers while they are on the phone. More time regained. Telephone tag eliminated. More satisfied customers.

Real Time will provide you these benefits:

- Automatically logs you on and navigates you directly to the client at the insurance carrier Web site
- Reduces duplicate data entry
- Provides you with a consistent workflow and simplifies staff training
- Provides you with E&O tracking via the activities created in your agency management system.

As you seek to identify and eliminate unnecessary costs and redeploy staff time to more productive uses, consider your staff's workflow today. Are some of them using carrier Web sites, others agency management systems, or a combination of both? Consider the following examples:

- **Carrier Web site**
  1. Find login for Web site
  2. Login into Web site
  3. Find the customer
  4. Find info needed
  5. Log the activity in your agency management system.

- **Agency Management System**
  1. You start with your customer- Real Time logs you into the carrier Web site & takes you right to the customer
  2. You find needed info
  3. Activity automatically opens in agency management system for completion.

Some users perceive that using the carrier Web sites is faster because they are in constant motion working through the site. However, when agencies actually do a time study comparing Real Time to Web site transactions, they typically see significant time savings. My personal experience in observing users is that the Real Time solutions take one-half to one-third of the time needed to achieve the same results by going direct to the carrier Web site. ASCnet's and AUGIE's Real Time studies reach essentially the same conclusion.

The following illustration from the ASCnet study shows the significant time and cost savings that can be achieved:

Agency Example of Real-Time Savings!

- CSR @ $20/hour (40K)
- 10 R-T transactions / day (200 / month)
- 4 minutes using a carrier Web site vs. 1 minute using a Real-Time transaction via an agency management system
- **Annual Time saved -- 15 Days!**
- **Annual CSR Savings -- $2400!**

(www.ascnet.org).

Consider how you and your staff could use this found time. If you translate this into dollars, the agency would save $2,400 in processing time. Multiply this number by the number of CSRs and other staff that are processing work. WOW! This can be big. These resources could be redirected to spend more time on pro-active client service and cross selling.

You are asking "What does Real Time cost me the owner/manager?" In most cases, this function is already a part of your agency management system. It's paid for! It just needs to be activated. You will find a really helpful Agency Real Time Implementation Guide and other resources at www.getrealtime.org.

Clearly Define How Employees Are to Use Your Systems

I find that most agencies don't use all of the functionalities of their agency management system. There may not be written definitions provided to the staff for the information required on each customer and/or policy and where it is to be kept. All users don't use the system in the same way. Your customer data could very well reside in the following places rather than in your agency management system where it should:

1. File Folders or other pieces of paper
2. In the producer's and the CSR's heads
3. In Outlook or other email programs
4. In date books and on calendars
5. Flash Drives, discs, laptops, personal computers, etc.

It is critical to get your data under control so that all of your employees handle it in a consistent way, keeping it in a common place in your system where everyone can find it. Failure to do so creates significant E&O and client privacy issues. Bottom line: Define how employees are to use all aspects of your agency management system and other technology. Monitor this and hold everyone accountable.

Use Download for Personal & Commercial Lines
Another under-utilized function in the agency management system is Download. Download provides for the roundtrip of data back to the agency management system following a Real Time transaction. Many users say the drawback to Download is that it overwrites their underwriting information. In many cases, this is not really true. While the most current view/version of the policy may not show this information, it can still usually be found on the original application. Do you really need the underwriting information on a daily basis to service the customer or only at re-marketing time? Assess your real needs and make an educated move to this functionality. Each time data is re-keyed results in the ineffective use of time and the chance for a clerical error that could create an E&O exposure. Having the Download in your system also facilitates the next Real Time transaction because the policy data exactly matches the carrier's data.

Fully Utilize Your System's Word Merge Function
One of the most under-utilized functions in your agency management system is the word merge function. Yes, everyone uses it. But is it used effectively, consistently and to its maximum? Maintaining a robust selection of appropriate documents in your agency management system provides you better control of the quality of your agency's communications, as well as significantly reduces redundant entries and saves time.

Your Agency's Action Plan
My message here is maximize what you have:

1. Use Real Time through your agency management system
2. Download – If you are not doing this you should look at it again. If you are only doing personal lines you need to look at commercial lines, especially for small to mid-size accounts
3. Capture all customer/policy data in your agency management system
4. Use your agency management system to its fullest capacity.

Also consider implementing multi-carrier rating and dual or multiple monitors as additional low investment technologies that can provide a quick and significant boost to productivity.
Use a systematic, controlled approach to deciding on systems and processes. Training and implementation need to be well planned and managed. Don't try to do everything at once. Agencies must monitor staff's usage of Real Time and require usage. Push your insurance carriers to add more Real Time functionality and to improve what they currently provide where needed. Real Time represents your future and is a superior workflow that will keep you competitive. We finally have the opportunity to realize the agents' vision of single-entry, multi-company interface as Real Time continues to evolve and to be more broadly used.

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