



White Paper

# Prepare for the 2011/12 Self Assessment Season NOW

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QuickBooks. It's about time.



## Prepare for the 2011/12 Self Assessment Season NOW

*Alison Ball heads up Intuit's UK Accountant Programmes. Drawing from her own experience in practice and from countless interviews with accounting practices in the past seven years at Intuit, she provides practical tips to help ensure that next season runs more smoothly.*

### The Background

**You've by now almost made it through the Self Assessment Season. Congratulations! You'll either be sitting back thinking you had your best season yet, or, if you are like most accountants, you'll be wondering why some things never change and the same issues keep popping up year after year.**

There are a lot of things you can do now to help ensure next year runs more smoothly. Conducting a staff debriefing session while things are fresh in their minds is just the first step. You then have to decide which items you will focus on, and make sure that processes get documented and put in place moving forward. And lastly, you need to notify clients of any changes you are making that might affect them.

This paper covers five key things you can do now to help ensure next year runs more smoothly. You'll learn an effective process to:

1. Unlock your staff's ideas
2. Agree on and identify processes that need fixing or fine-tuning
3. Get to the root cause of each problem or challenge
4. Create an action plan and assign a resolution owner
5. And lastly, prepare clients for next year.

## Unlock Staff Ideas

*One thing that highly effective companies do on a regular basis is to conduct a formal wrap-up session whenever a big effort has been completed. You can leverage many of the processes and procedures that these companies use, to help tighten things up for next year. And the best part is, it doesn't cost a lot and you don't have to bring in a consultant to do it.*

There are several different approaches you can take. This paper will cover the one that tends to work best with diverse personalities and busy teams. Intuit uses this technique at the end of each large project or at the end of a product launch, in order to ensure that everyone's feedback is captured and the best ideas are carried forward for the next year. We call it a Start/Stop/Continue exercise.

### **Conduct a Start/Stop/Continue exercise to get all your staff's ideas on the table.**

Shortly after your busy season ends, send an email to all of your staff asking them to give you their suggestions for next year. Ask them to bucket the suggestions into things your team should START doing, things your team should STOP doing, and things your team should CONTINUE doing in order to make things go smoothly next year.

Sounds simple right?

Well... it can be. But if this is the first time you are doing this at your firm, and with your team, you may have to get over some barriers first.

#### **Barrier 1 – non-participation**

Everyone has something valuable to contribute here! Your challenge is to ensure that even your most timid people feel like they should participate. You know your team best, so you probably know how to get each person to complete the exercise. As examples of what you can do, you can make it mandatory to send back the feedback by a certain date, and follow up in person with each person who has not contributed, or, you can award a prize which is given to someone drawn from the list of people who participated.

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### *Unlock Staff Ideas (cont'd.)*

*Once you have your staff's Start/Stop/Continue documents in hand, you are ready for the next step. Bucket the ideas into themes, and then have your staff help decide which ones you will commit to working on as a team, to help next year run more smoothly*

#### **Barrier 2 – people use the exercise to simply complain.**

You can control this by framing the request correctly and succinctly, and if you think your staff will simply complain and point fingers, then make sure they know that you are looking for objective examples of things your firm should start, stop and continue, in order to make things run smoothly next year.

An example is given below:

- **START** – we should start charging our clients a sliding scale.... Clients who bring their complete tax documents in by December 1st should be charged the least. By December 15th 10% more, and if they bring their documents in on January 15th or later, they should be charged double.
- **STOP** – we should stop chasing missing documents ourselves. What if we could hire a college-age person to chase down the missing documents and let us process returns instead?
- **CONTINUE** – we should continue bringing in lunch for the team when we are really busy! That worked well this past season, and it made us feel valued and kept us fed!

The items that staff identify as “Continue” doing should be documented so you can make sure you do them next year. The “Start” items and the “Stop” items are usually problems and need to be looked at.

Once you have your staff's Start/Stop/Continue documents in hand, you are ready for the next step. Bucket the ideas into themes, and then have your staff help decide which ones you will commit to working on as a team, to help next year run more smoothly.

## Agree on and identify processes that need fixing or fine-tuning

***Once you have gathered all the Start/Stop/Continue documents from your staff and read them through, themes are sure to emerge. Try and put the ideas that relate to each other together, and eliminate duplicates so that the “big themes” remain.***

Take each big theme and frame it as a problem. i.e., “Too many clients bring in their documents late”.

Put the big themes on large flip charts, and call the staff together for a meeting. Each staff member is given a fixed number of voting dots, depending on the number of big theme issues that was raised. A good rule of thumb is to give four dots to each person, but if you only have four items to discuss, you’ll want to reduce the number of dots to two. The idea here is that you want each staff member to have to really think about what is important to them and then use their dots to vote on what the team will be working on to improve next year.

After discussing each big theme, ask the staff to vote on the ideas they think will lead to the most improvements for next year.

Once you see where the dots cluster, it is easy to identify which issues your staff members think will lead to the biggest improvements for next year. These are the items you will work on in the next steps in this paper.

## Get to the root cause of each problem or challenge

***Now it is time to take the list you identified in the Start/Stop/Continue exercise... and break it down into contributing causes.***

You now have the list of things you and your staff want to work on to make next year run more smoothly. But before you can fix things, or implement procedures to smooth things out next year, you need to know WHY these things happened. Take the list of “most popular” problems that your staff identified in the Start/Stop/Continue exercise, then voted on with their dots, and put each one on a separate flip chart page.

Conduct a “Five Why” exercise for each one, to determine the real root cause. Determining the root cause for each issue will ensure you can put the right procedure in place for next year, so as to avoid the issue popping up again.

“Five Whys” means you often have to ask the question WHY five times to get to the real root cause of a problem or challenge.

An example is given here:

**Problem – We are too busy in the last two weeks of January.**

**WHY** (are we so busy at that time)? – Too many clients are bringing in their tax packages at that time.

**WHY** (do too many clients bring documents in at that time)?  
– We ask them to bring them earlier, but they don’t comply.

**WHY** (don’t they comply)? – There is no penalty for bringing the package in late.

**WHY** (don’t we have a penalty system in place)? – We didn’t create one or didn’t notify clients of it in time.

**WHY** (have we not created one and/or notified clients)? – We talked about it but didn’t actually do it last year. — **Root Cause**

### **Get to the root cause (cont'd.)**

Once you have gone all the way down to root cause, it is easy to put a solution in place. In the example above, the firm will commit to create a penalty system for people who bring their documents in after the date specified in their client letters, AND make sure each client is notified of that date well in time for next year!

If you want to put that in a more positive light, you can create a financial incentive for clients who DO bring their tax information in on time. Tell clients, in a letter:

“Our fee is £\_\_\_\_. If you bring your documents to us before 1st December this fee is cut by 40%. If you bring your documents to us before 15th December, you will enjoy a 20% discount. If you bring your documents to us before 1st January, you will enjoy a 10% discount. No discounts are given after 2nd January.”

## Create an action plan and assign a resolution owner

***Once you know the root causes, you can easily create a plan to solve those problems.***

Once you know the root causes, you can easily create a plan to solve those problems. If you have only a few issues, great. But if you have a bunch of them, you will want to spread the work around a bit so that everyone is contributing to the solution.

One way to do this is to assign a different resolution owner to each item. This person ensures that the problem is solved, processes are put in place and documented, but they don't have to do all the work themselves. Instead, they work across the team to get the work done, and they are responsible for reporting out at the end.

In the example given above in the "Five Why" exercise, one person would be assigned to make sure the reward structure was put in place, documented, approved by the firm owner or partner(s) and then ensure that client letters go out to all appropriate clients. But it does NOT mean that that person is responsible for sending out all the client letters!

## Prepare clients for next year

***From your problems list and corresponding root causes, identify which ones apply to clients, and work to solve those for next year.***

You now have a great list of issues in hand, your staff have voted on the most important ones to work on, AND you know why these things happened, and have assigned a resolution owner to make sure it doesn't happen next year!

From your problem list, identify which ones apply to clients. We have used the "clients bringing in documents late" issue throughout this document, and have suggested an incentive (or penalty) system to help clients be more mindful of firm deadlines next year. Be sure those client letters go out in time for clients to take advantage of the discounts next year.

But there are other ways you can prepare clients as well, and they may not have made it on to your problems list.

Look at the checklists you are using to help clients prepare for bringing in their documents. Are they complete? Did they help clients bring in everything needed? If not, update them now!!

Identify the clients that could benefit from being put on a good financial management software package, like QuickBooks Pro, or QuickBooks Online, and get them set up for the new year. Using sound financial management software can make the whole process much easier next year, as instead of dealing with receipts and papers you can work from well-organized reports and then just ask the client for original documents if you need them. And since QuickBooks is so easy to use and keeps all their key business records in one place, the clients will very likely appreciate the recommendation.

Also – you will want to make sure that clients are apprised of new tax laws and incentives that the Government has put in place to save small and medium size businesses tax. Be sure to create a plan to educate your clients about the best ways for them to save tax, before the current year is over.

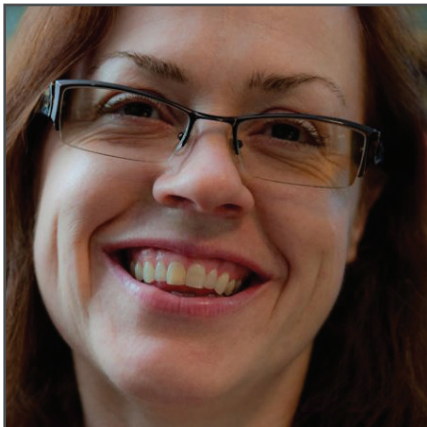
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### *Prepare clients (cont'd.)*

Meeting with clients regularly throughout the year is probably the best thing you can do for them, in order to help them take advantage of these changing laws and incentives. If you are unable to meet with them, or you think they will be reluctant to pay fees for such a meeting, consider creating a newsletter and sending it out quarterly, or inviting similar clients to a semi-social gathering where a particular new tax law is discussed.

Creating a plan for this NOW is essential. You want clients to recommend you to all their friends and colleagues, and value-add is a great way to do that.

Now go and book your skiing holiday, and get ready to do all the things listed in this paper when you get back! In fact, you might want to send out your Start/Stop/Continue email request before you go, so your staff have a chance to really think about it while you are gone.



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Alison Ball heads up the popular QuickBooks ProAdvisor Programme for Intuit UK. This programme is ideal for accountants who wish to provide superior service to their QuickBooks clients or, who wish to grow their practices by adding QuickBooks to their service list. A good accounting system like QuickBooks will help your clients keep better business records and can even lead to a more productive tax season next year.

Additionally, many accountants have reported they save a lot of money using QuickBooks, because Intuit allows the accountant to set up 99 company files for just one software license fee.

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