

How to work securely with your accountant during tax season

Just a little assistance *from* you can ensure your accountant does their best *for* you.



How you can help your accountant help you

We're happy to see you here, checking out an educational resource developed to help you work more smoothly and securely with your accountant at tax time. We hope you'll find it helpful.

No one *likes* doing taxes...

Except for accountants, that is. It's one of the reasons why they do what they do. An accountant who doesn't like preparing tax returns is like a vegan chef in a burger joint; they just don't exist. That's one of the reasons you hire an accounting firm.

But from February through April, even the accountants who love taxes the most can become overwhelmed. A lot of returns come through a firm in a very short amount of time. Every client is anxious to get taxes done and put away for another year.

Accountants work insane hours during tax season. Yes, it's their job. But you can help them do it more efficiently—and help yourself as a client at the same time.

Priority No. 1: Understand the growing threat of cybercrime

Accountants deal with sensitive information every day. In fact, cybersecurity is an obsession for them. It has to be; if firms don't adhere to **IRS cybersecurity standards**, by law, they face punishment that can include **fines of up to \$100,000 and even prison**.

That's why so many accounting firms run applications in the cloud; it virtually eliminates the risk of data theft. Your trusted accounting partner and their cloud services provider are there to keep your data safe—which means your accountant should be equipped to not only get your taxes done faster, but to help you stay safe.



But a little bit of help from you—nothing too taxing, we promise—still goes a long way. When you follow best practices for working with your accountant, you'll help protect yourself from cyberattacks that can lead to the theft of your most valuable data.

The trouble is, more than half of adults **don't know how to protect themselves** from cybercrime. In one study, more than two-thirds of businesses **reported being hit by a ransomware attack** in the last year.

Fortunately, this eBook has lots of information to help you work with your accountant so they can do their best—and safest—work for you. Let's get started.

3 ways you can help yourself—and your accountant—this tax season

Since we have you thinking about the importance of cybersecurity, our first tip on working with your accountant during tax season is about data security.

Tip 1: Follow the firm's digital protocols for exchanging information

Maybe in the past, you've printed out your tax information and mailed it to your accountant. Maybe you've walked it right through the door of your accounting firm's office. Or maybe you've emailed everything as attachments.

Stop doing that. If your firm is running in the cloud, as any firm that's committed to security and efficiency will be, there's a better way for you and your accountant to exchange tax information. It's likely to be in one of two formats: a secure online environment or a secure email address.

And you'll likely be sending documents in digital formats rather than scanning, photographing or printing them. It's important to note here that not every email address is secure; most are not. Running secure email requires a firm to use services that add a strong layer of security on top of a typical email application. A cloud-based firm should use that type of service.


Why is following your accountant's guidance on information sharing so important? The top reason, of course, is security. Your data is safe with a firm running in a cloud environment that's protected by a cloud provider's security professionals. The provider stores your information in the same high-security data centers used by big banks and other enterprise-level corporations.

But security isn't the only benefit of communicating digitally. When your accountant asks you to submit information through an online environment (also known as a portal) or through secure email, you'll find that this option is easier and more efficient than communicating via older methods.

Your data is not only safer, but it's also more likely to get quickly to the right person at your accounting firm. Communicating electronically makes sharing data simple and will save you a lot of time. In many cases, cloud-based communication lets you check on the status of your return at your convenience.

Tip 2: Trust your accountant to develop personal relationships

If you work with an accountant who's a sole proprietor, you still want to communicate digitally. But if you work with a firm that employs multiple people, the human element of your communication becomes particularly important.



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You might have known someone at the firm for years. You trust that person. Now your accounting firm is telling you to send your tax documents to and maintain contact with someone else (most likely digitally). Why? The firm could have very valid reasons.

For one, many firms now establish a single point of initial contact for all clients. It doesn't mean that person necessarily processes your tax return. In many cases, the person serves as more of a receiver and disseminator of information and doesn't handle your return at all. You can, of course, ask who will be handling your return. But don't fear the gatekeeper.

Firms set up workflows designed to process your tax return as quickly, accurately and securely as possible. When your accounting firm asks you to send tax information to a person you might not know well, no one at the firm is trying to trick you. The firm is simply operating within the framework it's developed for maximum efficiency. Send your information to the person the firm designates, and you'll speed up the processing of your return rather than slow it down.

You trust partners and staff accountants to handle your most sensitive data. Trust them to hire people qualified to do the same thing. If you send your information to the person you've always sent it to, rather than to the firm's requested contact, you're probably slowing the handling of your return. Firms stake their entire businesses on trust. If you show the same trust, you can improve your experience with your firm.

Tip 3: Consider making your core information easier to access


This tip really puts trust to the test. Think about letting your accountants access some or all of your accounts directly. That means giving them passwords. Yes, it's a big leap, but it can speed up the processing of your return immensely. And remember that you're trusting your accountant with your most sensitive data, anyway.

Take brokerage statements as an example. Individual taxpayers who frequently trade stocks pile up a huge volume of tax information during the year. Combing through all that information can take accountants hours. However, if your accountants can access your account directly, they can work much more quickly and easily, which means you get your return put to bed far more efficiently and in less time.

Yes, this is a difficult move to make, but it's worth considering. Ultimately, you trust your accountant. You have to; the accounting firm you work with will see and handle your most critical and private financial information no matter how you deliver it.

If you can deliver it in a way that maximizes efficiency and greatly reduces the possibility of error, it's worth considering opening your accounts and not just your data.

Your relationship with all your business partners is based on trust, and that's especially true for your accounting partner. Talk these options over with your accountant and see how you both feel. Figure out how much they would help you and the firm. And if these practices make sense and are a part of the firm's workflow, give them a try.



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Questions to ask your accountant about security

Of course, there's nothing wrong with asking questions about how your accountant wants to communicate and what you can do to make your experiences with each other easier. But if you're going to open your data completely and freely to your accountant, you're going to want—and should get—some reassurances.

Here are a few questions to get the conversation started:

Q: Is all data encrypted?

A: When data is encrypted, only the sender and intended receiver see it. All data should be encrypted, no matter how you communicate with your accountant. In a cloud-hosted online environment or a secure email application, it almost assuredly will be. Cyber-criminals can intercept unencrypted data during transfer, but encrypted data is virtually impenetrable.

Q: Does the firm require multifactor authentication to access data and applications?

A: With [multifactor authentication](#) (MFA), a second form of login is required before you can access an application or data. For instance, you can log in with a password on your computer, but that one login won't be enough to get to the data you're trying to see. You'll also have to confirm your login on another device, such as a phone or tablet, before you can have access.

With MFA, even if a cyberattacker steals your password, your data is still protected with the requirement of a second login. MFA should be standard with applications that run in the cloud. It's an absolute necessity for data security in any case.

Q: Does the firm practice the principle of least privilege?

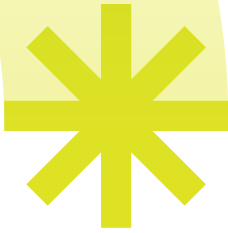
A: The [principle of least privilege](#) limits users' access to the absolute minimum they need to do their jobs—a practice that has effectively enhanced security in today's complex IT environment. In other words, the only people who see your data in your accountant's office are the ones who need to see it. An employee who doesn't deal with you, however trustworthy they may be, shouldn't be able to access your information. Your firm should be able to reassure you that only the right people can access your information. Most cloud-enabled firms can easily set up that type of access. Confirming that your firm has done so is essential.

Make getting your taxes done more bearable

The best part about these best practices for working with your accountant during tax season is that they'll save you time, too. The more you work within your accountant's parameters, the less work you'll have to do gathering and sending information, and the faster you'll get your return processed.

Never hesitate to ask the right questions, of course, but keep an open mind when working with your accounting firm. Your accountants have processes in place to deal with taxes, so you don't have to. Following their processes can make your life easier, more secure and less stressful—not only at tax time, but all year long.





Summing it all up

We hope this eBook will help you find ways to successfully and securely work with an accounting firm during tax season. If you're looking for a trusted advisor to work with at tax time and all year round—someone who can provide personalized advice based on your specific needs—remember that we're always ready to help.

Just click the **GET IN TOUCH** button and complete the brief form or give us a call. We look forward to hearing from you!