Work In Progress Administration

BAKER TILLY GREENWOODS

" it made our lives easier. Definitely a tool you must have! "

Maresna van Schoor
Work in Progress Manager

Accountants & Auditors

Why do you use WorkPool?

I am responsible for the internal controls of the production department, administration of all clerks as well as drafting of company policy documents. I am also responsible for the WorkPool development at Greenwoods. This involves customisation of the tool, tweaks in rules and creating reports.

We use WorkPool to control the internal flow of documents, manage work-in-progress and to track our products, being annual financial statements, tax returns, etc. We also use it to manage other processes such as file requests and managing the rules around that.

WorkPool tells us who does what, when, in an easy manner. Every user knows what his roles and responsibilities are without having to check the policy documents. WorkPool also simplifies the daily tasks and can be used as a task scheduler. If we had more "super users" it would also help track what to do now and what to do later - but not all staff are there yet. The type of work that we do, and how we do it, differs from one department to another e.g. the clerks mostly work on a project basis where they have "X" number of statements and tax returns to finalise by "X" date and it's their responsibility to get it to their manager on time.

WorkPool allows us to be more efficient, it saves us time and provides us with a global picture – which is a large one.

Life before WorkPool?

We had a lot of independent lists that everyone was updating for everything. The controls around the financial statements and tax returns were cumbersome because no one could see the big picture. Now, at the click of a button, we can see what is outstanding on any client and where in the process the relevant products are and with whom. Anybody can look it up and see what's going on.

What do you like most?

The fact that you can schedule your tasks on your calendar is fantastic. I don't use WorkPool like a normal user; as an administrator of clerks, the fact that I can, at any time, go and look at the tasks assigned to any person is great. This gives me a status report per person or project and I can see if they experience challenges in completing a project. Another handy feature is the "All tasks" report we created -at any point in time we can see the global picture at Greenwoods and pick things up like "secretarial department is overloaded, they have a 1000 resolutions to stamp".

What were the implementation challenges?

To document our processes in a diagram. I don't know if our processes are unique, because they seem so complicated sometimes. There are so many things to consider when you look at it from a process perspective. You need to make sure things happen when they should and that one person does not start working on something too soon when various people contribute to a deliverable. People think in checklists, but they don't always think who will be doing the work, by when, what the exceptions are and how to cater for this.

My biggest challenge is to get people to do their tasks. We have not yet implemented disciplinary rules/actions if they don't complete their WorkPool tasks. It still happens sometimes that a set of financial statements gets to the signoff stage but the clerk has not sign off his task yet to say it is complete. Someone's lack of action impacts our view of the big picture and the workload per resource. You cannot say for a fact that a manager has "X" number of statements if they don't keep their WorkPool up-to-date. This is difficult if you don't have management's support. It is a bit of give and take; you don't want to reprimand someone when they are logging 40 hours of overtime in a week and got the job done but forgot to update their WorkPool …

Initially the clerks were very negative about this extra, new system they have to use. But, as new staff arrive, it is already in place -they just had to learn to use it. Expectations also need to be managed. It can be very demotivating if you are in an administration department and all of a sudden 100 tasks pop up requiring action. Before, you knew what you had to do but weren't visibly reminded. But there isn't really any other way to do it. The users' resistance to the system disappeared quickly when they realised the benefits it held for them. New brooms sweep clean!

Greatsoft is our primary client and billing database and WorkPool is our primary workflow database. Sometimes we need to merge information, for instance when we are being audited by IRBA. We synchronise limited information between the systems to compile reports with information that resides in multiple systems. It can take a while as a custom report may have to be built.

How has WorkPool changed the way you work?

Our internal processes have changed. At first we had to correct WorkPool to match our policies and procedures. Now it has actually swung the other way; we update our policies and procedures and office manual to adjust them to WorkPool. It now manages the rules. WorkPool is stricter and we can't just randomly change things. Today our processes are more concrete and internal controls are built into WorkPool based on the flow diagrams we design. If something isn't addressed in WorkPool then we need to draft an office manual to address this. But if WorkPool is already dealing with something, all we do is add an entry in the office manual to refer to the rules as per the WorkPool flow diagram.

WorkPool has definitely given us a more concrete picture. In fact, it has become too easy for everyone to say, "Let's create a WorkPool process for this". People often underestimate that the rules they build in will become tasks for someone to do and sometimes one thing can become three, which can be demotivating. WorkPool definitely made things easier, but it also created a new perception that it can solve everything, which isn't always true.

I don't think you need to appoint a dedicated person to manage WorkPool full-time, but if we had to do it again I think we should have found someone who had a background in database administration plus "office policy creator" and combined this into a position. WorkPool would only be one of the entities you would need to look at as we also have other systems like Greatsoft, CQS, etc. that talk to each other. I don't think the best person to drive the implementation is necessarily management as they don't really care a lot about the details. It would be someone like me, a head of department, who knows how things really work, and should work, as per the policies and rules in our firm.

What benefits have you derived through the process?

- We are definitely more efficient. WorkPool saves us a lot of time on administration, at least 10% as a whole. The more you get used to it, the less you think about the savings. Of course people still spend the same amount of time on the projects because they must still do the same work.
- The fact that we have a "global picture" is a huge benefit.
- It is a lot easier to manage change and enforce rules. In the past, if we had to make changes to processes we had to update the office manual, it would be debated on a high level, we would consult with the department heads who would give feedback, the partners would approve it and the manual adjusted and, "Whoops, process changed". But there were still places where people did things another way and management would only hear about it later. It was doable in the past, but more effort, and we had to rely on the managers to make things happen. With WorkPool it is definitely easier because we just set a new task to do "X" and we get someone else to approve it and Bob's your uncle.
- WorkPool definitely simplified the project management and managing of the partners' various portfolios to the extent that they commit to use it. One of the biggest challenges we have overcome is that the partners can now draw their own lists and progress reports and see at what stage any project (job card) is. The summary report - where they track this and the total number of statements and returns - has become the heartbeat of some of the partners' project management.
- We save a lot of time in client queries. When a client phones to query where his tax return or statements are, then we can see it in WorkPool. In the past a query started a searching exercise following the trail from where it was spotted last. We can now accurately say "Mr X we have already posted your statements on that day" because it says so on WorkPool.

The way forward?

In our industry there are so many challenges e.g. SARS deadlines or the legal requirements that change from time to time. Now we can only do statutory audits for five years then we need to pass it on to another auditor. As such a process must be created so that there is a rotational basis for auditors and we don't audit something for a sixth year. The legal aspects make it difficult to stick to a process as things change from time to time. With the Tax department for example we are very busy some times of the year, while at others we have a lull before things pick up again. To manage these valleys and peaks is difficult as most timelines are set and we need to stick to them.

Going forward I would actually like to be more involved in the writing of the processes so that I can do it myself. This will alleviate some of the pressure and allow me to make changes faster. These days it is too easy for everyone to say, "Oh but WorkPool can write us a quick process." People don't always understand the relationship between things and processes.

Would you recommend WorkPool?

I would definitely recommend it. It is always a pleasure to work with WorkPool. We get feedback very quickly if not immediately. I think most companies cope, they just don't know they could cope better. I was very impressed when we initially got WorkPool to see how it made our lives easier. Definitely a tool you must have!