

## Time for re-armament as the clash of online accountants and their critics begins

Superficially, contractor accountancy has changed beyond all recognition with the rise of the volume accountants, contractor spreadsheets and even online data collection. Yet, in most of the important ways, the process has stayed much the same.

Contractors' clients are still sending in their transaction data, albeit in spreadsheets, where once there were ledgers. Accountants and their juniors still sit in their offices sorting through the spreadsheets and piles of receipts, doing the sums that contractors can't be bothered to. And, at the end of the process, the contractor gets the accounts or possibly a spreadsheet to sign. This is usually still posted, or scanned and uploaded, to Companies House, or HMRC.

Given how clunky spreadsheets are to use (and I know, because one of my first contracts was spent designing spreadsheet macros), have we really moved on, because the process is pretty much the same? Where are the major cost and time savings arising through using spreadsheets?

And let's not forget that usability rocks. A spreadsheet is no substitute for a piece of well designed online software that adopts the same process mapping as the contractor and is more user-friendly. Software designers use 'personas' to help design software. Typical contractor personas might be 'Emily, aged 45, a marketing contractor who is great with PowerPoint, but thinks Excel is the work of the devil'; or 'Pete, a 25-year-old IT contractor who develops software for City firms but is not so hot with spreadsheets'.

Two systems designed to achieve exactly the same result will look and behave markedly differently, depending on who is supposed to be using it. The one-size-fits-all specification of the spreadsheet lacks the usability that a professionally designed system for a target user will have. If you want to see how much customers love usability, look at the MP3 marketplace and ask yourself what Apple introduced that many competitors still can't match?

[Online contractor accountancy](#) has attracted some harsh criticism since the first services started hitting the marketplace last year, but rarely from customers. It's been service providers who clearly don't understand either their contractor marketplace and what it wants, nor what benefits a truly integrated online service has to offer.

As online contractor accountants start to look more attractive, but existing service providers keep poo-pooing them, perhaps we should all apply the lessons of history. Beware of people who don't, won't or can't sell you a machine gun. They'll try anything to get you to buy a bow and arrow.

	<p><b>Dave Chaplin</b> CEO ContractorCalculator</p>		<p><a href="#">View all our commentators</a> ▶</p>	<p>Dave Chaplin is a former IT contractor in the City of London, and is founder and CEO of ContractorCalculator, and author of the Contractors' Handbook.</p>
<p><i>Market Commentator</i></p>				<p>Started in 1999, ContractorCalculator (this site) is the leading independent website for the UK contracting industry – most of whom are highly skilled knowledge workers. <a href="#">Read Full Profile...</a></p>

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