

Benchmarking Estate & Trust Administration and Accounting Workflows

A Data-Driven Look at Efficiency, Technology,
and Workflow Opportunities

2026



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Key Findings



Settlement Timelines and Primary Delays

A high percentage of firms report average estate settlement timelines ranging from **6 to 18 months**, although a substantial number experience longer periods, 19–24 months or more.

The most frequently cited primary causes of delays are:

- **Court processes and requirements**
- **Difficulties with asset discovery and valuation**



Accounting Efficiency and Manual Burden

Firms spend widely varying amounts of time on accounting and reconciliation per file monthly, ranging from less than 15 minutes up to more than 4 hours. A major inefficiency is the reliance on manual data entry, with many respondents reporting that **76–100% of their fiduciary accounting work involves manual data entry.**

The accounting tasks that consume the most time generally include:

- Bank reconciliations
- Beneficiary distribution calculations
- Asset valuation tracking



Technology Needs and Barriers

The most desired automation tasks align directly with the primary time sinks:

- **Bank reconciliation**
- **Investment transaction import/categorization**
- **Beneficiary distribution calculations/reporting**



The most critical technology features cited are – investment data integration and a beneficiary reporting portal.



Key Challenges to Adopting Technology

The primary barriers preventing firms from adopting new technology are consistently cited as:

- **Cost of implementation**
- **Learning curve/training time required for staff**
- **Issues with Integration with existing systems**



Financial Performance and Workflow Improvement Focus

Most firms fall into the **\$2,500 – \$7,500 average revenue bracket** per estate administration file. When asked for the single most impactful improvement to their fiduciary workflow, top responses centered on automating or streamlining the most burdensome process areas, particularly faster bank reconciliation process and streamlined court reporting.

48%

of respondents work for a small law firm - 2-10 attorneys, representing the largest organizational type surveyed.

45%

of all beneficiary inquiries concern distribution timelines, making this the most frequent type of inquiry.

40%

of respondents cited court processes and requirements as the primary cause of delays.

38%

of respondents rely on Excel spreadsheets as their primary tool for tracking fiduciary accounting information.

30%

of respondents report that they haven't implemented fiduciary technology yet.

METHODOLOGY

Time Period

August - October 2025

Geography

The survey received 165 responses. The majority of respondents are located in Canada (84%, 139 responses), while 16% (26 responses) are based in the United States.

Participant Roles / Organization Type

The majority of participants are lawyers or law firm staff:

- Small law firm (2-10 attorneys): 48%
- Solo practitioner (law): 22%
- Medium law firm (11-50 attorneys): 18%
- Large law firm (50+ attorneys): 7%
- CPA / Accounting: 3%
- Freelance law clerk: 2%

 Primary Cause of Delay

40%

struggle with court processes and requirements

18%

experience third-party delays (banks, brokers, etc.)

16%

are affected by tax-related complications

Why Timelines Matter

Impact on Client Satisfaction and Firm Profitability

Timelines in estate settlement are critical levers for client satisfaction and internal firm efficiency, directly affecting how professionals spend their time and the quality of service delivered. Survey data shows that existing bottlenecks are prolonging cases and increasing administrative burdens.

Delays are endemic to the process, with average timelines clustered at **6–12 months (36%)** and **13–18 months (28%)**.

 Accounting Tasks Causing Delays

24%

are delayed by asset discovery and valuation

23%

Tax return preparation and filing

12%

Final reconciliation and closing

What It Means

The most significant sources of delay are external (court processes and third parties), but internal administrative and accounting tasks – specifically asset discovery and tax filing – are major contributing factors. These often tedious, manual tasks, like bank reconciliations (20% of time spent), slow down the entire process and must be optimized to shorten the overall settlement timeline.

The Cost of Delays

Client Anxiety and Time Drain

Extended timelines directly translate into increased client communication load (impacting administrative time) and resource inefficiency (impacting profitability).

Impact on Client Satisfaction: The Inquiry Burden

The key driver of client communication is the uncertainty surrounding the timeline.



Frequency of Inquiries

51% of firms receive 1–2 beneficiary inquiries per active file each month, while 28% receive 3–5.



Top Client Concern

The overwhelming majority of inquiries, 45%, revolve around distribution timelines.



Communication Method

The primary method for status updates is email updates, 41%, indicating a reactive, manual communication approach rather than proactive reporting.

Impact on Firm Efficiency: Manual Processes

Firms allocate significant staff time to tasks that should be automated, compromising profitability by reducing the time available for billable client work.



Manual Data Entry

20% of respondents report that 51–75% of their fiduciary accounting work involves manual data entry.



Time-Consuming Tasks

Bank reconciliations consume the most time in practice, 20% of responses, followed by beneficiary distribution calculations, at 15% time in practice.

What It Means

Beneficiaries constantly ask about distributions because the average timeline is long, and communication is manual and reactive. This administrative load reduces the time staff can spend on billable work. Automating communication around distribution timelines and speeding up tedious tasks like bank reconciliation are essential to reduce client anxiety and free up staff time.

The Path to Efficiency

Firms clearly recognize where improvements need to be made to shorten timelines and reduce administrative cost, linking these needs directly to the delays identified.

📈 Desired Improvement

28%

seek faster bank reconciliation processes

18%

would benefit from automated beneficiary communications

16%

need better investment data integration

Automation promises concrete time savings that could substantially increase capacity for firms

Potential Time Savings

39%

of respondents could save 5-10 hours monthly

42%

of respondents could save up to 5 hours monthly

This targets the primary delay causes related to asset discovery and valuation

What It Means

The three most impactful improvements requested directly address the major pain points: faster bank reconciliation (tackling the most time-consuming accounting task), automated beneficiary communication (tackling the top client inquiry: distribution timelines), and better investment data integration (tackling asset discovery/valuation delays). Implementing these improvements represents a clear opportunity for firms to reduce non-billable time and improve client perception of efficiency.

Fiduciary accounting workflows are heavily reliant on manual processes, leading to significant **administrative time spent per file** and **frequent opportunities for error**.

Manual Data
Entry %

51–75%

of work involves manual data entry for 20% of respondents

Average Time Spent
on Accounting Per
File (monthly)

The majority of firms spend up to

4 hours

monthly

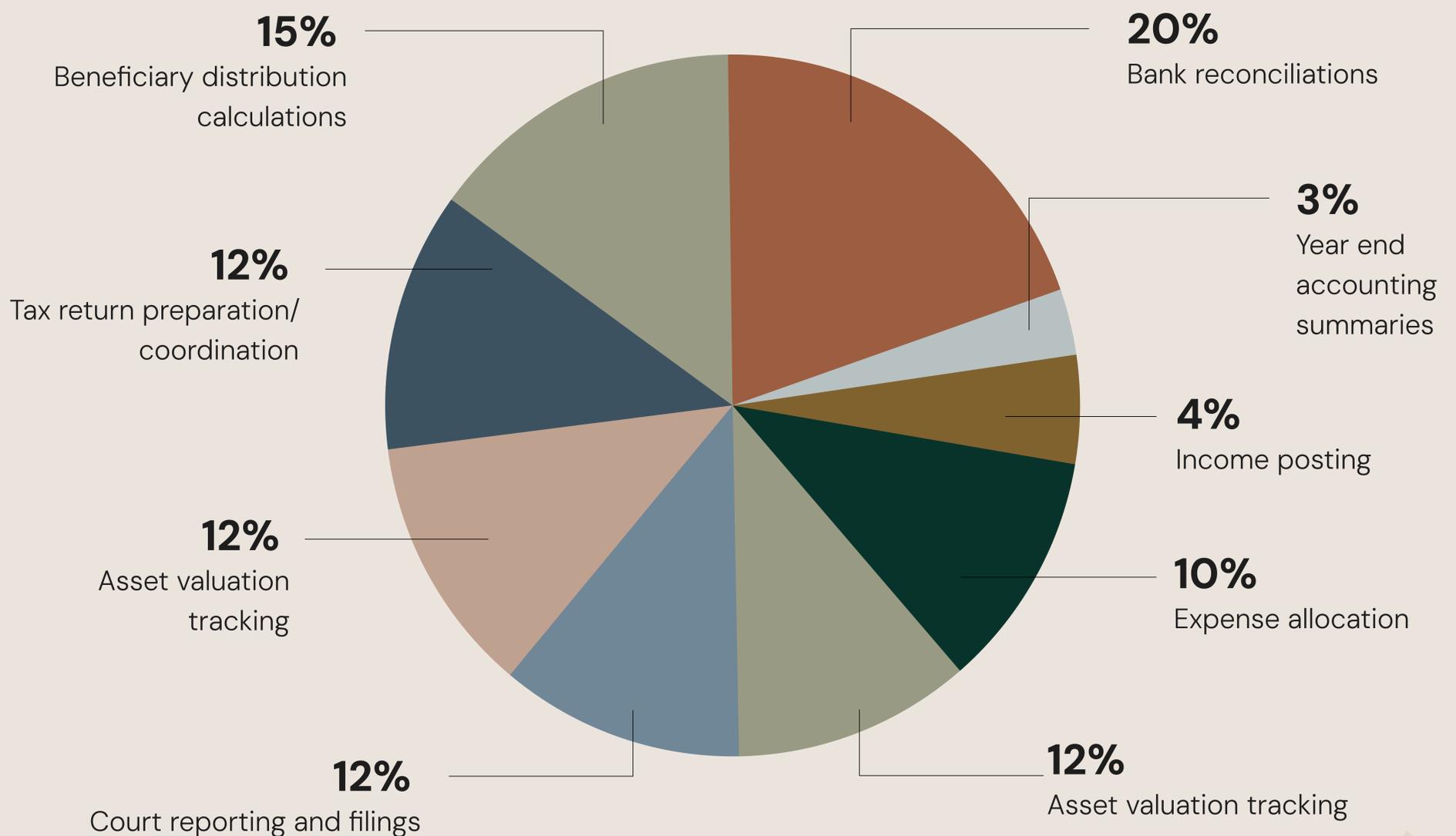
Risk of
Rework

47%

of respondents report that accounting errors require case rework or corrections.

Where The Time Goes Breakdown

The following tasks consume the largest percentage of time in practice, indicating where manual effort is concentrated



What It Means

The data shows that fundamental, repetitive tasks, particularly bank reconciliations (20%) and beneficiary distribution calculations (15%), are major time drains. This supports the finding that high percentages of manual data entry persist, indicating that most firms still rely on simple tools like Excel (38%) for complex fiduciary work. Automation is necessary to reduce the high frequency of rework/corrections (47% occasionally or more).

Optimization Opportunities

Firms identify clear needs for automation, which directly address the time-consuming tasks and manual data entry burdens identified above.



Faster Bank Reconciliation

The single most impactful improvement requested by firms is a faster bank reconciliation process (28%). Automation here is also the number one task identified as benefiting most from technology (19%).



Investment Data Imports

Investment transaction import/categorization is the third most requested automation benefit (13%), directly targeting the challenges of asset valuation tracking (12% of time spent).



Automated Distribution Calculations

Beneficiary distribution calculations are the second most time-consuming task (15%), and firms similarly identified this as the second most beneficial task for automation (17%).

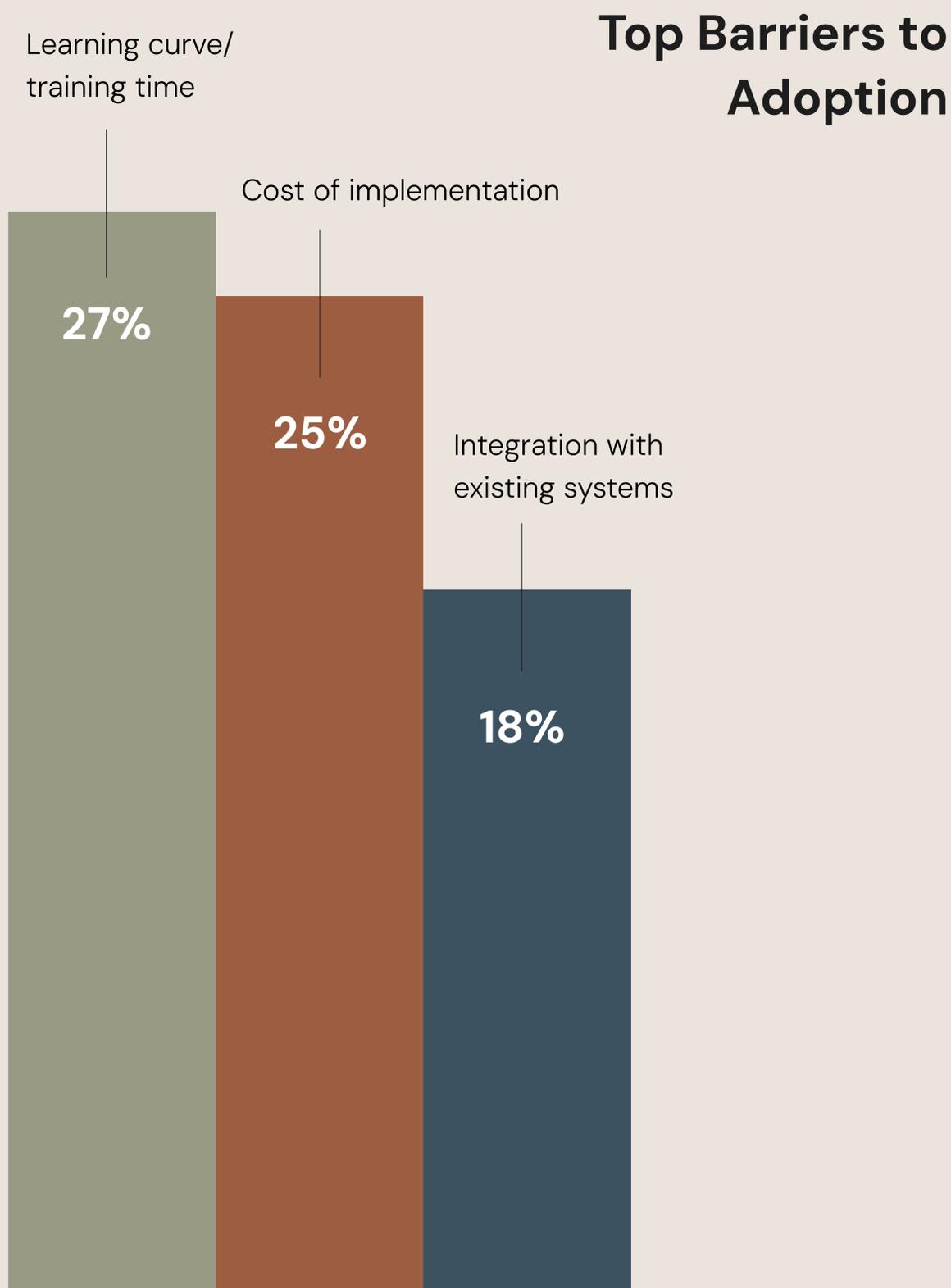


Time Savings Potential

Implementing automated accounting workflows could save 42% of respondents up to 5 hours monthly, and 39% could save 5–10 hours monthly.

Overcoming the Implementation Hurdle

Despite widespread reliance on inefficient manual processes like Excel spreadsheets (38% use them to track accounting information) and the fact that 41% of respondents haven't implemented fiduciary technology, firms face tangible barriers that hinder modernization. These barriers are largely centered around resources and compatibility, rather than simply technological reluctance.



The three largest barriers cited by firms focus on the friction associated with integrating and learning new systems.

There are significant worries about staff adaptation and the time investment required to master new software. Financial considerations are also prominent, particularly those related to purchasing, customizing, and rolling out new technology. Lastly, a notable challenge lies in ensuring new solutions work smoothly with current practice management tools or data sources.

Barrier vs. Solution

Firms can mitigate these top barriers by seeking technologies designed for ease of use and seamless integration, often targeting the specific workflow improvements they already desire (e.g., faster bank reconciliation, identified as the most impactful improvement by 28%).



Learning curve/training time

Invest in software with intuitive interfaces and built-in help resources.

- ☑ Automated beneficiary communications (16% requested improvement)
- ☑ Court reporting automation (12% feature importance).



Cost of implementation

Seek subscription models or solutions that promise rapid, measurable ROI (e.g., time savings).

- ☑ Faster bank reconciliation process (28% requested improvement)
- ☑ Document automation (20% feature importance).



Integration with existing systems

Prioritize tools designed with robust API connectivity for key financial data imports.

- ☑ Investment data integration (18% feature importance, 15% requested improvement)
- ☑ Tax form generation (10% feature importance).

Adoption Isn't About Resistance, It's About Readiness



The sources indicate that adoption barriers are predominantly practical and resource-based (cost, training, integration). This suggests that firms are not inherently resistant to change, but rather unequipped for the upheaval associated with complex or expensive implementations. The fact that 42% of respondents could save up to 5 hours monthly with automated workflows, and 39% could save 5–10 hours monthly, shows a substantial, quantified need for efficiency gains. Addressing the barriers through technology that offers clear, small-scale initial implementations and rapid, measurable time savings (like automated bank reconciliation) can overcome the "readiness gap" by providing immediate value with minimized resource drain.

A successful technology transition is less like shutting down the highway for a rebuild, and more like opening new lanes in phases. Traffic keeps moving, and each upgrade reduces bottlenecks right away.

The Path to Modernizing Fiduciary Accounting

Despite recognizing the time-consuming nature of manual processes (such as bank reconciliations, which consume the most time for 20% of respondents), firms face significant hurdles in adopting specialized fiduciary technology. The reliance on traditional tools and the perceived difficulty of implementation create a substantial efficiency gap.

Key Technology Gaps and Current Status

The data indicates that a substantial segment of the industry has not yet integrated specialized tools, relying instead on generic software or manual methods:



Non-Adoption Rate

41% of respondents report that they haven't implemented fiduciary technology yet. Of those who have implemented technology, 21% report no measurable ROI yet, and another 21% are unsure/haven't measured the ROI.



Primary Tracking Tool

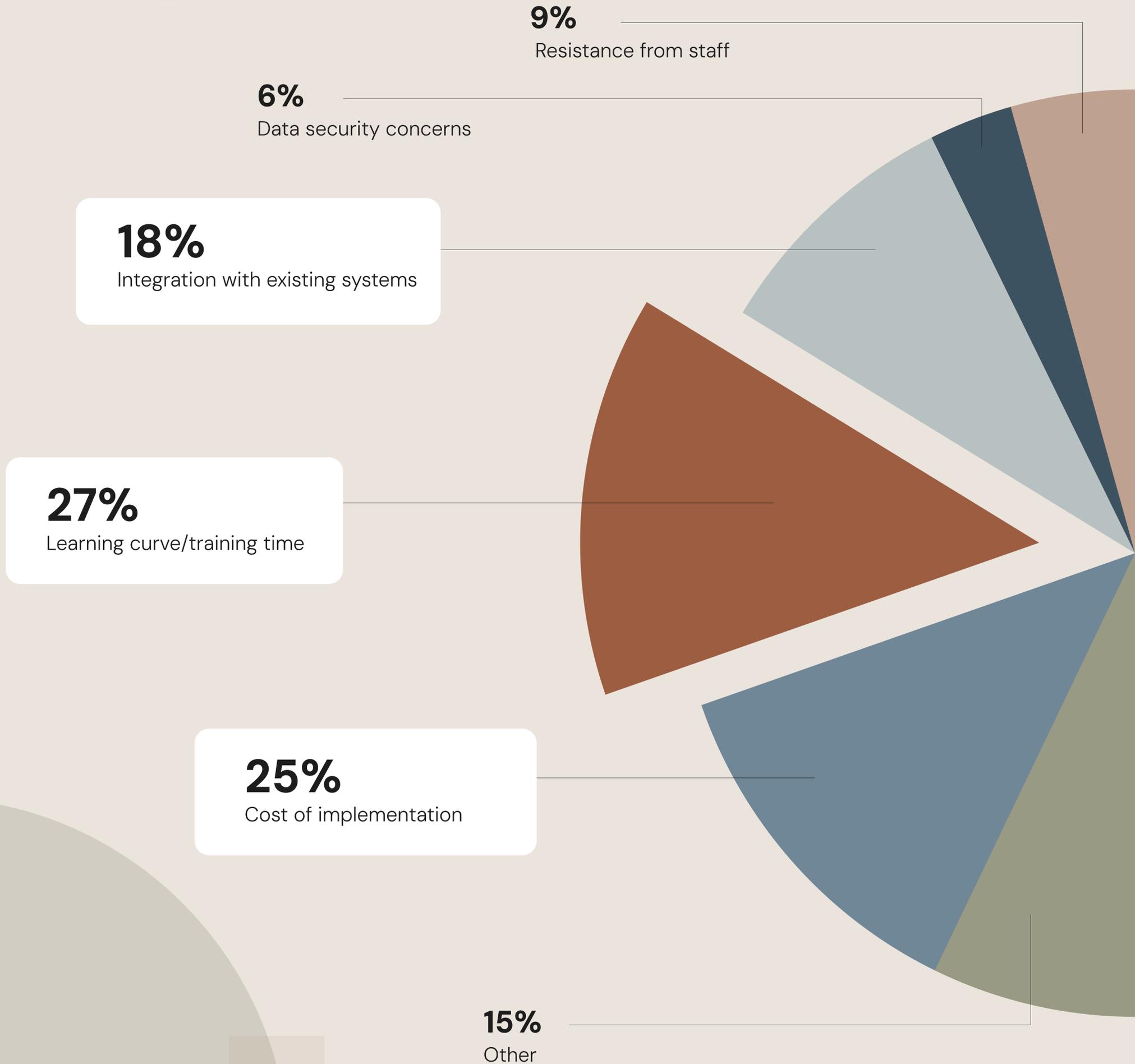
The most common tool for tracking fiduciary accounting information remains Excel spreadsheets (38%). Practice management software (19%) and specialized trust accounting software (19%) are tied for the second most common tool.



Manual Data Burden

The lack of integration leads to high manual effort, with 20% of respondents reporting that 51–75% of their accounting work involves manual data entry.

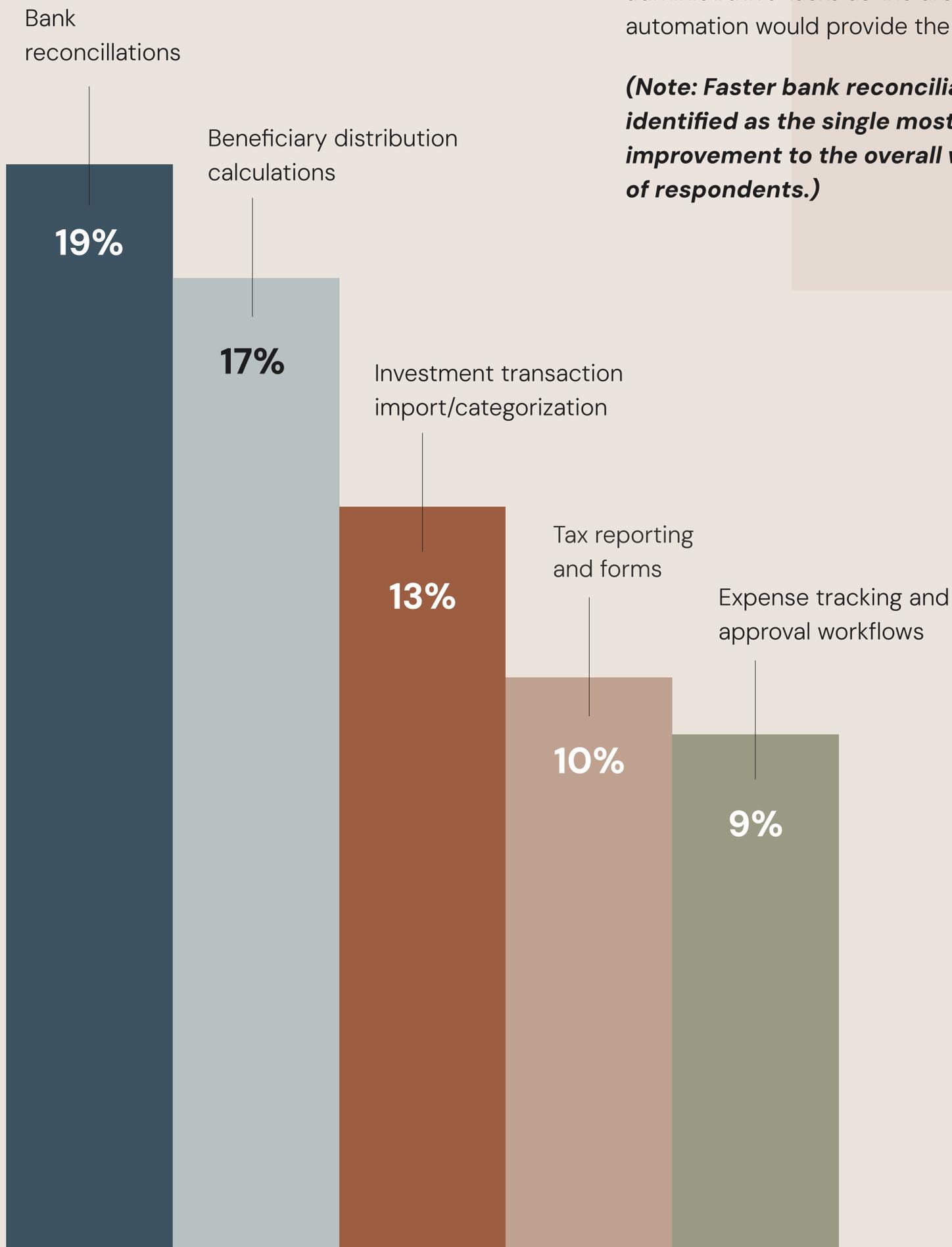
Biggest Barriers to Adoption



Desired Automation Features

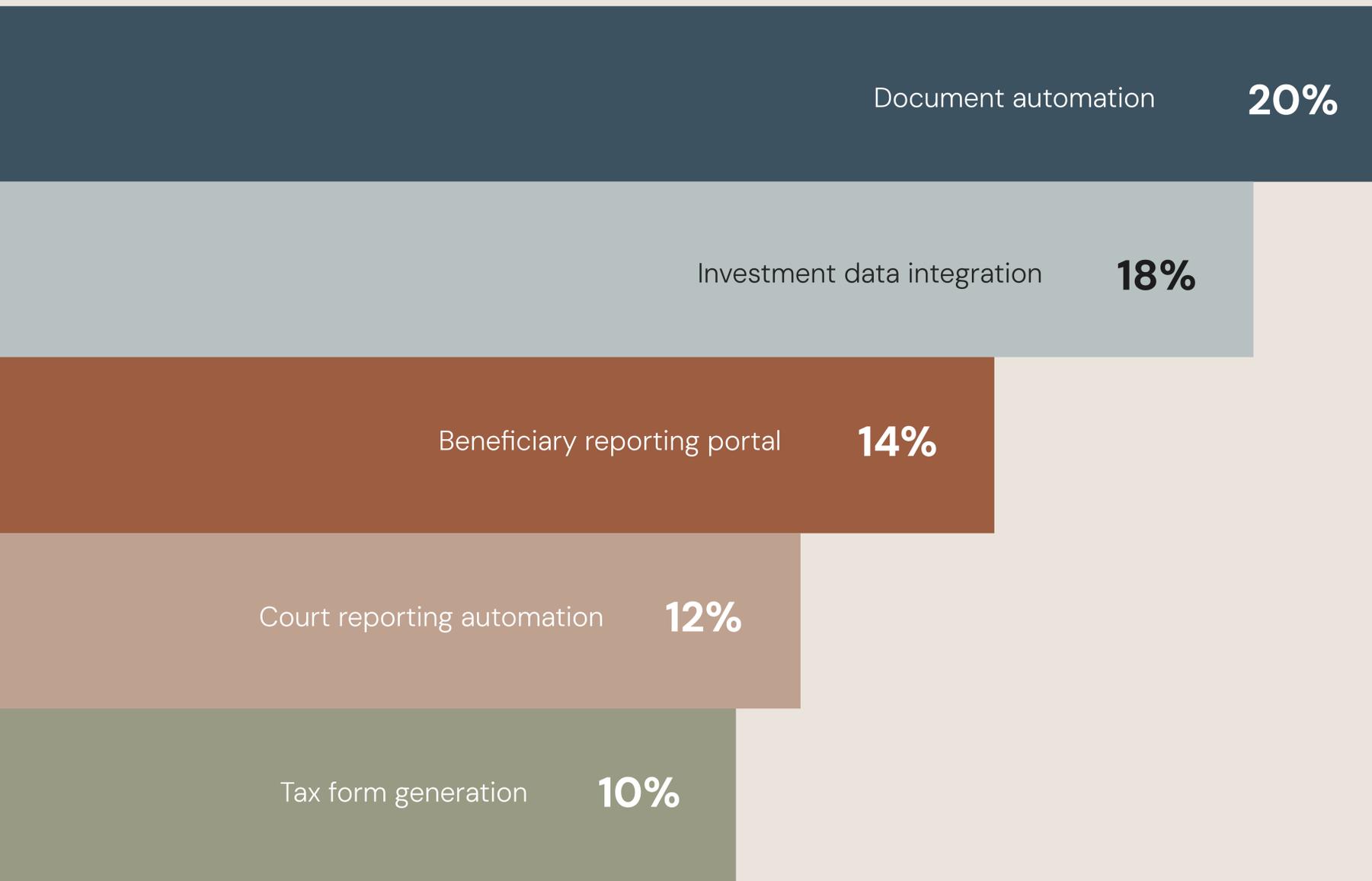
Firms clearly identify repetitive, time-consuming administrative tasks as the areas where automation would provide the most relief.

(Note: Faster bank reconciliation was also identified as the single most impactful improvement to the overall workflow by 28% of respondents.)



Technology Wish-List Items

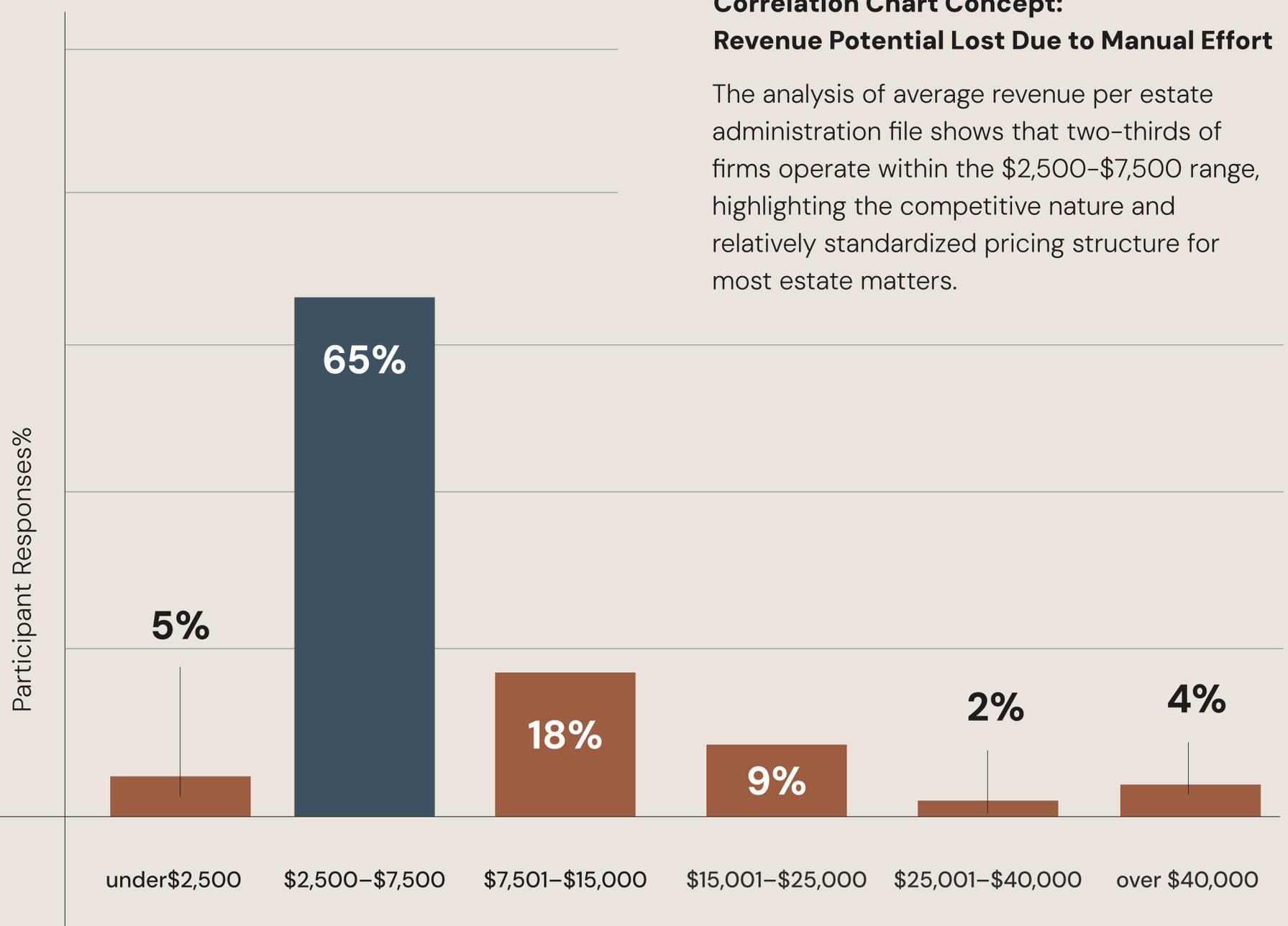
Beyond simply automating tasks, firms have a clear "wish-list" for specific features that directly support documentation, data handling, and client communication.



These desired features directly correlate with the biggest delay causes (court processes and requirements, 40%) and time-consuming accounting tasks (asset discovery and valuation, 24%; tax return preparation and filing, 23%). The need for a beneficiary reporting portal also addresses the top client concern: distribution timelines.

Workflow and Profitability Optimization Roadmap

The ability of firms to realize high financial performance is fundamentally linked to efficiency, particularly the capacity to reduce manual labor in time-consuming administrative tasks and shorten extended settlement timelines. The majority of firms surveyed operate within a middle-range revenue bracket, suggesting a major opportunity to scale profitability through workflow optimization.



Key Insight

The density of firms in the \$2,500–\$7,500 band (65%) means that differentiating profitability relies heavily on reducing time spent per file, as raising fees may not be feasible in a competitive market.

Top Reported Workflow Priorities for 2026

Firms clearly identify bottlenecks in their current workflows that, if fixed, would provide the single most impactful improvement to their fiduciary practice. These priorities focus heavily on alleviating the burden of manual accounting and client communication. The single most impactful improvements identified are:

28%	<p>Faster bank reconciliation process Directly targeting the task that consumes the most time in practice</p>
16%	<p>Automated beneficiary communications Addressing the high volume of inquiries (51% receive 1–2 per file monthly) primarily focused on distribution timelines (45%).</p>
15%	<p>Better investment data integration Solving the administrative delay caused by asset discovery and valuation (24% of delays).</p>
13%	<p>Streamlined court reporting Directly mitigating the number one primary cause of case delays: court processes and requirements (40%).</p>
10%	<p>Improved tax preparation coordination Counteracting tax return preparation and filing (23% of accounting delays) and external tax-related complications (16% of primary delays)</p>

The Profitability Drag

Inference of the relationship between a firm's high reliance on manual processes and the opportunity cost, measured in billable hours lost, which impacts overall profitability potential.

	Low Automation/High Manual Effort	High Automation/Low Manual Effort
Technology Adoption	41% haven't implemented fiduciary technology	Firms using specialized software (19%) or Practice Management software (19%).
Manual Data Burden	20% report 51–75% manual data entry	18% report 0–10% manual data entry.
Time Spent Per File	Significant percentage spend 1–4 hours monthly; 20% of time spent is on bank reconciliations	Firms report potential time savings: 42% could save up to 5 hours monthly, and 39% could save 5–10 hours monthly
Lower Profit Margin	Administrative time drain prevents capacity growth, keeping firms highly clustered in the \$2,500–\$7,500 (65%) revenue band.	Higher Profit Margin: Automation allows staff to handle more files or focus on high-value, billable client work (increasing realization rate/capacity).

Analysis

Capacity vs. Consumption The time spent on accounting tasks – ranging from 15 minutes to over 4 hours monthly per file – is largely driven by manual data entry. This administrative consumption cuts directly into the time firms dedicate to billable client work. By automating repetitive tasks, especially the highly manual bank reconciliation process (19% most beneficial automation), firms can unlock capacity. The realization of 5–10 hours in monthly savings (39% of respondents) translates directly to improved capacity and thus, greater profitability, allowing the firm to handle more files efficiently and potentially move into higher revenue tiers (over \$7,500)

Optimization Roadmap

Firms must systematically address the barriers to adoption (learning curve/training time: 27%, Cost of implementation: 25%) to realize the desired workflow improvements (e.g., faster reconciliation). This framework provides a model for transitioning from manual dependence to technological efficiency.

1

Asses & Quantify

Identify major time sinks (e.g., bank reconciliations) and the biggest administrative delays (e.g., court processes, asset discovery)

Calculate the estimated time savings (e.g., 5-10 hours monthly) to establish ROI benchmark.

2

Automate Core Tasks

Implement solutions targeting the most repetitive, high-impact tasks like bank reconciliation (19%) and beneficiary distribution calculations (17%)

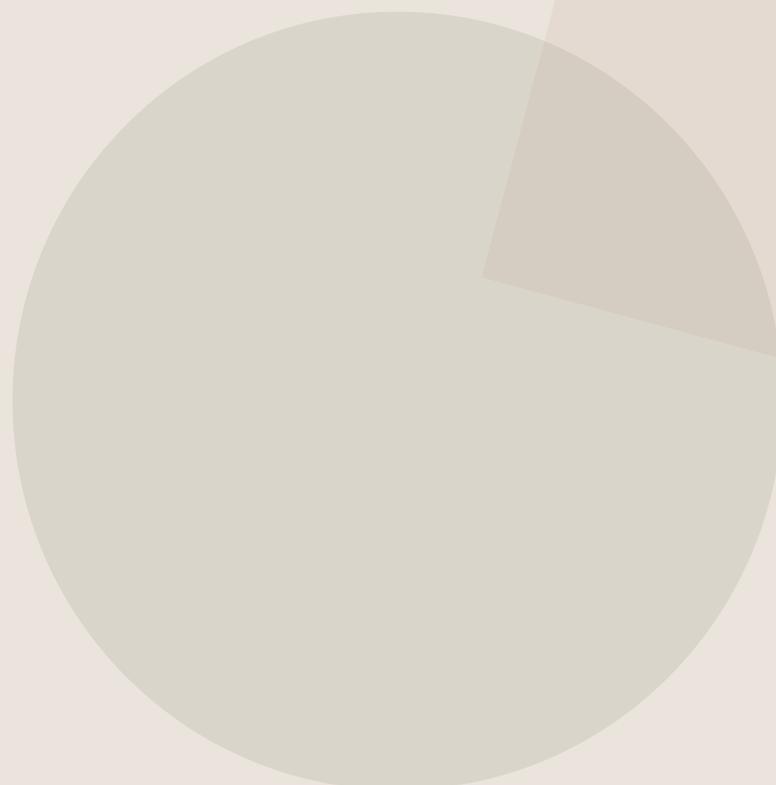
Reduce the need for high manual data entry (currently 51-75% for 20% of firms).

3

Integrate Data Systems

Adopt tools with strong investment data integration (18% feature importance) to solve asset tracking delays.

Overcome the integration barrier (18% cited as a top obstacle) by linking new software with existing practice management tools.



4

Measure & Train

Track time savings and ROI. Dedicate resources to training staff to address the primary adoption barrier of the learning curve/training time (27%)

Ensure measurable results, moving away from "No measurable ROI yet" (21%) or "Unsure/haven't measured" (21%) status

5

Refine & Enhance Client Experience

Implement client-facing tools, such as the beneficiary reporting portal (14% feature importance), and use saved staff time for high-touch service.

Reduce client anxiety by proactively addressing the top inquiry topic: distribution timelines (45%)

Adopting automation is like replacing people carrying buckets of water with plumbing. Each automated step adds a new pipe or valve, so routine work flows reliably in the background. That means your team spends less time hauling the basics and more time on the stuff that actually needs a human: exceptions, judgment calls, and client conversations.

Key Takeaways

Based on the data gathered in the "Back To School Study 2025," the Estateably Marketing Research team has compiled the following key takeaways.

What We Learned	What You Can Do
<p>Estate Settlement Timelines Are Long and Heavily Delayed by External Factors</p>	
<p>The average estate settlement timeline is substantial, with the majority of respondents reporting 6-12 months (36%) or 13-18 months (28%).</p>	<p>Implement robust case management and scheduling tools to manage the extended timelines. Since court processes and requirements (40%) and Third-party delays (18%) are the primary causes of delay, administrative efficiency must be maximized to mitigate external slowdowns.</p>
<p>The most frequently cited accounting-related tasks causing delays are asset discovery and valuation (24%) and tax return preparation and filing (23%).</p>	<p>Prioritize automation for critical, front-end tasks. Utilize features for investment data integration (18% desired feature) to expedite asset discovery and valuation.</p>
<p>Operational Workflow is Heavily Dependent on Manual Processes</p>	
<p>Many practitioners dedicate significant hours monthly per file to accounting and reconciliation tasks, with 42% spending up to 5 hours and 39% spending 5-10 hours. The majority of fiduciary accounting work involves high manual data entry, with 46% of respondents reporting rates of 51-75% or 91-100%</p>	<p>Focus efforts on automating high-frequency, time-consuming tasks. The single most impactful improvement desired is faster bank reconciliation (28%). Also prioritize automation for beneficiary distribution calculations (17% desired automation) to reduce manual work.</p>
<p>The most time-consuming fiduciary accounting tasks include bank reconciliations (20%) and beneficiary distribution calculations (15%). Furthermore, 47% of firms report accounting errors requiring rework or corrections.</p>	<p>Move away from outdated methods. While Excel spreadsheets (38%) are the most common tracking tool, adopt software offering automated bank reconciliation (19% desired automation) to reduce reliance on manual entry and lower the likelihood of errors.</p>

What We Learned	What You Can Do
<p>Beneficiary Communication Lacks Proactivity and Transparency</p>	
<p>The most frequent beneficiary inquiries relate to distribution timelines (45%) and communication and transparency concerns (18%). Most communication is handled through email updates (41%) or only upon specific request (20%).</p>	<p>Enhance client communication through dedicated portals. The second most impactful improvement sought is automated beneficiary communications (16%). Implement a beneficiary reporting portal (14% desired feature) to provide proactive updates and reduce time spent answering repetitive queries via email or phone.</p>
<p>Technology Adoption Barriers Persist Despite High Need for Automation</p>	
<p>A large percentage of respondents (41%) "Haven't implemented fiduciary technology" yet. For firms that have, 21% report "No measurable ROI yet," and another 21% are "Unsure/haven't measured".</p>	<p>Emphasize low barrier to entry solutions. Address the top barriers: Learning curve/training time (27%), Cost of implementation (25%), and integration with existing systems (18%). Choose intuitive platforms that minimize setup costs and training friction to prove value quickly.</p>
<p>The most important technology features for fiduciary accounting are document automation (20%), Investment data integration (18%), and beneficiary reporting portal (14%).</p>	<p>Invest in technology that supports documentation and data flow. Solutions must feature strong document automation to handle the heavy burden of required reports and filings (like tax forms and court reports) and offer robust investment data integration capabilities</p>

About The Study

Author & Acknowledgments

This report was compiled by the Estateably Marketing Research team utilizing data from the "Back To School Study 2025". We acknowledge the 165 participants across the United States and Canada who contributed their time and data to this research.

About Estateably

Estateably is a cloud-based platform that empowers financial institutions, accounting firms and legal professionals to transform their trust and estate administration and accounting practices. We help over 1,000 firms and 5,000 practitioners across the United States and Canada streamline complex estate work, manage fiduciary accounting requirements, and deliver exceptional client service. Estateably puts powerful automation at the heart of your practice, so you can efficiently handle probate forms, precedent letters, trust accounting, beneficiary reporting, tasks, contacts, and inventory – all from one centralized platform. With SOC2 Type II certification and commitment to the highest security standards, we've earned the trust of professionals and practitioners who demand both security and excellence in their fiduciary practice management.

Contact

For follow-up on your specific responses or interest in the findings, please contact marketing@estatetably.com

The "Back To School Study" highlights where manual processes are costing your firm the most time and money: reconciliation, asset valuation, and beneficiary communication are major areas of friction

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