

# How to Manage and Track Tax Returns at Peak Volume

A Step-by-Step Guide for High-Volume Tax and Accounting Firms





Your team knows what they are working on. You do not. Not without asking. That is the gap. You are managing hundreds of returns across multiple preparers and reviewers during the busiest stretch of the year. Returns are moving through the system, but knowing where they actually stand requires chasing people down. Which returns are ready for review? Who is overloaded? Where are hand-offs stalling? For tax and accounting professionals running high-volume practices, tracking return progress and managing multiple returns at this scale demands more than effort. It demands infrastructure.

Here is what separates the firms that finish peak season on time from those scrambling for extensions: visibility. Not working harder. Not hiring more people. Visibility. The ability to see, at any moment, exactly where every return stands, who owns it, and what is blocking it. Without that, you are managing by interruption. With it, you are managing by exception.

This guide gives you the complete framework:

How to set up tracking that works.

A daily protocol that replaces status meetings.

Hand-off rules that prevent rework.

The five breakdowns that stall returns every filing season.

The metrics that tell you whether your system is holding up.

Everything here is built to be implemented mid-season. You do not need to wait for next year.

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## Before You Start: Rate Your Current System

**Check each statement that is true for your firm right now.** Your score tells you where to focus first.

### Statement

- Every return has a single assigned owner at all times
- Status categories reflect actual workflow stages, not generic labels
- A manager can see all bottlenecks without asking anyone
- Preparers document context before passing returns to reviewers
- Reviewer questions include specific form, line, and what is needed
- Returns route to the right reviewer automatically based on complexity
- You know your average hand-off wait time this week
- You track how often returns bounce back to the preparer
- Client questions pending are visible and flagged after the expected response time
- Your team knows exactly where to find help when they get stuck

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## 0 to 3: Start with Section 1 (Tracking Setup)

Your tracking foundation needs work. This guide will save you significant time.



## 4 to 6: Start with Section 3 (Team Coordination)

You have the basics. Focus on hand-offs and breakdowns to unlock throughput.



## 7 to 10: Start with Section 5 (Metrics)

Strong foundation. Use metrics to fine-tune and the checklist to validate.

## Section 1: How Do You Set Up a Return Tracking System for Peak Season?

### Quick Answer:

Effective return tracking requires visible ownership, defined status categories, and dashboard views that show what is moving versus what is stalled. Set it up once. Monitor it daily.

You cannot manage what you cannot see. And during peak season, the information has to be automatic. If knowing where returns stand requires asking people, you are already behind.

### Step 1 Define Status Categories That Actually Mean Something

"In progress" tells you nothing. When you look at a dashboard and see 47 returns labeled "in progress," you know exactly as much as you did before you looked. Status categories need to reflect the actual stage where a return is waiting for the next action.

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## Categories that work for most high-volume practices:

Data Entry Complete

Ready for Review

Review in Progress

Client Questions Pending

Partner Approval Required

Ready to File

E-Filed

The difference matters. "**Client Questions Pending**" tells everyone why a return is not moving. "**On Hold**" makes someone ask. Multiply that question across hundreds of returns, and you start to see where the time goes.

## Step 2 Assign One Owner to Every Return, Always

This is the rule that changes everything: every return has one person responsible for it at all times. When it reaches "**Ready for Review**," ownership transfers from the preparer to the reviewer. When client questions arise, they transfer to whoever handles follow-up. The return is never unowned.

## Define these assignments before the filing season starts:



handles data entry for each return type?

reviews which returns based on complexity?

manages client follow-up?

handles partner or manager sign-off?

When ownership is visible to the full team, nobody wastes time figuring out whose responsibility a return is. That question simply stops being asked.

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## Step 3 Configure Views That Answer Questions Automatically

The goal is that no one has to interrupt another person to find out what is happening.

### Team View

All active returns showing status, owner, due date, and days unchanged. Filterable by status, preparer, due date, or priority.



### Manager View

Highlights bottlenecks. When returns cluster in "Ready for Review," your constraint is review capacity. When they cluster in "Client Questions Pending," your constraint is follow-up speed.

### Individual View

Each team member sees only their assigned returns, sorted by priority and due date.



### Setup time:

A few hours of initial configuration. After that, updates require seconds per return because they happen during normal workflow transitions, not as a separate task.

## Try This Today

- 1 Pick one status category that is too vague (usually "In Progress") and split it into two that describe what is actually happening.
- 2 Identify the five returns that have been unchanged the longest. Find out why.
- 3 Ask each team member: Do you know who owns the return you last touched? If the answer is not immediate, ownership clarity needs work.

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## Section 2: How Do You Monitor Return Progress Without Status Meetings?

### Quick Answer:

A five-minute daily dashboard review replaces lengthy status meetings. Check for bottlenecks, stalled returns, capacity imbalances, and upcoming deadlines. Act on what you see.



Here is the pattern at most firms during peak season: everyone stops productive work for a meeting to report what they are doing. The meeting takes the better part of an hour. By the time it ends, a meaningful block of the day is gone, and the information gathered is already stale.

Firms with dashboard infrastructure skip the reporting entirely. The information is already visible. What replaces the meeting is not another meeting. It is a five-minute decision cycle.

### Copy This Protocol: The 5-Minute Morning Review



#### **STEP 1:** Dashboard scan (2 minutes)

Look for: returns unchanged 3+ days, reviewer overload, client questions past response window, clustering in any status, and upcoming due dates.



#### **STEP 2:** Prioritization decisions (2 minutes)

Redistribute if one reviewer is overloaded. Follow up on stalled returns. Escalate returns approaching deadlines.



#### **STEP 3:** Team communication (1 minute)

One directive message.

*Example: "Redistributing eight returns from Chen's queue. Partnership returns due this week get priority."*

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This is a directive, not a discussion. The dashboard already told you what is happening. Now you are telling the team what to do about it.

## The Signals That Tell You to Intervene

Not everything needs attention. These signals do:



**Returns unchanged 3+ days: Something is blocking progress.**

Find out what and remove it.



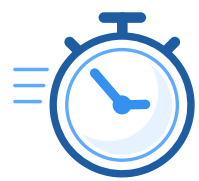
**One reviewer holding significantly more returns than others:**

Capacity constraint. Redistribute based on complexity, not just count.



**Client questions unanswered past expected response window:**

Communication breakdown. Direct follow-up needed.



**Returns due within 48 hours sitting in early stages:**

Immediate escalation. These should not be discovered late.

What disappears from your day are the basic information requests.

"Where is the Johnson return?" "Did anyone finish the partnership?" "Is the Ortiz file in review?"

Those questions stop being asked because the answers are already visible. The questions that remain are the ones that actually need a conversation.

### Try This Today

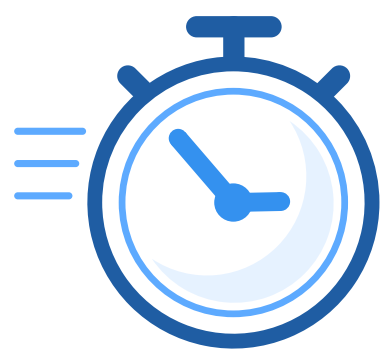
- 1 Cancel or shorten your next status meeting. Open the dashboard instead and see how much information you can gather in two minutes.
- 2 Count how many times today someone asked, "Where is this return?" That number is your visibility gap.

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## Section 3: How Do You Coordinate a Tax Team During Peak Filing Season?

### Quick Answer:

Explicit hand-offs eliminate coordination overhead. Context transfers with the return, questions follow a structured format, and status updates happen during workflow transitions.



The firms that move fastest during peak season do not have faster preparers. They have hand-offs that take the guesswork out. Every return arrives at the next step with the context that the next person needs to act immediately. Nobody wastes time figuring out the background that should have come with the file.

### The Preparer Hand-Off Note: Three Things, One Minute

Before marking a return "Ready for Review," preparers document three things. It takes about a minute. It saves significantly more than that.

#### Copy This Template: Preparer Context Note

##### CLIENT SITUATION:

[Unusual circumstances the reviewer should know]

*Example: "Client divorced mid-year, filing MFS. Estimated payments split per decree."*

##### TECHNICAL FLAGS:

[Areas needing extra attention]

*Examples: "Estimated payments do not match records. Verified with client, difference is Q3 penalty waiver."*

##### PRIOR-YEAR CHANGES:

[Significant changes from last year]

*Examples: "Changed from MFJ to Single. New Schedule C for consulting income."*

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You know what happens without these notes. The reviewer opens the return, sees something unexpected, and sends a question. The preparer answers. The reviewer asks a follow-up. The return bounces. Each cycle costs hours. A one-minute note prevents that entire chain.

### The Reviewer Question Format: Four Parts, No Back-and-Forth

When reviewers have questions, this format consistently eliminates unnecessary back-and-forth. The difference is specificity.

Element	Instead of This	Write This
Location	"Check the business expenses"	"Schedule C, Line 10"
Issue	"Something looks off with meals"	"Total meals \$8,400 but deduction \$4,200"
Why It Matters	(not included)	"Need to verify 50% limitation applied"
What I Need	"Can you look at this?"	"Confirm total was \$8,400 and \$4,200 reflects limit"

The left column is how most questions get asked. The right column is how questions get answered on the first try. Same information, same people, dramatically less back-and-forth.

Track your bounce rate: the percentage of returns going back to the preparer more than once. When that number starts dropping, your hand-off system is working. Same team, same returns, substantially less rework.

#### Try This Today

- 1 Pick three returns currently in review. Check whether the preparer left context notes. If not, that is your hand-off gap.
- 2 Ask your reviewers: What is the most common question you ask preparers? Whatever they say, build it into the hand-off note template so it gets answered before it gets asked.

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## Section 4: What Are the Most Common Peak Season Workflow Breakdowns?

### Quick Answer:

Most peak-season breakdowns are predictable: unclear routing, missing context, slow response to questions, or invisible bottlenecks. Fix the system, not the symptom.



Every firm hits friction during peak season. The difference between a rough week and a lost week is whether you saw it coming. These five breakdowns surface consistently across high-volume practices. All five are preventable.

### Breakdown 1: Returns Sitting in "Ready for Review" With No Reviewer



**What you see:** Returns piling up in the review queue. No one picks them up.



**What is actually happening:** Every return requires someone to decide who should review it. Without routing rules, returns sit waiting for that decision.



**Fix:** Define who reviews what based on return type. Individual returns with straightforward income go to junior reviewers. Multi-state or complex situations go to senior reviewers. Partnerships and S-corps go to business specialists. Prior-year issues stay with the same reviewer.



**Why this works:** Routing decisions happen once when you define the rules, not hundreds of times throughout the season.

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## Breakdown 2: Reviewers Asking Questions That Should Not Need Asking



**What you see:** Questions flying back and forth between reviewers and preparers all day.



**What is actually happening:** Preparers handed off the return without context. The reviewer has no background on client circumstances, prior-year changes, or technical flags.



**Fix:** Require the three-item preparer context note (see Section 3). One minute of documentation prevents hours of back-and-forth.



**Why this works:** Reviewers start with the information they need. The question that did not need to be asked never gets asked.

## Breakdown 3: Returns Bouncing Multiple Times Between People



**What you see:** A return goes to the preparer, comes back, goes again. Three cycles on something that should have taken one.



**What is actually happening:** The reviewer's question was not specific enough or the preparer's answer did not address what was actually needed.



**Fix:** Implement the four-part question format (location, issue, why it matters, what I need). When a return bounces twice, a manager reviews the thread and clarifies.



**Why this works:** Specific questions get complete answers on the first try.

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## Breakdown 4: Returns Discovered Late Near Deadlines



**What you see:** A return due in 48 hours that is still in data entry.



**What is actually happening:** No one filtered by due date. Priority was invisible.



**Fix:** "Due this week" is the first filter every morning. Returns approaching deadlines get immediate escalation if they are in early stages.



**Why this works:** Problems caught early are opportunities for adjustment. Problems caught late are emergencies.

## Breakdown 5: Team Does Not Know Where to Find Help



**What you see:** Team members stuck on technical issues, waiting for someone to become available to answer.



**What is actually happening:** Support channels and help resources were not validated before peak season.



**Fix:** Before peak season hits, make sure everyone on the team knows where to go when they get stuck. Knowledge base, quick video walkthroughs, in-product help. If your software has those resources built in, point people to them before volume ramps up. If it does not, build a shared document with your go-to answers so the same question does not get asked five times.



**Why this works:** Teams that know where to look resolve issues in minutes instead of waiting hours.

### Try This Today

- 1 Check the "Ready for Review" queue right now. If more than three returns are sitting without an assigned reviewer, you need routing rules
- 2 Ask your team: when you get stuck on something technical, where do you go first? If the answer is "I ask someone," your self-service resources need attention.

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## Section 5: What Metrics Should Firms Track During Peak Tax Season?

### Quick Answer:

Track four metrics weekly: hand-off wait time, question-response cycle, review bounce rate, and return completion time. Compare each week to your own baseline to spot trends early.

You cannot improve what you do not measure. But you also do not need a complicated analytics system. Four metrics, tracked weekly, tell you whether your peak season infrastructure is holding up or falling behind.

Metric	What It Measures	What It Tells You
Hand-Off Wait Time	Hours from "Ready for Review" to the reviewer starting work	Whether routing is working or reviewers do not know what to pick up next
Question-Response Cycle	Hours between reviewer question and preparer answer	Whether notifications work and response expectations are clear
Review Bounce Rate	Percentage of returns going back to the preparer more than once	Whether hand-off context and reviewer questions are specific enough
Completion Time	Total days from data entry start to e-filing	Overall workflow efficiency including all hand-off friction

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## How to use these:

Track weekly. Compare each week to your baseline from the first full week of filing season. The metric that is getting worse is the one that needs your attention. The protocols in this guide tell you how to fix each one.

The goal is not to hit a specific number. The goal is to improve week over week and catch problems before they compound into deadline pressure.

## Try This Today

- 1 Pick one metric. Just one. Track it for seven days. You will learn more about your workflow in one week of measurement than in a full season of guessing.
- 2 The easiest one to start with: count how many returns bounced back to the preparer this week. That is your bounce rate baseline.



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## Build It Once. Use It Every Season.

Everything in this guide works the same way: build the system once, then let it run. Status categories do not change year to year. Ownership rules hold across seasons. The 5-Minute Morning Protocol works whether you are managing 200 returns or 2,000. The four-part question format prevents rework regardless of which preparers and reviewers are on your team.

Peak season does not reward the firms that work the hardest. It rewards the firms that built the infrastructure to stay visible. When you can see where every return stands, who owns it, and what is blocking it, you stop managing by interruption and start managing by exception. That is the difference between surviving filing season and finishing it with confidence.

Your team is not slow. Your workflow just needs visibility that prevents coordination overhead from consuming capacity. Start with one section of this guide. Implement one change today. Track one metric this week. The patterns will show you where to go next.

# How to Manage and Track Tax Returns at Peak Volume

## Where Visibility Comes Built In

Every framework in this guide works better when the tracking, assignments, and communication are native to your tax workflow rather than layered on top of it.

**ProConnect Tax** is built around the visibility principles this guide covers. Firms can create custom status categories that mirror the workflow stages from Section 1. Preparers update return status as work moves through each phase, so the whole team sees a current picture of where every return stands without anyone having to ask.

### Why this matters

When your status categories match your actual workflow stages rather than generic defaults, a single glance at the return list tells you what is active, what is in review, and what is waiting on a client. The structure does the communicating.

The assignee field makes ownership visible across every return. As work moves between the preparer, the reviewer, and the partner, whoever is currently responsible updates the assignee.

You can see at a glance who owns what, and team members know exactly which returns are theirs without checking a separate spreadsheet or asking in a group chat.

Reviewer notes travel with the return, so the context from Section 3's hand-off protocol stays attached to the file rather than living in a separate email thread. When a return moves to the next person, the instructions move with it.

You can sort and filter returns by status or assignee to see where work is clustering, who is carrying the most volume, and which returns need attention. When you need to calculate the metrics from Section 5 or build the weekly tracking view this guide recommends, export the full return list to a spreadsheet. The data is there; the analysis is yours to run.

### What this replaces

Firms that manage visibility in a separate spreadsheet spend time maintaining two systems: **status in ProConnect, copy to the sheet, update the sheet, and share the sheet.** When the status categories and assignee fields live inside the software your team already uses to prepare returns, the visibility is a byproduct of the work itself.

# How to Manage and Track Tax Returns at Peak Volume

The infrastructure in this guide is what ProConnect was designed to support. If your current system requires these frameworks to be managed manually outside your tax software, and you want that visibility infrastructure built into the tool your team is already in all day, ProConnect Tax is worth a closer look.

## Your Three-Step Quick-Start



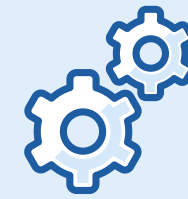
### STEP 1:

Set up your custom status categories in ProConnect before the first return comes in. Use the workflow stages from Section 1 as your template.



### STEP 2:

Run the 5-Minute Morning Protocol from Section 2 every day for two weeks. You will not want to start a day without it.



### STEP 3:

Use the Section 5 metrics export at the end of your first peak week. One week of data will show you exactly where your bottleneck is.

## Ready to see how ProConnect Tax supports high-volume practices?

ProConnect Tax is built for firms managing returns under volume and deadline pressure. Custom status categories, assignee visibility, reviewer notes, and return list exports are standard features that help your team stay coordinated without having to build a separate tracking system.

If you are evaluating whether your current platform can keep up with where your firm is going, a free trial gives you a live look at how the workflow runs in practice.



**Schedule a ProConnect Tax demo at**

<https://accountants.intuit.com/tax-software/tax-online/large-firms/>

# How to Manage and Track Tax Returns at Peak Volume

## Frequently Asked Questions

### How do firms track tax return progress during peak season?

**Quick Answer:** Firms track return progress using dashboard views with defined status categories, clear ownership assignments, and status updates made during normal workflow transitions rather than through separate status meetings.

Effective tracking requires three components:

- 1 status categories that reflect actual workflow stages (not generic labels like "in progress")
- 2 ownership rules that assign every return to one person at all times
- 3 dashboard views configured for different roles

Manager views highlighted bottlenecks. Team views show all active returns. Individual views show each person their own queue. Updates happen during workflow transitions rather than as separate administrative tasks.

### What is the best way to manage multiple tax returns at the same time?

**Quick Answer:** Managing multiple returns efficiently requires clear routing rules, structured hand-off protocols that eliminate the need for coordination decisions, and a daily dashboard review that replaces status meetings.

The biggest efficiency gain comes from removing coordination overhead. When every return has a clear owner, a defined next step, and context that transfers with the hand-off, firms process returns faster without requiring anyone to work harder. The five-minute morning protocol replaces lengthy status meetings by letting the dashboard automatically reveal bottlenecks, capacity issues, and stalled returns.

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## How do you prevent bottlenecks during filing season?

**Quick Answer:** Most bottlenecks come from unclear routing, missing hand-off context, slow question-response cycles, or invisible clustering of returns in a single status. Daily dashboard reviews catch these patterns early.

The five most common breakdowns are predictable and preventable:

**Returns without assigned reviewers**  
(fix with routing rules)

**Unnecessary reviewer questions**  
(fix with preparer context notes)

**Returns bouncing between people**  
(fix with structured question format)

**Returns discovered late near deadlines** (fix with due-date filtering)

**Teams unsure where to find help** (fix with pre-season resource validation)

## What metrics should firms track during peak tax season?

**Quick Answer:** Track four metrics weekly:

1 Hand-off wait time

2 Question-response cycle time

3 Review bounce rate

4 Total return completion time

Compare each week to your baseline to spot trends.

Hand-off wait time reveals whether routing rules work. The question-response cycle time indicates whether expectations are clear. Bounce rate indicates whether the hand-off context is specific enough. Completion time captures overall efficiency. Track weekly against your own baseline from the first full week of filing season.

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## How do you reduce the time tax returns spend in review?

**Quick Answer:** Reduce review time by requiring preparers to document client circumstances, technical flags, and prior-year changes before hand-off. Use the four-part reviewer question format to eliminate unnecessary back-and-forth.

Most review delays come from missing context, not return complexity. Reviewers spend time hunting for background that should have been documented. Then, question-and-answer cycles take multiple rounds because initial questions lack specificity. The preparer context note (one minute per return) and the four-part question format (location, issue, why it matters, what I need) address both problems.

## How do high-volume firms coordinate preparers and reviewers?

**Quick Answer:** High-volume firms use explicit hand-off protocols where context transfers with the return, questions follow a structured format, and ownership is visible and current at every stage.

Coordination overhead is the hidden cost of peak season. Every interruption asking "whose return is this?" or "what is the status?" stops productive work. Explicit protocols replace these interruptions with systems: ownership is always clear, context is always documented, questions are always specific, and status is always visible. The result is faster throughput without longer hours.



# How to Manage and Track Tax Returns at Peak Volume

## Quick-Reference Checklist: Peak Season Return Tracking

*Print this page. Keep it visible during filing season.*

### Tracking Setup

- Status categories defined (Data Entry Complete, Ready for Review, Review in Progress, Client Questions Pending, Partner Approval Required, Ready to File, E-Filed)
- Every return has one assigned owner at all times
- Ownership transfer rules documented (who handles what at each stage)
- Dashboard views configured (Team View, Manager View, Individual View)
- Routing rules set (which reviewer handles which return types)

### Daily Protocol (5 Minutes)

- Dashboard scan completed (2 min)
- Checked for: returns unchanged 3+ days, reviewer overload, unanswered client questions, status clustering, approaching due dates
- Prioritization decisions made and communicated (2 min)
- Due this week" filter reviewed (1 min)

### Hand-Off Protocol

- Preparers documenting three items before every hand-off:
  - Client situation (unusual circumstances)
  - Technical flags (areas needing extra attention)
  - Prior-year changes (significant differences from last year)
- Reviewer questions include four elements:
  - Location (specific form and line)
  - Issue (what appears incorrect)
  - Why it matters (impact on the return)
  - What I need (specific action requested)

### Weekly Metrics

- Hand-off wait time tracked (hours from "Ready for Review" to review starting)
- Question-response cycle time tracked
- Review bounce rate calculated (% returns going back to the preparer more than once)
- Return completion time tracked (days from data entry to e-filed)
- This week compared to last week's baseline
- Identified which single metric needs the most attention this week