

# The Timekeeping Dilemma: Attorney No. 30 Shares His Solutions

By Matthew Krejci

A year ago, we embarked on an extensive research project assessing the management pains in the legal profession. One aspect of the research involved detailed in-person interviews of thirty attorneys to identify developing trends. Shortly after starting our interviews, it became apparent that timekeeping was one of the top management pains for attorneys. Opinions ranged from, "Timekeeping is the worst thing I faced in my law firm and was one of the reasons I quit and took a job with the state requiring no timekeeping!" to "The practice of billing time makes liars out of honest people." But not all attorneys felt this way. Imagine our shock when the last attorney (#30) said, "I love timekeeping," and he wasn't kidding. In this article, we will share his top five strategies for timekeeping success, but before we do, let's look at why the other 97 percent of attorneys find timekeeping such a pain.

## Why Timekeeping Hurts

### The 6-minute lifestyle

Timekeeping creates angst and disfavor among attorneys, and is a symptom caused by the infamous billable hour system. Without the billable hour, there would be no .2 phone call, followed by a .3 conference, broken up by .2 in the restroom, continued with a .5 of reviewing complaint, finished off by a .2 of writing things down frantically on a steno pad. Can you imagine the sense of freedom from the alternative flat fee billing arrangement whereby you wouldn't have to record any of this, and you'd still get paid for your hard work on a case? You could even take a .3 in the restroom!

### Inconsistent and inefficient timekeeping processes

Attorneys keep track of their time in many different ways. Some scratch it out on a steno pad, some dictate it for their legal assistant, and some enter it directly into a software billing system. In the majority of cases it is reviewed at least one time by another attorney before it goes out to the client. Inevitably there is time lost in the process. Many attorneys don't even realize the way they are keeping their time is inefficient. We interviewed one attorney who bragged to us about his

effective process. "I keep a grid sheet at my desk and when I do something I write it down. Every three or four days I dictate my time for my secretary. After she types it up, I review it. After I give the okay, my secretary enters it into our billing software system." This "effective" process requires a single time entry to be written or typed a total of three times and then reviewed three times before it lands in a pile on a partner's desk to be reviewed again. It is easy to see how attentive, but ineffective, timekeeping can become cumbersome rather than helpful.

### Clients monitoring the clock

Client scrutiny and the increasing frequency of clients telling their counsel exactly how they want their time entered can also create headaches. Every client is different and attorneys must occasionally reread the guidelines to determine if block style billing is acceptable or if legal research of more than an hour is chargeable. There are clients who pick apart every bill that goes out and routinely argue that a certain task should have been a .5 instead of an hour. This can be an absolute nightmare for the attorney and may even result in attorneys cutting their time when the initial bill is sent out to avoid a lengthy discussion with the client.

### Negative timekeeping attitudes

Most law firms do not spend a lot of time training their new associates on the process of timekeeping. It does not take long for a negative attitude toward the entire process to formulate. Attorneys quickly realize that if they are too efficient in their work, they get penalized and may hear about their low billable hours from their superiors. If the attorney is not efficient enough, their time will be cut and opportunities for advancement may be diminished. Furthermore, clients can be overcharged for the work of less than efficient lawyers.

Despite these timekeeping pains, one of our interviewees loves timekeeping.

### Attorney #30's Top Five Tips for Efficient Timekeeping

When we spoke with Attorney #30, he stated with genuine excitement: "I enjoy

timekeeping! It is the opportunity to showcase my talents for my clients. I love entering the details and descriptions into our billing software. It's my livelihood. If I don't bill, I don't get paid." Eventually, significant portions of the legal practice will move to alternative billing methods, but until that day, we must make do with what we have and learn from Attorney #30's timekeeping exuberance. These timekeeping strategies will help attorneys stay focused, organized, and profitable while providing clients with exceptional services.

**1. Record it now:** Keep time contemporaneously with each task performed. If your firm offers a timekeeping software program, use it! If your personal computer contains the firm's billing software, you have no excuse for not entering it yourself. It shouldn't take any more time than scribbling it out on a piece of paper, and it saves your secretary time in having to decipher your notation. If you are away from your desk, carry the pen and pad with you at all times. You learned to carry the cell phone and as a business tool the timesheet is just as important. Make a point to have your time entered before you leave for home each day.

**2. Itemize it:** Keeping a detailed account of your time will protect you later if you are forced to explain yourself to a client or to the court when opposing counsel charges your claim for attorney fees is exorbitant. Some clients require block billing, so obviously if a client provides guidelines you need to keep those in mind and follow them to the letter.

**3. Record it once:** Avoid confusing yourself or your assistant by taking notes on separate pieces of paper and then trying to coordinate the details. It is your responsibility to manage your time so make sure the time you spend trying to organize your unorganized timesheets isn't billed to your client.

**4. Review it once:** After you have done so, your timesheets are ready to go to your supervisor or client and were only recorded and reviewed once. Instead of losing two billable days per month as one attorney we interviewed claimed, you may

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only lose a small portion of one day per billing period.

**5. Enjoy it:** You don't have to fall in love with timekeeping, but training yourself to view timekeeping as a good thing can make your life better and your career more rewarding. Think of each time entry as cash in your hand. Just make sure your clients are paying you timely!

With an overhaul of your timekeeping process, you too may learn to love timekeeping. It sure would make life easier to share the outlook of Attorney #30. Use timekeeping as a way to showcase your talents....and to get paid.

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