

COLUMBUS BAR

Lawyers

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The Billable Hour

By Jeffrey A. Willis

Here are some helpful tips for one of the most important, yet disliked, requirements for many attorneys working in firms — keeping track of one's billable time:

0.1 Do it every day.

There are very few people that can remember what tasks they performed several days ago and even fewer people that can remember the exact timeframe spent completing such tasks. I am not one of those people. As such, for the majority of people like me, it is imperative to record your billable time as you go each day. Surprisingly, once you establish the habit of doing it each day, it no longer seems like a chore.

0.2 Be honest.

Whether you are padding your hours to meet your firm's expectations or not billing the full amount of time spent working on a task to please your boss, the failure to accurately record your time is not only unethical, it is a disservice to you, your firm, and your clients.

0.3 Know the billing requirements of each client.

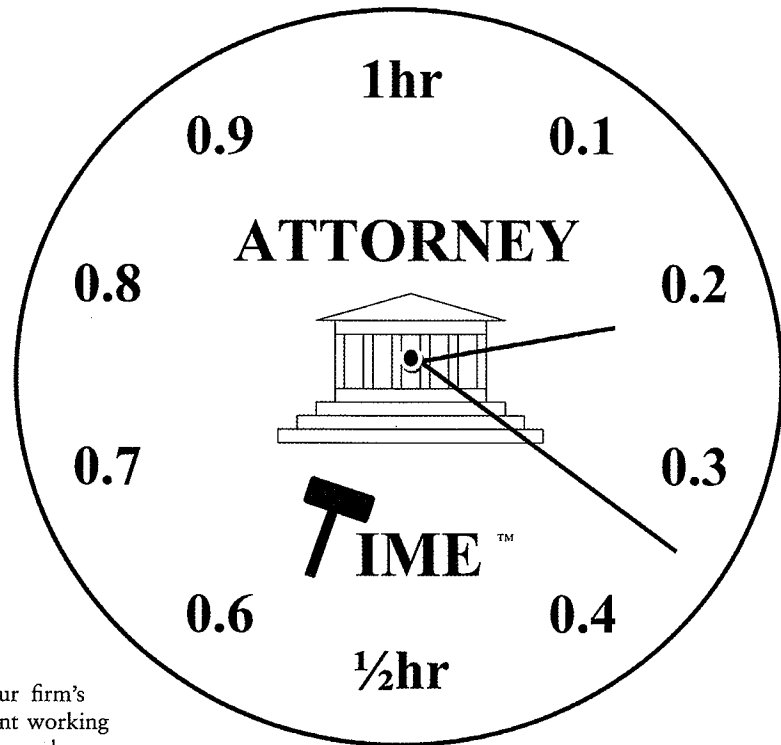
Certain clients, including many insurance companies, have specific guidelines as to what services or costs are reimbursable. Some require the use of codes for certain tasks, while others prefer a more detailed explanation of services rendered. Recording your time correctly the first time will help eliminate delays in receiving payments from the client, eliminate rejection of certain services, and avoid costly time spent on revising time entries at a future point.

0.4 Know the billing preferences of other attorneys.

Unless you are a solo practitioner, you likely will be working for another attorney's client at some point. Attorneys have different styles and requirements in terms of how they want billable time to be recorded. Some prefer that you itemize each individual task for that client, while some prefer related tasks be lumped to together into one entry (e.g., Perform legal research Ohio law for motion to dismiss and draft motion to dismiss). If you do not know the preferences of each attorney, I would recommend listing each task separately as it is much harder at a later date to separate the precise time spent on each task if they are merely lumped together.

0.5 Technology is your friend.

When I started practicing at a firm, I created a time entry template by using Microsoft Excel. The first thing I do each morning is to open the template and save it as a new document on my hard drive for



that specific day. Then, I keep the spreadsheet open the entire day and record a task as soon as I complete it. I found this leads to accurate time accounting and very detailed explanations of each task. It also is easier to store electronic time entries as opposed to paper copies, and it allows me to retrieve and review past time entries with only a few clicks of the mouse. Your legal assistant also will thank you as electronic time entries are easier to use for imputing time into the firm's accounting system and helps eliminate errors during that process.



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