Zero Click Time Capture

by Ray Deck of of Element55

Billable hours are the lifeblood of any major law firm, and capturing those hours accurately and in a timely manner is critical.

But recording billable activity to timesheets is often a pain for attorneys, and enforcing timely recording a headache for many firm administrators — with the frequent result that legitimate billable time goes unrecorded and unbilled.

The law firm of Edwards & Angell LLP found a pain remedy — and a way to reclaim additional billable hours with less effort. Last year, the 300-attorney firm implemented a fully-automated time capture system which records most time as it is worked, even when the attorney does not keep contemporaneous notes. It's called zero click time capture.

A Timesaving Timesheet

The heart of the system is a timesheet that is automatically pre-populated with activities conducted over the course of the day, such that it is mostly filled out when the attorney first opens it. He sees, for example:

.10 hours on an e-mail message to a client in re the schedule for completing a deal this month

.80 hours on a phone conference with opposing counsel

1.4 hours revising the pleading for another case

According to Keith Kotler, Director of Accounting at the firm, the system allows attorneys to find out exactly what they did during the day, and he says attorneys are amazed to learn all the little, yet billable, things they actually did. Some of them have an idea, of course, based on what they wrote down on a notepad. But what a surprise when they open up the timesheet and see the actual duration of their phone calls and quantity of their e-mail responses.

Integrating with Information Systems

The underlying power of zero-click time capture lies in its ability to communicate with the various applications and communication systems throughout the office to contribute to the automatic time entries without the attorney having to start or stop the clock or keep manual journals for most common activities. The system provides the following capabilities:

Integrates with the phone system to record the time, duration and phone number for outgoing and, when caller ID is available, incoming calls

Communicates with applications on the desktop and which document or e-mail message is being worked on or viewed in a given moment

Queries scheduling software on the attorney's calendar for appointments and meetings

Information management systems "fill the gaps" to provide better information on a captured activity:

Document management systems identify the proper client and matter for a document.

Contact and relationship management systems identify the person so attorneys don't merely get the phone number or e-mail address on the timesheet.

By collating information from multiple systems, automatic time capture gives the attorney the best possible picture of the day, with some time attributed to the proper client-matter and the balance containing enough description to make an intelligent decision how to assign the time.

Rollout and Attorney Reception

Rolling out the automatic time capture system at Edwards & Angell was relatively easy. According to Michael Morris, Training Director at Edwards & Angell, there was minimal resistance to the new automatic time entry system because almost everyone immediately recognized the benefit and realized that the new system would not be demanding more work on their part.

Some attorneys initially expressed concern that the system might enable closer scrutiny of their daily activities by accounting. But very soon they became convinced that was not the case. In fact, the new system proved to be incentivizing, as attorneys saw that all phone calls, e-mail and other time was being automatically recorded on the fly — and at the end the day all they had to do was put on the finishing touches by assigning to a matter and tweaking the narrative. They loved that they wouldn't have to pull out rag-tag sheets of paper at the end of the week to piece the whole thing together.

The automatic time capture serves as a memory jog for everyone. It has helped track time that would otherwise have fallen by the wayside. And by automatically ensuring that time is captured completely and in a timely manner, timesheets are more complete and detailed — a great benefit for clients who demand extremely detailed time records.

Reality Check

The firm conducted a review to quantify the increase in time captured. It was learned that attorneys and paralegals who used the automatic time capture software were, on average, capturing an additional six hours per month — valuable time that otherwise would have been missed and gone unbilled.

Two Lessons Learned

The system can be customized for individual work styles. Professionals have different styles of work that need to be considered when tracking their time. For example, some get more value out of tracking all their e-mail, while for others, only those that account for a significant amount of time need to be captured. Adjusting to the variation in work style was important to attorney adoption.

Technical support is minimal. The firm's user support team reported that the majority of inquiries they fielded regarding the automatic time capture were easily resolved simply by tweaking the thresholds for time capture to better reflect the attorney's working style.

ROI the Firm Can't Deny

The firm has concluded that the new system is the best example to date of direct return on investment in clear dollars, thanks to the combination of firm-level financial benefit, convenience for individual attorneys and client benefits.

This article was published in ILTA's white paper, *Finance: Accouting in the Electronic Age*, in March 2005 and is reprinted here with permission. For information about ILTA, visit their website at www.iltanet.org.