

TIPS & TECHNIQUES

Why Employees Hate to Track Their Time -
And What You Can Do About It*By Curt Finch*

My company sells employee time tracking software that automates client billing, project accounting and payroll. We have implemented these systems for customers repeatedly where the employees previously were unaccustomed to accounting for their time. Occasionally this has generated some intense emotions. Some people really don't want to track their time even when their managers are very firm.

Why is this? Why do people find tracking time so unpleasant, or even maddening?

And how about you? Do you like entering data into forms? Why or why not? Is tracking time any worse than filling out other forms?

My experience has shown that it often is for several reasons.

Reason One: *Reporting time can threaten status.* For salaried people, especially if they've been employed earlier in their life in an hourly "time clock" environment, reporting time can make them feel demoted. Conventional wisdom (that I disagree with) is that "professional" people are more trustworthy and less in need of supervision than "blue collar" people.

Reason Two: *"What if I find out that I don't work as much as I like to think?"* Some people, often the most productive people, garner self-esteem from the large number of hours they work. But sometimes they're not sure if they believe their own braggadocio and the thought of finding out the truth is scary.

Reason Three: *Time is an imperfect metric for effort or productivity.* Knowledge workers know that managers, who have the power to reward some people over others, often forget the vague and aggregated metrics of real productivity in favor of some simple numbers that are tangible, like time records. Managers may take the easy path of rewarding based on time spent rather than develop more subtle and appropriate metrics of real productivity. (Hint: don't do this)

Reason Four: *"I'm too busy"* The most responsible and busy employees - the most productive ones whose time is in highest demand - will, sooner or later, always have to stop doing the primary mission of the company to fill out a timesheet. The star employees tend to procrastinate regarding this task, subordinate it or even refuse to do it. Or worse, they'll create flawed records. On the other hand, the malingerers and marginal producers will often create perfect time records and never submit them late. This fact of life creates an impression in the minds of both that the whole exercise is worthless.

Reason Five: *"I've procrastinated too long - and now I don't remember what I did last week."* Procrastination results in useless time records. Who remembers what they had for lunch one day last week? When information - which was mostly made up - is eventually recorded about how much time was spent and on what, it often tends to understate the real accomplishments of the workweek. Reviewing this record can be demoralizing.

So - *newsflash* - it's an imperfect world. And people hate tracking their time for many reasons. But how can you possibly run a project oriented organization, especially one that bills for it's time, without time accounting? The answer is that, in this increasingly competitive world, **you can't**, at least not for long. If you don't get every hour billed that should be, or if you don't know which projects are profitable and which ones aren't, you're going down. Hard. Because somewhere in your numerous and growing array of competitors is a company that's getting it right. Your only choices are to follow or fail. Or you could lead - and be the first one to get it right.

So let's look at some ways to overcome all this employee resistance to time tracking.

Education and Buy-In: I am a free market capitalist. So naturally I always think that the most effective way to get people to do something is to make sure they understand what's really and truly in it for them. And there must be something - something that matters - in it for them.

- In the case of payroll for hourly workers, the desire to get paid fairly for every hour they actually work provides the incentive.
- In the case of billing automation, it's revenue for the company (i.e. a successful company). Most people can understand this, and they care about the success of their company. If your employees do not care about the success of your company, timesheets won't help you. You have to go back to the basics of creating a moral and compelling vision of how your company helps humanity (or fluffy bunnies, or whatever.) In the absence of having that strong vision, "bonusing" employees for their success in some intelligent way is usually helpful, although often fraught with opportunities to misstep.
- Project accounting is more abstract than payroll or billing. If done badly, it can lead to unnecessary overtime, stressful blown schedules, bad estimates and cancelled projects. Relating specific examples from your company in which good time collection could have prevented problems helps to get employees on board.

Adoption Dashboard: It helps to include graphs that clearly illustrate which departments and people are entering their time consistently and completely, and which are not. This helps managers understand early on who they need to badger about getting their time recorded, or who to reward for doing a good job in this area.

Phased Rollout: Adopting a multiphase rollout approach that leads to per-person per-project profitability allows you to change the culture in more manageable steps.

Incentives: Linking bonuses or other benefits with complete data collection is often used in customer relationship management (CRM) tools to adjust sales commissions. The same can be done for other forms of data collection. My company, Journyx Inc., has a patent—we call it the 'frequent flyer patent'—for automatically rewarding your employees on your behalf for timely time reporting.

Email Reminders: Getting an automated reminder when your time has not yet been entered produces results...usually! Some percentage of people will become more timely with their data entry via this method. But be careful about overdoing the number of automated emails that you send. People will naturally start ignoring them if you send too many.

Implementing Project Accounting: If you have more than five people in your organization and they are working on many projects or within many processes, it is time to start thinking about implementing time tracking. If you have 100 people in an R+D group and you're not tracking time, then you're wasting the lives and work of a significant percentage of your employees. You might have them working on projects that the market will not reward you for, which are over budget or otherwise in the ditch, and you don't know that today.



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Curt Finch is the CEO of Journyx (<http://pr.journyx.com>), a provider of free Web-based software located in Austin, Texas, USA that automates billing, payroll & project management by tracking time, expenses and mileage. Journyx has thousands of customers worldwide including American Airlines, Bayer, BlueCross BlueShield, AC Nielsen and others. Journyx is the first and only company to establish Per Person/Per Project Profitability (P5), a proprietary process that enables customers to gather and analyze information to discover profit opportunities. Finch is a software industry veteran. In 1997, Curt created the world's first Internet-based timesheet application and the foundation for the current Journyx product offering. Curt has managed development teams creating enterprise-level software solutions since 1985, with a focus on distributed workforce management. In 1992, Finch led the team porting Tivoli's product line to the AIX operating system, which led to the company's acquisition by IBM. As a member of the executive team, Curt helped launch The Kernel Group (TKG), a venture-backed firm that grew to 50 employees and \$7.5 million in sales during his tenure. Curt has a B.S. in Computer Science from Virginia Tech University in the USA. Curt Finch can be reached at curt@journyx.com.