



Making Time Entry Profitable: Increasing Efficiency through Ease of Use, Constant Availability, and Mobility

Executive Summary

Client satisfaction and profitability are essential to the success of every law practice. Achieving these strategic objectives depends on the ability of attorneys and legal staff to track billable time efficiently and accurately. But despite numerous advances in technology that have led to streamlined workflow processes and increased mobility, attorneys often find themselves bogged down by time entry systems that are slow, cumbersome, and time-consuming. This paper discusses the challenges presented by inefficient time entry systems, suggestions for changing the time entry paradigm, and best practices for adopting new strategies to increase billable time, thereby increasing client satisfaction and profitability.

Spending Time Tracking Billable Time

With attorneys and legal professionals becoming increasingly mobile and the workplace now a fast-paced global arena rather than a brick and mortar office, accurate time entry is more important than ever. Successful law practices have their foundations firmly rooted in being able to track billable time accurately, which keeps clients happy and maintains a strong bottom line. Thanks to advances in technology, paper-based time entry is a thing of the past and digital time entry systems are the standard throughout the legal industry. But when busy professionals need to track their time while they travel the world, the frustrations of slow connections, downtime, and network traffic can hamper their ability to track time effectively.

Most time entry systems today require database drivers to be installed on each client PC, and staying online requires a constant reliable connection to the network. Users must access the network to create client and project entries and then post information to a central database maintained on the server. Almost every timekeeping action requires the user to wait for the server to receive a request and respond to it before going on to the next action.

As a result, a slow or intermittent connection to the network can result in users spending an inordinate amount of time simply waiting for an opportunity to enter billable time. If issues with the internal infrastructure block access to the network, users are unable to log a time entry until the network is back online. Moreover, as law firms expand and more timekeepers need to access the network, bandwidth and latency issues as well as overburdened servers and busy databases further slow down time entry.

TCO and Deployment Issues Hamper Productivity and Profitability

Network and infrastructure issues are not the only stumbling blocks to time entry. Non-intuitive user interfaces add to the amount of unbillable time as legal staffers learn how to use a time entry system and create individual entries

for billable time. Having to access a central database with a fixed number of categories available for billable time makes it difficult or impossible for timekeepers to track each client project individually. The larger the firm, the greater the number of servers required to accommodate requests and storage of time entries. And when accounting departments need to access servers to collect data and create monthly reports, timekeeper access is restricted further.

Many firms upgrade to new software and hardware technology in an effort to increase revenue and productivity and thereby lower costs. However, the time and expense of deploying and learning new technology can easily offset the benefits of adopting a new time entry system. Realizing a return on investment can take months or even years. By the time the technology has paid for itself, even newer technology is available.

In order to keep up with the ever-increasing speed of today's legal landscape, a law practice needs to step away from "business as usual" time entry strategies by implementing a time entry system that is not dependent on connection state, overburdened servers, Web page refreshes, or busy databases. Users need to be able to track their time no matter where they are in the world without having to wait.

Changing the Time Entry Paradigm with DTE Axiom

Law firms can meet the challenge of time-consuming time entry by adopting a solution that eliminates dependency on network stability. DTE Axiom is an Internet-based application that does not require a constant connection over TCP/IP. Instead of users needing to access a central database continuously through a network in order to record time entries, DTE Axiom uses an on-demand middle tier architecture to store validation data and user-specific time data on the client in a location determined by the network administrator. Locally cached data allows a user to keep working regardless of the network infrastructure. Users can work online or offline, and queue entries to propagate them to the central database later. See Figure 1.



Figure 1. DTE Axiom centralizes time databases to reduce maintenance without slowing users down



DTE Axiom's updated connectivity paradigm keeps all user interactions inside the application on the client, and an indicator on the toolbar and at the bottom of the calendar window shows the status of queued entries. Utilizing background processing, the program periodically checks in with the server(s) for data changes it needs to either receive or post. Local access to time entry data allows users to track their time without being delayed or limited by a connection to the server. As a result, users can quickly search, scroll, or filter through any time and validation data.

A Familiar Interface Speeds Implementation and Lowers Learning Curves

DTE Axiom presents users with a familiar look that simulates the latest Microsoft Office 2007 interface. The calendar-based home screen uses modern software controls, ribbon toolbars, and drop-down menus just like many other programs users have worked with for years. See Figure 2.



Figure 2. DTE Axiom calendar-based interface

Using standard interface designs and graphic elements minimizes retraining, which further increases productivity because attorneys and staff can get up to speed quickly and begin using the product. If multiple timekeepers use DTE Axiom to enter time, they can choose from a previously created list of displayed names or use a timekeeper search field to choose a new timekeeper.

User-created templates and user-defined fields also help speed time entry, and a built-in spellchecker ensures accuracy. Templates offer virtually unlimited combinations of ways to create time entries and templates can be stored in groups to keep them organized. After defining a few templates, a user can invoke DTE Axiom's TimeSaver feature to enter time quickly by clicking a template to start a timer and then clicking again to stop the timer. Timekeepers can create nicknames and user-defined field codes to simplify access to frequently used clients and projects.

Less Typing, Faster Entries

Familiar narrative codes eliminate the need to enter redundant strings of narrative text each time an entry is made. A recent entries screen simplifies time entry further by allowing a user to view every completed time entry, select one, and then create a time entry that is fully filled out or needs just minor adjustments. A user can narrow down the list by typing a few words into a text search field or specifying a time range to search within, and then double-clicking to create a new time entry from information in the selected entry.

Every time a user creates a TimeSaver, DTE Axiom creates a related time entry automatically, eliminating the need for extra steps. TimeSavers minimize to the Windows taskbar, and a user can easily switch from one timer to another, automatically updating their DTE calendar at the same time. DTE Axiom's daily view identifies unbilled gaps in a day so a user can create a time entry for that interval or drag and drop the gap onto any of the completed time entries to add that time gap to an existing entry. See Figure 3.

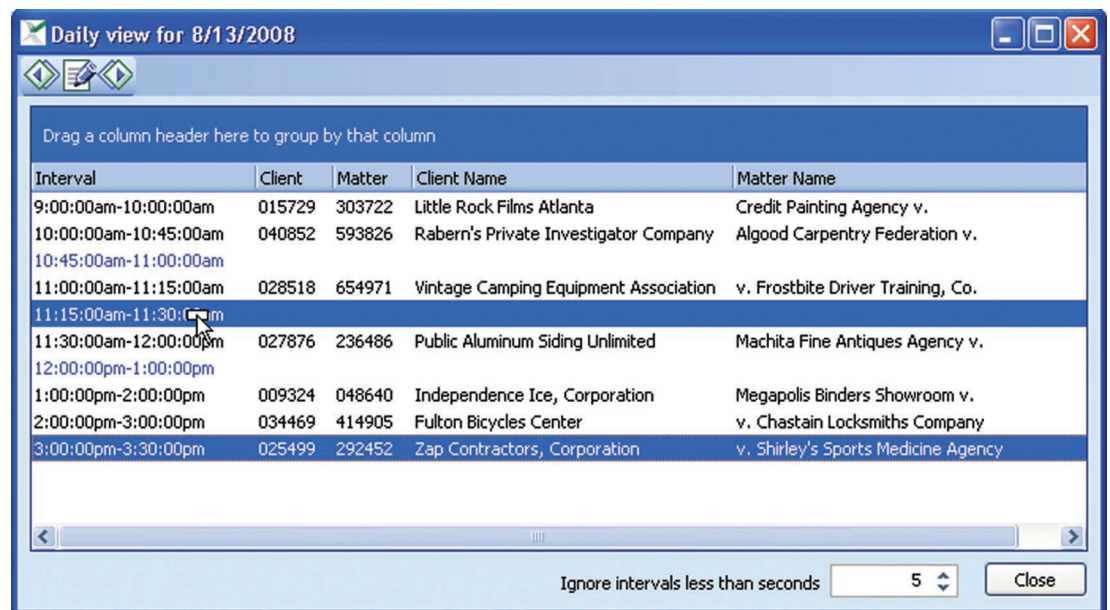


Figure 3. DTE Axiom Daily View

Simplifying the process of creating entries and tracking billable time lessens the amount of time required to track time. And being able to free up more time while working results in increased billing and more accurate billing information.

Independent System Protects Administration and Enables Efficient Reporting

DTE Axiom provides many features to speed the entry of financial information:

- Accounting staff can view time and expense entries in daily, weekly, or monthly views and instantly create HTML reports over a range of time to identify trends.
- Customizable Crystal Reports formats give timekeepers and management fast and easy access to billable and non-billable time and expenses.



- Workgroup reporting allows practice managers to review case and client billings quickly.
- Time and expense data can be exported manually or automatically to match any billing systems' text file import format, with validation information automatically synchronized between any SQL or text file source system.

DTE Axiom tracks time entries independently from billing systems, eliminating administrative workload and downtime issues. Network traffic and timekeeper workloads do not affect accounting, and accounting report generation does not interfere with time entry. Should the billing system become unavailable, timekeepers are not affected and can continue to enter their time and expenses. By the same token, misconfiguration of a client system by an administrator will not disable the accounting system.

Taking Time Entry on the Road and Keeping it Safe

Timekeepers can track and enter time from anywhere in the world via the Internet or an intranet. DTE Axiom is accessible from a laptop, mobile device, outside network, or even a flash drive containing the entire program. Because the system is Internet-based, users have full access to all the same functions and features regardless of the endpoint they are using, without having to retrain on a variant version of the software. An optional HTTPS secure connection allows users to work securely from home, hotels, WiFi hotspots, and inside client networks.

As attorneys spend increasing amounts of time on the road and in client settings, data must be protected against breaches from outside the network. A breached system not only compromises client confidentiality, but it is a liability to the profitability and reputation of the firm. To protect against security threats, DTE Axiom uses industry standard 128-bit Blowfish technology for public key encryption to secure data both inside and outside law offices.

Protecting confidential client information within the firm is also a high priority, particularly as firms grow and absorb senior talent. The Ethical Walls capabilities incorporated into DTE Axiom allow administrators to manage memberships manually or automatically to control levels of security internally using multi-level, multi-tiered group and security configurations. Sensitive information cannot be released beyond approved personnel, thereby controlling internal access to individual clients and projects. Obscuration can be created based on login or group membership for attorneys and professional staff when they are subject to a wall. Firms can choose to enforce "password only" access inside the office, outside the office, or both.

Easily Deploying Technologies for Efficient Timekeeping

DTE Axiom accommodates thousands of timekeepers on a single server, regardless of where they are located. As a result, large practices with more than a single office can centralize data from multiple servers to just one, reducing hardware and support costs and easing server maintenance workloads. Law firms can eliminate large, upfront expenses for software by paying for only what they use. The DTE Axiom Active Timekeeper Licensing membership requires users to pay only a per-user monthly rate that covers licensing, maintenance, software upgrades, and technical support.

Because DTE Axiom runs over an existing IIS server infrastructure, its footprint is so small that users can run it from a flash drive. The software does not use the Windows registry, and users or administrators can install it by downloading from a browser or via Enterprise "Push." The combination of locally cached data and background threads removes any network and server dependencies. There is no database installation required on client PCs, so initial configuration and implementation typically require only one or two days, even in very large law firms.



Reducing Databases Reduces Complexity for a Global Law Firm

A New York firm with more than 2,300 lawyers throughout 20 countries needed a time entry system that could reduce network infrastructure dependencies while providing simple methods for attorneys, paralegals, and secretaries to enter time. The firm evaluated several leading products and ultimately turned to Advanced Productivity Software, the makers of DTE, for their newest solution, DTE Axiom.

DTE Axiom provides exactly the functionality this firm has been looking for, and will enable them to use a single database to replace more than 30 time databases they have been maintaining worldwide. DTE Axiom's centralized approach should result in a dramatic savings of time and complexity for the firm by eliminating the need for administrators to collect time from these many databases and synchronize validation data with them as well. DTE Axiom's patent-pending architecture enables this drastic reduction without hindering the user experience with the slow data transfers, latency, and sluggish screen refreshes that other centralization solutions impose. "It is quite gratifying to be able to solve what the customer feels is a compromising situation by providing a solution that pleases both IT and accounting departments as well as timekeepers," says Matthew McInerney, DTE Product Manager.

Conclusion

In a busy law practice, accurate and efficient time entry is essential for ensuring client satisfaction and profitability. For an organization to remain competitive and achieve its strategic goals, "business as usual" is no longer good enough. DTE Axiom has changed the time entry paradigm for legal professionals by delivering power and flexibility without the frustrations of slow Internet connections, downtime, and network traffic. DTE Axiom's fast, reliable timekeeping technology can meet the needs of IT, accounting, and legal professionals in any law firm and help pave the way to success.

About Advanced Productivity Software

Since 1990, Advanced Productivity Software (APS) has been dedicated to developing highly scalable time-tracking software to meet the needs of today's law firms. Hundreds of thousands of users worldwide depend on APS software solutions including DTE Axiom for time entry, RollCall for staff time and attendance tracking, and LookUp Precision for online usage tracking, cost recovery, and password management. APS software products are installed in law firms worldwide, including more than half of the AmLaw 100 firms. More information is available at www.aps-soft.com.



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