Legal Time Tracking: The Complete Guide for Law Firms

There's more than one way to track billable time in a law firm.

Some lawyers start a timer as they work. Others enter time manually at the end of the day. Some use mobile time trackers to capture work on the go, and others let passive timekeeping tools record billable time while the work is actually happening.

Each method comes with different tradeoffs in accuracy, effort, and convenience.

So which legal time tracking method actually works best?

The short answer: The best method is the one you'll use consistently. You don't have to use the most advanced approach if your tracking needs are simple, but you do need a process that makes it easy to capture time accurately and completely.

The harder part is getting everyone in the firm to do it the same way, every day. That starts with understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each time-tracking method.

Why Your Method Matters

One of the biggest differences between legal time tracking methods is when time gets recorded. Research shows that the longer lawyers wait to enter time, the easier it is for billable hours to slip away.

According to the American Bar Association, waiting until the end of the week can result in up to 20% of billable hours lost, while the potential loss rises over 50% when time is entered more than a week after the work is completed.

If you work an average of 12.5 billable hours in a week at $300 per hour, a 20% loss could represent $750 in unbilled work. A 50% loss could mean $1,875 of billable time never reaches an invoice.

No matter which method your firm decides to use, the most important consideration is that time gets tracked as close to the work as possible so fewer billable hours get missed.

Compare the Top 4 Time Tracking Methods for Lawyers

Every timekeeping approach has its pros and cons. Let's compare four common methods in terms of accuracy, effort, and what each is best for.

Method	How It Works	Accuracy	Effort	Best For
Timer Tracking	Start, pause, and stop timers while working on a task	High when used consistently	Low to moderate	Switching between tasks throughout the day
Manual or Batch Entry	Estimate and record time after the fact (i.e., end of day/week)	Low; depends heavily on how soon time is entered	Moderate	Predictable workflows or a small number of daily matters
Mobile Time Tracking	Use timers or manual entry to log billable hours from mobile devices	High when entries are made as work happens	Low	Court, closings, traveling, or working away from the office

Passive Time Capture	Software records work activity in the background and automatically creates suggested entries	High, with potential to capture billable time other methods miss	Low	Most complete record of billable time with the least manual effort

Of these four attorney time tracking methods, a combination of mobile tracking and passive timekeeping is often the most accurate and complete option.

- Timers have a built-in disadvantage: if someone forgets to start or stop the timer, or begins multitasking while a timer is running, it's no longer accurate.
- Manual and batch entry present a similar problem, as estimating time after work is complete tends to result in underbilling.
- Mobile time tracking can be an effective method, but disconnected apps on individual phones or tablets may not be suitable for firm-wide use.
- Passive time capture reduces reliance on memory and actively tracks time as work is completed, making it a more dependable and complete method for law firms.

Where Does Time-Tracking Software Fit?

Legal time tracking software brings multiple methods into one system, so lawyers can choose the approach that works best for the firm. Features may include timers, mobile entry, passive timekeeping, and options for manual or batch entry to add any time that wasn't recorded.

That flexibility ensures more entries follow the same process across the firm. And when firms use integrated time and billing software, each entry stays connected to the right client and matter to make invoicing easier.

What Passive Time Capture Actually Means

Passive, or automatic, time capture is designed to record billable activity in the background as work is performed. The benefit is higher accuracy, less

manual effort, and more consistent timekeeping practices across the firm.

Here's how passive time tracking for lawyers works.

Instead of starting a timer every time you open a document, answer an email, make a call, or go to court, passive timekeeping tools keep a running record of that activity.

For example, it may recognize that you spent 18 minutes reviewing a document, 12 minutes responding to a client email, and 25 minutes on a call. It can also use your calendar events to account for scheduled work like court appearances, client meetings, or closings.

That recorded activity can be organized into suggested time entries that you review, assign to the correct client or matter, edit if needed, and turn into invoice-ready entries.

Each day ends with a complete record of the work that happened instead of attempting to rebuild it all from memory.

Because passive time tools monitor work activity, make sure you understand what gets captured, where that data is stored, who can access it, and whether you can review or exclude activity before it becomes a time entry.

Build Time Entry Discipline Across the Firm

No time-tracking method is effective if lawyers use it inconsistently or default to estimates. Firms need a few simple standards that make entering time a prompt, consistent, and convenient process.

Start with the basics:

- Set a daily entry deadline. Ask lawyers to review and submit the day's entries before a set cutoff time to increase accuracy.
- Use the same billing increments. How do attorneys bill in your firm? Six-minute increments are common, but make sure each lawyer applies one standard consistently.
- Track non-billable time, too. Administrative work and other non-billable activity still help your firm understand efficiency, productivity, and

profitability for each matter.
- Write clear descriptions. Time entries should explain what work was performed without forcing billing staff to rewrite vague descriptions.
- Review for completeness. Check entries at regular intervals to look for missing or questionable records that need to be corrected before invoices go out.

The quality of your entries matters. Clear descriptions help clients understand what they're being charged for and give your firm a stronger record of the work performed if an entry is questioned later.

For example, "Research — 1.2 hours" is a vague description. "Research statute of limitations issues related to breach of contract claim — 1.2 hours" is stronger.

Make Mobile Time Tracking Easy

When legal work takes you away from your desk, billable hours still need to be recorded. Court appearances, meetings, travel, remote work, and calls taken on the go all create time that can be harder to remember and log once the day is over.

Mobile time tracking can solve that problem, but a general time-tracking app may only capture the duration of work. If it doesn't connect the entry to the right client, matter, billing rate, and firm workflow, someone still has to sort it out later.

Look for mobile time-tracking features that make it easy to:

- Start and stop timers from a phone or tablet
- Enter time manually or offline when needed
- Assign entries to the right client or matter
- Add clear descriptions while the details are fresh
- Sync mobile entries back to the same time and billing system your firm uses

The easier it is to record time away from the office, the more consistent time tracking will be across the firm.

INFOGRAPHIC

Best Practices for Accurate and Efficient Time Tracking

A one page reference your team can follow to capture time accurately, with less chasing at the end of the day.

Get the infographic

Turn Time Entries into Billing and Better Reports

Time tracking should give you more than a list of hours. Once time is recorded, those entries need to feed into your billing, financial records, and reports without adding more manual work.

That's where an integrated time and billing system makes a difference. Recorded time gets tracked, billed, and collected in the same place, so data follows through from capture to invoice to reporting without starting over each time.

When time entries automatically flow into invoices and update reports, the process looks like this:

Time captured Reviewed Billed Paid Reported

The distinction is how much of the billing process happens without manual input. More information goes where it's needed next, and lawyers spend less time recreating, estimating, or re-entering work that's already done.

That gives billing teams cleaner entries to work from, keeps invoice data current, and makes reports more accurate because fewer billable hours get missed.

From there, firm leadership can compare what was worked, billed, and collected to get a more reliable view of realization and profitability across the firm.

What a Day of Time Tracking Looks Like in TimeSolv

Picture a three-lawyer firm where everyone tracks time differently. One prefers timers, another spends much of the day in court and meetings, and the third relies on passive timekeeping tools.

TimeSolv lets each lawyer use the method that fits their day while keeping every entry in the same system, tied to the right client, and ready to move into review, billing, and reporting.

9:00 a.m.: Capture Starts

Lawyer 1 switches between timers as work changes from drafting to answering a client call. Lawyer 2 starts recording court time from the mobile app. Lawyer 3 uses the TimeSolv PointOne integration to capture activity passively throughout the morning.

4:30 p.m.: Entries Come Together

Each lawyer reviews the day's entries, uses built-in shortcuts to add clear descriptions while the details are fresh, and submits invoice-ready entries for approval.

5:00 p.m.: Time Is Ready for Billing

Approved time moves into billing without anyone rebuilding the day from notes, calendars, emails, or separate tracking tools.

What TimeSolv makes possible is keeping time entry flexible without fragmenting it. Lawyers can track time in different ways that suit their workflows, but the firm still gets one consistent record of billable activity.

That means fewer billable entries go missing, less time goes toward estimating and reconstructing the day, and the flow from time capture to billing gets simpler.

Where Time Tracking for Lawyers Gets Easier to Master

The less lawyers have to think about time tracking, the more attention they can give to legal work. And the more complete your time records are, the less revenue gets left behind.

That's what TimeSolv is built for. One connected time and billing system gives lawyers simple ways to capture time throughout the day, then keeps every entry moving through billing, payments, and reporting with less manual work.

Make time tracking easier to get right, every day. Start your free 10-day trial now to explore a more consistent way to work, bill, and get paid in TimeSolv.

Frequently Asked Questions

How do lawyers track billable hours?

Lawyers typically track billable hours using time tracking tools, timers, manual or batch entry, mobile time tracking apps, or passive time capture. The most accurate approach is to record time quickly after the work is completed to keep billable hours from being lost.

What is the best way to track time as an attorney?

The best attorney time tracking method is one you use consistently. Timers work well for focused tasks, mobile apps help capture work on the go, and

passive time-tracking tools reduce reliance on memory by recording billable activity as it happens.

Should lawyers track non-billable time?

Yes. Tracking non-billable time gives law firms a more complete picture of where lawyers spend their time throughout the day. That data is necessary for a clear view of the firm's efficiency and profitability over time.

What is passive time capture?

Passive time capture records lawyer activity in the background as work happens. Depending on the system, it can recognize when a lawyer starts and stops working on a new task and when a scheduled calendar event begins and ends to create suggested time entries for that duration of time.

EXPLORE TIMESOLV

See how your firm would track time in TimeSolv

Run your own matters, rates and timers through TimeSolv free for 10 days, no credit card required.

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