Strategies for Accurate Time Keeping

The joys of time keeping. While it's the vehicle by which your practice gets paid, it is also one of the most hated tasks among attorneys. This disdain for time tracking can often lead to inaccurate entries, whether from memory lapse or the effects of procrastination. Whatever the cause, inaccurate timekeeping can harm your practice, resulting in lost profits and/or dissatisfied clients. This post discusses some strategies for promoting accurate time tracking within your firm.

Provide detailed descriptions

When reviewing an invoice, clients like to see detailed explanations regarding the services they are paying to receive. That means that simple phrases like "conference" or "document review" are probably insufficient to provide a clear description of work done and why it took the stated amount of time. To combat this potential client conflict, use detailed task descriptions when time tracking. Here are some examples:

- A "conference" description should include the participants and purpose of the meeting. Therefore a more effective description might state "In-office conference with defendant's attorney in regards to settlement negotiations." The client now knows who was involved, where the conference took place, and what was discussed.
- A "document review" description tells the client nothing about the types of documents being reviewed. In addition, if this was a lengthy task, the client may question the amount of time spent upon seeing such a general description. That translates to wasted office time and resources on an issue that could have been avoided with a more detailed task description. Consider this one: "Review of medical documents and

billing statements from Washington General Hospital." Now, the client knows what documents were reviewed and may be more understanding of the time spent sorting through complex medical records.

In the discussion about task descriptions, it's also important to touch on time blocking, which is a method that many attorneys use for time entries. With blocking, instead of listing each individual task, the attorney may lump them all into one collective block of time. For instance, let's say you worked on Mrs. Johnson's case for most of the workday. First, you drafted court filings. Then, you spoke with several witnesses. Lastly, you had a settlement conference call with her attorney. With time blocking, you may track 5 hours of time for Mrs. Johnson, with a generic description like "case preparation". To promote accurate time keeping, it is much more effective to track and enter each of these tasks individually. It holds you more accountable for the accuracy of your time tracking and it also provides your client with a more comprehensive view of work done in her case.

Encourage contemporaneous tracking

Every lawyer has his or her own way of tracking the time spent on a task, but most fall into one of these categories:

- The reconstructive biller – This attorney has a set time of the day or week to enter their tasks. These attorneys try to reconstruct what they did for each client and make all entries into the time tracking system at one time. The argument for this type of billing behaviour generally focuses on the hatred that many attorneys have for time entry. Instead of doing it throughout the day, as soon as it occurs, they would rather wait (some might say procrastinate) and do all of their time tracking during one specified period of time. They may even delay their time tracking until it is time to send the client an invoice.The most common problem with this type of time tracking is accuracy. These attorneys are relying heavily on their memories to reconstruct the activities of their day or week. They may forget about an unscheduled task that was completed or overestimate the amount of time a task actually took to

complete. This type of time tracking can easily lead to inaccurate billing that either overbills the client or cheats your firm out of earned profit.
- The contemporaneous biller – This lawyer tracks their time as soon as the task is completed. They do not have to rely on unreliable memories or comb through their calendars trying to piece together their days. Instead, when the task is completed, they enter the time into the tracking system. This is the most effective method of time tracking, resulting in more accurate billing statements.

Arguments against contemporaneous billing usually focus on the inconvenience of entering time in the midst of a busy work day. However, with the right time tracking system, the process becomes quick and conveniently fits into your busy schedule. The folks at TImeSolv constantly consider the time restraints that most attorneys work under. That's why they offer a time tracking and billing system that is user friendly and well-suited for your demanding schedule. When performing tasks from your desk, you can easily track your time by accessing the TimeSolv toolbar. The timer will automatically keep track until you tell it to stop. You can even track multiple tasks simultaneously. Firm-wide customization codes also help save time by providing uniform language for entry descriptions. With TimeSolv Mobile, time tracking is possible from virtually anywhere. You can use your smartphone, laptop, or tablet to quickly track your tasks, even when there's no available internet connection. To learn more about accurate time keeping with TimeSolv, click here for a free trial.

Strict deadlines

As a law firm leader or manager, you can encourage accurate and timely tracking by implementing strict deadlines for time entries. You may have a policy that requires daily or weekly time tracking. You may even require that all tasks be entered within 48 hours of completion. Only you know what works best for your practice, but these types of requirements and rules can gently nudge your lawyers into developing contemporaneous time tracking practices and guard against profit-stealing procrastination. To really drive home the point, make sure that there are real consequences for consistently missing time tracking deadlines so repeat offenders fall in line.

With a combination of innovative technology and firm-wide strategies, you can promote accurate time tracking within your law practice. Take some time to review the current tracking habits of your attorneys and implement changes as needed. A small effort could lead to increased profits and more satisfied clients.

About Erika Winston:

Erika Winston is a freelance writer with a passion for law. Through her business, The Legal Writing Studio, she helps legal professionals deliver effective written messages. Erika is a regular contributor to TimeSolv and a variety of other publications.