



Feature

Practical Billing Tips for Paralegals

By Ursula Furi-Perry

As courts continue to enforce the recovery of paralegal fees for many legal services, legal staff are faced with the task of billing their time. “We’re charging our time at a professional level,” said Jeanine Rogers, President of TimeBillers, Inc., a billing service for law firms. As such, legal staff must “be aware of their flexibility and education, of what they’re providing.”



The rules behind billing are simple. Accuracy, specificity, diligence, and professionalism are all necessary for successful billing practices. “Bill promptly, bill specifically, and show value,” recommended Leonard Bucklin, trial lawyer and expert on litigation management and attorney fees. Proper billing

practices not only lessen client dissatisfaction and disputes over fees, but they can also help legal staff shine. “A lot of paralegals and their raises are evaluated by how many hours they put in,” explained Rogers. Supervising attorneys, as well as clients billed for paralegal services, will be more satisfied with legal staff that keep close track of their time. “If you show the value that was created, it will raise your stock, whether with the attorney that was supervising or the client,” Bucklin said.

Consider the following practical tips for billing:

- **Phrase time entries properly.** “That description you’re writing on time sheets is very likely to come out verbatim on the client’s bill,” Rogers said. As such, time descriptions should be detailed and specific. Bucklin counsels against simply entering general tasks on time sheets. For example, don’t just write down legal research, but indicate also what specific authority or area of the law was researched. Use present tense verbs that convey actions, says Rogers, and make sure you spell everything out.
 - **Understand what’s billable.** Courts are cautious to award paralegal fees only for legal and professional services. “You can recover for work that is legal, but not clerical or administrative,” said Bucklin. Be sure to describe billable time in a manner that
- conveys its professional and legal nature, as disputes over paralegal fees may center on the way a time entry is phrased. As an example, the time entry “file organization” may sound clerical, even if it’s intended for time spent on organizing a trial notebook. “Paralegals need to be cognizant of what they’re providing for the client in a non-secretarial manner and describe it as such,” said Rogers.
 - **Have adequate equipment and supplies.** Firms are still businesses, Rogers said, so “you have to be set up to track your time and collect it contemporaneously.” Bucklin recommends using a computerized billing system and clock, while Rogers swears by plenty of blank time sheets.
 - **Account for all interruptions.** Phone calls, meetings, and new assignments may pop up during a task, so keeping track of all start and stop times is essential. “You have to write down your stop time every time you get interrupted,” said Rogers. “If the interruption is for another client, write down your start time [for that case].”
 - **Don’t guess.** “Guessing results in the wrong time and...even amounts which look suspicious,” Bucklin stated. To avoid speculation, prompt timekeeping is the best bet. “Try to think of everything you did yesterday, and write it down today,” Bucklin pointed out. “You’ll find that it doesn’t work.”
 - **Establish a timekeeper’s notebook,** in which you should write down tasks immediately after they’re performed. Besides noting accurate time, Rogers recommends citing the action performed; its object or purpose, the client and parties involved; the task’s location, if it pertains to a special event; and the



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reasons for performing the task. To help keep you from scrambling for descriptions, “have a list of work codes and abbreviations handy...and a list of [open] cases at the firm,” Rogers advised.

- **Keep track of all of your time**—even tasks that won’t be billed. “I think it’s important to write down your non-billable hours,” Bucklin said. “It’s self-discipline; you can see what you should be eliminating and find places to prioritize.”

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