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Top 5 Time Recording & Project Management Tools

There is one necessary evil that every service based organisation: the timesheet.

Employees avoid it at every opportunity, but eventually, time - or the poor soul in charge of collecting timesheets - catches up with them. The real problem with timesheets is that they require you to track time on every single thing you do, and no one likes to be micromanaged. No one wants to know if that project took longer than it should have or discover how few hours they actually spent on "real" work that week.

The Reason for Tracking Time

The problem is unavoidable. The service-based industry is built on billable hours. Even retainers are based on an understanding of how much time a business will spend on a specific client each month.

The other problem is that people don't actually track their time, so organisations never have a true understanding of how much time is required to complete a project. Consider this: A designer estimates it will take 10 hours to complete a design. Three months later, he fills out his timesheet over a period of two weeks, accounting for 11 hours of design time. He didn't actually track his time, but he thinks it's in that ballpark. Besides, it looks good that he spent a lot of work on the project. The Account Director reviews the timesheets and compares it to the original estimate. There are two implications: 1) The project is unprofitable. 2) Future quotes for this type of design project will be set at 15 hours.
Now, if the designer had tracked his time accurately, he would have been able to say that it actually took him 6 hours to complete the project. This knowledge would have changed the agency's view of that project. In addition, this miscalculation causes inflated prices moving forward.
It creates the misconception that anything below 15 hours could be unprofitable for the agency.

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Timesheets are a necessary evil if profitability is a concern. But you can make it easier on your staff to make time tracking a part of their daily work.

4 Tips for Getting Employees to Track Their Time

One of the biggest problems, even if you've made time tracking mandatory, is that timesheets are ignored and therefore inaccurate. To get your team on board with time recording, follow these rules:

1. Communicate the benefit of tracking time

Forcing employees to track their time can breed suspicion - they feel like they are constantly being monitored and timesheets are a way to "check in" that they are doing what they should be doing. It's important that you explain time tracking is not about a lack of trust; it's about making sure the company remains profitable, as mentioned above. And profit leads to bonuses, training and pay rises and investments in future "fun" things. Time tracking can also help to improve forecasting and capacity issues, removing the stress because your business has underestimated the project and overpromised to the client.

2. Provide training and support

Make sure every single employee - <u>including leadership</u> - is trained on how to use the time tracking program, how to submit timesheets, and how to review their own productivity. Create a guide for new employees to read over during their induction and make sure you stay up-to-date on improvements in the software. One of the barriers to tracking time is overcomplicated and unusable software.

3. Reward employees who follow guidelines

If your business requires timesheets, then tracking time is just part of the job. But you can reward employees with small gifts or recognition if they consistently submit accurate timesheets on time. One fun way to do this is

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to give your employees back their "time" by letting those who do this well leave early once a month on a Friday. Use a role model example to show everyone else it can be done!

4. Make it a seamless part of their workday

People don't look forward to logging hours in a spreadsheet every Friday at 5 p.m. Choose a tool that works with your business, and ask for people to test out and review various apps. Do people want to integrate the tool with their calendar or project management software? Is having a mobile app necessary? Do your managers need to be able to see when remote workers are online and working? Consider what would cause the least disruption in your team's workday.

In the next section, I outline a few tools you can consider.

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5 Time Tracking Software Options to Evaluate

To really understand how much time it takes to write a blog post or design a landing page or even the time required to service one high-maintenance client, you need a reliable and easy-to-use time tracking solution. It needs to be something your team will enjoy using, and it should have all the features without being overly complicated. Time tracking add-ons and apps are available in many other agency project management systems, so check out the integrations pages of your other software to see if there is one you could use with your current tools. Here are 5 tools that my clients use:

1. TrackingTime https://trackingtime.co

TrackingTime has apps for Windows and Mac users and boasts an iPhone and Android app. You simply input a task, choose a project, and press play to start tracking. With this tool, you can see which clients took up the majority of your time, and how you are spending your time in-between projects.

Its Pro version has a calendar integration for managing and monitoring tasks and projects. And there's powerful reporting in the app where you can analyze where the team's time went and filter by project, client, or user. In addition, you can use the Zapier connection to streamline your workflows with project management tools, invoicing software, calendars, and email.

Price: Free for teams up to nine people, Pro is $4.99/user/month

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2. Timely – www.timelyapp.com

Timely is a hybrid of a to-do list, time tracking app, and calendar. It integrates with major calendar providers - such as Google and Mac - and each task is tagged with a specific project. You simply block off hours in your calendar, and the tool will log your time. You can also easily move projects around with the drag-and-drop feature. The program allows a manager to view his team's projects and calendar, so he can see who has too much on his plate and what projects are going over budget.

Price: Free for individual use and up to five projects, $14/user/month

3. Harvest – www.getharvest.com/

Harvest is built around a robust time tracking tool. Harvest allows staff to track time and send invoices from an integrated application. Staff are able to start and stop timers to allow accurate reporting and submit time sheets. The Harvest system then generates visual reports allow you to analyze time and see the distribution of your staff resources at a glance, helping you to keep your projects on budget and estimate for future projects accurately. Harvest also allows you to invoice accurately using the time sheet tracking data. The system provides an integrated invoicing component which generates and tracks invoices and retainers through to payment.

Price: Harvest costs from $10-12 /user/month.

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4. Toggl – www.toggl.com

Toggl is a popular time tracking app that supports separate teams within an organisation. You can assign individuals a different billable rate, and for agencies who work with freelancers, you can create separate workspaces so confidential documents don't fall into the wrong hands. The tagging feature makes sure that all projects, clients, and tasks are easy to find and evaluate. The software also tracks how you spent your day -- including what programs you used and where there were gaps, which could be helpful when manually entering time spent on a project.

Toggle has a Chrome extension and is available as a Windows and Mac desktop app, and Android and iOS mobile apps. It has hundreds of integrations so it can seamlessly be added to your current workflows.

Price: Free or $9/user/month, $18/user/month, $49/user/month for added features

5. Freckle - www.letsfeckle.com

Freckle is a user-friendly time tracking tool for teams. It's easy to keep track of projects or types of work through its tagging system, understand employee utilisation rates, and keep track on non-billable time. The Pulse section lets employees see their productivity by day, and you can import timesheets from Excel and other time tracking applications.

Price: $19/month/1 user, $49/month/5 users, $199/month/25 users

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Project management tools

Project management done properly will help your business get better at what it does. It improves efficiency and team skills development, giving your organisation a competitive edge.

Many service-based businesses still manage their projects on Excel spreadsheets – using technology that's ten years behind ten years ago.

Managing projects without a proper tool can turn a brilliant concept into a complete mess, ruining relationships with clients and returning poor results.

Increasingly, companies look for business management software that helps to outline every task in the project, collaborate with the team, and get an overview of customers and billing. Just like every business has its niche and strong suites, so do creative project management software and tools. Here are 5 that my clients use:

1. Trello – https//trello.com

Trello is known for visualising project tasks on a cardboard-like dashboard that's great for managing short and quick everyday assignments.

Top features:
- Task management on a cardboard
- Creating multiple task lists
- Attach pictures and files to tasks
- Organizing lists by dates or priority
- Commenting on cards

What's special about this tool: Trello has a highly visual interface, making daily task management fun and intuitive. It is great for small teams with no complex projects.

Pricing: Trello is a free tool, with extra cost of $5/month for Trello Gold

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2. ASANA - https://asana.com

Combines elements of project management, file storage, and collaboration and helps to manage projects across a team without email.

Top features:

- Projects with multiple users, tasks, and subtasks
- Real-time interaction with team
- Commenting under projects and tasks
- Notifications about projects updates
- Attachments under projects
- In-app inbox for faster communication

What's special about this tool: Asana is a really easy-to-use tool with a simplistic layout. If you're a small team with unsophisticated projects, check it out.

Pricing: Free for up to 15 members, Premium from $8.33 user/month.

3. Scoro - https://www.scoro.com

Scoro combines project management with CRM and billing so that agencies need one tool instead of five different ones.

Top features:

- Projects with tasks and deadlines
- Project scheduling mode
- Customisable project management dashboard
- Detailed reporting and tracking metrics
- Time entries and billing for time
- Invoices and quoting with pre-set templates
- CRM and sales pipeline management
- Client and billing data attached to each project

What's special about this tool: Scoro is more comprehensive than many other task and project management tools, including CRM for small business, billing, and media planning. It is perfect for agencies that need to frequently bill their clients for work and projects.

Pricing: from $22 user/month for complete agency management

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4. BASECAMP - https://basecamp.com

The darling of project management community, Basecamp has won thousands of users' hearts.

Top features:

- Projects with multiple users and tasks
- Message boards for discussing a project or idea
- In-app team collaboration
- Reporting on project performance
- Separate dashboard for showing to clients
- Email and desktop notifications

What's special about this tool: Basecamp takes only 10 minutes to set up and is super easy to use. This same simplicity might start to limit more complex projects and restrict efficient collaboration.

Price: $29/month for unlimited users

5. LiquidPlanner - https://www.liquidplanner.com

LiquidPlanner is a project management tool great for teams with extensive time-tracking requirements, initially built for technology teams.

Top features:

- Estimating a realistic range of time to complete tasks
- Resource management/scheduling screen
- Note feature for adding possible obstacles to projects
- Commenting on tasks and activities
- Task-specific communication boards

What's special about this tool: LiquidPlanner has a different methodology for creative project management – it helps teams to set realistic deadlines based on best-case and worst-case scenarios.

Pricing: Standard plan (up to 50 projects) $29 user/month, Professional (includes dashboards and up to 300 projects) $39 user/month