By Gordon Eng

Weighing Choices in Time and Billing Applications

Small and large

firms and different

resource needs

can be matched to suitable programs

ecording time in an accurate and convenient manner is critical to the business side of lawyering. Time and billing software can help lawyers handle this indispensable administrative task. Indeed, under Rule 4-200 of the Rules of Professional Conduct, accurate timekeeping may be interpreted as an ethical and professional duty of a lawyer to the client. To meet this challenge, some programs offer an integrated suite of time and billing, accounting, contact management, case management, and firm management. Other programs are stand-alones. Sometimes the stand-alone program is a module that can be combined with the vendor's other modules to create customized suites.

All-in-one solutions may be preferable for an office that does not have, or wishes to convert from, established accounting, calendaring, contact, and case man-

agement programs. However, allin-one solutions tend to be resource hogs. Stand-alone solutions, in turn, may be preferable if the firm wants to mix and match with other programs. With a stand-alone, however, duplication of effort is more likely. For example, someone may need to perform data entry of client information into multiple programs.

Fortunately for consumers, the relatively large number of vendors of time and billing software seems to have generated a fair amount of competition. Most vendors try to make it easy to transition from a competitor's software to theirs and either have a built-in ability to import the data from another vendor's program or will provide this service for the user at little or no cost. This service is not always advertised, so it may be worthwhile to ask.

All time and billing programs can capture time, but there are significant variations in how and whether each program takes the data and converts it into the desired format. With most programs, it is difficult to change the preset invoice formats, so a firm should choose a program that already has an acceptable range of formats. Firms can ask the vendor for a trial version of the software. As is typical with software, the vendor's minimum hardware requirements (e.g.,

memory and processor speed) are indeed minimum, because when the program runs with others (such as network, word processor, and e-mail) its performance

will be affected.

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Comparison

In the interest of examining how various programs address these issues of price, performance, and compatibility, I gave a closer look to some of the more popular time and billing programs (in alphabetical order).

Juris. One of the oldest players in this field, Juris has a separate time and billing module that can be coupled with others (financial analysis, accounting, and case management). No demo version is available, but users can arrange an online demo. Juris has a version for small firms and solos, but their target customer is the growing or large firm. This program and Pro Law were the most expensive in the review group. I was not able to run the online demo, but the features for this program appear to be extensive.

PC Law. PC Law version 6 is the program that I use in my office. It has many features, but it is not an all-in-one program. The base program has time and billing as well as accounting, contact management, calendaring, and conflict search features, but it does not have a case management program. Rather, the program links to third-party case management programs.

Editing the reporting and billing templates is a trial-anderror process. Final bills, however, can be exported for editing in a word processor. While many users may not enjoy this duplication of effort, the feature may be the only way to put the bills into a form that is worthy of being sent to clients.

The time entry page allows users to show multiple matters at one time, and the integrated stopwatch can then be moved from one matter to another. Most other programs use a single time slip interface, which can be burdensome when switching be-

tween matters or consolidating time for a given matter. Unfortunately, there is no spell check feature built into the time entry program. Overall, PC Law is an inexpensive, multifeatured program suited for a small firm.

Pro Law, Unlike PC Law, Pro Law is an all-in-one solution with a host of features. In addition to time and billing there is a full suite of office support, including accounting, case management, calendaring, and other modules. The software is made for a clientserver environment, and so system requirements are high. Firms will need a dedicated server for Pro Law, and they should not even think about using it on Windows 95, 98, or ME (and soon NT). I tried to run the demo, for example, only to discover that I did not have the system resources. This program is intended for a larger firm with newer hardware that is looking for a broad range of features.

Quick Books Pro 2003. This is an accounting program, with a timekeeper included in the "pro" version, that has a very strong following with small firms. It is a multifeatured program with no case management ability.

The procedures for creating a client, generating bills, and setting up the timer require a fair amount of consultation with the manual. This program can be more challenging when attempting to implement customized billing arrangements. The base program has a stopwatch timer, which can be run within the program or as a remote module. There does not seem to be a limit on the number of timekeepers. Invoices can be exported into for-

Time and Billing Software Comparison								
	Package Type	Supported OS	System Requirements	Pricing	Customer Support	Contact Information		
Juris	Stand-alone, modules	Win 98/ME/NT/ 2000/XP	Pentium III with 128 MB RAM; hard drive with 3 MB	\$1,700 for 15 timekeepers and 5 concurrent users	3 months free	Phone: (615) 377-3740 Web site: http://www.juris.com		
PC Law	Suite	Win 98/ME/NT/ 2000/XP	Pentium 200 MHZ; 32 MB RAM	\$195 for 2 timekeepers; \$100 for each added timekeeper; network version more	3 or 6 months free, depending on base package	Phone: (800) 387-9785 Web site: http://www.pclaw.com		
Pro Law	Suite	WinNT/2000/XP	PII 400 with 96 MB RAM; PIII 733 or higher, with 192 MB recommended	\$99/mo. for 36 mos. for 1 user; \$30/mo. per each added user up to 15 users, then \$40/mo. for each added user	Included in monthly fee for 15 users or less	Phone: (800) 977-6529 Web site: http://www.prolaw.com		
Quick Books	Suite	Win 95/98/ME/ 2000/NT/4.0/XP	Pentium 200 MHZ; 64 MB RAM; hard drive with 175 MB free space; IE 6.0	\$299.95, no limit on the number of timekeepers; up to 5 simultaneous users	Free installation support	Web site: http://www.quickbooks.intuit.com		
R.T.G.	Stand-alone	Win 95/98/ME/ 2000/XP	Pentium 133 MHZ; 32 MB RAM; 20 MB free hard drive space	\$75 single computer or network; up to 99 timekeepers; only 10 can access the program at one time; one remote module included	Lifetime e-mail support	Phone: (310) 453-0933 Web site: http://www.rtgsoftware.com		
Tabs	Stand-alone	Win 98/ME/2000/ NT/XP	Pentium, 64 MB RAM; 20 MB free hard drive space	\$295 for 2 timekeepers on a single computer or \$995 for 5 timekeepers on a server	60 days free	Phone: (402) 423-1440 Web site: http://www.tabs3.com/		
Timeslips	Stand-alone	Win 98/ME/2000/ NT/XP	Pentium 333 MHZ; 64 MB RAM, 128 MB recommended; 100 to 110 MB free hard drive space	\$199.95 for 2 users; network version \$399.95 single user, \$99.95 for each added user or \$499.95 for 5 users	30 days free	Phone: (800) 285-0999 Web site: http://www.timeslips.com		
Tussman	Suite	Win 95/98/ME/ 2000/XP	4 MB free hard drive space	\$395 for 3 timekeepers; \$50 for each additional timekeeper; network version more	6 months free	Phone: (800) 228-6589 Web site: http://www.tussman.com		
Verdict	Stand-alone	Win 95/98/ME/ 2000/XP	Pentium 300 MHZ; 32 MB RAM	\$1,295 unlimited timekeepers; \$1,495 network version allowing 10 simultaneous users	30 days free	Phone: (800) 225-3147 Web site: http://www.micro-craft.net		

mats for word processing. This program comes bundled with an accounting program that is popular with a number of small firms, but it does not have the ease of use and capabilities of some other programs.

R.T.G. Data Systems. Version 2.10 is a stand-alone program with a low cost. The program allows users to establish rate tables, which can be assigned by case. This helps the timekeeper to avoid guesswork if the firm uses more than one rate structure. Also, there is a spell checker for the billing descriptions.

The stopwatch method of tracking time is only available with the included remote module. The initial price is the lowest in the test group, but providing the stopwatch feature to all timekeepers adds \$15 per head. The overall cost is still likely to be less, however, than that of the other vendors, because they apply the per-seat method of licensing. The software offers no live support. Only support via

e-mail is provided, but unlike the other vendors, which charge for support after a brief initial period, RTG claims to offer lifetime support. Overall, this software has the features that a small firm or solo needs, and it is a good value for the price.

Tabs 3. Version 11 has a stand-alone time and billing module that can be combined with practice management and accounting modules. Right out of the box, the program asks users for passwords and access rights. Careful attention to the instructions for the setup of this program is essential. This is a feature-rich program, but it is somewhat difficult to set up. For larger firms the access controls are essential, although small firms and solo practitioners may find them burdensome.

This program has a spell checker. On the other hand, navigation to open time slip entries and to open clients and matters is less direct than it is on other programs. Some

of the other products are likely to be easier to set up and use, but this program may have strong appeal to firms that want to integrate practice management and accounting features in one package.

Timeslips. Version 11 is a stand-alone program that links to many popular case management and accounting programs. The company was recently acquired by the makers of the Peachtree accounting program, so greater integration into Peachtree may follow. The program uses an interface for opening new clients and entering time that requires some practice. A wide variety of billing types and practices are permitted, but adjusting and revising selections can be difficult. Even with a detailed set of tools for formatting bills and modifying the templates, these tasks are not a simple exercise.

This program has been a popular choice over the years, but first-time users will be

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spending some time with the manual in order to use the program with confidence. According to the manufacturer, the latest release (Timeslips 2004) has spell checking.

Tussman Programs. Version 7 is a standalone that can be combined with other modules, including calendaring, accounting, network use, and remote use. Tussman is promoted as a program written for lawyers by lawyers. The initial setup instructions are easy to follow, which is good because it is important to follow these steps for the program to run properly. Opening clients and matters is simple. New client entries automatically require users to establish matters. The program has a good interface, with a thoughtful layout of information.

One helpful feature is a calculator that can be used to determine elapsed time. This is very helpful for lawyers who track time without using a computer stopwatch. Modifying the template for billing statement formats is a trial-and-error process. After working through numerous options, the result has to be printed before users can see what has been created. This program allows users to retrieve and modify a final bill. Other programs have varying degrees of this ability. Overall, this is one of the better time and billing programs.

Verdict. The honor of being the oldest software company in this area may belong to Micro Craft, the maker of Verdict 9.0. It can trace its software back to a time before DOS. Verdict 9.0 is a stand-alone program with modules. Although the base cost of this program is at the high end, Verdict 9.0 does not charge users based on a per-user method. The number of timekeepers is unlimited, although the base network version allows no more than 10 users to post simultaneously.

The program has a spell checker, and users can retrieve up to six past months of billing in order to correct entries. A lot of client and account information is displayed in the screens, whereas with other programs users need to generate a report in order to display additional information. Some may consider the ample display confusing, however.

As with other programs, some time with the manual may be needed to get started and to work with the configuration settings that provide flexibility with bills and reports. The program has an appealing pricing format if a firm intends to have more than 10 users, but it has a somewhat steep learning curve.

According to Abraham Lincoln, "A lawyer's time and advice are his stock in trade." Lawyers have many choices in time and billing applications, each of which has its appeal for a particular market. Whether the software is part of a suite or stands alone, it plays a vital role in a firm's practice.

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