SELECTING THE RIGHT BILLING SYSTEM:
WHAT FACTORS WILL DETERMINE YOUR FIRM'S NEEDS?

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I am frequently contacted by attorneys seeking a new or replacement time & billing system. Usually the question is, "Please tell me the RIGHT billing system to purchase. We have xx attorneys." Or, "We're only x attorneys, so please tell us which is the least expensive and simplest system." If only it were that easy. There is never one right answer. What factors will ultimately guide the determination as to the "best" or "cheapest" package?

First and foremost, the requirements of your clients must be taken into consideration. For example, institutional clients such as insurance companies and financial institutions have very specific requirements. They want task-based billing—often using their own set of task codes— and electronic billing, customized statements, and sometimes more. The time & billing software that can handle these requirements will be more pricey, and complex than you would otherwise need to service your other financial needs. It doesn't matter how small your firm may be, or how tight your budget, because if you represent these clients and wish to hold onto them, you will have to find the most economical package which can fully provide the functionality you need.

Does your firm have different rates for different clients? Does Attorney "A" bill out at one rate for one type of client, and a different rate for a different type of client? Or one rate for very old clients, another for older clients, and yet another rate for newer clients? If so, your firm must closely examine the capabilities of the software for handling varying rates for the same attorney. How many different rates can be active at one time? How easy is it to manage rate changes, either retroactively, currently, or prospectively? How easy is it to get to a listing of the information of which clients are at which rates for which attorneys, so you can affect some but not others? Each answer will impact how well the software will meet your needs. And it's amazing how poorly many of the well-established programs handle this area.

If your firm bills everything on an hourly basis you can get away with a simpler system than if you also do variations such as flat fee, contingent fee, hourly plus potential bonus and so forth.

The next consideration is that of the reporting requirements of the firm. This will be based in part on the sophistication, in a business sense, of the partners of the firm. The software should have as much reporting sophistication as necessary to meet the requirements of the firm for financial analysis, or an ability to easily and completely export data to Excel for further manipulation. Some firms don't want to know much more than how much cash is in the bank. Other firms do sophisticated profit-centered analysis based on office, practice area, and even individual attorneys and/or clients. As you can imagine, the more sophisticated the reporting requirements, the more complex, and likely expensive, the software will be.

My experience is that many firms have at least one "must have" report which is intricately tied to their compensation and/or bonus system. Often these reports are convoluted and complex, with many exceptions which are handled with ease manually. These firms are dismayed to find out after purchase that they cannot be accurately programmed. Usually a vendor will look at such a report before purchase and say "no problem". But when they get into the specifics of how that report is generated, and look at how you've set up your data for tracking, they will be unable to reproduce it. So beware. By the time you figure this out, it is usually too late to turn back. And usually the problem isn't the vendor or the software, it's the inconsistency in the data itself. The best solution is to examine this in complete detail before setting up the data, so that any necessary modifications of fields or completion of missing information can be made upon conversion. Of course, it may be that the software you are considering just can't accommodate the data the way it needs to in order to produce the report.

The firm must look ahead to what additional functionality it may want in the future. Is case management a topic of discussion? Are you outgrowing your accounting software? It makes sense to look at packages which are integrated—often with modules which you can purchase later—to provide the additional functionality. That will narrow choices quite a bit. Some packages offer everything in one: time & billing, accounting, case management, relationship management, document management, imaging, and strategic reporting. Some offer some pieces of this puzzle. What matters is whether the pieces you get today and can add later will meet both your present and anticipated future needs. You want to avoid linking of different packages if possible. Although many firms do it, it will always require more labor and varying degrees of double entry work. Entering data in two separate systems almost always leads to inconsistency and error. And when using linked systems, it takes much more time and effort to perform any type of sophisticated analysis, as the exchange of information flow between linked packages is always limited.

Finally, the software's unique logic, e.g. the way it processes information and performs procedures, should be a good fit to the firm's manner of processing information. The firm—except for those which have no decent system, or a poor system in place for managing financial information—should select a package which fits its methodology, and avoid selecting a package which requires the firm to radically change in order to adapt to it.

Note: following is a listing of the major time & billing packages as of the writing of this article. Those which integrate to accounting and/or case management are noted with an asterisk. This is not a comprehensive listing, as there may be additional packages which have not made it to the list. However, it is fairly comprehensive. The actual original resource is always being updated, and is available for Pennsylvania lawyers upon request through the Pennsylvania Bar Association Hot Line. Note that packages are only listed for which a *primary* purpose is time and billing. For that reason, a package which is primarily case management but is capable of some time & billing functionality (e.g. you would not buy it without desiring the case management first and foremost) would not be listed here. Separate resources are maintained for accounting and case management software.

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TIME & BILLING SOFTWARE

Title	Telephone	Website or Publisher	Target Size
About Time (time entry only)	1-415-247-8100	www.versys.com	mid
Acumin *	1-800-349-7371	www.dexco.com/eacumin.html	mid-lge
Aderant (f/k/a CMS Open)	1-877-608-4369	www.aderant.com	lge
Advantage Express *	1-800-543-3185	www.advxp.com/pagebody.htm	Small - lge
Airtime Manager (time capture only – automatic / also works with Blackberry)	1-877-267-4464	www.a4p.biz	
Alpine Datasystems	1-800-547-1837	www.alpinesw.com	mid
AltaPoint Law Office Management	1-888-258-2552	www.altapointlaw.com	
Bill Power (shareware)	1-770-426-5735	www.integracomputing.com	Sm
Bill Quick	1-888-245-5669	www.bqe.com	sm-mid
Bill Your Time Easily	1-888-292-0213	www.silverstate.com	sm-mid
BSA Pro	1-800-684-3002	www.seabill.com/bsa.html	Solo-sm
Carpe Diem (time entry only)	1-800-789-8098	www.sageus.com	All
Caselode for Windows	1-800-677-1826	www.caselode.com	Sm - mid
Certa Technology (time entry only – web-based or PDA or Outlook tool)	1-540-710-7984	www.certatechnology.com	
CompleteLaw *	1-612-812-2593	www.completelaw.com	Solo-sm
DDI*LAW and DDI*Timetrak	1-847-647-2222	www.ddisoft.com	all
Dexco	1-800-349-7371	www.dexco.com/edexdls.html	mid-lge
DTE (time entry only)	1-800-783-9231	www.aps-soft.com	all
Easy Case & Billing	1-800-905-SOFT	www.easysoft-usa.com	Sm-mid
Element 55 (time capture only – automatic / also works with Blackberry)	1-617-423-0692	www.element55.com	
Elite [1]	1-323-642-5200	www.elite.com	Mid-lge
Equisitions *	1-800-661-3306	www.equisitions.com	mid-lge
Esi-Law *	1-888-669-4545	www.esilaw.com	Sm-mid
Integra Law Office Management System *	1-250-782-3322	www.powerinn.com	Sm-mid
Juris, Inc.	1-615-377-3740	www.jurisinc.com	mid
Legal Insight	1-415-247-8100	www.versys.com	mid
Legal Vision	1-800-661-4633	www.vertech.ca	mid-lge
LMS V *	1-513-977-4578	www.legal.rippe.com/rippeweb/home/contactus.html	Med-lge
Omega Legal	1-800-356-1339	www.omegalegal.com	mid-lge
Orion *	1-404-635-1161	www.orionlaw.com	
Partner View	1-415-247-8100	www.versys.com	mid
PC Law. *	1-800-387-9785	www.pclaw.com	Sm - lge

PD Partner *	1-800-282-8308	http://fsli-pdpartner.comm/pdp/tb.html	Mid-lg
Perfect Law	1-800-749-6200	www.perfectlaw.com	sm-mid
Perfect Practice *	1-407-843-8992	www.adclegal.com	
ProLaw Enterprise *	1-800-977-6529	www.elite.com	Mid-lge
ProLaw Ready	1-800-977-6529	www.elite.com	sm
RainMaker Gold *	1-800-341-4012	www.rainmakerlegal.com	mid-lge
RTG Bills (and RTG Timer)	1-310-453-0933	www.rtgsoftware.com	sm
Tabs III *	1-800-487-7111	www.stilegal.com	sm-mid
Time Logger	1-800-669-4611	www.responsivesoftware.com	sm-mid
TimePro *	1-814-357-9290	www.timepro.com	Sm-mid
Timeslips	1-800-285-0999	www.timeslips.com	sm-mid
[1] Note: Elite offers an ASP subscription solution called Timesolv and Worksolv			