Administrative Headaches

Is Automating Staff Time and Attendance the Cure?

BY ALONZO BODDIE

Like most corporations, law firms often have several different types of employee categories: attorneys, paralegals, administrators, secretaries, and human resources (HR) and information technology (IT) professionals, to name a few. As a result, law firm managers must balance the policies and procedures that vary across and within employee categories. This can include pay structures, vacation accrual, sick leave, benefits, overtime, and more.

Large parts of these general firm management tasks are directly related to the timekeeping process, but historically most software that automates the timekeeping process for the legal industry has focused solely on billing professionals. For the countless other staff members who support the billable professionals and contribute to the firm's client work, processes and revenues, the time and attendance process is typically manual. This forces legal administrators and HR managers to handle the repetitive and non-productive work involved in aggregating and managing the data associated with non-billable staff. These manual, labor-intensive processes also make it challenging for HR departments to be responsive to requests from administrative staff regarding routine personnel matters.

Law firm managers seeking to increase and enhance responsiveness to employees' needs and help their firms become more efficient should consider implementing a more automated technology system – one that enables staff time and attendance to be handled electronically.

An automated system would free HR, supervisor and staff time for more productive tasks that bolster the firm's bottom line.

CONSIDER THE BENEFITS

Years ago, firms realized that attorney time would be more accurately captured electronically, resulting in an increased number of billable hours and a more streamlined accounts receivable process. Similarly, the implementation of an electronic staff time and attendance system can streamline HR and payroll processes, cut down on administrative time, and improve accuracy and efficiency through integration with leading HR and payroll systems.

Think about how much more efficiently your firm would operate if the following processes were possible: employee timesheet templates were set up according to hiring parameters; staff filled out and submitted timesheets electronically; reminders were automatically sent to staff who forgot to submit timesheets; supervisors could review, approve and submit staff timesheets electronically; staff could check their sick leave balances; HR staff weren't bombarded with questions about vacation time accrual; and approved timesheets

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SCHEDULE A CHECK-UP

Before deciding to automate your firm's staff time and attendance process, take the time to examine your current HR and payroll policies and procedures as they pertain to non-billable staff. Evaluate the following:

- **Timesheets, payroll and billing**. How are non-billable staff tracking and submitting their hours? What is the process for supervisor approval? Who tracks down missing timesheets? How are timesheets totaled and prepared for payroll? How are overtime hours accounted for and approved? Are clients billed for administrative overtime? What is the payroll error factor? What is the process for correcting errors? How much employee, supervisor, HR, and payroll staff time is spent on these tasks?

- **Leave policies**. How do sick time and vacation leave policies vary across employee categories? How are sick time and vacation time currently accrued and tracked? What about paid holidays? Are accrual rules and rates being applied accurately and fairly? How are time-off requests submitted and approved? How many hours do supervisors and/or HR staff spend responding to employee requests regarding leave balances?

- **Process efficiency**. Is your current process consistent among employees and departments? Where do breakdowns and bottlenecks occur? Does your process require that information be re-entered into more than one system (for example, HR, payroll, and billing)? How many hours are spent each week that could be allocated to more productive business tasks?

MATCH NEEDS WITH TECHNOLOGY

Once you've examined your current processes, you can start looking for technology that will support your firm's ideal scenario. The first step is to determine the setup. For example, will you need the flexibility of a Web-based system? Will you want employees to access the system through your firm's portal? What time-entry method best suits your firm's needs: time clocks or manual entry? What are the approval requirements for submitted time, leave, and expenses? What other systems should be integrated?

Keep in mind that end-user adoption is the key to success. Be sure that the software you choose has an intuitive, user-friendly interface. It should be simple to use so the entry process is easier for the employee than the prior method. Perception is important, and a time and attendance system that employees like to use – and one that saves them time with fewer errors – will facilitate their critical acceptance.

In today's economy, no employer wants staff spending time on redundant tasks that have no direct, bottom-line value to the organization. By examining a firm's staff time and attendance processes, the legal administrator will likely find HR and payroll inefficiencies that an automated system can prevent from occurring. ❋

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