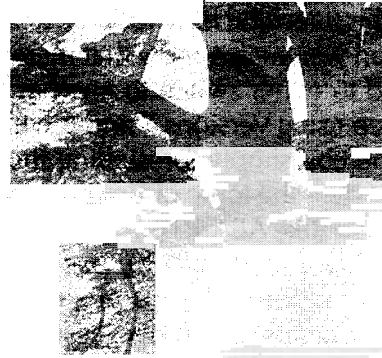


Technology Corner

By Joseph G. Hodges, Jr.

Billing Software for the Solo and Small Professional Service Firms



If you are a solo practitioner or a member of a small firm, then this article is for you. If you are a member of a large firm, this article likely is not for you, although there may be a few helpful hints that can assist you in your search for a billing software system that can meet the needs of a large firm.

They say “a lawyer’s time and advice is his stock in trade,” which is so very true when it comes to accurately recording and billing one’s time for legal work, as the almighty billable hour is the very source of our livelihood as professional service providers. And yet, knowing this truth, we are notoriously bad about recording our time on a regular basis, let alone billing our clients for it when the work is done. Part of this is just bad work habits on our part, but a significant part of it is that we are not very good about using good billing software tools to get this critical function done and on a timely basis.

The thrust of this issue’s column will be to reexamine once again the field of available billing software for solos and small professional service firms to try to ascertain which ones are the best and merit further consideration, even to the point of swapping out one program for another. By necessity, not all the programs can be included, and included among this group will be some less well-known software products that have gained recent notoriety, in part because they are very affordable. The big caution with those programs is that they may not be suitable for other than a solo firm or one with only two or three timekeepers.

For years the standout software program in this area was Timeslips. Early on, it won the endorsement of the ABA’s Law Practice Management Section, which soon led to it becoming the default favorite, at least amongst lawyers (much as HotDocs did later on). Then, in the late 1990s, Timeslips was acquired by Sage Software (formerly Best Software) somewhere



Joseph G. Hodges, Jr. is an attorney in Denver, Colorado and is a member of the ABA’s Real Property, Probate and Trust Law Section Technology Committee.

between the release of Version 6, which was not Y2K compliant, and Version 7. From all accounts the execution of this transition left a lot to be desired. In fact, the transition was such a mess that many loyal users were forced to either switch to another billing program or keep using Versions 7 and 8 without further upgrade, thereby simply forestalling the inevitable. Even today when the topic of Timeslips comes up on discussion lists (like ABA-PTL and ABA-LawTech and ABA-SOLOSEZ and ABA-TAX), people seem to be overly critical of the Timeslips program as it is currently being maintained by Sage, especially now that they have exported their tech support to India.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, and in fairness to the current version of Timeslips, which is the 2008 version that retails for \$500 for a single user and \$900 for a five-station network, they still claim it to be the number one time and billing software for legal professionals based on optional verbatim responses to the 2006 ABA Legal Technology Survey

Report. Prior to that, they won the Law Office Computing's Reader's Choice Award for 11 years in a row through 2005 (Law Office Computing is no longer published). The program also easily integrates well with other business software programs, such as Microsoft Outlook, Microsoft Excel, Peachtree by Sage and QuickBooks. Features it has that are designed specifically for law offices include fee allocation and split billing, as well as a variety of billing formats such as hourly, contingency and flat fee. The program even includes a legal dictionary for spell checking of the bills before they go out. They offer 30 days of free tech support from the point of purchase, as well as a 60-day, full refund return privilege. The program currently requires at a minimum Windows XP or 2000 SP 1, 300 MB of hard disk space for installation, and 256 MB of RAM. For more information, contact them at www.timeslips.com or call 1-800-936-7104.

Perhaps the next best favorite billing software program is called TABS III ("Tabs3") by STI. This program has been around as long as Timeslips, and it is the only one that was rated by the ABA's Software Evaluation group when that group was still in business back in the 1990s. Most recently, Tabs3 has won the

Law Technology News award for Time and Billing Software for Under 50 Attorneys for the fourth year in a row. They are conveniently based in Lincoln, Nebraska and have a whole suite of software products available for managing a law or professional practice. The nice thing about Tabs3 is that it can be scaled for a firm of from one to 99 timekeepers and it fully integrates with the companion STI PracticeMaster case management software system. A complete list of what's new in the current Version 14.2 is available at www.tabs3.com. Two significant improvements are the addition of Application Toolbars and an all-in-one data back up and restore function. There is

also improved integration between Tabs3 and the STI General Ledger software system. What I particularly like about this program is the ease with which new users can orient themselves to the system with a minimum of training, and the fact that tech support comes as part of the user's affordable optional annual maintenance fee.

This software currently retails for \$295 for up to two, single user timekeepers (\$495 for up to five, single user timekeepers) and \$495 for up to two network users (\$995 for up to five network users). The annual maintenance costs for these levels are \$105 for two single users, \$155 for five single users, \$155 for two network users and \$300 for five network users. It requires at a minimum Windows Vista or XP or 2000 and 49 MB of hard disk space. In the interests of full disclosure, I personally selected this software about three years after I went solo in 1986, mainly because of its simplicity and the way it replicated bills I initially produced on a MAC Satori software billing system in a shared office environment. I have stayed with it ever since, with my firm size never being higher than three timekeepers, and I have been very pleased with it. More importantly, should I ever choose to increase the size of my firm, I will be able to seamlessly upgrade to a larger version of this program at minimal additional cost.

A rather new player on the block, so to speak, is Billing Matters, which is a companion to the well-known Time Matters program, both of which are currently in Version 8 and are now owned and maintained by LexisNexis, www.timematers.com.

They say "a lawyer's time and advice is his stock in trade," which is so very true when it comes to accurately recording and billing one's time for legal work, as the almighty billable hour is the very source of our livelihood as professional service providers.

com. Historically, Time Matters was developed and released before Billing Matters, even though their version numbers are now the same, but the need for a companion billing program was perceived early on. Billing Matters is a fully-integrated, back-office solution that shares the same database as Time Matters, but gives you the added features of billing and accounting. Some of its more popular features include centralized billing, a payables process manager, time sheets and a full range of reporting options. Importantly, Billing Matters can be used independently or as an integrated part of Time Matters. It requires at a minimum Windows XP or 2000 or Vista, 256 of RAM and a 500 MB hard disk. It retails for \$350 for a single user, or \$600 if Time Matters is bundled with it. I personally have not used nor seen this particular software in operation other than at trade shows, which is not the best viewing environment, so I recommend that those of you who want to try it request a 30-day approval basis or a demo version.

Another popular program that has been around for a long time and is currently owned and being supported by LexisNexis Practice Management is PCLaw, which now comes in Version 8 both in a PCLaw version for solo and small firms up to nine timekeepers, and one called PCLawPro for large firms. Their pricing structure for the PCLaw version is simple: \$400 for the first user and \$300 each for each additional user up to nine, with the annual maintenance fee being \$250 for the first user and \$45 each for each additional user up to nine (FYI the Pro version pricing starts at \$4,000 for 10 timekeepers plus \$100 per user for annual maintenance). This program really is a combined time billing, accounting and practice management system all rolled into one, whereas some of the other systems take a modular approach toward the same end. Their byline under why their prices are so low is that high prices do not necessarily mean good software or support. One thing is clear and that is the fact that this program is integrated into one, which could be a real plus for many people. The listing on their Web site at www.pclaw.com of the features that come with the PCLaw version is fairly extensive and includes most of the features that one should be looking for in a good set of time and billing, accounting and practice management software programs, and it makes for a great checklist to use in evaluating both this and other similar programs. In addition, a demo video

overview of the program is available online, as is a trial version, and they offer free conversions from Quickbooks and Timeslips. The minimum operating requirements are Windows XP or 2000 with 256MB of RAM and 1 GB of hard disk space available just to PCLaw.

Another popular set of programs comes from Amicus by Gavel & Gown Software (www.amicusattorney.com). Amicus currently is offering three products in Version 5: Amicus Attorney, Amicus Accounting and Amicus Small Firm, all of which are available on a free trial basis. Given the parameters of this particular column, we will concentrate on Amicus Small Firm, which combines the front office power of Amicus Attorney with the back office efficiency of Amicus Accounting in a single package that is tailored specifically to meet the needs of small law firms. This program has practice management, time, legal billing and accounting functionality all included in a single CD, thereby making it another integrated solution. The minimum operating requirements for a single workstation include Windows 98 2nd Edition or 2000 or XP or Vista, 166 MHz Pentium processor, 128 MB of RAM and 105MB of hard disk space. The pricing structure for the Small Firm version is \$499 for the first license and \$349 for each additional license. The annual support fee, in lieu of a \$95 per call fee, is \$295 for the first license and \$95 for each additional license. Amicus claims to have a client base of some 225,000 legal professionals at the present time, which is substantial and allows them to control their costs better.

Still another product that is very popular is Version 11 of ProLaw, and in particular ProLaw READY for Small Firms by Thomson Elite (www.prolaw.com). This product is a fully integrated practice and financial management solution that can be implemented quickly and easily to help smaller firms automate the practice and manage the business of law and eliminate the redundancy, manual processes and inconsistent data entry that occurs when separate software applications are used. This product combines case, relationship and document management with time entry, billing and accounting all integrated together into one software solution. It is specifically optimized and priced for law firms of 1 to 10 attorneys, although the actual pricing for the product unfortunately is not indicated anywhere on their Web site. The system minimum requirements that are indicated

on their Web site are Windows 2000 Pro or XP Pro (not very helpful).

Another potential option is AbacusLaw by Abacus Data Systems, Inc. (www.abacuslaw.com), as they do offer integrated solutions that incorporate the practice management and billing features a solo or small firm needs. Unfortunately, the Classic version only comes with the practice management solutions and the Silver version that they recommend for solo and small firms only comes with a core set of billing features, whereas the Gold version has them all. Unfortunately, pricing information for these three versions is not currently available on their Web site.

When it comes to affordable billing solutions, there are several options that may be worth looking at. The first one that

comes to mind is QuickBooks for Professional Services. Intuit currently has four offerings here: QuickBooks Simple Start for \$100, QuickBooks

Pro for \$200, QuickBooks Premier Professional Services for \$400 and QuickBooks Enterprise Solutions: Professional Services for \$3,000. Of these, it would appear from their Web site at www.quickbooks.com that the best choice would be QuickBooks Premier Professional Services, given its features. What is not clear is how robust these programs are in terms of allowing the entry of lengthy service descriptions and handling some of the nicer features of the programs that are discussed above. Included among the potential add-on software programs for QuickBooks are Online Timesheet, Checks, Forms and Supplies.

There are many other affordable billing programs that have been spoken about from time to time on the various discussion lists. Several people have spoken highly of the relative merits of Response Time Logger (currently in Version 4) by Responsive Software (www.responsivesoftware.com). This program costs a mere \$89 for one user, \$159 for two, \$237 for three and \$395 for up to five. They provide a free, 60-day demo download on their Web site and tech support is free. Another popular one is the Tussman programs that are now in Version 9 at www.tussman.com. These were developed by California attorney David Tussman starting in 1985. Their program consists of three basis modules, legal billing, general ledger and calendar, and is currently installed in over 3,000 law firms nationwide. The

When it comes to affordable billing solutions, there are several options that may be worth looking at.

pricing for the one to five timekeeper Silver edition is \$595 for the billing, plus \$100 for the calendar, and \$200 for the general ledger. Still another popular one is RTG Bills and Timer by RTG Data Systems at www.rtgsoftware.com. RTG Bills costs a mere \$95 with no additional cost for each timekeeper. RTG Timer is free for the first timekeeper and \$15 for each additional timekeeper. The products are designed for law firms and solo practitioners. They offer free support by e-mail. Their network version is the same as the single user version. You can download a free demo or view an online slide show. Yet another option worth checking out is the Legal Billing 6 time and billing software from Chaos Software (www.chaossoftware.com),

a company that has been developing Windows based software programs since 1992. This product costs a mere \$34.95, but is fairly robust for its small size.

The ultimate in affordability is BillQuick Lite by BQE Software, Inc. (www.bqe.com/ProductPages/BillQuicklite.htm) in that the cost for a single user is \$0 (yes, zero) plus \$249 per year for support. The two-user version costs \$495 plus \$249 per year for support. The cost for three or four users is \$100 per user plus \$20 per year per user for support. BillQuick Pro for five users and up starts at a cost of \$895 plus \$349 per year for support. Several people like Time 59 by Business Data Designs, Inc. (www.time59.com/login.asp), but you have to like Web-based billing software if you are going to use this product. The pricing is \$19.95 per year for unlimited use with a 30-day, free trial. My only closing caution about the less expensive products is that some of them may be good examples of "you get what you pay for."

Web Sites of Interest

Customizable Start Pages

■ Netvibes—www.netvibes.com

■ Pageflakes—www.pageflakes.com

2007 ABA Legal Technology Survey Report

■ www.abanet.org/tech/ltrc/survstat.html

What's New At Google Apps?

■ www.google.com/a

YouTube—All the On-Line Videos You Will Ever Need

■ www.youtube.com