

## Time *Equals* Money.

If you're looking for an effective way to bill clients by the hour or are wondering whether your creatives are spending their time wisely, one of these time-tracking programs could be right for your firm.

Keeping track of how your designers spend their time is one of the keys to profitability because, in essence, time is all designers have to sell. Most firms use paper or digital time sheets that still lead to lost billable hours, calculation errors, extra processing time and unauthorized absence.

These factors have led organizations of all sizes to adopt a new generation of timekeeping software. With smaller firms realizing benefits in a few days, all firms would seem to profit from more automated time management.

For this review, HOW examined several new products and one well-known workhorse. Since HOW last covered this kind of software in 1996, the major timekeeping trend has been the shift to Web-based software.

Today there are dozens of companies selling Web-based timekeeping services. This competition reduces costs and offers many options to fit your needs and budget. As with traditional software, Web-based systems still require an investment of time to set up users, accounts, bill rates and all other financial data. Once completed, though, return on investment begins immediately in capturing more billable hours.

Whether you choose a Web-based or traditional approach, consider whether you need capabilities such as purchase orders, invoices, expenses, client contact data, etc. Ideally, time should easily be posted to either an add-on package, imported into a spreadsheet or printed to generate invoices, etc., to help manage your business.

With these points in mind, let's take a closer look at some of the options available to creative firms.



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### **JobCapture**

Among the software reviewed, JobCapture is the most unusual. Its key feature is a timer that automatically tracks usage in applications such as Adobe Photoshop or QuarkXPress. No manual timekeeping is required. It's designed to be unobtrusive, monitoring application usage, then sending this info to a database when a document is closed.

In JobCapture, an "Auto Job Jacket" automatically pops up showing file name, job name, user, activity and time spent. As with all computerized timekeepers, JobCapture is better at capturing in-office activity. You still have to remember to manually record out-of-office meetings, press checks, etc.

The simple JobCapture interface is not meant to be a complete production-management or accounting system, but it can examine job status and data on each user. Graphs and reports help manage activity.

While the inability to account for expenses and vendor activity limits its usefulness, JobCapture is convenient if you don't need a complete suite of functions and hate timekeeping.

By press time, a low-cost version called TaskCapture should be available for automatically tracking time by clients and jobs, but without some of the analysis and reporting capabilities of JobCapture.

### **Clients and Profits**

The gold standard in timekeeping and general business-management software for creative-service firms has to be Clients and Profits, which was recently upgraded. The updated version maintains everything that was good and includes some enhancements.

One obvious change is the improved "Web browser" interface. It's easier to locate or add information to jobs, and more information is shown on-screen. As a result, there's less window-switching and mouse-clicking.

A new Production menu lets you quickly access everything from proposals and estimates through purchase orders. Scheduling and timeline-setting functions are also integrated. A related Production Planner shows all open jobs in a timeline view. Whether or not you have a dedicated production manager in your firm, this is welcome.

Tracking jobs is important, but what sets Clients and Profits apart is that it's comprehensive. It handles all costs, timekeeping, expense reporting, payables, receivables, invoices, progressive billing and even credit-card accounting.



A new Palm-based client tracks time out of the office—i.e., at a photo shoot—then syncs up later to record the time. This is a huge advantage compared to other timekeeping software that requires manual entry when you return.

A stopwatch and daily time card track your time while you work. It's flexible enough to let you make changes if you forget to turn off the timer. You can also time several jobs at once while multitasking, and go back to a previous time card to adjust hours.

Clients and Profits can handle overtime and unbillable time. Batch time entry continues to be an option; paper time sheets are still viable and low-cost, and ensure critical oversight. Another good timekeeping option is adjustable billing rates for clients and staffers.

Easy reports based on time offer a clear picture of projects, employees or the entire business and do a great job distilling information into a clean summary, including graphs showing estimated vs. actual hours.

No one would buy Clients and Profits just to have a timekeeping system, but if you want a powerful management tool that works seamlessly with all of your key financial data, especially time, then Clients and Profits is a great package.

### **StopWatch and DesignSoft**

For years, DesignSoft has offered a basic timekeeping application with a timer and timesheet. With StopWatch (and its OS X version, StopWatch Plus), manual timekeeping doesn't get much simpler or more intuitive.

To get going, you set up employees, job numbers and fee codes. As your workday progresses, you start new timers. As you complete a task, you stop the timer and, with a button, record the project information to the time sheet.

For some small organizations, this might be all that's needed. To invoice a job, multiply the total time by the hourly rate or export to Excel's billing and analysis functions.

For larger firms with many time sheets, DesignSoft offers Time Sheet Manager and Creative Billing for more elaborate analysis, billing and accounting. Time Sheet Manager collects and merges timesheets from across an organization to give you a handle on time-based costs by employee, job, client, date, etc.

For more complete job-management and billing, Creative Billing joins time to accounting for expenses, billing rates, markups and invoicing. Modules for accounting handle aging reports and monthly statements.



Unlike Clients and Profits, which requires a more substantial investment from the start, DesignSoft's modular approach lets you buy as much or as little of the system as you need, so you can start small.

## TimeFox

*Those seeking simplicity and functionality should try TimeFox Web-based tools to manage time, projects, invoices and productivity. At \$35 per month and \$5 more per month for each additional user, a 10-person firm would pay \$80 per month or \$876 per year. (Annual subscriptions get a price break.) That sounds like a lot, but Clients and Profits would cost at least \$6,000 for the same sized firm.*

*TimeFox is more than just a Web-based timesheet; it also has good project-management tools. Below, a new project is being setup. The long list at the left shows that you can manage a wide range of items, including clients, task costs, estimates and personnel.*



*Now if the program's only benefit was its low cost, it wouldn't be noteworthy. But its features deliver, too. Setup and interface for personnel, clients and projects are easy. A simple step-by-step guide gets you going quickly, and there's unlimited tech support.*

*There are a couple of ways to enter time in TimeFox. One is to manually select a project from the master pull-down list you created at setup. Just choose a task from the list and enter time spent on the task. The other way is to use TimeFox's Stopwatch, which tracks time until you stop it. If you start and stop several times, the Stopwatch records the various time and adds it up.*

*You can correct your daily or weekly timesheets, and if you're a manager, you can review and change other people's timesheets. And because it's a Web-based system, TimeFox is accessible any time and anywhere.*

*TimeFox is also a project-management tool. For a new project, you select a batch of tasks from those you established during initial setup. TimeFox makes reporting easy and also captures expenses so you get an accurate view of the project.*

*TimeFox isn't is a full-featured accounting system but does export data to programs such as Excel. All things considered, TimeFox is a must-try.*

*As with similar software, TimeFox offers a way to generate estimates and track them against actual hours. Checking these costs regularly is important to maintaining profitability, and because TimeFox is Web-based, you can do that just about anywhere and at any time.*



## Virtual Ticket and Job Manager

Virtual Ticket and Job Manager are two related high-end packages for timekeeping and job-management.

As with Job Capture, Virtual Ticket is based on a digital job jacket to organize production tasks. All due dates, creative notes, specs and change requests are captured so it's easy to stay on top of your workflow.

Virtual Ticket includes just about everything needed in a workflow system. There's even an option to write add-on programs or modify the software if you have the technical expertise.

For those who need to visualize job progress, a Gantt bar chart offers at-a-glance confirmation of progress in each key area.

The companion tool to Virtual Ticket is Job Manager, which collects time and generates estimates and invoices. This isn't a full accounting system, but it lets you dump the financial data you collect into your own accounting program.

The Job Entry screen captures essential details in a single concise format. Similarly, there's a workday summary that pulls together in a single screen all of a day's work. Tabs at the top switch between summary by charges and summary by tasks.

Job Manager includes a complete set of time-capture tools for both user and manager. For instance, time cards are a simple digital form that shows time worked that day by employees. As employees work, a Job Recorder window with drop-down menus makes it easy to select the job number, cost center, start and stop times, and task.

All of the time can be automatically sent to timesheet analysis. Managers can see time by task, job or employee and track job progress in real time. As a full-featured program, Job Manager distills all time, materials and job costs. A tabbed interface lets you flip among a detail view, outside purchases and task summary. WIP (work in progress) reports—always essential in effective time and profitability management—are easily generated. Job Manager invoices time and expenses, then distributes the invoices and other data to the general ledger account codes in QuickBooks or MYOB for accounting.

The combination of Job Manager and Virtual Ticket rival much of what you'll find in Clients and Profits—and even exceeds it in terms of customization. That said, Clients and Profits is still more comprehensive and easier to use.



## Recommendations

If you want a complete, easy-to-use package that performs most time- and cost-tracking tasks well—and you can afford it—I recommend Clients and Profits.

If you want more comprehensive control of workflow and digital-asset management and don't mind transferring your financial data to a separate accounting package, Virtual Ticket and Job Manager fit the bill nicely.

Job Capture will appeal to those who need something in the background counting minutes for them. The price of this convenience may be too much for some firms, and it doesn't include all of the capabilities of full-featured packages.

The full version of Creative Billing and StopWatch is a combo that costs less than Clients and Profits. It doesn't have all the bells and whistles of Clients and Profits, but you can buy just what you need, and it's easy to use.

*TimeFox is an excellent Web-based solution. It's easy to use and inexpensive, and you don't have to invest in server hardware and maintenance. Because it's Web based, you can enter time at home, from a client's office or while traveling.*

All of this software is available in demo form, so if you're serious about taking control of your time- and project-management, decide how much you can afford to spend, then try that software for a couple of days. It's time well-spent.

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