Track and Invoice Your Billable Time with Time Trakker

Whether you're an independent developer or work for a corporation, there are a number of aspects to your job that just make life so much more fun. Making backups, writing documentation, resolving IRQ conflicts so that your CD-ROM drive will work - these are the types of things that make you want to leap out of bed and rush to work every morning, right? Another task that ranks right up there in my "Top Ten" list (and probably yours as well) is logging my time and creating invoices. This month's Cool Tool is one possible solution to the weekly (or bi-weekly, or monthly) agony of going through your Day-Timer, reconstructing just what it was that you did, and writing up invoices for that work.

Rick Strahl's Time Trakker uses a "Time Clock" metaphor that makes it nearly painless to log your time as you're working - and includes a number of other features so that you can convert that database of hours spent into invoices or time reports.

Getting Started with Time Trakker

The installation of Time Trakker is a process that other software would do well to emulate. As with Strahl's other package, West Wind Email, Time Trakker is well-behaved, creating files if they don't exist and prompting the user for data when needed. All that's necessary is to copy the TIMETRAK.APP, TIMETRAK.HLP, and (optionally), TIMETRAK.MPR files to wherever FoxPro will find them. I have a directory called DEVUTILS where things like this go, and FoxPro's path is set to DEVUTILS during startup, so by placing the Time Trakker files here, it installed instantly and painlessly. I modified my startup PRG file (called by CONFIG.FPW) to run Time Trakker automatically, so it's available but out of the way all the time.

Once you have the files where you want them, issue the command DO TIMETRAK.APP to load Time Trakker, or DO TIMETRAK.MPR if you'd like Time Trakker automatically installed on your system menu.

The first time you install Time Trakker, it will prompt you to create a Users File and a Clients File, and will guide you through the steps necessary. The Users File is used if you have multiple developers logging time while the Client File is used to differentiate time spent for various customers. I've found it useful to set up a hierarchy of clients and projects so that I can be more specific in billing. Additionally, I've set up additional "clients" to track non-billable time, such as writing this article for FoxTalk or yakking it up on FoxForum.

[Screen shot: TT_NOEXS.BMP "Time Trakker will prompt you to create files if they don't exist."]

[Screen shot: TT_NEWCL.BMP "Time Trakker allows you to set up new clients - including address, phone and email information."]

Once installed, you log time by selecting the Punch In and Punch Out menu options. The Punch In dialog allows you to select a client (or project) and the user (again, remember that this is multi-user.) Once you're finished with a task, select the Punch Out menu. The resulting dialog allows you to select what type of billing should be used for this period of time and to annotate the work performed. A nice feature is the "Leave Open" pushbutton. This allows you to make notes for this time period but not close it out. You would use this if you wanted to record detailed descriptions of what you were doing along the way instead of trying to remember all the details at the end of the time period.

[Screen shots: TT_IN.BMP and TT_OUT.BMP "Time Trakker uses a 'Time Clock' metaphor whereby you punch 'In' and 'Out' to record your time."]

Two others nice features are the ability to edit the entries as you are making them and the ability to create additional manual entries. Suppose you were working on a project and get a phone call for a different matter. After you've finished the call, you realize that you never "punched out" for the first project. You could do so now, and "roll back" the time to when the phone call began. Then, using the "Manual Entry" menu option, you could create a new entry for the phone call and your time would be straight.

Getting Information out of Time Trakker

Once you've been using Time Trakker for a while, you're probably going to want to do something with the information you've collected. Time Trakker contains a number of reports that enable you to "slice and dice" your time by project, user, or both.

The Time and Billing Report allows you to select users, clients, time period, billing types and specific output options. Using the Invoice output option automatically sends the entries to a file that is used to create invoices; checking the Mark Entries as Billed checkbox also marks those entries as billed so they don't come up again. Selecting the Print Report option gives you a choice of previewing or sending the report straight to the printer.

[Screen shot: TT_TANDB.BMP "The Time and Billing Report screen allows you to create a variety of reports."]

Once you've created entries to be invoiced, the Invoice screen is used to "fine tune" the information and create an invoice. You can also use this screen to add more items (non-time items) as well as other services. Once you've created an invoice, it can be further edited as necessary - say, to modify or elaborate descriptions of specific services.

[Screen shot: TT_INV.BMP "The Invoice screen is used to create invoices and apply payments."]

You also use the Invoices screen to apply payments. It's a little tricky at first - you click on the Balance box in the Invoice screen to bring up the Account Detail screen, and then double click on the header to bring up the Account Payment dialog. From there you can create a payment date and amount, and apply it to an invoice.

Screen shot: TT_PMT.BMP "The Account Payment dialog displays by clicking on the header of the the Account Detail dialog."]

Other Features

There are a number of other features available that I don't have space to cover. For example, you are not limited to billing for time on your invoices. You can create items for good and non-time-specific services, and you can even create invoices on the fly. You can also run various Time Trakker screens and reports directly, by passing parameters to the DO TIMETRAK command. For instance,

DO TIMETRAK.APP with "PUNCHIN"

will load the "Punch In" screen without having to go through the main Time Trakker screen or using the Time Trakker menu. This functionality can be used if you want to run Time Trakker off of a different menu (perhaps a separate "Develop" menu of your own) or if you're including Time Trakker in a separate application.

I've found only two significant problems with using Time Trakker - and neither is the fault of the software. First, it's hard to remember to punch in and out each time I switch projects, and since I by nature multi-task throughout the day, I'm always forgetting to switch projects. When Rick adds the direct "Link to Brain" option, this won't be a problem anymore. The other problem is the stark realization of seeing what you actually spent your time on - not what you "think" you spent your time on. Like bitter medicine, it's good for you in the long run - but it sure is tough to swallow the first few times you see how you've frittered away an afternoon, all the time thinking you were so productive... These two issues shouldn't stop you from investigating Time Trakker and giving it a run.

Where To Find It

Time Trakker is fully functional shareware; it can be found on this month's Companion Disk, as well as on CompuServe's FoxUser forum (TTPLUS.ZIP, library 9). If you like it and use it, send the author $49 for a single user or $199 for a site license. You can register the single user version via SWREG on CompuServe. A license of unlimited distribution is also available - contact the author for details.