



White Paper – 3 – Research Managers and Administrators

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Introduction

How to choose a robust timesheet management system.

Research Obligations: Governance and Accountability

Tracking costs, expenses and time, for audit purposes.

Managing Economic Budget Cuts

Cost savings at a time of economic stress can protect jobs and help achieve long-term goals.

Project Management: Avoiding Project Over-run

Staying within required time and budget limits, and keeping cash-flow stable.

Producing coherent project management information; enabling stronger corporate decisions.

Productivity and profitability: improved decision making information.

The Reality Check – Where Did All The Time Go?

Perception of time spent on projects is often inaccurate.

Why Timesheets Work

European Union funding and auditing; compliance with Sarbanes Oxley in the USA.

Budgetary discipline and quality time.

Is There Really A Return On Investment?

Reduction of repeat administrative tasks

Dashboard monitoring and planning facilities

Forecasting time allocation with like-for-like activities

Conclusion



Introduction

How to choose a robust timesheet management system for research teams.

Managing public sector budgets just got a lot more difficult. The continuing legacy of the global recession is about to enter a new phase of austerity and accountability. If research teams found it difficult to justify their work and findings before the recession, now they are beginning to find it much more challenging. The funding winners will be those who can demonstrate with greater clarity how they are prudently and productively spending public and private money.

Projects funded internally, within public organisations and those funded by external groups and agencies, perhaps with the European FP7, are increasingly required to illustrate efficiency and value for money. The era of spreadsheet timesheet reporting is surely over. Today, funding agencies demand a more dependable reporting system. In terms of funding applications, with all other things being equal, the winning bid will be the most trustworthy, the bid which is most cost transparent with clear objectives.

This white paper explores some of the issues faced by research managers and administrators, and identifies many of the substantial benefits of timesheet monitoring systems.

We believe that effective time monitoring within public and private sector organisations can lead to immense time and budgetary savings. The resources saved through greater efficiency and productivity analysis can be redeployed to amplify the success of a dynamic and focused organisation.

Research Obligations: Governance and Accountability

Tracking costs, expenses and time, for audit purposes.

Spreadsheets have their place. But its place is no longer in the realm of timesheet management. Today's complex integration of research budgets often requires administrators to correctly allocate time and expenses to a specific project, despite having the same people, working at the same facility, on different projects. The great risk is that hours are incorrectly allocated to one project and to the detriment of another.

The more complex a reporting procedure, the less likely it will be administered correctly considering the multiple factors and inputs from different locations along with the likely re-keying of data from one source to another, simple human error is always a risk. Therefore, choosing a monitoring system which is quick and easy to use is crucial to gaining the cooperation of busy research / consultancy

professional. The success, or failure, of a project may ultimately be down to the number of hours invested in the project. If timesheets are incorrectly reporting hours invested, universities and other research organisations risk undermining good science with poor administration.

The Manchester Institute of Innovation Research (MioIR) reports that before switching to timesheet monitoring software, one of its most difficult and time consuming tasks was ensuring researchers were claiming the correct hours on the correct project and that when reporting time that there was no duplication.

Managing Economic Budget Cuts

Cost savings at a time of economic stress can protect jobs and help achieve long-term goals.

Daily reporting, unbiased, institutional memory retention

Impartial negotiation platform

The comparative capacity of timesheet management systems substantially reduces the scope for duplicate reporting and enables a more flexible approach to team working. Daily timesheet reporting allows individuals and managers to record flexible working practices in an unbiased and transparent framework. This institutional memory built into timesheet processes permits the seamless transition of managers; new managers can immediately see working patterns and budget indicators.

When it comes to performance reviews with staff, or with clients, timesheet management software is now an integral part of an impartial negotiation platform. Internally, it creates the basis for appraisals and bonus assessment. Externally, clients can see how time was allocated and why billing is represented in a particular way. Used correctly, these measures enhance employee performance and funding authority trust.

Project Management: Avoiding Project Over-run

Staying within required time and budget limits, and keeping cash-flow stable.

Producing coherent project management information; enabling stronger corporate decisions.

Productivity and profitability: improved decision making information.

There was a time when the private sector showed some disdain for what it perceived as the more tolerant expenditure of public sector organisations, not least, the research branch of academia. Today, there is universal acceptance that funds are tight and probity increasing. There is also growing acceptance that failure to effectively control budgets and personnel activity can lead to dismissal; research funding rainmakers want to know exactly how budgets are being spent.

Examination of public accounts is set to intensify and as the spectacular failure of rigour with global warming data demonstrated, questions do not start with 'How well did you spend your budget?' but 'You received public funds, what do you have to show for it?' There is tolerance for researchers to ambitiously set out to develop clear objectives, so long as they do so with academic and administrative competence. Failure to lead the project effectively or to administer funds correctly is less likely to be tolerated in this new Spartan era.

Timesheet management systems help not only the planning side of academic research, but the fiscal side too. The planning and monitoring capacity of leading systems link with globally used packages such as Sage and Quick Books, Microsoft Project and Excel. The result is a seamlessly integrated reporting system which effectively collates personnel and budgetary resource data. When cash-flow is king, spreadsheet reporting can only be described as the emperor with new clothes – the wrong kind of transparency.

The Reality Check – Where Did All The Time Go?

Perception of time spent on projects is often inaccurate.

Recent studies by Harvard University indicate our propensity to multi-task, or focus on a specific task, impacts on the way in which we complete a list of chores. Multi-taskers tend to scan larger amounts of information, but process less of this information. The outcome is often a failure to complete tasks in a coherent or timely manner. People within the sample who focused on a task tended to complete this task more quickly than the multi-tasker. But a third group, the procrastinators, showed a tendency to complete the list even more quickly than the very focused.

This is not because the procrastinators lacked focus, but because they tended to skip over more challenging tasks, returning to them after completing easier tasks. The researchers suggest the sense of accomplishment from completing easier tasks enabled a quicker resolution of more complex issues. The very focused group, however, tended to stay stuck on the more challenging task, not moving quickly to complete the rest of the list.

The key message from this study is that we need to better understand how we use our time, and to adapt our working schedule accordingly. The more clearly we can identify patterns and bottlenecks in workflow, the better prepared we are to create a new, more productive work schedule.

Occupational psychologists have proven a disparity between age and our perception of time. Essentially, the younger we are, the faster we perceive time to be, and the older we are, the slower we perceive time to be. This may seem like common sense or a mere anecdote, but the series of tests designed to observe this phenomenon produced clear patterns of differential perceptions. This

misalignment is believed to emanate from the impact of temperature and hormones on the circadian cycle, which alters with age.

Though such time sensitivities can be subtle, they can become significant when a divergent team must plan and assess its use of time resources. If we overestimate, or underestimate how long tasks take us, it can affect delivery of target billing. For this reason, an accurate, independent, means of assessment is necessary in the workplace.

Why Timesheets Work

European Union funding and auditing; compliance with Sarbanes Oxley in the USA.
Budgetary discipline and quality time.

Accountability to auditors and clients has magnified in academic and corporate life during the last decade. Sarbanes Oxley compliance in the United States, and funding audits from organisation such as the European Union, now almost always command a time management component as part of the justification of expenditure.

Law firms, accountants, architects, surveyors, designers and software engineers, are just some of the professions now tasked with increased accountability in terms of client billing and internal performance monitoring. What started out as a means of budgetary control and fraud avoidance has now become a key performance indicator, and a critical tool for the scheming of work flow and output.

Budgetary discipline is advocated by many of the world's leading research organisations as a means of demonstrating an efficient management approach. The capacity to show internally where time has been costed and how it is being allocated is now a commonplace first step in conflict resolution.

Is There Really A Return On Investment?

Reduction of repeat administrative tasks
Dashboard monitoring and planning facilities
Forecasting time allocation with like-for-like activities

Time management software enables research managers to avoid repeat administrative tasks such as team timesheet compilation. Using a simple dashboard system, a manager can now collate individual timesheets inputted directly by other staff. This style of reporting enables a manager to measure performance and predict future output. More advanced systems will also permit budget analysis on an individual task or client project.

This ability to forecast potential short-falls and budgetary over-runs can help teams adapt their overall plan to stay within acceptable and agreed targets. When it comes to quoting for new projects or



estimating for future tasks, the historical data can illustrate the key stages of times resource requirements.

It is obvious that cost savings can be gained by more efficiently managing labour resources, however, there is also a more immediate and direct cost saving in payroll administration. Replacing the labour-intensive payroll process with automated time management reporting can make significant impact. For example, saving 40 hours per pay period may amount to as much as 2,000 hours of savings over the course of the year. If this activity is scaled across a larger organisation, potentially hundreds of thousands of pounds can be reallocated each year. Cost savings and error reduction are also achieved with automated time monitoring systems and a coherent team reporting approach.

Conclusion

Compliance. Efficiency. Transparency. Accountability. These are the strengthening trends throughout the research management sector. Without time monitoring systems, professional research teams increase their risk of audit failure, legal action, and potential charges of professional misconduct.

However, with strong time management compliance and transparent time accounting, researchers can make a virtue of effective management. Transparency is paired with cost control and integrity is twinned with efficiency. In the age of accountability, the question will not be 'Will we get a time management system?' the question will be 'Why don't you monitor your time properly?' **Ends**

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