

Briefing

November 2016

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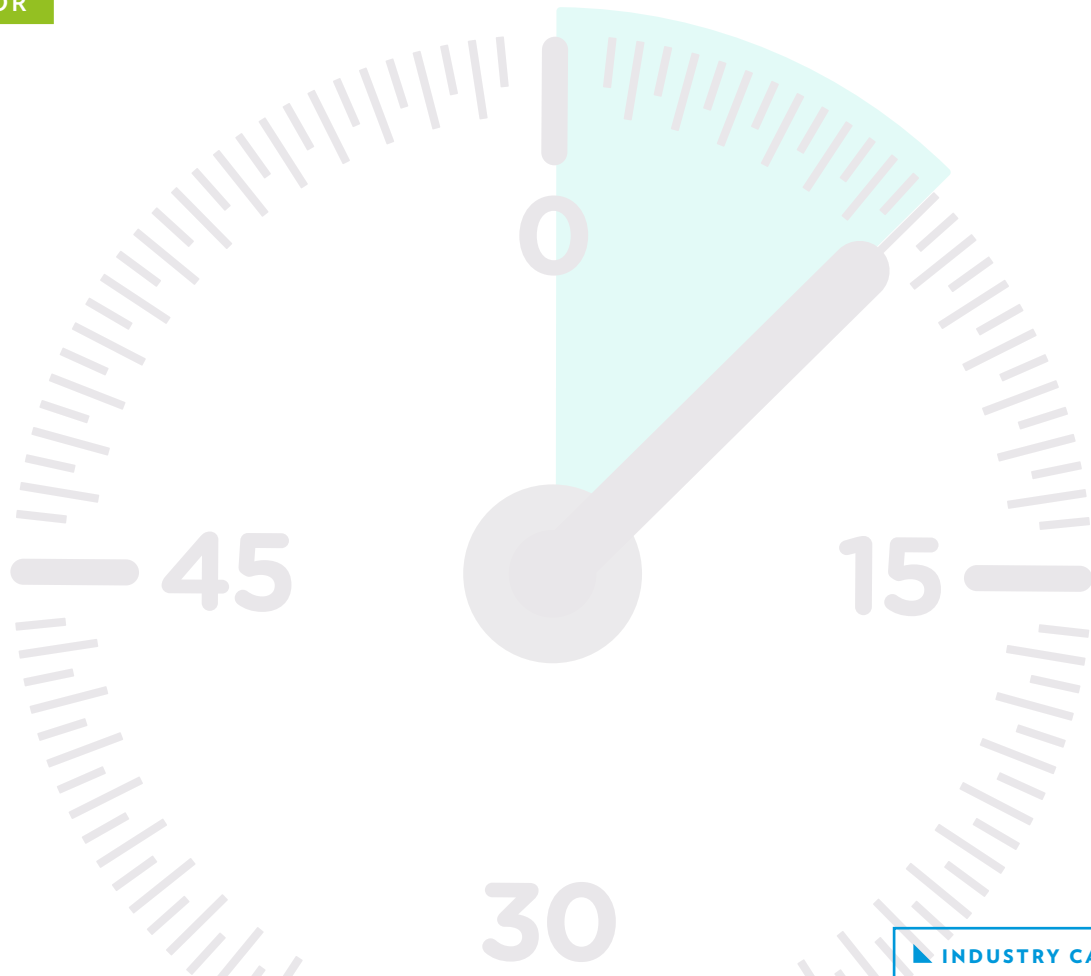
FINDING THE TIME

How IT is helping Charles Russell Speechlys make up for lost hours



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*Legal business on a fresh, more fruitful formula for
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INDUSTRY CASE STUDY

Toughening up on time

Charles Russell Speechlys used new technology to reset the time-recording culture among fee earners – while also providing timely information flows to management

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ou will no doubt remember what you did yesterday. But can you really remember what you did last Wednesday afternoon – and also how long you spent doing it?

Law firms sell time, and that means ensuring fee earners capture the time they spend on client matters. Time recorded promptly will be more complete and more accurate. Clients expect no less.

But how do you ensure that fee earners keep their recording up-to-date without the need for finance or management to intervene?

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“After a certain stated number of strikes, they’re informed the failure will have a financial impact on their bonus. It’s transparently in people’s interests to ensure they’re always recording time promptly.”



Screen time

Charles Russell Speechlys’ solution to this challenge was to take control of their screens.

“We built an application whereby, if a certain number of time-recording days were found missing, a stopwatch would flash up on their screen,” says head of revenue and credit control Adam Vosper.

“The fee earner can dismiss the stop watch for an hour – so he or she can deal with urgent matters – but after that if he or she tries to ignore the prompt again, the time-recording software can override the other applications and force the fee earner to bring his or her time recording up-to-date.”

It sounds like a fantastic psychological experiment. But even though effective time recording is ultimately critical to cashflow, perhaps

it also sounds a bit much for a minority of people? However, four years and a wider business rollout later, the idea has transformed time-recording behaviour, says Vosper. It’s also a fully-fledged product in its own right – Enable Revenue Manager.

“It has simply meant that everyone has to be more disciplined about time recording,” says Vosper.

And the firm has clearly benefited from forcing fee earners to conduct their time recording in a timely fashion. “We immediately gained better knowledge of the split between chargeable and non-chargeable activity, and a far more accurate picture of business performance at any point in time. Management had up-to-date information on activity levels across all business groups,” he explains.

For more information, visit:
www.enableplc.com

Strikes action

The system has since evolved into the Enable product it is today – including in the context of the 2014 merger between Charles Russell and Speechly Bircham. The two firms had the synergy of the same time-keeping system, but each had different specific policies. As with all aspects of a merger, it was an opportunity to put in place the best system across the merged firm.

On the one hand, the system of alerting is now more lenient. “We give fee earners a certain number of ‘strikes’, where they can effectively ‘snooze’ the application,” says Vosper. But there’s still a stick to wield alongside this apparent carrot. “After a certain stated number of strikes, they’re informed the failure will have a financial impact on their bonus,” he says.

“It’s transparently in people’s interests to ensure they’re always recording time promptly.”

Now available out of the box as Enable Revenue Manager, the tool’s parameters can be configured at an office-wide as well as an individual level, it can accommodate the patterns of part-time workers – and it’ll also help with the process of finding time after the event.

“The latest version will investigate the daily document list and a fee earner’s diary activity to assist the effort to recreate time,” explains Vosper. The prompt that appears can also distinguish between missing time and time that has been recorded but not closed and/or is a temporary allocation.

“Finally, there’s even a management tool that automatically emails both the HR team and the revenue manager to alert them to potential problem areas,” says Vosper.

“On initial implementation, there were some inevitable grumbles,” he laughs. “But the fact is that our fee earners are honest with themselves – they just know they wouldn’t be as disciplined without it.

“And as you’re capturing billable time more promptly it pays for itself quickly – and many times over.”



All in the timing

Enable Revenue Manager launches automatically, notifying users on their Windows desktop when units of time are found to be unaccounted for in the time-recording system.

But it also proactively helps the fee earner to locate their individual missing time by investigating their diary and document management system for activity that could potentially count toward their targets. The system integrates out of the box with the Tikit Carpe Diem time-recording database and its ‘best match’ technology to embed activity data directly, populating fields automatically so fee earners don’t have to begin with a blank page. But other time-tracking systems can also be configured.

As working patterns at law firms grow increasingly flexible to keep the talent happy, culture healthy and fixed costs down, the system also contains its own configurable features, enabling firms to tailor alerts to both how and where they do business. For example:

- Requirements can be set for the individual, grouped by role or office, or indeed rolled out firm-wide.
- Weekends can be incorporated for the Middle Eastern working week.
- The system can create a working week for those working part-time schedules.
- Messages that appear to users when time is missing can be decided by the firm.