

# Taming the Time Card

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*By Rick Brenner  
Chaco Canyon Consulting*

[www.replicon.com](http://www.replicon.com)



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Filling out time cards may seem maddeningly trivial, but the data they collect can be critically important to project managers. Why is it so important? And what does an effective, yet minimally intrusive time reporting system look like?

At some point, most of us have been required to submit time cards. To most professionals the task often seems maddeningly trivial, especially when the card is due in ten minutes, we've forgotten how we actually spent our time for a few days, and the whole thing is just a piece of fiction.

In accounting or law, where time spent determines client billing, time reporting is obviously necessary. For many other professions, expended-effort data seems to have no real purpose. But expended-effort data can be an indispensable management tool for project-oriented organizations.

Why is this data so important? Projects are supposed to end. Often there's much more project work to be done than people to do it, which creates pressure to complete successfully any existing projects. That's one reason why project sponsors always ask, "When will it be done?"

To answer such questions, project managers need to know roughly how long each task should take, and how much effort has been expended so far. They estimate the former and measure the latter.

Management would rather estimate than guess time to completion. Lacking historical effort data, estimates cannot be based on data; lacking current effort data, actuals are little more than hunches. By tracking the time of project team members, project managers can control projects better because they can base their estimates on real data.

The primary requirements of any time-card system for professionals: Respect their time and respect them.

If your organization is project-oriented, and you don't yet collect expended-effort data, you might consider starting. But whether a system is in place, or you're considering one, take care that it meets your needs without burdening or insulting professionals. A well-designed system can be minimally intrusive and still yield useful data.

Here are some criteria for a time card system that doesn't put the corporate culture at risk:

- Gather effort data only from the people who work on projects.
- Include all overtime.
- Don't bother with supervisor's signatures. Any professional inept enough to get caught lying that way is not to be trusted with important project work.
- Collect data weekly. This helps keep people fairly current.
- Don't try to account for 100% of a person's time — focus on the time spent on project work.

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- Put the system on the Intranet. Make it easy to use from anywhere.
- Provide a separate account for each project task, so you can compare actuals with estimates.
- Pick a minimum resolution: 15 minutes or more. Any finer than that is fiction.
- Report all work done, no matter where — even at home or on travel.

If people understand the need for the data you collect — and if you use that data — your time reporting system will be a tool, not a target.

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