

How to estimate case hours

In the legal profession, time really is money. Most attorneys bill their clients hourly, so projecting a total fee requires that attorneys estimate the number of hours they will have to bill for a case.

While no two cases are ever the same, over time patterns emerge. The type of case, client, court, and other factors can predictably impact the number of hours an attorney can expect to bill a client. A very experienced attorney may be able to accurately pinpoint the amount of work a case will require, but for most of us, technology is an invaluable tool for making accurate estimations.

A good client/case database will record what charges a client faced, indicate what factors were relevant to the case, and how many hours a client was billed for. With this information you should be able to answer these questions:

- How much time do attorneys at our firm spend on different types of cases? What is the firm wide average?
- What factors cause attorneys to spend more time on a case?
- What factors cause attorneys to spend less time on a case?

If your firm does not track this data, remember, it is never too late! A simple database can be started and maintained with a minimal investment of time and money.

In the meantime, there are qualitative ways to answer the same questions. Brainstorming with attorneys and tapping into your accumulated expertise should also provide reliable estimates.

Once you are pretty confident with the answer you have obtained to the above questions it is up to your firm's management how it is used. At Sumpter & Gonzalez, for example, the factors are recorded in a worksheet like the one excerpted below. These are completed by the attorneys to be used for the sliding scale application.

DWI Check List- This check list will be used to determine a client's fees. Please state the number of hours you believe a factor will add to this case.		
Base Estimated Attorney Hours: 15		Base Estimated Paralegal Hours: 10
ENHANCEMENTS	Hours	Notes
Fails all field sobriety tests		
Fails breath test		
Fails blood test		
Fails two field sobriety tests		
Refuses all field sobriety tests		
Admits to 2 drinks ...		