
ClickTime Whitepaper

Expensive Lessons:

*The Importance of Ease-of-Use In
Timesheet Software*

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Background: Distributing the Burden

Electronic timekeeping products are rooted in the principle that if users track and enter their own time, clerical staff are relieved of the need to manually collect and keypunch timesheets. By distributing the data-collection burden to each individual worker, management can reduce the need for centralized clerical staff while adding just a few minutes of work to each employee's day. This is a trade-off that has become fully accepted in modern enterprises, as self-service applications become more common.

The Need for Current Data

Timesheet data is used for a variety of purposes in an organization: cost accounting, payroll, billing, and project management. In each of these areas, data which is incomplete or tardy can nullify the benefits of having such a system in place.

Consider the example of a consulting firm which utilizes an electronic timesheet package to manage the work performed on projects. A client's overall budget is entered in advance, and the firm will work against that budget but not exceed it. The timesheet package collects user data each day and presents project managers with the current status of actual vs. budgeted time for each project. At the end of the project, a client's invoice reflects the detail of work performed, and remains within budget.

In this example, it is crucial that time data be kept absolutely current, without any substantial lag in the entry of timesheets by workers. Of course, there are many factors which will impede the accurate and punctual collection of timesheets -- these include user apathy, difficulties using timesheet software, errors in entry, lack of access to a terminal, language and timezone barriers, etc. A well-implemented software system will mitigate these factors and furnish managers with a coherent and accurate picture of resources devoted to each project. In fact, it is the very function of enterprise software to overcome apathy, confusion, and disorganization, and deliver to managers the data they need to make decisions.

Effects of Corporate Hierarchy

Often the most valuable and substantial individual contributors -- such as senior law partners, creative directors, lead programmers, etc. -- actually outrank most of the operational staff in a company. For this reason, and because of their tight schedules, they tend to be less "obedient" in following company procedures. In fact, many organizations hire extra staff just to assist these contributors in dealing with paperwork, computer chores, and other operational details.

Thus a paradox: these "major contributors" are the least likely to fill out timesheets regularly, they cannot be ordered to do so by an operations department, and yet their time is the most valuable to calculating cost and billing data.

The Role of Software

Too often, companies cannot truly assign a value to their significant software investments. Press and analyst reports frequently cite examples of large ERP or CRM implementations where customers cannot even judge whether their ROI is positive. Time and again, multimillion-dollar software implementations are abandoned altogether because they are not adopted by their intended user bases.

These failures provoke an obvious question, "Is this a failure of user training?" Perhaps this is true; but no system should require an extraordinary level of training to compensate for a design which is excessively challenging to use. If software is reasonably intuitive, or resembles existing software with which users already have a comfort level, the odds of success increase dramatically.

The role of software is not only to automate business processes; it is to add an additional layer of intelligence to facilitate its own use.

Software Design Matters

On a user's computer, different software products compete for a user's attention. Today's "knowledge worker" has a dizzying array of software installed both on their PC and their company's network. Products which are easily used and understood get used more often, while those which are difficult remain generally under-utilized. It's common sense --- any office worker will build lists in Excel before attempting to build a "real" database, for the simple reason that they can understand Excel but not a relational database. Email is used for sending documents for approval long after the multimillion dollar "document management" package has been installed. The graphic designer writes memos using her desktop publishing software, simply because it's more familiar.

Despite this phenomenon, most enterprise software is still built more poorly than most packaged software. And most web-based enterprise applications have poorer interfaces than most consumer-oriented websites. The reasons seem obvious - why invest time and money in making software elegant if people are required to use it anyway? Making "mandatory" software friendly has been compared to improving customer-service at the DMV. It's mandatory, so why should it be easy?

But just as Amazon.com would get fewer orders if it were more difficult to use, any business software loses participation from company employees if it fails to show respect for their time and attention.

Given the critical nature of timesheet data, and the fact that a company needs each worker to enter his/her own time frequently, the design and user-friendliness of software directly impacts the bottom line.

Conclusion

All employees must participate actively in any timekeeping program in order for the results to be meaningful and relevant to management. Failure of even a few individuals to participate yields poor-quality data which may be ignored, and risks the ultimate failure of the system.

By implementing well-designed software which respects end-users' time and attention, and by making it as easy to use as possible, a company can greatly improve employee participation, which in turn improves both the quality of its data and its management effectiveness. The bottom-line impact of this improvement may greatly exceed the cost of the more usable software. And since the quality of software interface rarely correlates to its cost of acquisition, improvement can be achieved with no increase in expense, but simply greater attention to the quality of the user experience when selecting products.

More Information

For more details on the connection between software design and employee participation, contact your ClickTime Sales Representative or send email to info@clicktime.com