It pays to know where your time goes: Part 2

Tracking time spent on professional activities helps interpreters in many ways, but learning what to track is an adventure in itself. Following up on Part 1, here’s more about how we went about gaining

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In Part 1 we reviewed the initial findings of our time tracking trial, which confirmed that interpreters invest a considerable amount of time in non-billable tasks or what can be considered overhead. We also discussed the conclusions that grew out of the results – the lessons-learnt if you will. In this second and final entry we’ll review how we went about tracking our time and the tools we used.

How did you come up with the categories you track?

Almute: Well, it was kind of a trial and error thing, but we did it as a group and we were able to compare notes. Not all categories make sense for everybody. Time tracking systems allow for a “matrix” structure, i.e. you track “tasks” (e.g. “travel time” or “interpreting on site”) and “projects” (e.g. “customer X”). We tried to use a similar set of categories, but they turned out to be quite individual for some of us.

Nacho: I also learnt it by doing. The best thing is that you normally can set up categories (or rename them) as you go. I started tracking time with 5 categories (called “tags” with the tool I use) and have ended up with 17. I also deleted a couple of categories that were not precise enough or weren’t used at all.

What categories do you track?

Almute: After three years of experience, the following categories make sense to me:

- Marketing activities (including networking)
- Continuing education
- Preparing for an interpreting assignment
- Interpreting (i.e. time spent at the conference, NOT just the time I am actively interpreting in the booth)
- Travel time
- Conference organisation (e.g. recruiting colleagues, booking tickets, writing mails, forwarding documents, etc.)
- Office work (e.g. filing documents, writing invoices (if this is part of a project where I am the consultant interpreter, this would be part of “conference organisation”), preparing my tax return, etc.)
Teaching
Preparation for teaching assignments
Translation
Voluntary work (e.g. for AIIC)

Julia: As tasks I track: Interpreting prep, interpreting on-site, interpreting travel/appoche (paid), team organization and consulting, translating (including proof reading). These are the billable tasks.

As for non-billable/overhead: Education/training, writing quotes, lead generation/prospecting/lead follow-up, office/accounting/invoicing, networking and association work.

I think it’s important not to be too detailed. We are not writing a PhD thesis or conducting scientific research; we’re trying to learn something about the profitability of our business, very individually.

Time tracking tools usually allow a CSV export that can be opened as an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet then allows analysis of how much time (of different categories) was spent on a project/client, or on a specific task (e.g. translating) over a certain period of time.

I have applied a little trick and defined a project called “overhead”. So, whenever I perform a task that is typically overhead (see list above), I assign it to the project “overhead” (which is obvious, because there is no project or client I could assign it to). In my analysis in Excel, this allows me to filter for all overhead time spent (and by deduction for all productive/billable time).

Please note that prep time and all the hours that you spend for a certain client comes under “billable”!

The time tracking tool I am using right now, DueTime, allows me to do all these analyses in the tool itself. I can filter all tasks for one specific project or all projects for one specific task, and I can select whether to do this for a specific month, week or day. Of course, the most basic analysis would be how much time in total you have spent working in a given week or month.

Nacho: I have set up the following categories, which can be assigned to a specific task with a “tag”. With the tool I use, you can assign several tags to the same task. For example, if I’m negotiating prices with a client on the phone, I would tag “telephone call” and “negotiation”.

These are the 17 categories (tags) that I have set up:

- Translation
- Interpretation
- Voice-over
- Training and support tasks (as a trainer)
- Further training (as a trainee)
- Client acquisition
- Negotiation
- Quote preparation
- Assignment preparation
- Travel time
- Telephone calls
- Correspondence (emails, letters, faxes)
- Bookkeeping
- Administrative tasks
- Social media
- Association work
- VEGA (work for/with young professionals)
This sounds incredibly complicated! How much time do you spend on time tracking?

**Julia:** Oh, once you have set up the tool (takes you maybe 30 min), it takes no more than 3-5 minutes a day. And it’s definitely worth it. Any analysis of a given project or time span might take another 3 minutes. But I can now tell you at the touch of an icon how much time I spent doing any task or on any project in the month of July, or how much time I worked in total, etc. It really changes your whole attitude as an entrepreneur.

**Nacho:** It also helps your client understand why we invest so much time in a given project. If need be, it is also possible to print an extract of all tasks with start and stop times. I think this is an invaluable source of information when negotiating with the client for higher rates, payment of organization and preparation time, cancellation rates, etc.

I understand these time tracking tools work like stamp clocks where you clock in and out. What if you forget to clock in or have a day of “multitasking” moving backward and forward between different tasks?

**Julia/Nacho:** Oh, yes, there are these days when you had actually planned to do this translation, and then a customer calls and wants you to do something else. All of a sudden you have to look for a colleague, and then you think - oh, I better write that invoice, otherwise I will never get paid. Or you write emails to different customers. As we pointed out, we are not doing a PhD here. After a day like this I simply roughly aggregate the hours and edit the time tracking tool retrospectively, allocating like 2 hours for office work (overhead), 2 hours for customer relationship management (overhead), 2 hours for the translation (customer X). All time tracking tools allow for retrospective entries and editing.

Tricky question: How do you track multitasking like writing emails in the booth while your colleague is interpreting, or doing the odd translation for customer A while in the booth for customer B?

**Julia:** Well, allow me to say that I think it’s unfortunate that many feel it necessary to do that when they should be relaxing so as to be fit for the next turn and/or supporting their teammate. I think it’s unsustainable and also unfair vis-à-vis the client, who is actually paying us for being there. The fact that many feel a need to do so, however, only shows that it doesn’t seem possible to make enough money without squeezing the most out of one’s time. For me it simply means that if you really think you need to be paid twice (by two clients) for the same time period, you’re not charging enough.

As regards time tracking, at the beginning I allocated such hours (e.g. doing association work on the train while on paid approche for project C) based on my gut feeling. What is important, however, is that one unit of time cannot be allocated twice - that distorts your whole time tracking and the tools won’t accept it anyway. You have to decide. Based on my gut feeling I mostly allocated the hours to the “higher value” project, i.e. the association work on the train on (paid) approche for Customer C was not allocated to “association work (overhead)” but remained “approche customer C”. A 1/2 hour phone call with Client G during the break at a conference for client F was not allocated to Client G, it remained interpreting on-site for client F.

I think the best way is to do a test run for a month and see what you can learn from the experience, find out what makes sense for you. There is no one or best way to do it; it depends on what you
personally want to get out of it. In my case, I would like to know my billable/overhead split and the profitability of specific jobs. For example, if one month my billable/overhead split is poor, I will be able to track down why; it could be, for example, that there was the AIIC regional assembly and I had a whole weekend of overhead in addition to all the normal overhead.

Nacho: Like Julia, I think interpreters should not write e-mails or do translation work while in the booth. Apart from that, I tend to avoid multitasking to boost concentration (and therefore efficiency) on any given task. I use the cloud-based tool toggl.com. If, for some reason, you are doing different things at the same time, you can assign different categories/tags to the same time range. For example: you’re travelling on the train, writing an email to a young colleague about an AIIC event. I would assign 4 tags to the same task: “travelling time”, “correspondence”, “VEGA”, “association work”. This seems very time-consuming but actually it is only a matter of 4 clicks. In practice, I would only assign 3 tags instead of 4, leaving out the last one. Apart from the tasks, with toggl.com you can (and should) set-up clients and projects, which can be done as you go.

What are the different time-tracking alternatives and why did you choose yours?

Nacho: I have tried several time-tracking solutions and have found cloud-based platforms very useful for my needs. Instead of installing the program on your computer, you just need to visit a website and log in. Many of the tools available (toggl.com, timecase.net, yanomo.com) have an iOS and/or Android version, which means that you have time tracking at your fingertips. I have chosen toggl.com because it suits my workflow (I find the mixed approach of project, client and tag-based tracking very smart), you can even access the site or app offline and its free version covers all features I need. You can create as many reports as you want selecting one or different tags, clients, projects, a date rage. It is possible to export to a CSV or PDF file, and even import your CSV reports from another tool. By the way, it took me 1 hour, 8 minutes and 58 seconds to learn how to use it, read some related blog entries and have the system up and running!

For more views on time tracking software check out this discussion on interpreting.info.

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