



## Technology Is My Partner

Partners generate revenues.

For Larry Gray, Managing Partner of the 15-person firm, Alfermann Gray and Co. (AG & Co.), in Rolla, MO, implementing the right technology was crucial. With technology as his partner, Larry has been able to grow clients, revenues and profits while supporting his empowered-staff business philosophy.

In 1978 Alfermann Gray & Co. adopted one of the first integrated software packages on a System/34. It was the first significant leveraging of technology for AG & Co. In 1986 the firm adopted personal computers, but their old software products did not innovate along with them. AG & Co. had no choice but to use non-integrated applications. In the following years, the firm experienced strong growth, and with it, pain and administrative drain on their bottom line.

“It took more and more time,” Larry says, “to keep track of engagements, tasks and so on. Not good when you’re growing like we were.”

1997 was the watershed. Larry’s “Technology Is My Partner” commitment married his goal of a flatter organization and empowered staff. Mr. Alfermann acted as father of the bride (he retired feeling confident his namesake firm was in excellent hands). The first housekeeping chore was to invest in fully integrated software—tax, write-up, small business accounting, practice management, and so on. AG & Co. chose a powerful software, believing it would save a lot of time and deliver better capabilities.

### **The Key: Practice Management**

“The software suite does what we need and want,” Larry says, “except for the Time & Billing module. One of its deficiencies was billing. It’s not real world. When one of my staff bills a client, we want complete time and expense information in front of us. We want to be able to easily and quickly select what to bill and generate an invoice. Our old time and billing software was too dependent on the human element. To bill an engagement, say write-up or payroll services, you had to sort and scan lists of time and expenses to ferret out just the detail belonging

to the engagement. It was cumbersome and time-consuming. It required a full-time clerk to handle billing.

“Why invest in technology unless it will truly generate revenues and reduce costs? I want to leverage my time as much as possible.”

When asked about adjustments to bills and other billing decision making, Larry agreed it is important. “Of course, being able to include or exclude time or expenses, maybe write-up or down the net bill amount—flexibility available when you need it. Massaging every invoice is not the norm in our firm. Software should automatically pull in all time and expenses for an engagement, like [BQE Software’s] BillQuick software does. BillQuick shows me work in progress for each engagement. Everything is there, no more searching around. BillQuick also lets me bill each engagement separately, or together on a single invoice.

“Pulling all engagement detail is important,” Larry emphasizes. “In the past few years the number of firm engagements have grown substantially. We capture time and expenses for everything. But after spending hundreds of hours trying to get our old time & billing software to do what we needed, we gave up and searched for better technology.

“That’s when we found BillQuick---and got a big surprise during conversion. We discovered thousands of WIP items in the shadows—a tenth of hour, a quarter hour, etc., hundreds and hundreds of line items. With our other time & billing software, it was too easy to miss items, too easy to bill less than the true work done for a client.” With diligence, Alfermann Gray and Co. billed most shadow WIP items after converting to BillQuick.

### **Engagements Take Too Much Time, Right?**

“Yes, I hear that from staff and partners in other firms. It slows things down. Steals time from billable hours.”

Larry’s response is pointed. “Why cheat yourself out of revenues and profits? The real culprit is not capturing actual time as the work is done. Entering an engagement code adds a second of time. Waiting to record work for hours or days---it’s too easy to forget 5 minutes, 10 minutes or 15 minutes of work done for a client. Of course, there are other benefits to immediate time recording too.

“My Technology Is My Partner commitment comes in here too. Billable time equals revenue, so we use technology---BillQuick and devices---to capture it as accurately and easily as possible. For example, BillQuick’s stopwatch timer makes multi-tasking easy. I can open a stopwatch for one task, start another and record time, return back to the first . . . I can open as many stopwatches as I need, turning them on and off with a click all day long.

“Another technology example is how we track time and expenses out of the office. Nurturing client relationships and capturing revenues is not limited to our office. We’re on the road a lot. My BillQuick time sheet is always a click away, either on my PDA or my laptop.

“Whether in the office or out, I always charge time to an engagement. The extra moment is worth it. It’s the right thing to do. And we have the evidence: increased billable hours. Now when I bill a client, I know what the service cost and that my bill is fair.”

Larry Gray also notes that the person in his firm who performs the work for a client also produces a draft bill immediately after completing the job. This is part of his empowered staff business model (which includes regular monitoring and support systems to ensure quality work) results in invoices going out the door when work is done.

“BillQuick helps us generate more accurate and complete bills, and we produce them faster. For most clients we deliver the invoice with the work. Empowered staff and technology—including BillQuick—speeds up cash flow and increases our profits.”

## **Managing Engagements and Tasks**

Another reason AG & Co. switched to BillQuick was due date monitoring and scheduling. “Our old time and billing software dumped all tasks to the same date when it carried them over to a new year,” Larry says. “Things do not come in at the same time each year. Managing tasks was complex in our old software, resulting in high administrative and management time and too many steps. I need to know at any time whether our goal of say, getting tax returns out within 2 weeks during tax season, is being met.”

AG & Co. first tried a custom Job Tracking Worksheet in Microsoft Excel. Knowing the job stage, for example, Tax Review in a client’s 1120 Tax Preparation engagement, anyone in the firm could estimate when the job would be done. The Excel spreadsheet did its job, but at the cost of lost benefits, including less effective management procedures.

“That’s another area where BillQuick helped us. We tapped its custom fields and memo fields on the Engagement screen to implement the same tracking capability we had in our Excel spreadsheet. Using standard codes, everything is tracked through the firm—job number, date in, whether we’re waiting on information from the client and the date, who the return was passed to and the date, etc.”

Larry’s bottom-line issue: “Be timely with client jobs. To accomplish that our team must be on top of things, the right information at the right time. We couldn’t do that with our old software because it was too elaborate, too cumbersome. With BillQuick, we meet and *exceed* client expectations.”

## Bottom Line

“Technology helped us free up four full-time positions in our firm, including three managers,” Larry says. “Part of our overhead reduction is the result of what BillQuick provides us, and part is other technology we implemented.

“In our firm staff record their time and expenses to client engagements in BillQuick. As the job progresses, we review BillQuick’s Billing Review Report daily to see if something is not right so we can correct it before it’s a problem that requires a write-down. When the job is done, the staff person or partner responsible for the engagement generates a Billing Review Report and draft invoice. With review and any changes, bills are out in less than two days, often the same day.

“Technology helped us streamline and flatten our organization. We eliminated three managers without losing efficiency, tracking jobs, or reducing our high standards for client service. Our former billing admin person transitioned into a fully billable member of the team. And the technology investment was not astronomical. For example, we invested about \$8,000 in software, time, training and so on in our old time and billing software. BillQuick proved a much better investment, costing about half the previous investment. Our return on investment with BillQuick is enough to cover both the previous software misstep and our BillQuick investment.

“The bottom line is our clients are happier because we serve them better and faster. Our employees are happier because they financially benefit from empowerment. And our profits have grown.”



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Founded in 1995, BQE Software, Inc. released the first version of its flagship product, BillQuick®, in 1996, growing it into a leading time billing and project management software solution. BQE develops products that completely automate timekeeping, project management and billing processes. Extensive management information is available through hundreds of reports. BillQuick also tightly integrates with QuickBooks® in real-time, providing 2-way synchronization.

The BillQuick Family extends recording of time and expenses to the Web, cell phones, email and PDAs, and converts appointments and tasks in Microsoft Outlook into time entries. BillQuick employs advanced technology, including *workflow automation* and *fuzzy logic learning algorithms*.

BillQuick adapts to firms of any size with unequalled features and flexibility of BillQuick products. BillQuick supports Microsoft Access and SQL databases.

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