



Time & Expense Tracking

The Power Of Time Management

Balancing Projects, Profitability & Life in the AE World

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Part I of the *Designing Your Business Master Class Series*



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Introduction: The Asset You Can't Replace

I want to tell you something that took me thirty years to fully understand: time is the only asset you can't replace.

Money can be earned back. Projects can be restarted. Relationships can be repaired. But the hours you lose to disorganized work, untracked effort, and unclear priorities — those are gone. And in our industry, every one of those hours has a dollar value attached to it, whether you're charging for it or not.

When I was running my firm, I was always curious about where time actually went. Not in the vague sense of "we spent a lot of time on design" — but specifically: how many hours did meetings consume across the life of a project? How much went to production versus real design? What was my team actually billing versus what they were actually working? These aren't abstract questions.

They're the difference between a profitable firm and one that's constantly grinding to stay afloat.

Here's what I discovered: something that most people consider boring — time tracking — is actually one of the most powerful management tools available to any AE firm. When you track time correctly, you understand profitability on every project. You write better proposals because you have real data. You make better hiring decisions. You know whether your firm is healthy before the problem becomes a crisis.

This ebook is based on the first session of my Blueprint for Success Master Class series — a 12-part program covering everything from time tracking to proposals, project management, KPIs, strategic planning, financial management, and business development. Think of this as the foundation. Build the right habits here, and everything else in your practice becomes easier to manage and more profitable.

I'm going to break this down into three areas: tracking time via buckets, calendar blocking, and how both tie into a genuine work-life balance. These aren't separate topics. They're one integrated system.

One thing upfront: there is no one-size-fits-all answer for how to run your practice. What I'm sharing has worked for the majority of firms I work with. The real goal is to give you a framework you can adapt and make your own.

“Something as what some of you might consider boring or mundane as time tracking really excited me. I created a system that I think is really simple, effective, and helps your whole team understand where they spend their time.”

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

Thinking in Buckets

I've been in this industry long enough to have seen every time-tracking system imaginable. Elaborate task lists with fifty line items. Spreadsheets that no one fills out. Software that's perfectly configured and never touched by the staff. And the classic: the end-of-week time slip panic, where everyone tries to remember what they did five days ago, or worse yet, end-of-month mad rush to enter time the entire month. None of it works well, because none of it is simple enough.

The fundamental problem with how most firms track time isn't a software problem or a discipline issue. It's a thinking problem. We ask people to remember specifics — which exact task they did, in which exact phase — when what we actually need is the big picture of how time flows across a project.

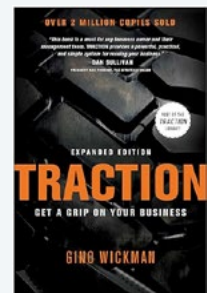
So here's the system I use and teach: time buckets.

The bucket concept is deceptively simple. Instead of asking your team to recall granular details, you ask them to think about which large category their time falls into. Everything that happens in an architecture or engineering firm can fit into one of these buckets:

Code	Category	Billable?
OX-	Office Non-Billable (master category)	No
OA-	Office Administration	No
OB-	Business Development)	No
OM-	Marketing)	No
OP-	PTO)	No
MT-	Meetings	Yes
PM-	Project Management	Yes
DS-	Design	Yes
PR-	Production)	Yes
PA-	Permits & Approvals	Yes
BN-	Bidding & Negotiation)	Yes
CA-	Construction Administration)	Yes

“Understanding fees starts with a clear definition of the project scope. From there, you need a realistic understanding of the project so you can set expectations early and build a framework that actually supports the work.”

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting



Traction: Get a Grip on Your Business by Gino Wickman — eosworldwide.com

Each bucket gets a two-digit code. MT for meetings. PM for project management. These are used in every single phase. DS for design. PR for production. These are used in most phases. PA, BN, and CA are pretty much limited to their own phases, in addition to MT and PM. Once your team knows these codes — and I mean really knows them, without thinking — time entry becomes dramatically faster and more consistent.

Design vs. Production: A Critical Distinction

I want to pause on something it took me a long time to realize: the difference between design and production is critical, and most firms don't separate them clearly enough.

Production is everything required to produce the deliverables outlined in your proposal: drafting, detailing, dimensioning, referencing, sheet layouts, etc. Design is all the effort required to get ready to start those production drawings: the thinking, the problem-solving, the concept development, the sketches.

Even during schematic design, when we're typically templating out the construction document set or setting up the title sheets, that's not really design. It's production. When you can see that clearly — when you can run a report at project close and see the actual ratio of DS hours to PR hours — you understand what kind of firm you are. You also know what you need to charge for a project.

Building Your Activity List

Inside each bucket, you can add specific activities. The key word is "can" — you want as few as possible while still getting the information you need. After 30 years of running my own firm, I never once went back to analyze how much time we spent on floor plan dimensioning versus reflected ceiling plans. What I needed was to know how much time went to meetings, project management, design, and production. That's the level of granularity that drives real decisions.

I use a color-coded spreadsheet to think through which activities belong in each bucket. It's much easier to think through your system in a spreadsheet than inside your software — once your thinking is clear, inputting into a firm management system like BQE CORE is simple.

The goal: reach the minimum number of sub-activities that gives you the information you actually want at the end of a project. Keep it simple. Starting too granular is a mistake most firms make and then abandon.



You can download the Activity List template at www.douglasteiger.com/products

Time Entry Is a Snap

I'm a big proponent of entering time daily. Not weekly, not at the end of the month — daily.

I know the end-of-week scramble is practically a professional ritual in AE firms. But here's what weekly time entry actually costs you: accuracy. When you try to reconstruct your week on Friday afternoon, you forget things. You round up and round down. You miss the half-hour of project management you did Tuesday morning. That's money left on the table.

Daily entry doesn't have to be painful. With the right system, it takes about three minutes.

The Keyboard Shortcut Approach

Here's how I teach time entry process to firms I advise – using a firm management platform like CORE:

- Type the first three letters of your project name, hit Tab
- Select your project phase, hit Tab
- Type your two-digit bucket code (e.g., DS-), hit Tab
- Use the down arrow to select your activity, hit Tab
- Enter your memo, hit Tab
- Enter your time

That's it. It's super simple. But this shortcut approach also leads to the importance of setting up a proper naming structure. You only need a formal name at the master project level. The sub-levels, phases and activities, should be a set up with the alpha-numeric system. In the shortened naming system time is saved because you don't have to scroll through long dropdown menus. When your team knows the codes by heart, the whole sequence takes under a minute per entry.

The key to making this process work is consistency. The activity code and its description should never change. Once you've set up "DS- BIM Modelling" as an activity, don't rename it, don't modify the description. If you want to add specifics, that goes in the memo field. These memos should be positive and describe the solution that was achieved by doing the work.

“The description in the memo should be written in a positive manner, describing the solution, not the problem. These should be written as if a lawyer is reading them.”

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

This is something I can't stress enough. How your team writes time entry memos will directly affect your client relationships and your ability to defend your fees. A memo that says "fixed the client's mistake" is a liability. A memo that says "resolved design coordination issue with structural engineer" is professional and defensible. Train your staff. Give them examples. Review the memos before invoices go out.

One hour of invoice review per month can save you thousands of dollars in fee disputes over the course of a year.

Fixed Fee Doesn't Mean You Stop Tracking

I get this question constantly: "We work on fixed fee projects. Why do we need to track time in detail?" Because the profitability of your fixed fee is based on the cost of hours spent on that project. And the only way to know if the project was profitable — and to generate better fee proposals next time — is to track what actually happened and the actual cost of delivering the work. Track time in detail on fixed fee projects. It gives you a post-project analysis that improves every future proposal and tells you which project types are genuinely profitable at fixed fee.

Tip: The Dash That Makes All the Difference

Always put a dash after your two-digit code. If you type "CA" without a dash, any word containing C and A together will show up in the dropdown — which could be dozens of items. Type "CA-" and only the activities under the CA bucket appear. Clean, fast, unambiguous.

Calendar Blocking — Seeing Your Whole Life at a Glance

Here's a question I ask every firm owner I work with: do you know how you actually spend your time each week?

Not how you intend to spend it. Not how you wish you spent it. How you actually, measurably spend it.

Most people can't answer that question with numbers. They have a general sense — "I'm in meetings too much" or "I spend most of my week on production" — but they don't have data. Calendar blocking solves this. It's a productivity technique where your calendar integrates with your to-do list and your time-tracking system, using the same bucket categories and the same color-coding across all three.

"I like to add a personal category to help achieve a work-life balance. If meditation, working out, or some other activity is what allows you to recharge your batteries, put it down in the calendar. This will make it easy to see what your whole holistic life looks like."

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

The Seven Calendar Buckets

For most firm leaders, I recommend no more than seven or eight calendar categories. Too many colors creates visual noise and defeats the purpose:

- **Emails** — time blocked for processing email (reading and replying), not just responding on the fly
- **Design / Production** — your actual billable project work
- **Client Meetings** — scheduled client-facing time
- **Marketing** — brand-related effort: photography, awards, content, social, relationship-building not tied to a specific pursuit
- **Business Development** — pursuit of specific projects: networking, RFPs, proposals
- **Admin / Finance / Billing** — running the business
- **Personal** — working out, family, meditation, whatever recharges you

What a Firm Owner's Week Actually Looks Like

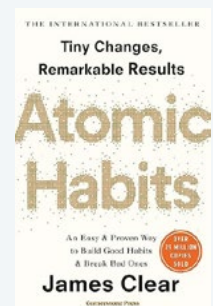
In a well-structured week for a firm principal, here's a realistic time allocation:

Category	Hours / Week
Billable Project Work (Design, Meetings, PM)	25 hours
Business Development	5 hours
Marketing	3 hours
Admin, Finance, Billing	3 hours
Email (non-billable)	4 hours
White Space (buffer / adjustment)	10 hours
Total	50 hours

The 10 hours of white space is not wasted time. Things always come up. Clients call unexpectedly. A project issue surfaces. White space is what separates a structured week from a week that falls apart by Wednesday.

Connecting Your Calendar to BQE CORE

BQE CORE integrates directly with both Outlook and Google Calendar. In your CORE settings, go to Productivity Tools → Integrations and you'll see the dialogue box for calendar linking. Once connected, time blocks from your calendar flow into your time tracking, making the whole system seamless. When your calendar colors match your bucket colors, the system becomes intuitive rather than effortful.



Atomic Habits
by James Clear

The Numbers Behind the Buckets

Let me show you why this system matters financially — because this is where time tracking stops being an administrative exercise and becomes a profit tool.

The 2,080 vs. 1,864 Problem

Most people think of a work year as 2,080 hours: 52 weeks times 40 hours. But 2,080 isn't a realistic number of potential hours. Nobody actually works 2,080 hours in a year, even if they are scheduled for a standard 40-hour week.

When you subtract 12 federal holidays, 10 vacation days, and a conservative estimate of sick time, you're left with approximately 233 actual workdays per year — or 1,864 work hours. That's right around 10% of available hours automatically non-billable. That's why I use this reduced number for all utilization calculations.

While gross utilization (billable hours /2080) is a relevant KPI, deducting holidays, vacation and sick time gives you a more realistic, true utilization target for how much time someone should be working during a typical week on billable work versus non-billable work. This is the number we want to use when setting targets for employee utilization.

Pay Rate, Cost Rate, and Bill Rate

These three numbers drive everything. They are the metrics you need to track to understand your potential profitability.

Pay rate is simple: $\text{salary} \div 2,080$. For a principal earning \$175,000, that's \$84.13/hour.

Cost rate is your break-even rate — what you have to charge to cover salary plus all overhead: rent, equipment, software, non-billable staff, insurance. You

“I use 1,864 hours in a work year. This accounts for the deduction of 12 holidays, 6 sick days, and 10 vacation days. From a starting point of 261 possible work days, there are only 233 actual work days — which amounts to 1,864 possible hours based on an 8-hour day”

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

calculate this by taking your total operating expenses and divide by the total direct labor cost. The break even multiplier varies by firm size. Some general ranges to keep in mind:

- Solo practitioner working from home: 1.75–2.0x
- Small firm with part-time admin: 2.0–2.5x
- Mid-size firm with overhead staff: 2.5x–2.75x
- Larger firm with significant infrastructure: 2.75x or higher

Bill rate is what you charge the client per hour. The difference between bill rate and cost rate is your potential profit — but only if you collect it all.

The Role of Utilization

Utilization is the ratio of billable to non-billable time. An architect who spends 85% of their 1,864 annual hours on billable work has an 85% utilization rate. Here's something worth understanding: 100% utilization is essentially impossible. Even one hour of non-billable admin per day drops an 8-hour day to 87.5% billable. I round to 90% as a practical maximum for most production staff. Principals typically target their time to be 25-50% billable because they carry the overhead of running the firm itself. And remember, this is already after 10% of their total available time is taken out for PTO.

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Work-Life Balance Is an Inner Choice

I want to be honest with you about something, because I think it's more useful than any spreadsheet I've shared so far.

I spent the first fifty years of my life thinking in the future. When I was in college, I told myself I'd be happy when I graduated. When I graduated, I'd be happy when I had a good job.

When I had a good job, I'd be happy when I ran my own firm. When I ran my firm, I'd be happy when I was married. When I was married, I'd be happy when I had children.

I'm not proud of that pattern. But it was real, and I suspect many of you recognize it.

It wasn't until my fifties — after years of intentional inner work — that I shifted how I hold things. That shift didn't come from a business book. It came from learning to be present to what's actually here, rather than perpetually leaning toward what's next.

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, wrote something I return to often: *"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."*

That's not a lofty idea. It's a practical one rooted in the reality of "what is." No matter how well-structured your week is, things will go sideways. Projects will blow up. Clients will be difficult. Staff will leave at the wrong moment. The question is not whether these things happen — they will — but what you bring to them when they do. How you react is what is important.

What Balance Actually Looks Like in Practice

I work with firm owners who are genuinely passionate about architecture. For some of them, a balanced life means traveling to see important buildings, participating in design juries, and spending weekends sketching. Architecture is both vocation and avocation. That's balance — for them.

"There is no such thing as work-life balance. It is all life. The balance has to be within you."

—Sadhguru

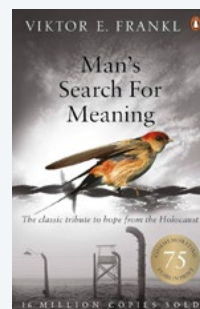
For others, balance might mean being home for dinner with their family, a child's sports team, or having a consistent morning practice before the workday starts. That's equally valid.

The Gratitude Practice That Takes Two Minutes

Every morning, before I get out of bed, I name what I'm grateful for. My life. My family. My health. My work. It takes two minutes, and it sets the tone for the entire day differently than reaching immediately for a phone. I do the same practice at night before I fall asleep. Compounded over months and years, it changes how you experience your days. That's the Atomic Habits principle applied to your inner life: a small, consistent practice, repeated daily, compounds into something substantial. Try it. See if it shifts anything. To me, life is one big experiment.

“Calendar blocking is one tool that can assist with achieving the work-life balance you want today. Schedule in the balance part of your life. If you want your life to change, then something has to change. So what do you want to change?”

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting



Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl — on resilience, meaning, and the freedom to choose your attitude

Conclusion: One Small Change

I want to leave you with the same thought I leave every group with at the end of a session.

You don't have to implement all of this at once. You don't have to overhaul your time-tracking system, rebuild your activity list, restructure your calendar, and recalculate your cost rates before Monday morning. That kind of wholesale change is overwhelming, and it almost never sticks.

Pick one thing. Just one. Maybe it's committing to daily time entry for the next 30 days. Maybe it's setting up your seven calendar buckets this week. Maybe it's running the billing potential calculation for your current staff so you understand what you're actually generating.

Consider tracking time via buckets to make your entries faster and more consistent. Use color-coded calendar blocking to see, at a glance, how your week is actually structured. And remember that work-life balance isn't something you achieve once — it's an inner choice you make every single day. That's the foundation. Everything else builds from here.

Any one of these moves the needle. All of them together transform a practice.

“Hopefully, if you implement just one of the suggestions from this ebook, it can shift some aspect of your life just a little. If you continue and build on those ideas that work for you, the payoff in the future is huge.”

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

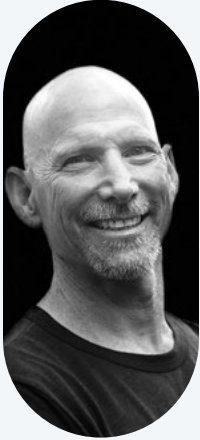
Put the System to Work

The bucket system and calendar blocking work best when your time data flows automatically into your projects, billing, and financials. BQE CORE makes that happen — time tracked in seconds, profitability visible in real time.

[TO LEARN MORE, BOOK A DEMO →](#)



About the Author



Douglas Teiger, FAIA

Founder, Teiger Consulting

Douglas Teiger is an architect, advisor, and founder of Teiger Consulting, where he works with architecture firms to strengthen how they define scope, structure fees, and manage projects. With more than 40 years of experience in practice, his work is grounded in a deep understanding of how firms operate and how they grow.

Doug began his career working in architectural firms before opening his own practice in 1989. In 1999, he co-founded Abramson Teiger Architects, where he served as managing partner for two decades. During that time, the firm grew from six to more than thirty people, earning a reputation for consistently strong design work. A key part of that success came from Doug's focus on streamlining operations, allowing the firm to dedicate more time and attention to design and project research.

That experience now informs his consulting work. Doug helps firm leaders connect the business side of architecture with the work itself, bringing structure to areas that are often handled informally. His approach to fee estimating reflects that perspective. He teaches firms how to align scope, cost, and delivery into a cohesive system that supports both project outcomes and financial performance.

Beyond project and financial strategy, Doug works closely with firm principals on broader aspects of practice. His work often includes strategic planning, operations, marketing, and business development, along with guidance on team structure and long-term growth. He is known for acting as a sounding board for firm leaders, helping them think through decisions with greater clarity and confidence.

At the core of his work is a commitment to mentorship. Doug focuses on helping emerging and growing firms accelerate their development while building a more balanced and sustainable approach to practice. He brings a practical, experience-based perspective to that work, shaped by decades of leadership and hands-on involvement in projects.

Douglas holds a B.A. in Architecture from Cornell University, where he graduated with honors, and is a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (FAIA), a distinction recognizing his contributions to the profession and his impact on architectural practice.

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Running a better architecture or engineering firm takes more than experience. It requires clear insight, practical tools, and guidance you can trust. This is where we can help. Our resource library is built for firm leaders who want to improve financial performance, strengthen project delivery, and make more confident decisions. Inside, you will find webinars that turn complex topics into clear actions, articles that challenge how firms operate and grow, and reports and ebooks grounded in real data and experience.

You can also put ideas into practice with tools, templates, and checklists designed for immediate use, connect with peers through user groups, and learn from real customer success stories. Every resource is created with one goal in mind: to help you run a better firm. Explore what is most relevant to you and take the next step forward

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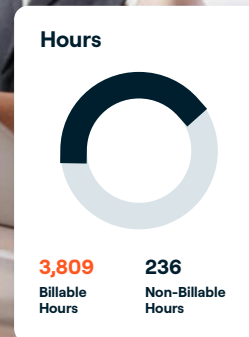
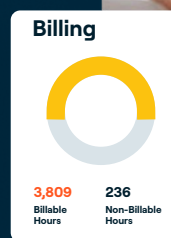
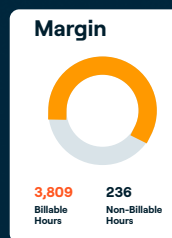
[User Groups](#)

BQE CORE

If you're serious about improving efficiency and profitability, you need access to technology that makes the process of tracking Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) straightforward. BQE CORE is an all-in-one firm management platform with integrated accounting and project management tools that's backed by a company with over 30 years of experience and countless end users worldwide. It was designed by an engineer and architect to give their firms the tools they needed to thrive. Thus all of the built-in features are designed to address the pain points A/E firms typically face.

BQE CORE can streamline your business processes, while simultaneously providing groundbreaking insights that will help grow your firm, all from the convenience of a desktop computer, laptop, or mobile device. BQE CORE makes it easier than ever to collaborate with both your team and clients.

Running your business should be exciting, not chaotic. That's why we're here, and most importantly, why we developed CORE.



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