



Time & Expense Tracking

Why Tracking Time Matters, for Individuals & the Firm

How thoughtful time tracking drives project success, improves profitability, and builds a stronger firm culture.

Time Is Your Most Valuable Resource

Too often, it goes untracked, underestimated, or misunderstood. And it is always one of the most hated parts of the job.

Whether you're a firm owner, principal, designer, engineer, project manager, or administrator, time tracking isn't about micromanagement, it's about visibility, clarity, and smarter decisions. For firm leaders, it reveals where your resources are going and how projects actually perform. For project teams, it ensures your effort is recognized, helps prevent burnout, and protects the profitability that keeps the firm strong. And for everyone, it builds a culture of accountability and trust. One that supports better planning, fairer workloads, and long-term growth.

No matter your role, building this habit is about understanding the value of your time, and using that knowledge to do better work. Here are some of the benefits of tracking your time consistently and accurately:

Ensure you get credit for your work:

Whether your firm bills hourly or works on a fixed-fee basis, tracking all the time you spend ensures that every minute of your effort is accounted for. For billable work, that means you, and the firm, get paid for what you deliver. For fixed-fee work, it helps ensure you're not unknowingly working for "free" and you deliver projects efficiently and profitably.

Make future project planning more accurate:

When everyone logs time consistently, the firm accumulates real data about how long different tasks, project phases, or deliverables take. This helps in scoping, estimating, and pricing future projects more realistically, avoiding underestimation or scope creep. But this only works if everyone is participating, from the most junior designer to the most senior firm owner.

Protect and improve firm profitability:

Accurate time tracking gives visibility into both billable and non-billable work. Non-billable time is valuable when it supports training, mentorship, professional development, proposals,

and team building. The goal is balance. Too much non-billable time reduces profitability, but being overly billable often means critical development and cultural activities are being neglected. Tracking everything helps the firm maintain that balance, reduce inefficiencies, and make smarter decisions about how time is allocated.

Enable better project management and resource allocation:

With real-time or near-real-time time data, project managers can see who is working on what, identify bottlenecks, make staffing adjustments, and keep projects on schedule and on budget.

Support transparency, accountability, and firm growth:

Time tracking fosters a transparent culture where everyone understands how time is being spent. This helps build trust internally, and ensures decisions about staffing, hiring, and growth are data-driven.

Because of all these benefits, adopting a consistent time-tracking habit from day one, especially when starting with CORE, is one of the most important habits a design-staff person can build. And just to reiterate, there is no person too senior or junior to build a habit of accurate and timely time tracking. Unless everyone is rowing in the same direction, the firm won't benefit from the advantages of having accurate data to drive decisions.



How to Use CORE for Time Tracking: A Practical Guide & Best Practices

Now that we've covered why time tracking matters, let's look at how to do it well, with minimal friction.

This section is your practical guide to time and expense entry in BQE CORE. It's built specifically for design and technical staff and draws from official implementation best practices. Think of it as your cheat sheet: clear steps, helpful tips, and smart defaults to help you build a consistent, stress-free time tracking habit.

1. Getting Started with Time & Expense Entry in CORE

- Open the Time & Expense screen in CORE. This is where all time and expense entries are logged.
- CORE offers three main ways to enter time:

Weekly Time Card view is ideal for a quick glance at your week. Entries are grouped by project and show hours, activities, billable flags, memos, and more.

Detailed Sheet view is great for reviewing and editing multiple entries at once. You can sort, copy-paste, batch edit, and delete with ease.

Daily Time Card is designed for speed, simplicity, and daily use. With a modern interface, Google-style smart search, customizable fields, and integrated timers, it helps you enter time quickly without navigating away from your work. You can even install it as a desktop app on Mac or Windows for easy access throughout the day.

- You also have the option to use timers: simple start/pause/stop them as you work, which can be handy for tracking time on tasks without needing to manually enter hours later.
- If you also track expenses (e.g. reimbursable purchases, vendor bills, etc.), the Expense Entry section lets you log those with date, project, expense item, units, etc.

Recommended setup (for new users and teams):

- On the time card, enable grouping by Project (so entries are organized by project).

- Make sure the “Status” column is visible for everyone (to monitor whether entries are submitted/approved), and the “Memo” column as well, if your firm requires notes along with time entries.
- If you don’t have the right permissions to make the above changes in the settings, talk to your firm’s BQE CORE administrator.

After initial setup, ask every user (especially new staff, or old dogs learning new tricks) to practice: make a few sample time entries, submit, un-submit, approve, etc., so they get comfortable with the workflow.

It is also vital that you make a standard process for how people categorize time. Especially when time should be considered billable, unbillable, or placed in an overhead category like marketing, professional development, or team building. Make sure these categories are built-out in your CORE settings correctly, and that you communicate with your team so everyone know the right categories to enter time.

2. Distinguishing Billable vs. Non-Billable (Indirect) Time & Why It Matters

Not all valuable work is billable. Internal meetings, staff training, mentoring, business development, and process improvement may not be charged to clients, but they’re essential to running a healthy, resilient firm. That’s why it’s critical to track both billable and non-billable time. The goal isn’t to hit the highest utilization rate possible, but to ensure your firm is investing wisely in its people, culture, and future.

Higher utilization isn’t always better. When non-billable time disappears, so does space for innovation, learning, and long-term growth. The goal is balance, and you can’t improve what you don’t measure. Tracking all time, accurately and consistently, gives your firm the visibility it needs to make smarter decisions about staffing, profitability, and operational focus.

What typically counts as non-billable / indirect time:

- Internal meetings, staff check-ins, 1:1 management meetings, company-wide updates, etc.
- Administrative tasks: timesheet entry, invoicing, filing/scanning, organizing files, and internal documentation of systems and processes
- Training, professional development, continuing education, software-training or license-related work
- Business development, proposal or bid preparation, marketing, and other internal business-growth activities
- PTO, vacation, sick time, and other personal time away from the office

Best practices for non-billable time:

- Define what counts as non-billable vs. billable in a time-keeping policy or handbook. Make sure this is communicated with the whole team so everyone follows the same standards to ensure consistency.
- Use specific codes or categories for different types of non-billable work (Admin, BD, Training, etc.) so it's easy to run reports later.
- Simplicity is your friend. Don't get carried away with too many categories or you risk your team not putting time in the right bucket. Remember, your data is only helpful if it is accurate.
- Regularly review and analyze non-billable time reports (ideally by role/department) to understand where time is going and whether certain overhead activities are taking too much time (and to make sure people are categorizing time correctly).
- Limit non-billable time strategically. While some indirect time is essential (training, business development, internal coordination), too much can erode profitability. Each role should have a target for the percentage of time that is billable (their Utilization Rate).
- Ensure everyone receives training on what constitutes billable vs. non-billable time. Misunderstandings here are a common source of inconsistent tracking.

Implications for project and financial reporting:

- Non-billable time affects cost reporting and reduces business profitability (since cost is incurred without corresponding revenue).
- Unlike a "write-off" (which removes previously billed hours), marking as non-billable is proactive — you're deciding in advance not to bill that time, which helps avoid surprises in margins or cash flow.
- When in doubt, all time spent on a billable project should be marked as billable. This is best practice, as project managers or principals can always write off time later.
- If you are marking time spent on project work as non-billable, make sure you verify that with the project manager or the principal in charge. Don't guess if project work is billable or not.

CORE has made it easier for people to just have more time in their day. They're not having to spend hours trying to fill out their time sheets at the end of the week.

- Jaki Ellis, Principal at Britacan

3. Make Time Tracking Seamless — Use Calendar Integration

One of the biggest barriers to time tracking is that people forget to enter time because it feels like extra work. Don't fall into this category. Make time tracking a habit that you do every day and never skip - like brushing your teeth. This is where CORE's calendar integration becomes a powerful tool.

How it works:

- You connect your existing calendar (e.g., Google Calendar or Outlook/Exchange) via the CORE add-in.
- When you create meetings or tasks in your calendar (e.g., client calls, internal meetings, design sessions), those events can be converted into time entries automatically: date, duration, description, memo, attendees, etc.
- You then assign Project/Phase/Activity, adjust billable vs. non-billable if needed, and save — turning calendar events into tracked time without re-typing details.
- You can convert events either at the time they're created, after they occur, or in batch at the end of day/week (useful for busy schedules).

Recommended workflow for design staff:

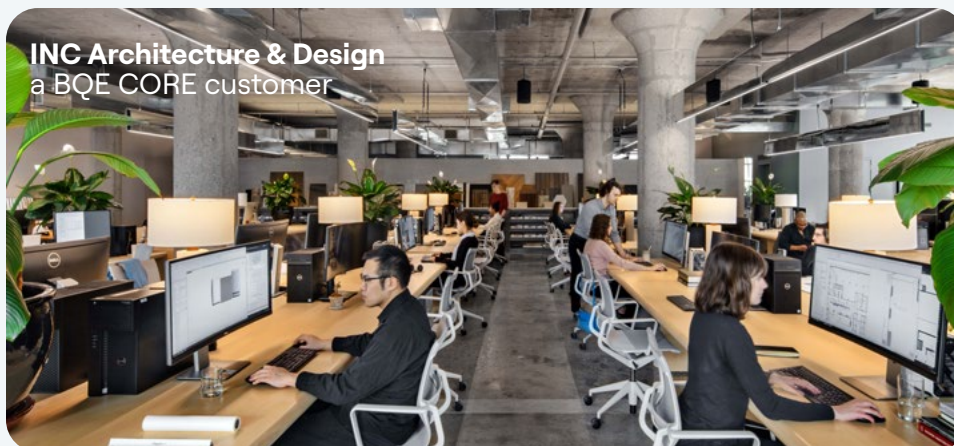
- Encourage adding every project-related event (calls, meetings, internal design sessions, coordination with consultants, etc.) to your calendar — even small ones like a short call or internal review.
- At day or week end (or immediately after a meeting), convert the event into a time entry in CORE. This minimizes the “lost time” problem and reduces memory-reliance.
- For events that are routine (e.g., weekly team check-ins, recurring coordination meetings), consider setting the calendar event as recurring. That way, conversion becomes a near-automatic habit.
- Use the memo/description and attendee fields to add useful context — helps when you or PMs review time entries later.

Calendar integration makes time tracking easier, more accurate, and less intrusive — exactly the conditions you want when building a firm-wide time-tracking habit.

Suggested Adoption & Culture-Building Steps (for Firms Starting CORE)

To help your firm build a sustainable time-tracking culture with CORE, consider including in your rollout plan:

1. **Kickoff Training Session:** Walk your team through CORE's Time & Expense screen, the difference between billable vs. non-billable time, and calendar integration setup. Include live demos.
2. **Firm Time-Tracking Policy:** Provide a short handbook or internal guidelines that define what is billable, what is non-billable, how to code different activities, and expectations (e.g., weekly submissions, use of calendar integration, etc.).
3. **First-Week Tasks:** Ask each user to log actual time for everything they do (project work, internal tasks, meetings) and convert a few calendar events to time entries. This helps build the habit early.
4. **Regular Review & Feedback Loop:** After 1 month, run utilization and non-billable time reports; review with team or leadership to highlight gains, inefficiencies, and opportunities to refine workflows. Make this reporting and review a monthly and quarterly process.
5. **Reinforce Value and Show Results:** Use time-tracking data to inform project budgeting, future proposals, resource planning, and profitability. Share success stories (e.g., "we recovered X hours this month, which helps justify staffing or catch-up on overhead").
6. **Consider what reports and dashboards your team has access to.** The more transparency you create and exposure your team has to data the more likely they are to build good habits and better understand the business impacts of their efforts.
7. **We have seen that firms that make data and reports more accessible to the full team typically have better adoption when it comes to time and expense tracking.**



Final Thoughts

Time tracking is one of the most underrated, and unloved, habits in a professional services firm. But when done consistently and thoughtfully, it becomes a strategic asset. It's not about surveillance or red tape. It's about visibility, accountability, and building a stronger business.

For designers, architects, and engineers, and other consultants, tracking time means your contributions are recognized, your workload is understood, and your value is visible. It helps ensure you're not quietly giving away hours, and allows your firm to advocate for your time, development, and well-being.

For project managers, time data enables better forecasting, staffing, and budget control. It reveals bottlenecks early, keeps teams aligned, and supports smoother delivery. For firm leaders, it unlocks insight into utilization, profitability, and performance. Making it possible to grow with intention instead of guesswork.

The firms that thrive are the ones that understand where their time goes, and use that insight to drive smarter decisions. CORE gives your team the tools to make time tracking seamless and meaningful.

Start building the habit now. Your future projects, and your future firm, will thank you.



Explore More Resources

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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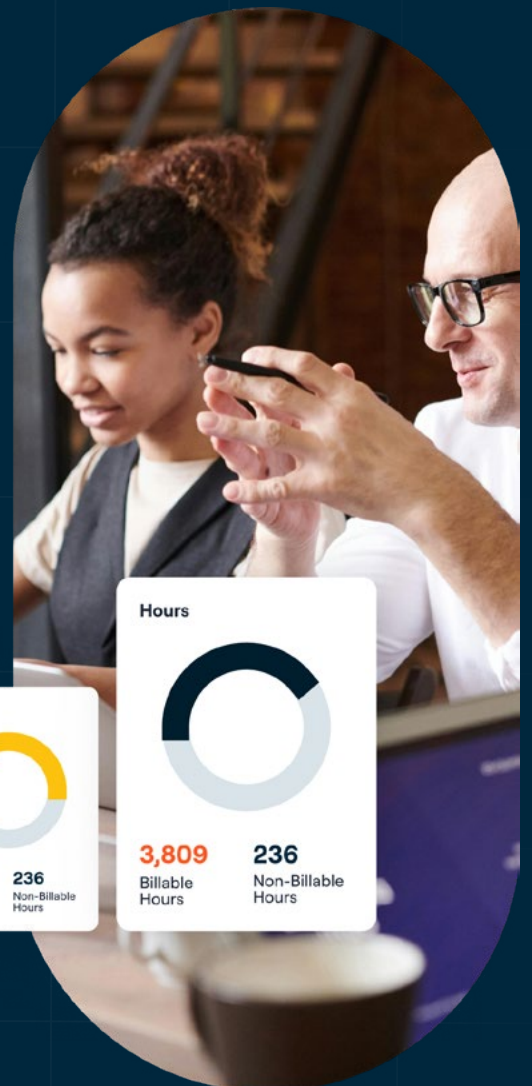
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About BQE CORE

Designed for engineering, architecture, and professional services firms, BQE CORE is a leading provider of business management software.

Firm owners are busy. This is why we built BQE CORE to streamline operations by integrating time tracking, project management, invoicing, accounting, a CRM, and payroll into a single platform, enabling firms to boost productivity and profitability.

With a track record of over 25 years serving the A&E industry, BQE empowers businesses to make informed decisions through real-time insights and powerful analytics, helping them achieve growth and operational excellence.



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