

# Tips on surviving hourly billing with a clear conscience

In the Corporate world, one gets all kinds of hints for when you're spending too long on a task. Your boss will tell you. The department you're doing work for tells you they want it yesterday. Your spouse phones to tell you to come home. And in the end, in many environments, it doesn't matter that much it you do "too good" a job, because it's all coming out of the same purse. As my own boss, I sometimes find that the time I want to spend on a project, to get it the way I want, appears extortionate to me when converted to billed dollars. If you're wondering why that's a problem, maybe I can borrow *your* conscience for the next few years! For the rest of you, here are some solutions which have helped me balance quality and cost.

- Where the project allows, provide an quotation, and try to live with it. A clearly defined project with a definite price takes all the billing guesswork away—even if it does put all of the risk on you.
- After you work with a client for a while, you will get a sense for whether they like basic service or value added, then you can start in the right ballpark, and keep fine tuning.
- If you run into problems because your experience is lacking, or your design was poor, "stop the clock" until you are back on track. My only exception to this is if a client wants me to do something outside of my current expertise, and they clearly understand that a certain amount or trial and error will be involved.
- When in doubt, communicate! If you have a choice of ways to do something, and you have time, ask what they want. (Sometimes the simplest solutions are best.)

One other course I have taken may be at odds with the conscience thing—I used to have different rates depending on what I was doing and where I was. Database development cost more than editing a Word document, working away from my office was more expensive than working at home. Non-profits and seniors got a break. No more! My time is my time, and I let my clients decide whether it's worth it to them. I'd like to think that I provide extra value on some mundane tasks, but in the end, it's up to the client. It makes billing and quoting much easier.

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He is semi-retired but accepts contracts to help finance his expensive hobbies. David retired from a 33-year career in corporate IT and now specialises in developing database applications for Windows platforms, web-sites, and generally in improving business processes by simplifying, clarifying and beautifying all kinds of business documents.

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You can learn more about the work he does at [www.creekwood.ca](http://www.creekwood.ca).

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My experience has been that clients appreciate good work and honest billing, and that often what seems expensive to me is a bargain to them, especially compared with what they were used to putting up with before. I'm providing services that my clients either can't do themselves, or don't have the time to do themselves, and despite my misgivings, they keep coming back. I do still get a hint when I'm taking too long: my wife doesn't have to call me to come home any more—but she will sometimes ask if I'm ever going to bed!

And if I *still* can't sleep at night, I can always throw in a freebie or two.