

REPORT: How Smart Timesheets Are Shaping the Future of Work

What is the 'future' of the future of work? The very definition of a "job" is shifting. Prefixes to positions and job descriptions now routinely include "virtual," "remote" and "mobile."

To understand what the "future" looks like, it's important to put a finger on the pulse of the current landscape. In fact, it's often in the details that a sense of direction can be gained. In this survey, conducted by Journyx, in partnership with MSDynamicsWorld.com, 186 respondents answered questions about one very granular and yet revelatory aspect of the "future" of work: timesheets.

The immediate goal of the survey and the structure and nature of the questions posed focused on how people track their time, across roles and departments, and how the process of filling out their timesheets could be easier.

The findings, however, help us also understand where and how timesheet and time tracking software can grow, what the opportunities are within the niche for innovation and further development, as well as - more broadly speaking - the evolution in the way we work.

Besides these implications, the survey and its responses make a great resource for companies looking to gain insight into the "bugs" workers face when filling out their timesheets and why they may [dislike the practice](#).

Time Trackers: A Profile of the Ideal User

"Time trackers" in a business context come in two roles:

- One operates at the managerial level, handling the administration and collection of timesheets
- The other category includes employees, team members or contractor workers — in other words, those who actually use and fill out timesheets for compensation.



Of the 186 respondents, **55% identified themselves as managers** and **44% reported as being team members**. These numbers further break down into these top five departments:

- Professional Services
- IT
- Customer support
- Sales
- Finance and Accounting

As it will soon be seen, the distribution of the respondents' departments aligns perfectly with the types of applications used.

Applications and Usage

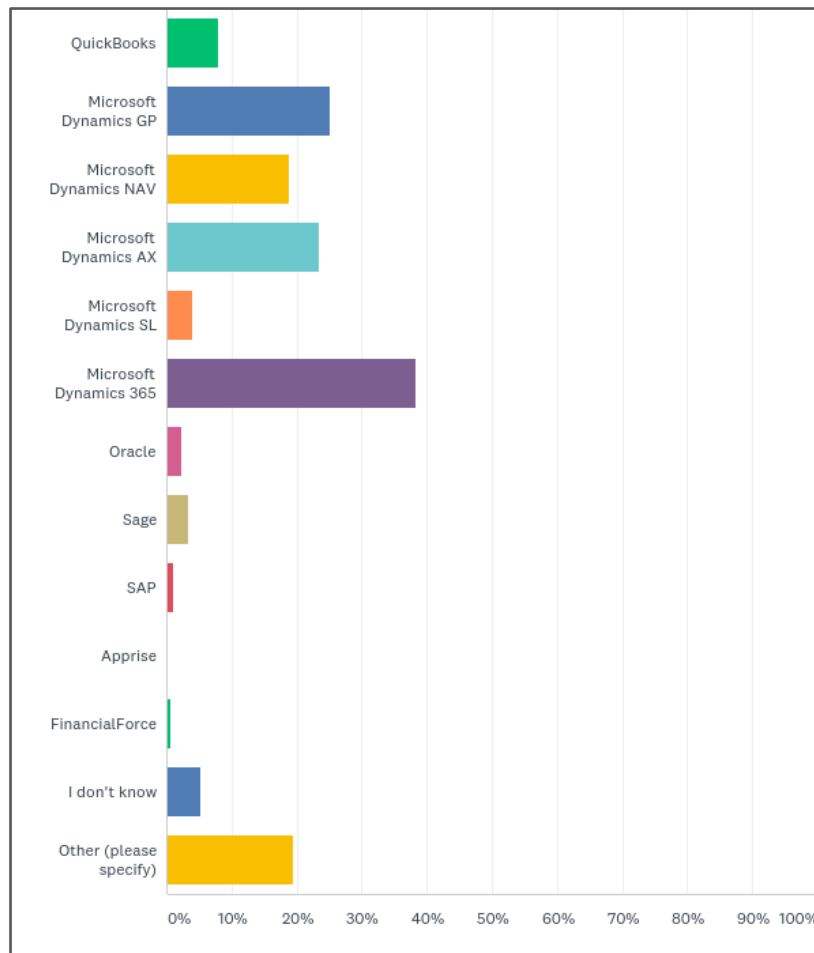
And what about the workplace context? An overwhelming **74% of respondents report working most of their time within software applications**. Specific software varies from industry to industry, and **only 26% of respondents spend half their time or less** working within software applications.



Accounting/ERP Applications

The Microsoft Dynamics suite was naturally the most popular accounting/ERP application used (given that the audience for the survey was members of MSDynamicsWorld.com), with Microsoft Dynamics 365 showing the highest percentage of users (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1:
Accounting/ERP
Applications Used

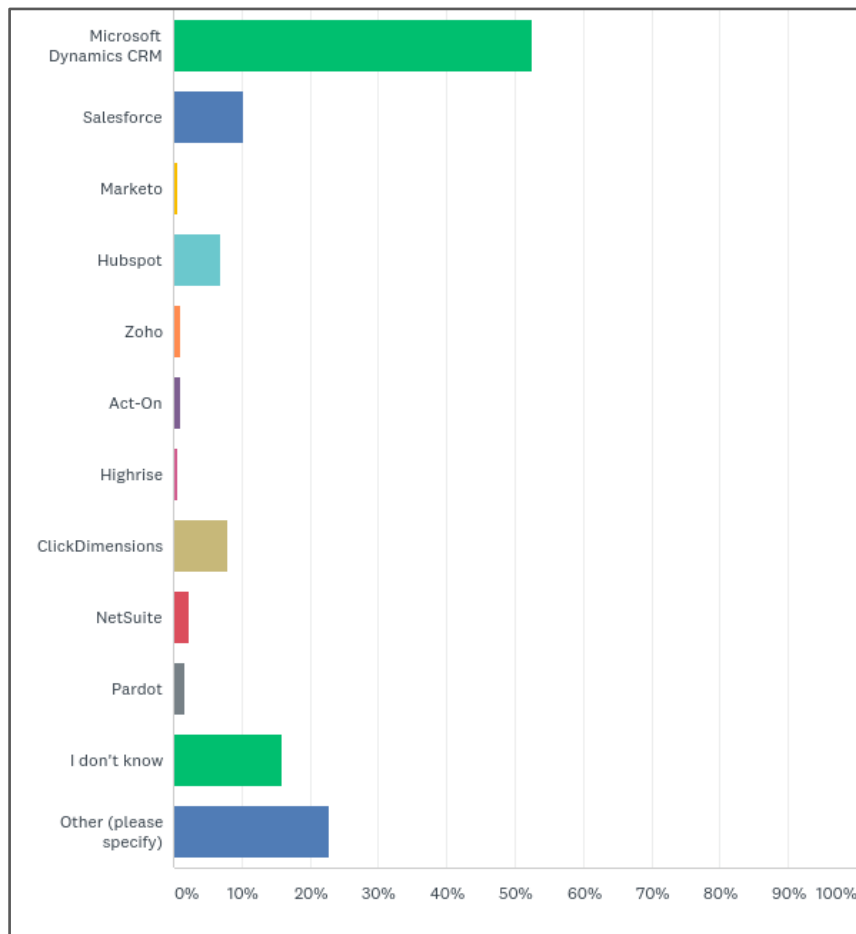


Sales and Marketing Applications

Microsoft Dynamics CRM (53%) was also the top software application used by sales and marketing, beating out Salesforce at 10% and Hubspot at only 7% (Fig. 2).

Raisers Edge, Constant Contact and Sitecore were some of the "other" software choices mentioned, but some respondents also remarked that they used their own customized, internal pipeline and set of spreadsheets for these purposes.

Fig. 2: Sales and Marketing Applications Used



Customer Service and Support Applications

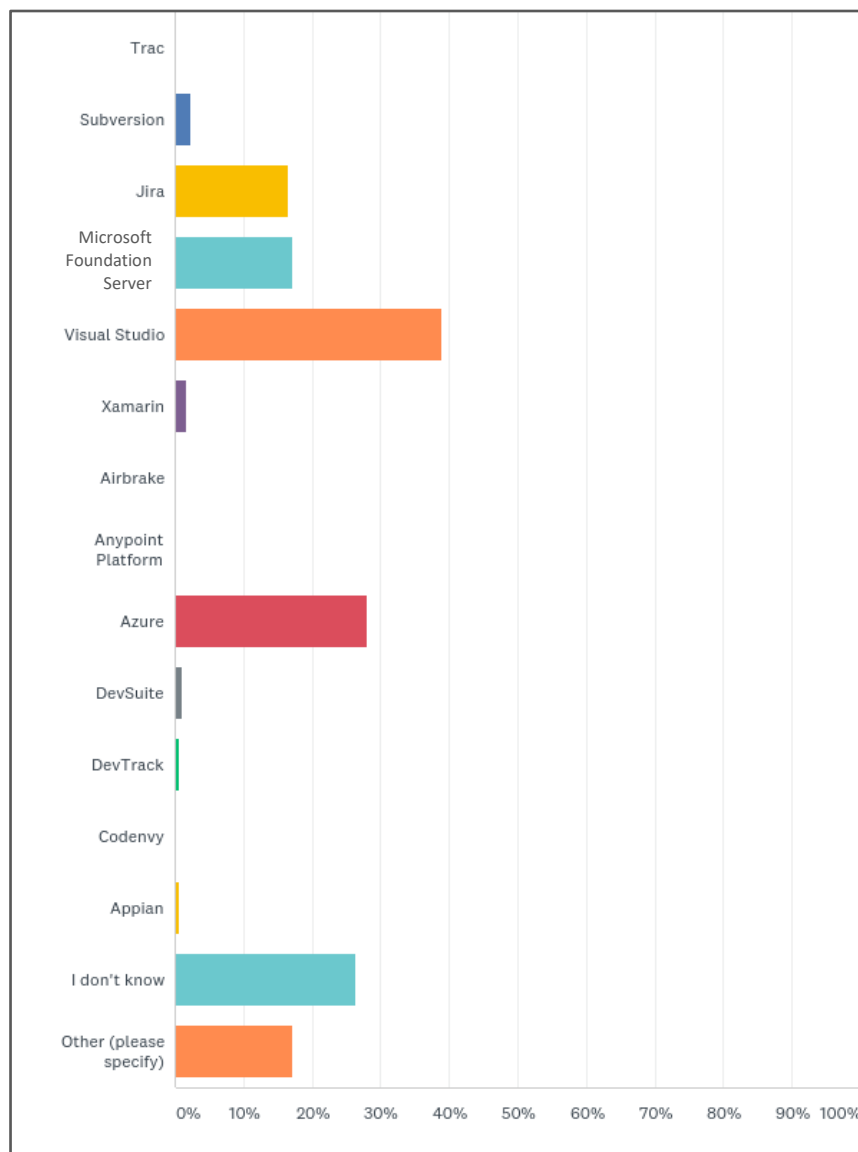
Microsoft Dynamics CRM also provides customer service and support functions, besides combining sales and marketing, and it's this flexibility that can account for 43% of respondents choosing it. Other write-in choices also favored customer service and support modules within Microsoft Dynamics NAV, as well as Microsoft SharePoint.

Engineering and Development Applications

Things get more varied when it comes to engineering and development functions, however. While suites like Microsoft Dynamics are robust enough to offer an integration between various business functions, such as resource management, accounting, financial, and customer relationship pipelines, dev-focused software comes with its own contextual specifics.

This is why applications like Visual Studio (39%), Microsoft Azure (28%), Foundation Server (17%) and JIRA by Atlassian (17%) won out as most used by survey respondents. In a development environment, software tools like feature tracking and issue tracking often take priority over and above resource and project management (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Engineering and Development Applications Used



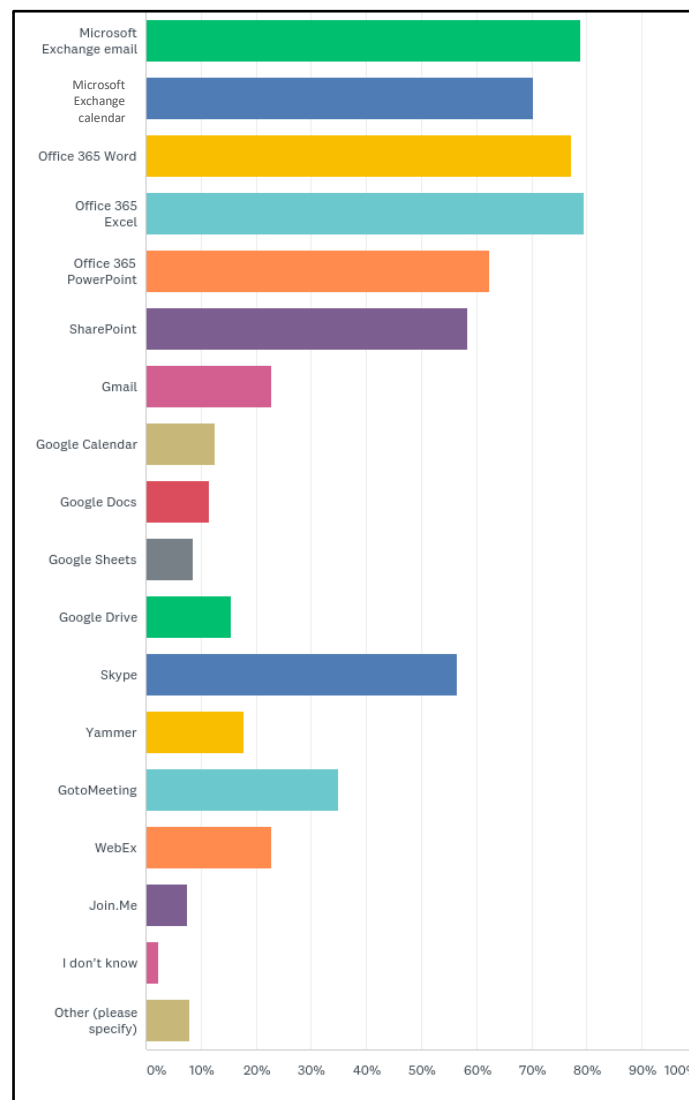
Since IT and Engineering/Dev were among the top departments that respondents identified being employed in, these applications would be par for the course. Does this data tell us anything more, specifically in the case of time tracking?

Since a majority of survey respondents report working most of the time within software applications, it would also make sense that these applications allow users to be able to track time from them.

Employee Productivity Applications and Project Management Software

Productivity applications, based on the responses garnered, fell into suites where communication, coordination, scheduling, and collaboration could occur. For instance, Microsoft Exchange email was used by 79% of users, while the calendar was used by 70% (Fig. 4) – which, again, is natural given the survey takers had a natural bias towards Microsoft products. Google and its suite of productivity applications was also represented by a contingency of respondents. Of course, these percentages involve some overlap in users, since respondents were invited to check all options that applied.

Fig. 4: Productivity Applications Used

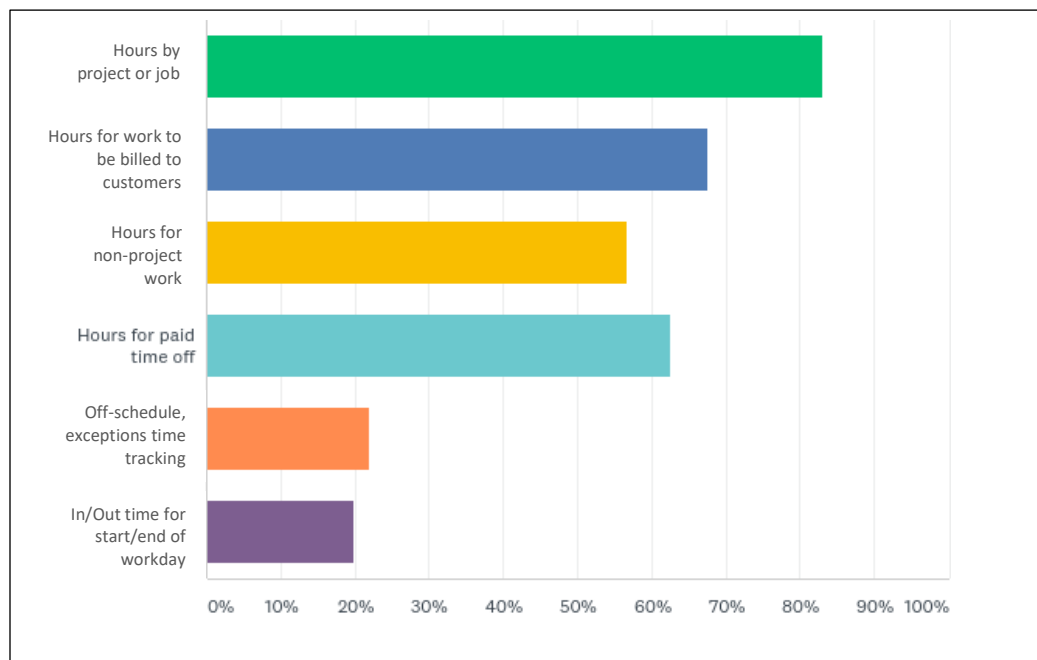


This means that using applications that can easily interface and "speak" to each other is important and makes users' lives easier. Even if there are separate applications for specific functions, this extensibility enables users to work seamlessly across applications and is extremely important when it comes to employee productivity.

State of the Union — Where Time Tracking is Today

Given the applications being used and the nature of users' daily jobs, it's not a surprise to find that 78% of respondents report having a time tracking process already in place, while 83% report tracking hours by project or for customer jobs (Fig. 5). This is likely for tracking project progress, but also for resource management and future allocations.

Fig. 5: Types of Time Data Tracked



"Billable hours" was the next most popular choice, with 68% of respondents saying that this piece of data was what their time tracking efforts went toward. Of course, billable hours are directly related to revenue, as well as employee compensation and tracking productivity.

Clearly, timesheets and time tracking have not only "landed," but they're also here to stay and are an important indication of the future of work. However, it's important that the process of tracking time be made easier for users. So, how can all of these applications work together to achieve this?

On "Smart" Timesheets

What are "smart" timesheets?

"Smart" software applications are usually built on a foundation of artificial intelligence (AI) and/or machine learning algorithms, learning from the data inputs to make the user experience easier and more efficient.



They can also work seamlessly with other applications, using data from those applications to perform a certain function. In the case of smart timesheets, data from other relevant software applications could be synced into a timesheet and automatically categorized in the proper projects and task sets – making the process of filling out the timesheet exponentially easier for the end user.

To get a sense of what users would be open to adopting and what behaviors they might demonstrate when faced with "smart" timesheets, the next series of survey questions asked respondents to cast their mind into their preferences and weigh options.

Of respondents who were asked whether or not they would use timesheets that automatically populated with data from other applications they already use, **an overwhelming 85% answered either "Yes" or "Maybe."**

Since a major function of a smart timesheet is machine learning, users would need to spend some minimal time "training" it — i.e., changing pre-filled data fields so the sheet can learn and make corrections or suggestions for entries. When asked how willing they would be to do this, here's how the responses broke down:

- **76% would be very or somewhat willing** to do this if it meant their timesheet would be *easier to fill out*.
- **74% would be very or somewhat willing** to do this if it meant their timesheet would be *more accurate*.
- **73% would be very or somewhat willing** to do this if it meant their timesheet would be *faster to complete in the future*.

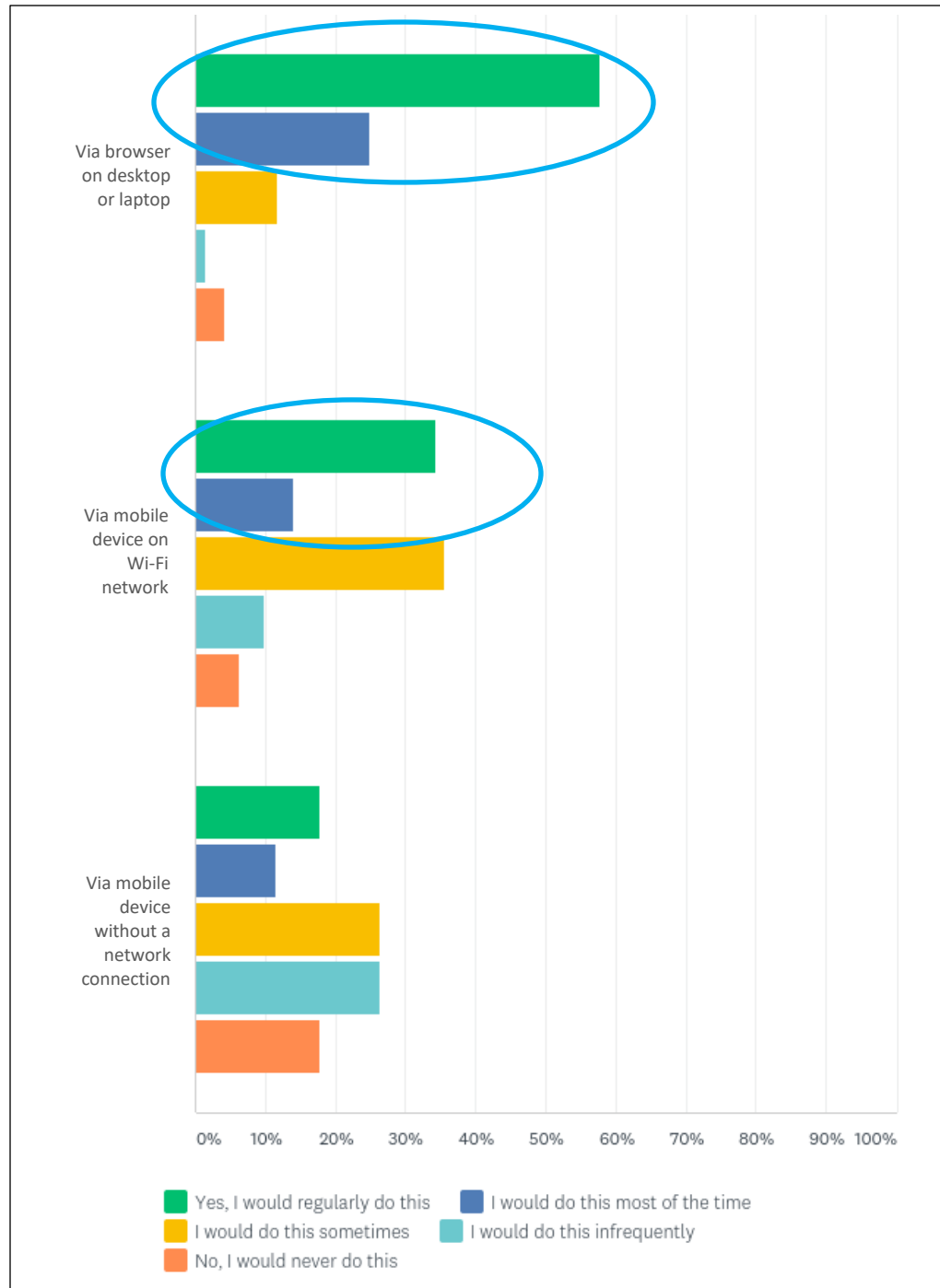
Accuracy and ease are the primary concerns here, which helps to illuminate the state of timesheets as a "dreaded task" – if it's difficult or will result in bad information, then the whole process of collecting time data will be useless.

Suites like Microsoft Dynamics 365 or productivity tools like Exchange, Calendar, and SharePoint, might be enhanced by integrating with a time tracking application to pull this data into timesheets.

Device Accessibility

How do timesheet users prefer to track time, in terms of types of devices? The answer to this may depend on the industry and need – field services will have a greater tendency towards mobile time tracking. However, 83% of the survey’s respondents said they would access their timesheets via browsers on desktops and/or laptops regularly or most of the time, while 48% would use a mobile device on a Wi-Fi network with the same frequency.

Fig. 6:
Device
Access
Preferences



In other words, while consumer behavior in functions like e-commerce can be mobile-first, heading towards mobile-only, internal business operations still rely heavily on desktops, laptops and computer screens.

Wi-Fi connection is also a must: only 29% would have a need to use smart timesheets without connectivity. Timesheet software that lives in the cloud (and the data that is saved when using this software) is one situation that would require constant connectivity. However, there may be instances where offline time tracking is desired (such as while traveling).

Methods for Collecting Timesheet Data

What about the methods by which data is collected into timesheets? This question gave respondents the ability to choose very familiar options that they were probably already used to in other applications, now migrated and transferred to the use of a timesheet.

As expected, the survey results found that users prefer that a smart timesheet anticipate entries and consider it a valuable feature to be able to have timesheet software access and "speak to" other applications to populate fields automatically. When asked how they would prefer their "smart" timesheets to collect and estimate the amount of time reported on a project:

- 77% required that information be collected from **other entries in another application**.
- 46% prefer some kind of process that **monitors their activity in another application** to collect time spent working in that application.
- 37% would like time data **collected from a timer that could be started and stopped**.
- 33% would like their timesheet entries to be populated from **file-creation and file-save times to determine projects that were worked on, and for how long**.

Such solutions or features of "smart" timesheets go right to the heart of respondents' issues of desiring greater accuracy and ease when filling out timesheets.

Making Project Time Tracking Smarter

Tracking hours as related to projects has three very specific uses:

1. To track project status.
2. To create smarter budgets, organize resources better, and make quicker adjustments
3. To estimate and forecast the financial revenue as well as costs that are related to billable hours

In other words, both rely on tracking actual hours worked, which are then allocated and appended to projects; but what about other time-related data? Here's where "smart" timesheets really have the chance to respond to users' needs and create an even more robust solution:

- 63% of respondents wanted information relating to **"pre-filled" expense entries, such as project or travel expenses**
- 52% of respondents wanted even greater granularity with the above, requiring that project or travel expense entries **automatically and "smartly" sync up with credit card charge amounts**
- 42% of respondents mentioned that they would like to see **data on "items completed," which would include hours of equipment used or files used**, i.e., non-financial data, though still relating to the project
- 24% wanted **GPS tagging to be able to track which customer job was being worked on**, perhaps as part of field service operations

This data is significant. It not only points to a major gap (and, therefore, an opportunity) for smart timesheets that respond to this need, but it also demonstrates a greater trend or behavior that users demonstrate in all applications.

In other words, users moving into the next decade of software solutions are expecting two very big changes:

- First, that all their software, as a matter of intentional design and features, can integrate seamlessly and "speak" to each other
- Secondly, that part of the definition of "smart" is that it can learn behavior and then make suggestions based on the analysis of what is inputted

These are the principles that underlie spheres such as AI, neural networks, machine learning and big data. If "smartphones" have set the precedent to convergence in software and hardware (think, continuity of function and design across Apple phones, laptops and apps), then the new "smart" includes behavioral assessment and learning to the point of predictability and suggestions.

Digital assistants such as Siri and Alexa are simply deepening this expectation and altering users' own approaches to the software used in everyday business. This is a significant trend that is poised for explosion.

Privacy Issues

Of course, with the talk of "big data" and digital assistants – or, indeed, any idea relating to software that can learn behavior and offer suggestions – comes the issue of privacy.



Based on the answers of respondents, it becomes clear what their priorities are. Here is where the initial profile of users comes into play. It makes sense that respondents are from IT-focused industries, where such technologies are greeted with enthusiasm and open curiosity, as evidence of a forward-moving society.

Instead of stating, definitively, that they have concerns, 42% of respondents mentioned that they "maybe" have privacy concerns relating to a smart timesheet, while 32% responded that they would not have privacy concerns.

So, privacy concerns are not a major deterrent; but they can definitely be an incentive: When it comes to human control and decision-making being reinserted as part of the process, the numbers get better.

When asked whether their privacy concerns would be alleviated if individual users had complete control over when timesheets could collect other information, learn and cull from other applications, 46% of respondents chose, "Yes" while 42% chose "Maybe."

However, when asked whether privacy would no longer be an issue if the information collected was never shared with anyone but the timesheet user and only used for filling out their timesheet, 53% said that this would indeed alleviate their concerns.

Now that the imaginations and appetites of the users have been piqued through these questions, would they consider adopting smart timesheets? **The majority of users chose, "This would definitely motivate me to make a change and use this."**

The reasons for this adoption of smart timesheets were threefold, as rated by respondents:

- **82%** said it definitely would or might motivate them to adopt, if their timesheets were *easier to complete quickly*.
- **78%** said it definitely would or might motivate them to adopt, if it made their timesheets *more accurate*.
- **76%** said it definitely would or might motivate them to adopt, if it was easier to *submit their timesheets on time*.

Conclusions

It's clear that timesheets are becoming a standard and are being used across industries, for multiple uses and in creative ways by a score of professionals, both at the managerial and employee levels.

When it comes to the potential of "smart" timesheets, there is a lot to be explored in the areas of sharing and collaboration, not only between users but between software functions themselves. Smart timesheets also have an as-of-yet little-explored aspect: learning. Implementing this angle into the functionality of "smart" timesheets and time trackers can help businesses not only simplify and automate, but gain better business intelligence.

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And, finally, time tracking in this survey calls for an inward look — that is to say, respondents are encouraged to think about time tracking in the context of their daily business use and benefits they could achieve in a workplace context.

In the end, it's clear that a "simple" function like time tracking is poised to hook into, tether and pull together other major aspects of running a business.