

The Truth about the Billable Hour

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THE TRUTH ABOUT THE BILLABLE HOUR

One important aspect of law firm life that is nearly impossible to avoid is the "billable hour." Most law firms make their money by billing their clients by the hour. In order to be profitable to your firm, you must make enough money from your billable hours not only to cover your salary and your overhead, but also to generate revenue for the firm. It's not a complicated equation – the more hours you bill, the more revenue for the firm.

Firms "average," "target" or "minimum" stated billables typically range between 1700 and 2300, although informal networks often quote much higher numbers. The NALP Directory of Legal Employers (www.nalpdirectory.com) (<http://www.nalpdirectory.com/>) contains billable hour information in the "hour and lifestyle" tab, although many firms choose not to share their data.

Not all law firms have the same emphasis on billable hours. Public interest law firms, smaller law firms, and law firms outside of large metropolitan areas often require less billable hours and may place more emphasis on training, client development, community-related activities and the like. In addition, government and public interest employers typically do not have any billable hour requirements because they do not bill their hours to a paying client.

[CAREER GUIDES & ADVICE \(/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE\)](#)

[BAR ADMISSION \(/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/BAR-ADMISSION\)](#)

[CHOOSING THE RIGHT EMPLOYER FOR YOU \(/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/CHOOSING-RIGHT-EMPLOYER-YOU\)](#)

[LLMS AND THE NEW YORK BAR \(/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/LLMS-AND-NEW-YORK-BAR\)](#)

[TO SPLIT OR NOT TO SPLIT \(/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/SPLIT-OR-NOT-SPLIT\)](#)

[ACCEPTING & DECLINING EMPLOYMENT OFFERS \(/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/ACCEPTING-DECLINING-EMPLOYMENT-OFFERS\)](#)

[BASICS OF WRITING SAMPLES, TRANSCRIPTS & REFERENCES](#)

A. The Full Time Job: Target 1800 Billable Hours

Assume you "work" from 8:00am-6:00pm each day	10.0	(/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/BASICS-WRITING-SAMPLES-TRANSCRIPTS-REFERENCES)
Assume you take an hour for lunch	-1.0	FREQUENTLY ASKED RESUME QUESTIONS (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/FREQUENTLY-ASKED-RESUME-QUESTIONS)
Assume you take two 15 minute coffee breaks	-5	INAPPROPRIATE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS & HOW TO HANDLE THEM (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/INAPPROPRIATE-INTERVIEW-QUESTIONS-HOW-HANDLE-THEM)
Assume you spend a half-hour reading legal updates and reviewing general correspondence	-5	INTERVIEWING ADVICE FROM FIP INTERVIEWERS (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/INTERVIEWING-ADVICE-FIP-INTERVIEWERS)
Assume you will need to attend department meetings, occasional conferences, and do CLE	-5	INTERVIEWING TIPS (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/INTERVIEWING-TIPS)
This means that you work 10 hours a day but may bill	7.5	TURNING A CALLBACK INTO AN OFFER (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/TURNING-CALLBACK-OFFER)
If you work a 5 day week	x 5	ASSESSING LAW FIRMS: CULTURE, CLIENTS, COMPENSATION AND BEYOND (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/ASSESSING-LAW-FIRMS-CULTURE-CLIENTS-COMPENSATION-AND-BEYOND)
You have been at work 50 hours and billed	37.5	CRITICALLY EVALUATING PRO BONO POLICIES (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/CRITICALLY-EVALUATING-PRO-BONO-POLICIES)
If you do this all year long, and we assume:		FIRMS SPONSORING SPLIT PUBLIC INTEREST SUMMERS (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-
• 3 weeks vacation		
• 2 weeks holiday		
• No sick or personal days		
You will work 47 weeks	x 47	
And have billed an annual average of	1762	
To gain an extra 70 hours to be respectable you could:		
(a) Add approximately 1.5 hours a week (approximately 20 minutes a day)		
1.5 x 47 weeks =	70	
So come in at 8:00am and work until 6:20pm M-F	1832	
You have achieved		
BUT you have been "at work"	2420	

The Commute

•With a half hour commute (to your desk and working)
 you are "working" from 7:30am to 6:50pm
 •With a one hour commute you are "working" from
 7:00am to 7:20pm, Monday-Friday
 OR

(b) Work one Saturday a month
 10:00am-5:00pm with 1 nonbillable hour
 6 x 12 months=

72

1834

You have now billed

BUT... you have been "at work"

2434

B. The Overtime Job: Target 2200 Billable Hours

Assume you "work from 8:00am-8:00pm each day

12.0

Assume you take an hour for lunch and an hour
 for dinner

-2.0

Assume you take four 15 minute bathroom/coffee
 breaks

-1.0

Assume you will need the same time for department
 meetings, conferences and CLE

-5

8.5

This means you "work" 12 hours a day but bill only

You do this 5 days a week

x 5

42.5

You have "worked" 60 hours but have billed only

If you do this all year long, and we assume:

- 3 weeks vacation
- 2 weeks holiday
- No sick days or personal days

You will work 47 weeks

x 47

DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-
 GUIDES-ADVICE/FIRMS-
 SPONSORING-SPLIT-PUBLIC-
 INTEREST-SUMMERS)

THE LAW FIRM SUMMER ASSOCIATE
 DANCE (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-
 DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-
 GUIDES-ADVICE/LAW-FIRM-
 SUMMER-ASSOCIATE-DANCE)

PUBLIC INTEREST LAW FIRMS
 (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-
 DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-
 GUIDES-ADVICE/PUBLIC-INTEREST-
 LAW-FIRMS)

TIPS FOR MAXIMIZING YOUR TIME IN
 BIG LAW (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-
 DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-
 GUIDES-ADVICE/TIPS-MAXIMIZING-
 YOUR-TIME-BIG-LAW)

**THE TRUTH ABOUT THE BILLABLE
 HOUR (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-
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 GUIDES-ADVICE/TRUTH-ABOUT-
 BILLABLE-HOUR)**

WHAT ARE FIRM SPONSORED SPLIT
 PUBLIC INTEREST SUMMERS?
 (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-
 DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-
 GUIDES-ADVICE/WHAT-ARE-FIRM-
 SPONSORED-SPLIT-PUBLIC-
 INTEREST-SUMMERS)

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU DON'T GET
 AN OFFER (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-
 DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-
 GUIDES-ADVICE/WHAT-DO-WHEN-
 YOU-DONT-GET-OFFER)

BEFORE YOU APPLY:
 UNDERSTANDING GOVERNMENT
 BACKGROUND CHECKS (/STUDENT-
 LIFE/CAREER-
 DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-
 GUIDES-ADVICE/YOU-APPLY-
 UNDERSTANDING-GOVERNMENT-
 BACKGROUND-CHECKS)

FACT VS. FICTION: PUBLIC INTEREST
 CAREERS (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-
 DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-
 GUIDES-ADVICE/FACT-VS-FICTION-
 PUBLIC-INTEREST-CAREERS)

1997

And have billed an annual average of

the needed 200+ hours you could add two

by ~~STUDYING LAW AT YALE (/STUDYING-LAW-YALE)~~ ~~OUR FACULTY (/FACULTY)~~

PUBLIC INTEREST PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/PUBLIC-INTEREST-PROGRAMS-AND-RESOURCES) CENTERS & WORKSHOPS (/CENTERS-WORK

If you work ~~STUDENT LIFE (/STUDENT LIFE)~~ ~~STUDENT LIFE (/STUDENT LIFE)~~ with 1 nonbillable hour, you will have

6 billables per day x 2 = 12 x 12 months =

144

TRI PI (TRAVEL REIMBURSEMENT FOR INTERVIEWS IN THE FUTURE) (YLS TO INTEREST) (/STUDENT-LIFE/CAREER-DEVELOPMENT/STUDENTS/CAREER-GUIDES-ADVICE/TRI-PI)

2141

For a new total of...

Still short!

So, add another Saturday a month for 10 months (take a break in Nov. & Dec. for the holidays)

6 x 10 months =

60

2201

You made it! You have billed

However, you have been "at work"

3058

The Commute

- With a half hour commute you are "working" from 7:30am to 8:30pm Monday-Friday
And 9:30am-5:30pm three Saturdays a month
- With a one hour commute you are "working" from 7:00am to 9:00pm Monday-Friday
And 9:00am to 6:00pm three Saturdays a month

Keep in mind that these schedules do not account for personal calls at work, training/observing, talking with coworkers, a longer lunch (to exercise or shop perhaps), a family funeral, pro bono work (if not treated as billable hours), serving on a Bar committee, writing an article for the bar journal, or interviewing an applicant. When contemplating offers from firms, ask questions to learn more about their billable hour policies and practices.

-Updated May 2016



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This website is supported by the Oscar M. Ruebhausen Fund (/centers-workshops/oscar-m-ruebhausen-fund) at Yale Law School (https://law.yale.edu/about-disclosures)