

# A Twelve-Step Program for Alienating Your Clients

By Abhay Padgaonkar

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A consultant died at the ripe old age of 85 of natural causes and went to heaven. Despite a long line at the pearly gates, St. Peter came to greet him at the end of the line and took him by hand to the front of the line. The consultant was clearly pleased, but asked surprisingly, “I like all this attention, but what have I done to deserve the special treatment?” St. Peter said, “To be honest, we have never had anyone come here who was 157 years old.” The consultant looked surprised. “There must be some mistake,” he said, “I am only 85 years old.” St. Peter reassured him, “Oh, there is no mistake at all. We added up all the hours from your timesheets!”

Consultants are not alone in this predicament. They have plenty of company from other professional service firms of lawyers, accountants, and architects. This is only one of the many ways in which these so-called professionals torment, infuriate, and alienate their clients—the same clients they depend on for repeat business, testimonials, and referrals. Despite evidence to the contrary, the professional service providers are clinging on to an outdated mode by charging for their time and not for the value they create, thereby alienating their clients in the process.

## A Twelve-Step Program

Here is a twelve-step primer for ensuring that your clients are thoroughly frustrated:

1. **Surprise!** The client has no way of expecting from month to month how much time was billed, by whom, and for what. At the end of the billing period, surprise the clients, as they are waiting with abated breath, with a lengthy and weighty invoice. They simply won't know what hit them!
2. **Protest Too Much?** To make the charges *appear* legitimate, break them into infinitesimal increments of time of say, one-tenth of an hour. As the old saying goes, “If you can't dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with B.S.!”
3. **Minimum Standards.** Set an arbitrary minimum for the above-mentioned increment of time. So even if it's a two-sentence email or a one-minute voice mail from the client, charge them for at least two units or 20% of an hour, regardless of how long it actually takes you to process it. Be sure to pad the time, but keep it reasonable enough so you can defend it on the off chance that it's questioned. This tactic also has the side benefit of discouraging too much communication with the client and leaving them in the dark.

4. **Spreading the Misery.** Perfect the art of milking time by billing the same time to multiple clients. How will they ever find out that you billed the same hour to three different clients? The higher the factor of billed time to clock time, the better. (Don't forget the special treatment you will get at the pearly gates after all is said and done!)
5. **Creative Endeavors.** Invent necessary but mindless activities to justify your time such as: draft, review, revise, receive, instruct, call, begin work, follow up, meet, research, work on, work with, and finalize. The more physical activities the merrier. And there is extra bonus if these actions are available for your staff in an easy-to-use, pull-down menu in the time tracking system.
6. **Increase Employment.** Agree to further research issues that you already know or should know. Delegate this work to junior staff to keep them busy and ask them to write a formal memo to you. Make sure to charge the client for your time explaining the project to your underlings, reviewing their research, and sharing it with the client.
7. **By Invitation Only.** Invite everyone on your billable team to a call or a meeting on the pretext that they need to be plugged into what's going on. Don't worry if most of them are checking their Blackberries during the meeting and hardly contributing anything meaningful. It is far more important (and lucrative) to create an aura of participation and collaboration.
8. **Stretch Marks.** Behave at all times as if you are acting busily in the best interest of the client, but know that reaching desired outcomes or finding resolution too quickly is an anathema. Encourage scope creep by finding creative ways to stretch the engagement to its theoretical maximum or better yet beyond whatever you promised in the firm's forecasting system.
9. **Create Overhead and Charge for it.** Clearly, it would be too blatant to overtly charge the client for time keeping. However, spend an inordinate time checking and re-checking the fractions of time charged by everyone on your staff and making sure it's defensible if questioned. Increase your daily or hourly billing rate at least twice a year to account for increased overhead or simply to keep up with industry trends.
10. **Time to Reschedule.** If something is scheduled by a 3<sup>rd</sup> party or higher authorities such as review boards, courts or tax authorities, make sure that you are not available. That way you can bill the client for all the necessary administrative costs, overhead, and delays because of your unavailability.
11. **Keep Them in the Dark:** Provide a litany of mindless activities on the invoice, but do not provide a progress report on where things stand. Wait for the client to raise issues and ask for the status. Once the client has opened the door, you can keep the meter running by charging for research, documentation, reviews, drafts, and other esoteric activities.

12. **Nickel and Dime:** If none of the above tactics works well enough, rub salt in the clients' wounds by charging for copying, faxing, graphics work, report production, research site subscriptions, and postage at outrageous rates to the point that the client would wish that they had bought shares in FedEx Kinko's.

### **Doing It Right**

Let's be real! Billing for expertise and advice by time is one of the Ten Commandments in the professional services world. However, as Alan Weiss says in his book *Value-Based Fees*, "There are legitimate and obvious ethical reasons not to use time units for billing bases." The age-old, Time and Materials approach engenders nothing but frustration, distrust, and animosity in the minds of the clients and results in an adversarial relationship.

One wonders if it was a similar experience that prompted Mark Twain to say: "The more I get to know about lawyers, the more I'm in favor of hangin' or Shakespeare to write in *Romeo and Juliet* about Queen Mab galloping "O'er lawyers' fingers, who straight dream on fees."

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### **About the Author**

A management consultant, author, and speaker, Abhay Padgaonkar is the founder and president of [Innovative Solutions Consulting, LLC](http://www.innovativesolutions.org) ([www.innovativesolutions.org](http://www.innovativesolutions.org)), which charges fixed, value-based fees when providing advice on formulating strategies, translating them into meaningful actions, and generating measurable results to marquee clients such as American Express.

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