Faster Time Tracking

This automated time clock can speed payroll, improve job-costing, and help you estimate more accurately

by Ben Kelley

Even though the construction company I own isn't large, we used to spend a huge amount of time processing payroll. Every week, we would scramble to collect time sheets, then spend time back in the office deciphering our workers' handwriting and double-checking their time sheets for possible discrepancies, mistakes, lost billable time, and overbilled time. Since I use time records to track job costs and compare actual vs. estimated expenses, we also had to organize the time sheets according to the CSI cost codes in our original estimates. Only then could we finally generate payroll, submit our invoices, and track our costs.

That's why I became interested in ExakTime's JobClock and FastTrakker time-clock system (877/435-6411, exaktime.com): I thought it might help us streamline our procedures and produce better reports. The JobClock is a small battery-operated time clock that is activated by either small color-coded Keytabs or a programmable handheld device called a FastTrakker (see Figure 1). Different-colored Keytabs can be assigned to track up to 10 different activities, and the FastTrakker can be programmed with up to 1,000 cost codes. The system also includes software —

Figure 1. To record his hours, a worker simply touches the time clock (left) with an electronic fob. Handwritten time sheets (lower left) are a thing of the past.

building shelter
creating superior living spaces connected to the environment (A)

TASK CODES
1 - ADMINISTRATION
2 - ALLOWANCE #1
3 - ALLOWANCE #2
4 - ALLOWANCE #3
5 - APPLIANCES INSTALL / APPLIANCE PANELS
6 - BATH ACCESSORIES
7 - CABINETS/ BUILT-INS- BUILD. INSTALL, HARDWARE
8 - CHANGE ORDER #1
9 - CHANGE ORDER #2
10 - CHANGE ORDER #3
11 - CONCRETE
12 - COUNTERTOPS
13 - DECKS, PERGOLAS, SCREENED PORCHES, OUTDOOR SHOWERS
14 - DEMOLITION
15 - DOORS, EXTERIOR - INSTALLATION & HARDWARE
16 - DRAINAGE: FOUNDATION, DRYWALLS, FROM DOWNSPOUT
17 - ELECTRICAL
18 - EXCAVATION
19 - FENCES & GATES
20 - FLOORING
21 - FRAMING
22 - GUTTERS
23 - HVAC
24 - IN, SETUP
25 - INSULATION
26 - LANDSCAPING
27 - LUMBER YARD
28 - MAILBOX, ADDRESS POSTS
29 - MASONRY, FIREPLACES
30 - MOBILIZATION (MOVING RESOURCES TO/ FROM JOB)
  - OUT
31 - OPTION #1
32 - OPTION #2
33 - PAINT, EXTERIOR
34 - PAINT, INTERIOR
35 - PLUMBING
36 - PUNCH LIST (CLOSEOUT)
37 - ROOFING, RUBBER
38 - ROOFING, SHINGLES
39 - SAMPLES AND MOCK-UPS
40 - SHEET ROCK
41 - SHOP: FOR EXTERIOR WORK
42 - SHOP: FOR INTERIOR WORK
43 - SIDING
44 - SITE MAINTENANCE
45 - SMALL PROJECT
46 - SPECIAL EXTERIOR
47 - SPECIAL INTERIOR
48 - STAIRS, INTERIOR

(B)

CSI COST CODES	TASK CODES
01 31 00	1 - ADMINISTRATION
ALL #1	2 - ALLOWANCE #1
ALL #2	3 - ALLOWANCE #2
ALL #3	4 - ALLOWANCE #3
11.31	5 - APPLIANCES, INSTALL
10.28.16	6 - BATH ACCESSORIES
12.3O	7 - CABINETS/ BUILT-INS- BUILD. INSTALLATION, CABINET PULLS
C/O #1	8 - CHANGE ORDER #1
C/O #2	9 - CHANGE ORDER #2
C/O #3	10 - CHANGE ORDER #3
O3	11 - CONCRETE
12.36	12 - COUNTERTOPS
O6.15	13 - DECKS, PERGOLAS, SCREENED PORCHES, OUTDOOR SHOWERS
O2.41	14 - DEMOLITION
08.1O	15 - DOORS, EXTERIOR - INSTALLATION & HARDWARE
36.46.13	16 - DRAINAGE: FOUNDATION, DRYWELLS, ETC
26	17 - ELECTRICAL
31.23.23	18 - EXCAVATION
32.31	19 - FENCES & GATES
O9.64	20 - FLOORING
O6.1O	21 - FRAMING
O7.71.23	22 - GUTTERS
23	23 - HVAC
	24 - IN, SETUP
O7.21	25 - INSULATION
32.92.19	26 - LANDSCAPING
01 65 00	27 - LUMBERYARD
10.55	28 - MAILBOX, ADDRESS POSTS
O4 57	29 - MASONRY
O1.71.13	30 - MOBILIZATION (MOVING RESOUR...
	- OUT
OP1	31 - OPTION #1
OP2	32 - OPTION #2
09.91.13	33 - PAINT, EXTERIOR
09.91.23	34 - PAINT, INTERIOR
22	35 - PLUMBING
02 00	36 - PREP, JOB
01 76 00	37 - PROTECT INSTALLED CONSTRUCTION
01.77.00	38 - PUNCH LIST (PROJECT CLOSEOUT)
O7.53	39 - ROOFING, MEMBRANE, METAL
O7.31	40 - ROOFING, SHINGLES
O1.43	41 - SAMPLES AND MOCK-UPS
09 29 00	42 - SHEET ROCK
SET	43 - SHOP: FOR EXTERIOR WORK
SIT	44 - SHOP: FOR INTERIOR WORK
O7.46	45 - SIDING
01.74.16	46 - SITE MAINTENANCE
	47 - SMALL PROJECT
SE	48 - SPECIAL EXTERIOR
SI	49 - SPECIAL INTERIOR
O6.43.13	50 - STAIRS, INTERIOR
10 71 16	51 - STORM PANELS
O9.30	52 - TILE
01.74.19	53 - TRASH REMOVAL (GOING TO DUMP STATION)
TR	54 - TRAVEL BETWEEN JOBS
06.2O.13	55 - TRIM, EXTERIOR
06.20.23	56 - TRIM, INTERIOR (INCLUDING HARDWARE FOR DOORS & WINDOWS)

Figure 2. The author programs his employees' red FastTrakkers with simplified cost codes and job descriptions (A), which are also printed out and displayed on site. These simplified codes correspond to CSI MasterFormat cost codes (B), which the author uses for estimating and job-costing.

called TimeSummit — for tracking time and attendance records and cost codes.

I wasn't sure if the ExakTime system was the right fit for my company, but decided to give it a try when I found a JobClock, software, and a pair of FastTrakkers being auctioned on eBay for hundreds less than the list price of $1,269. While that turned out to be not such a bargain — the JobClock we bought was dead on arrival — we're still very pleased with the system itself. We've cut down our payroll processing time by approximately 75 percent; no more 8:08 a.m. starts are recorded as 8:00, or 4:20 p.m. departures recorded as 4:30 — and I don't have to interrupt work in the field to decipher the writing on our time sheets or review them as often. It's simplified how we do things.

Timekeeping

We use one JobClock per job and will soon add another one for our shop. The clocks are weatherproof and have plenty of storage capacity. We download timekeeping records nearly every week, but we don't really need to, because each clock can store up to 10,000 records. We typically hang the clocks in the project's "communication center," on the job-site trailer door.

Each of our employees has one of the red FastTrakkers, which cost $129 each. These are small enough to fit in a pocket and come with a quick-release detachable key ring. We program them with the employee's name and our task codes and job descriptions, which are displayed in the LCD window when the wheel at the top of the fob is pressed (**Figure 2**). Employees don't need to know the CSI MasterFormat cost codes we use for estimating and job-costing, only the task number or job description (which is displayed next to the task number on the FastTrakker) for the job they are performing.

We also post a single-page hard copy of these cost codes — we call it our "Task Legend" — next to the JobClock, or somewhere convenient on the job. In addition, we print these codes on the back of paper time sheets, which we still use for work on small jobs that don't have a JobClock on site and to correct mistakes
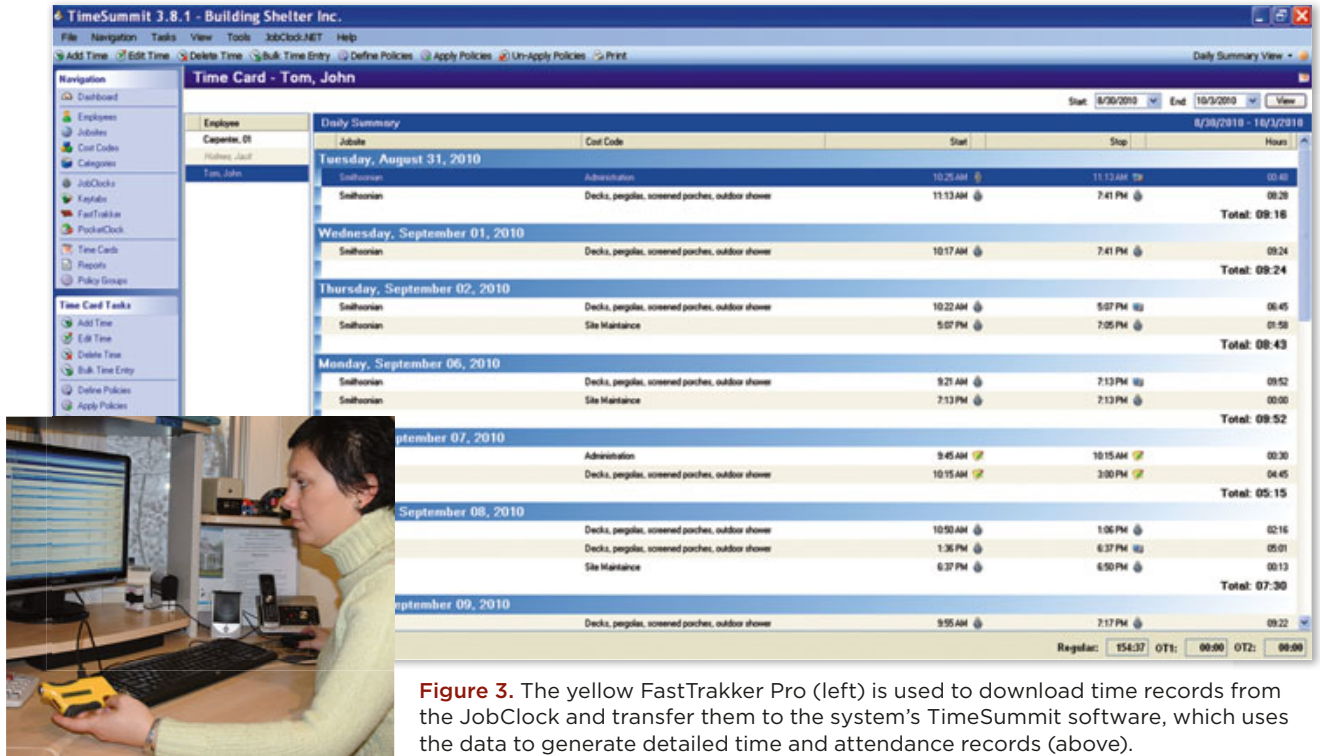
Figure 3. The yellow FastTrakker Pro (left) is used to download time records from the JobClock and transfer them to the system's TimeSummit software, which uses the data to generate detailed time and attendance records (above).

made when entering (or forgetting to enter) time on the JobClock. While our Task Legend is numbered and alphabetized for our employees, the Excel spreadsheet that we use to create it has a hidden column with the corresponding CSI cost codes.

To clock in, a worker pushes his fob's spin wheel down, scrolls the wheel to select the appropriate job activity, then touches the fob to the JobClock. Successful data transfer is confirmed with a beep. Later, when he is done with that particular job and begins a new task, the worker again touches the fob to the clock for the new task, which clocks him out of the last task. Instead of trying to remember at the end of the week what they did at the beginning of the week, employees clock in and out as they begin and end each task. Once they got the hang of it, our employees appreciated this system's simplicity and accuracy.

We can program the FastTrakkers to track anything we want, even travel time between jobs or project-specific tasks. For the most part, though, we keep our cost codes consistent from job to job. Though not all of our codes are relevant to every job, all of them will eventually be used, and consistency breeds familiarity.

Employees are responsible for their own FastTrakkers. Our company handbook explains how the devices work. Using somebody else's is against the rules. And if an employee loses or breaks his, he's bought it.

Recordkeeping

We also have a yellow FastTrakker Pro (list price $150), which I use to collect records and track my own time in the field (the red FastTrakker can't download data). Data collection is very simple: You press "collect," point it at the JobClock, and the

FastTrakker Pro downloads all of the time that's been entered to date. According to the manufacturer, data stored in a JobClock can also be sent wirelessly back to the office via iPhone, iPad, Blackberry, or other mobile devices with PocketClock software, but that's not a feature that we've used.

I collect data at the end of each week and take it to Adriana, our administrative assistant. She plugs the FastTrakker into our server via a USB cable, opens the TimeSummit software, and downloads the data (**Figure 3**). After generating time records for each employee — and reconciling any paper time sheets that may have been submitted for small jobs or corrections — Adriana transfers the information from TimeSummit into QuickBooks. Right now she still inputs the data manually, but we could also link the FastTrakker to QuickBooks or to a payroll service with optional AccountLinx software. The entire process takes about five minutes per employee; before we started using FastTrakker she was spending 20 minutes or more reconciling and recording each worker's time sheets.

Reports

The TimeSummit software is extremely user-friendly. It took us less than an hour to learn how to download data and produce useful reports with it. TimeSummit will create electronic time sheets, of course, but we can also break down the data contained in the time sheets by person, by job, by date, or by CSI task (**Figure 4, next page**). When I estimate labor costs, this information gives me a clearer picture of who's performing and who's not. If I find I've overestimated the time it takes to complete a task, I can be more competitive on the next bid; if I've
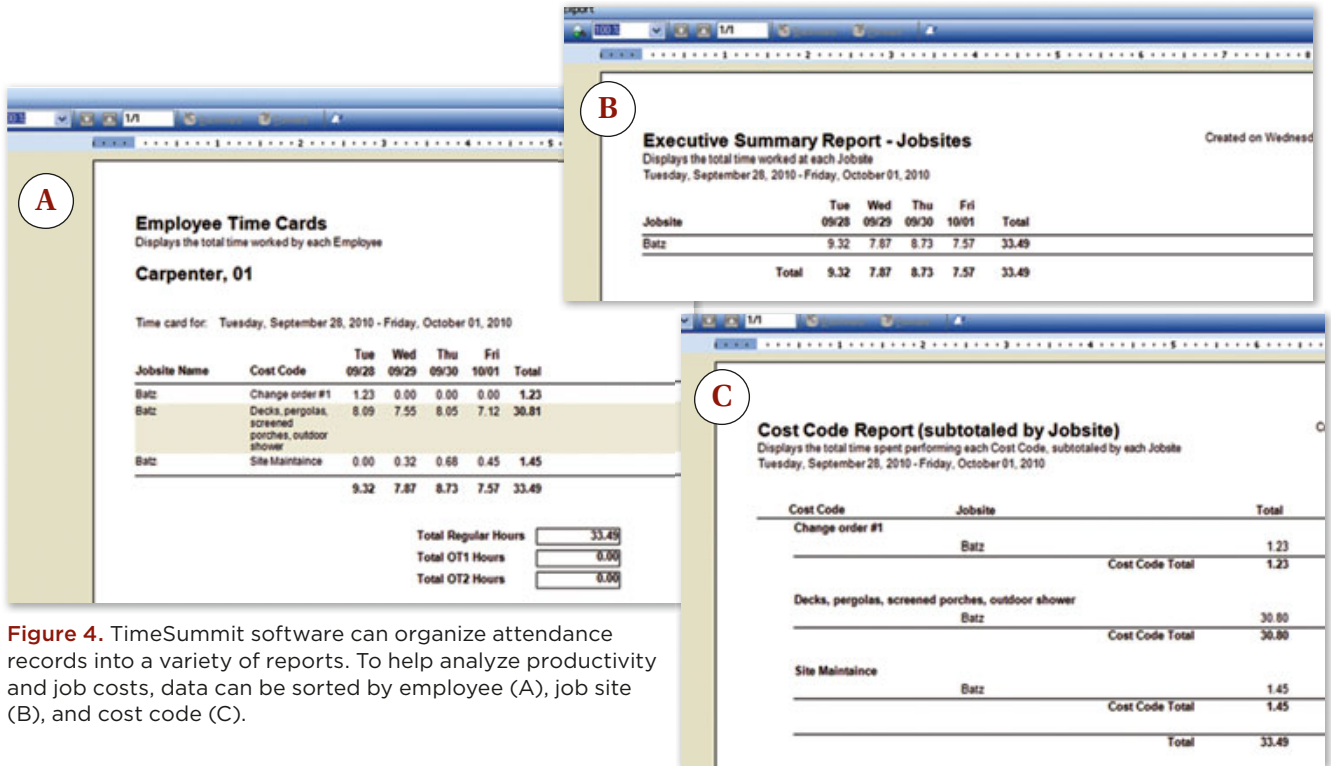
Figure 4. TimeSummit software can organize attendance records into a variety of reports. To help analyze productivity and job costs, data can be sorted by employee (A), job site (B), and cost code (C).

underestimated, I'll know that for the next quote.

Every week, Adriana also generates a "Job Health" report that is organized by the CSI codes we used to create our estimate. This report summarizes not only our labor costs pulled from TimeSummit and QuickBooks, but also our materials and trade partner costs, and it indicates how our actuals compare to our estimates (**Figure 5**). Every week, I know exactly how we are doing in terms of schedule and budget.

Change orders and allowances. A particularly useful feature

of this system is that it allows us to quickly and accurately record, track, and bill change orders and allowances. We post change-order numbers and allowance descriptions on the trailer door, along with their corresponding cost codes, and can add as many change-order and allowance options as we want (though we try to keep all of our job costs on one sheet).

Lumberyard time. We can accurately track time spent making lumberyard runs now, too. If we stop to pick up materials on the way to or from the job, we can input "lumberyard" to add time spent there. Each entry equals 15 minutes, so we would input "lumberyard" twice for a half-hour run. It's necessary to wait one minute between entries, or the JobClock won't record it, so if I'm in a hurry, I can just enter the task next at hand and get to work, then clear up the time spent at the yard later in the office by referring to our lumberyard receipt for that day. The point is to find out, definitively, how much time we spend at the yard. We've made it a goal to spend no more than one or two hours per week there, and this system allows us to measure how we're doing.

Ben Kelley owns Building Shelter, a building and remodeling company in Vineyard Haven, Mass.

Description	Est Amt	Prior %	Prior Amt	Curr %	Total %	Amount
Permitting and Fees	609.40			44.31%	44.31%	270.00
Project Web Site	1,040.00			14.42%	14.42%	150.00
Product Delivery Req's (Product Procurement)	370.40			80.99%	80.99%	300.00
Mobilization: move job, end of project cleanup	416.70			58.15%	58.15%	242.30
Site Maintenance	769.50			21.79%	21.79%	167.65
Construction Waste Management/Disposal	700.00			49.27%	49.27%	344.92
Professional Final Cleaning	150.00			0.00%	0.00%	0.00
Protecting Installed Construction	285.20			20.47%	20.47%	58.37
Existing Conditions	231.50			200.11%	200.11%	463.25
Deconstruction	1,228.57			60.20%	60.20%	739.60
Framing	740.90			0.00%	0.00%	0.00
Framing Materials	734.68			22.48%	22.48%	65.16
Exterior Trim	884.70			14.42%	14.42%	127.55
Interior Trim	1,217.63			3.16%	3.16%	38.50
Siding	1,035.31			23.37%	23.37%	241.94
Doors/Windows - Exterior - Install & Hardware	5,156.42			18.84%	18.84%	971.45
Screen and Storm Doors	1,074.70			21.16%	21.16%	227.37

Figure 5. The author manually enters TimeSummit data into QuickBooks to prepare "project health" reports, which provide a real-time snapshot of a job's progress and financial details. With additional software — called AccountLinx — data can be automatically exported to most accounting packages.