Did You Earn Your Fee Today?

Idea In Short

Professionals who bill by the hour, consultants, lawyers and accountants among them, rarely stop to translate their daily rate into a concrete question about value actually delivered. A simple piece of math reframes the entire relationship: if a client is paying handsomely for every billable hour, did today's work genuinely return several times that amount in real value, or did it simply consume time?

The Math Hiding Behind an Hourly Rate

Professionals who bill for their time, whether consultants, lawyers or accountants, work inside a system where their time is valuable both to themselves and, as a direct expense, to the client footing the bill. Every hour billed comes straight out of a client's profits, which means every hour genuinely needs to deliver more value than it costs, or the arrangement simply is not worth it for the client paying the invoice.

A Simple Way to Frame the Math

Consider a straightforward example: someone billing a few hundred dollars an hour, working a full day of billable hours, ends up billing a meaningful sum for that single day. If a client reasonably expects several times that amount back in actual value, the real question shifts from simply completing tasks to something sharper: did today's work genuinely deliver a strong multiple of its own cost, or did it just consume time?1

Why This Is a Fair Question for a Client to Ask

It is entirely reasonable for a client to expect a strong return on the fees they pay, since they are committing real money out of their own profits and real time from their own staff to work alongside whoever is billing them. Opportunity cost runs in both directions: every hour a client spends supporting a project is an hour not spent on something else, which raises the

bar for what a productive engagement genuinely needs to deliver.

Real Caveats Worth Acknowledging

Several honest caveats complicate any attempt to answer this question precisely. Results from professional services work are rarely immediate, and they cannot always be guaranteed regardless of how sound the underlying work was. Outcomes depend heavily on how well a recommendation actually gets implemented, a variable largely outside the control of whoever delivered the original analysis. Strategic work in particular often does not translate into a clean, immediately visible metric, and some of the most valuable work, careful risk management, for instance, succeeds precisely by avoiding an expensive problem that then never shows up as a visible number anywhere.

Change Management Is Real Value That Resists Easy Measurement

Change management work follows a similar pattern: it is genuinely necessary for a recommendation to actually stick, yet it rarely converts directly into an immediate revenue figure that proves its own worth. The same holds for technology investments that produce real savings only after absorbing significant upfront fixed costs, savings that take time to materialize and are easy to underappreciate in the moment they are actually incurred.

The Question Still Matters, Caveats and All

None of these legitimate caveats make the underlying question any less worth asking. Even without a precise, provable dollar figure attached to a given day, honestly considering whether today's effort genuinely moved a client's underlying problem forward sharpens judgment in a way that simply tracking hours worked never will.2

A Habit Worth Adopting Regardless of Role

This same discipline applies well beyond billable professional services roles. Anyone paid a salary, rather than an hourly fee, can still ask a version of the same question: did today's work genuinely justify its share of the cost an employer bears to keep that role staffed. Framing daily effort against a concrete cost, rather than simply against hours logged, tends to sharpen focus on what actually matters far more effectively than a vague sense of having

stayed busy.3

A Question Worth Asking at the End of Every Day

Ending each day with an honest version of this question, whether billing hourly, on salary or running an independent practice, builds a habit of connecting daily effort to genuine outcomes rather than simply logging time. Over a career, that single habit tends to separate professionals who are trusted with increasingly important work from those who are not.

- 1Billable Hour
- 2Value Proposition
- 3Return On Investment

Summary

Billing by the hour hides a harder, more useful question underneath: did today's work genuinely deliver several times its cost in real value, or did it simply consume time the client is paying for out of their own profits. Asking that question honestly, even without a perfect answer, sharpens focus on what actually matters each day.