Must-Know Guide to Buying a Time Clock

The definitive time clock buyer’s guide covering key issues such as cost, real-time data integration, ease-of-use, deterring time theft, and maintenance.
If you’re like most of us, buying a new time clock for your business is not something that you do every day, or even every year.

In many cases, the time clock that you buy today will be the one your business uses for 5 or 10 years or more. But before you write a check or sign a purchase order for the newer version of your same old time clock, ask yourself this: “What do I need to know before buying a time clock?”

In this guide, we’ll answer that very question. We’ll also talk about the evolution (or lack thereof) of time clocks, and will discuss the reasons why traditional time clocks are no longer the best choice. Then, we’ll introduce you to the benefits of cloud-based smartclocks, and finally, will highlight the top 5 questions you need to ask of a smartclock vendor.

Traditional Time Clocks: The Technology that Time Forgot

Pull your smart phone out of your pocket or purse and take a look at it. Sure, it’s a $200 device that you can use to call work, friends, and family—but it does so much more than that! It can help you find your way to a work conference in another city, take a photo that you can share with friends, keep you entertained while you’re waiting for your flight to leave and even remind you of your wife’s birthday.

Now look at the time clock hanging on your wall (or if you’re getting one for the first time, a picture of the one you’re considering.) Chances are, it’s pretty big, relatively bulky, and was probably “really” expensive—it’s not unusual for these beasts to cost thousands of dollars. It may have a literal bell or whistle, but in terms of being able to provide you with any additional value, you’ll need to look elsewhere.

The first time clocks were invented just a few years after the first telephones—so why aren’t our time clocks almost as advanced as our phones? That answer is simple: Because until now, no one has demanded that they improve. Unlike other technologies that must innovate or risk becoming obsolete, the time clock seems to have been given a free pass.

Businesses anticipate that doing something other than buying a time clock just like the one they currently have would be too expensive, or would be too time-consuming and painful to implement. So when a business needs to replace a broken or completely outdated time clock, the people in charge of the search tend to default to the time clock that they’re used to, rather than demanding a more customizable, innovative solution. But defaulting to the “traditional” time clock solution is fraught with peril.

Traditional Time Clock Pitfalls

If you’re considering replacing your current time clock with another traditional time clock, or are looking for your first time clock solution, you’ll want to consider the following realities of standard or traditional time clocks:

High cost: Today, most traditional time clocks start at around $600 and go up (and up!) from there—and that’s just the initial cost. When you consider that most traditional time clocks also require expensive installation fees and maintenance costs, and that clock manufacturers often charge for upgrades, the total cost of ownership can be positively astounding.

Lack of innovation: Take another look at your smartphone—how different does it look than the phones we used 50 years ago? Now take a look at the traditional time clock you may be considering. Hmm, that’s odd—it may be a different color, or made from plastic instead of metal, but other than that it’s pretty much the same as it was decades ago. And it certainly doesn’t do much above and
beyond what it did 50 years ago—no added value there. (The exception to this would be biometric clocks, which we'll cover in a moment.)

**Limited configurability:** Most traditional time clocks will have exactly zero configuration options. Some clocks will have configuration options available—but as you may expect, those clocks cost more up front, and come with the additional professional services costs associated with hiring a knowledgeable consultant who is capable of successfully programming the clock to meet your needs.

**Easy to fool:** Traditional time clocks concentrate on performing a single task—documenting when an employee clocks in or out. However, they do nothing to prevent time theft through “buddy punching” where one worker clocks in for a co-worker who is absent. If John clocks in for Jane, a traditional time clock is none-the-wiser.

**Finally, an Attractive Alternative to Traditional Time Clocks: A Smartclock**

Thankfully, there now exists a truly innovative, cost-effective, customizable alternative to traditional time clocks—the smartclock. Using the latest tablet technology, smartclocks have large, multi-color touchscreens that capture time via a scanned QR card using a built-in camera. And because smartclocks are connected to the cloud and work seamlessly with cloud-based software, you can anticipate a number of benefits:

**Affordability:** Your initial investment in a smartclock is substantially lower than it would be with a traditional time clock—and because upgrades and maintenance are included and simply pushed out via the cloud, the total cost of ownership is also lower.

**Grows with your needs:** Just like you can customize your smartphone with apps and functionality that make your life easier, improve your productivity, and save you money, smartclocks can be similarly customized to meet your specific and growing needs.

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**Biometric Time Clocks: Are They All They’re Cracked Up to Be?**

One way to prevent time theft is by upgrading to a biometric time clock, which requires a thumbprint or other unique identifier to clock an employee in or out, but biometric time clocks come with their own set of challenges.

**Cost:** Biometric technology doesn’t come cheap, so plan on paying 2 to 3 times the cost over a traditional time clock.

**Setup:** Biometric clocks require extremely cumbersome enrollment processes where new employees have to submit fingerprints, hand scans, or other biometric data against which the clock will compare future data.

**Data security:** Because biometric clocks collect private personal data, like fingerprints and handprints, they are attractive targets for hackers and others intent on stealing data—but securely storing and maintaining this data can be a tedious and expensive process. Additionally, there is a general level of concern that biometric data may be linked with other personal information and used for purposes other than tracking attendance.

**Health issues:** Transmission of germs and disease is a common concern among biometric clock users. Almost all biometric clocks require each employee to press their thumb or place their entire hand onto the clock’s glass. Vendors often recommend that users wipe the readers after every use—a practice that is easy to recommend and impossible to actively enforce.
Fewer maintenance needs: Unlike biometrics clocks that are known for being temperamental and prone to malfunction (“Hey George, the thumbprint reader isn’t working again!”), smartclocks require less physical interaction and as a result, have fewer maintenance issues. And because a smartclock is constantly connected to a cloud-based service, you’ll receive an alert in the unlikely event that your smartclock is experiencing a problem, so that you can resolve any small issues before they become big problems.

Lower learning curve for staff: Because smartclocks have an intuitive user interface, businesses can anticipate a shorter learning curve than they may for traditional or biometric clocks. And because smartclocks arrive pre-configured, they’re up and running in less than an hour, not several days.

Saved time in processing payroll and other time-related tasks: Smartclocks work seamlessly with cloud-based time and attendance software, meaning you can easily edit erroneous punches, apply business rules for things like overtime and meal breaks, set up your preferred time rounding and implement other policies directly.

Ensure more accurate time data: Like biometric clocks, smartclocks prevent time theft or “buddy punches” by ensuring that John Smith is the one who’s punching in John Smith’s timecard. But unlike the issues around setup, data privacy and hygiene caused by biometrics clocks, the most advanced smartclocks simply capture an image of the employee when s/he clocks in, so managers can visually confirm that the time card belongs to the employee who is clocking in with it.

Saves IT resources, time and headaches: Smartclocks easily fit in with your existing technologies, without the need for extensive or expensive IT investments—and updates, upgrades, and maintenance tasks are performed automatically, requiring no IT intervention.

The Top 5 Questions You Should ask a Smartclock Vendor

Now that you understand the many benefits of a smartclock over a traditional time clock, you should just run out and buy the first smartclock you see, right? Not quite—not all smartclocks are created equal. To ensure you’re making a smart investment in a smartclock, here are the top 5 questions you’ll want to ask a potential smartclock vendor.

1. Does your smartclock come preconfigured and ready to use? You’ll only want to consider a vendor that can provide you with a smartclock that is ready to go from day one.
2. Can you have one smartclock to handle employees from different shifts? Some smartclock vendors require you to purchase a separate smartclock for each working shift; however, you’ll be able to streamline the process and keep overall costs down by selecting a smartclock that can manage multiple shifts within a single clock.

3. How does your smartclock eliminate the issue of time theft/buddy punching? Different vendors handle this in different ways, but many businesses find that capturing an image as an employee clocks in and out is the most effective, efficient way to prevent time theft.

4. How often do you release updates and upgrades? Choose a vendor that provides updates and upgrades on a regular basis, and can show you an anticipated update/upgrade schedule for the next 12 months.

5. Tell me about your company and its experience? You’ll want to make sure you select a vendor is going to be around to provide the upgrades and support they’ve promised. You’ll also want to look closer at any vendor that has proven experience working with cloud-based applications.

Making an Informed Time Clock Purchase

For most companies, a time clock is not an everyday or inexpensive purchase, which is why it is so important to understand your options and make an informed decision. Because time clock technology has largely been static, it may be tempting to stick with the same old technology you’re used to—but if you do stick with it, you’ll be stuck with the same frustrations, headaches and pitfalls all over again. A biometric clock may seem to be the answer at first glance, but health concerns and high costs tarnish their luster. For a truly innovative, cost-effective alternative to traditional and biometric time clocks, consider a smartclock. With a variety of benefits—from lower cost to easier maintenance—a smartclock is the smartest way to go when it comes to purchasing a new time clock.

About Replicon

Replicon is the leading provider of cloud-based time sheet software with over 1.5 million users in 70 countries. For over 15 years, Replicon has empowered thousands of companies of all sizes to increase their productivity and profitability by providing hassle-free time and expense management capabilities and superior customer service. Our growing suite of fully-integrated applications provides a complete solution for any time tracking need including professional services, IT chargebacks, project costing, time & attendance, time off and more.