



The Double Dip

Maintaining the highest ethical standards

BY BRAD YARBROUGH

Our industry is comprised of good people who, overwhelmingly, want to conduct business in an ethical manner. But any failure to do so, whatever the frequency, is a bruise to the reputation of the industry and the people within it. One such failure in the right of way profession involves double dipping.

According to the dictionary, double dipping is when a person is illegitimately compensated a second time for the same activity. Also referred to as double billing, it is the action of invoicing and being compensated from two (or more) entities for the same increment of a person's time. And given the nature of our business, it primarily occurs among right of way agents who are working on a consulting or contracted basis.

But how pervasive is the practice? To my knowledge, it has not been statistically studied. Therefore, it would be difficult to express double-billed hours as a percentage of total hours billed by right of way contractors or consultants. But, in the last eight years of my company's operations, I have discovered the practice on two occasions. In both cases, our firm suffered a financial loss when the issue was discovered and money was refunded to the client. And with both instances, the company's good name could potentially have been tarnished. The reality is, we'll never really know whether the occurrence went undiscovered on other occasions. Now, that's a scary thought.

How do we work toward eliminating this unethical practice?

Recently, an owner of another brokerage business said, "We ought to do a better job of policing ourselves." And, his opinion is shared. I increasingly hear similar statements throughout our ranks. We must hold individuals in our profession accountable for such thievery.

Here are some steps we can take:

- Do a thorough job of investigating the history of individuals looking for project assignments.
- Include provisions in all agreements with contractors, consultants and employees that prohibit double billing.
- Carefully review time and expense reports to be certain that individuals are accounting for their time accurately.
- Take swift punitive action against those whose actions are blatantly dishonest.

Placing an emphasis on ethics is always appropriate, and the IRWA supports this with a code of ethical standards for its membership and the entire industry. Hopefully, the effort will help those who want to achieve true success both personally and professionally. 🌟



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