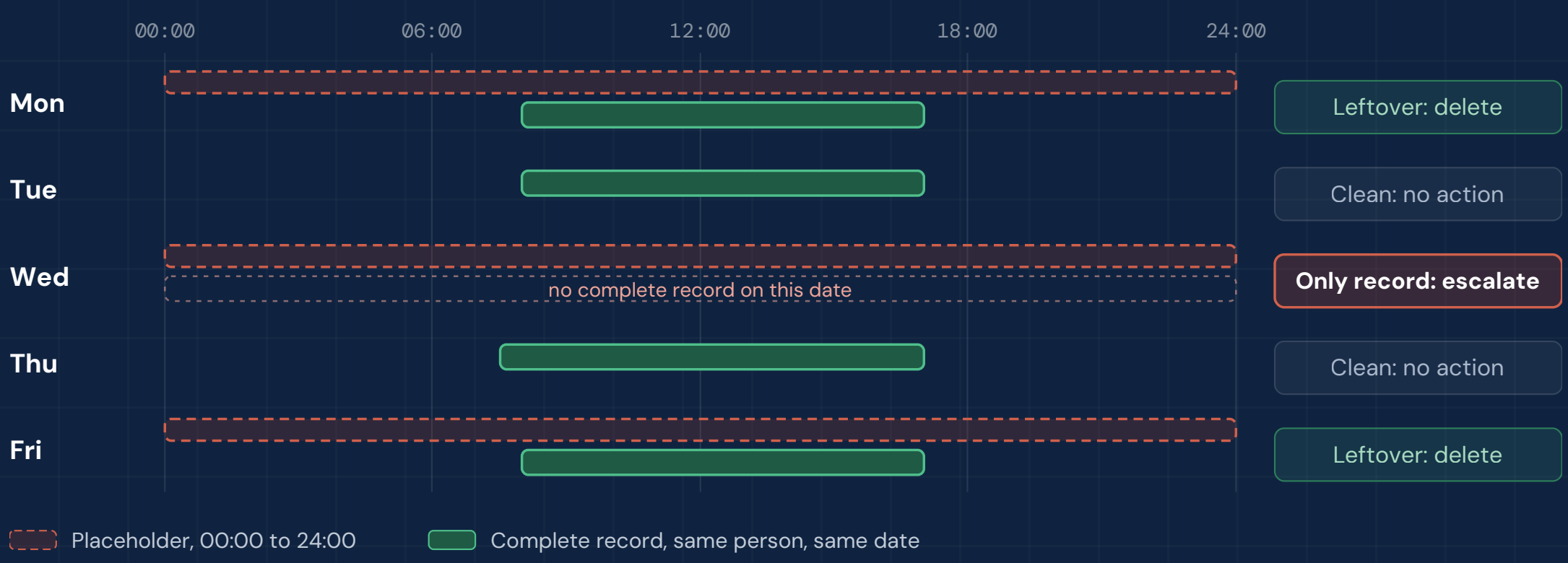
A SHORT BRIEF FOR FOUNDERS AND OPERATIONS LEADS

The Evidence Gap

A placeholder entry on a time record looks like clutter, and the procedure seems to say delete it. On most days that is right. On some days it is the only proof the work was done.

ONE PERSON, ONE WEEK OF TIME RECORDS

Red is a midnight-to-midnight placeholder. Green is the complete record.



Deleting the only evidence of the work is the expensive mistake.

Delete Wednesday's placeholder and the day shows nothing, with no error to say so.

Delete only when the same person has a complete record on the same date.

US federal rules require hours worked to be recorded for each day, and accurately. A deleted entry is a gap in that record, not a tidier one.

US Department of Labor, Fact Sheet 21. Practice figures banded from real work, no client detail.

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WHAT THIS IS, AND WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

This is not a brief about tidy records.

It is about one moment in back-office cleanup: an entry looks wrong, the procedure seems to say delete it, and deleting it is fast. Most of the time that is fine, and once in a while it erases the only proof that someone worked.

What it is not

A case against deleting bad data. A rule that every odd entry needs a manager. A story about anyone doing something wrong, or legal advice about what your own records must hold.

What it is

A decision rule for placeholder entries on time records: when to delete, when to approve the person's own request, and when to stop and escalate. Drawn from a back-office exception queue of hundreds of rows.

Each day

hours worked must be recorded for each day and each workweek, and "the law requires this information to be accurate"

US Department of Labor, Fact Sheet 21

2 years

minimum retention for the time cards and records that wage calculations are based on

US Department of Labor, 29 CFR Part 516

3 years

minimum retention for payroll records, so a deleted entry can be asked about long after the cleanup

US Department of Labor, 29 CFR Part 516

A WARNING

Read these rules for what they are

They are US federal minimums under the Fair Labor Standards Act. States and other countries add their own, and none of this is legal advice. I use them because they state plainly what a time record is for: proof of hours, kept accurate, kept for years.

NOT USED

The "buddy punching" share of gross payroll

A percentage for it is widely credited to a payroll association. I could only find it on the blogs of vendors selling time clocks, never in a published study with a method, so it stays out of this brief.

THE PROBLEM AS IT LOOKS

A placeholder looks like clutter. Sometimes it is the only record.

Most people working a queue see an obviously bad entry and clear it. The trouble is that "obviously bad" and "the only trace of a worked day" can look identical on screen.

How it usually looks

A bad entry on an otherwise clean record. Delete it, the exception clears, the queue gets shorter, and the record finally looks the way the procedure says it should.

What is really happening

On most days a complete record sits beside it and the placeholder is leftover. On some days nothing else is there, and the placeholder is the only sign the day was worked at all.

1 in 5

US payrolls contain errors, each costing an average of $291 to put right

Ernst and Young survey, 2022

1,139

time, attendance and expense errors per 1,000 employees a year, the most common error type

Ernst and Young survey, 2022

26 min

per employee spent fixing missing and incorrect time punches, the most time-consuming fix

Ernst and Young survey, 2022

SOURCE NOTE

A survey of 508 payroll staff, released by a payroll vendor

Respondents worked at US companies of 250 to 10,000 employees, and the results were released by Paycom, which sells payroll software. Read the numbers as a sign of how common time errors are, not as a price list for a small team.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Corrections leave debris

An edited record can keep its original fragment, or a gap can be filled with a whole-day entry. Either way the leftover is not the work itself, and it sits on the record looking exactly like an error.

THE ASYMMETRY

A wrong deletion raises no error

Delete correctly and nobody notices. Delete wrongly and the day simply shows nothing, until the person finds out that what they are owed is short.

THE OPTIONS I CONSIDERED

Three ways to clear a placeholder, each with a cost.

All three clear the exception eventually. They differ in speed, in who carries the risk, and in what is left behind for the next person to read.

OPTION 01

Delete

A clean record and a shorter queue, in seconds. The cost: if no complete record sits on that date, the deletion leaves a worked day empty, and nothing on screen says so.

OPTION 02

Escalate

Slower, and it spends the owner's time on rows that may turn out to be harmless. The gain: the owner sees the whole pattern at once, not one row at a time.

OPTION 03

Approve their request, then delete the leftover

Fast and documented, because the person has said in writing that the entry is wrong. The limit: it is only available when they actually asked.

THE CHECK

Delete only when all three hold

Same person, same date, and a complete record present on that date. Miss any one and it is a contact or an escalation, not a deletion.

READ FIRST

The whole day, not the flagged entry

Look for a pending correction request, an edited record whose original fragment was left behind, or an AM and PM swap before choosing anything. Most wrong calls come from reading one row instead of one day.

THE TRAP

Citing a complete record from the wrong date

A full record the day before looks like proof at a glance. It proves nothing about this date, and it is the most common way a careful operator still deletes the only evidence.

WHAT DECIDES IT

Not how wrong the entry looks. Whether the work is still on the record after you act.

THE CALL I MADE

Option 03 when they ask. Option 02 when the day would go empty.

Never option 01 on a hunch. Speed matters in a backlog, but a deletion that cannot be justified from the record is not speed, it is risk moved onto someone else.

WHEN REQUESTED	**Approve their request, then delete the leftover** The person's own request is the documentation. Approving it and clearing the remainder is fast and leaves a trail anyone can follow later.
WOULD GO EMPTY	**Escalate with the rows attached** Written as a question: I see this entry on these records, and deleting it would leave the day empty; is this expected? The owner decides, with the evidence in front of them.
NEVER	**Delete on a hunch** Looking wrong is not evidence of being wrong. If I cannot name the complete record it duplicates, I do not delete, however long the queue is.

WHY THE RECORD IS THE STANDARD

When time records are missing or inaccurate, US courts can accept the worker's reasonable estimate of hours, and the employer must disprove it.

> The test is not whether the entry looks wrong. It is whether the work is still on the record after I act.
>
> From the decision log

WHAT I WATCH AFTERWARD

One placeholder is a fix. A pattern is a question for the owner.

Clearing the rows is the easy half. The harder half is noticing when the same thing keeps happening, because then the cause is upstream and no amount of cleanup will stop it.

WATCH 01

The same pattern on related records

Placeholders on other people or neighbouring dates after similar corrections mean the cause is upstream. That goes to the owner as one named pattern, not a pile of rows.

WATCH 02

Amounts that match exactly across days

Identical figures on different days can be normal, since people repeat the same work. They can also be a copy. I ask before I conclude, and I attach the rows.

WATCH 03

Days left with nothing on them

After a cleanup pass, I check that no worked day now shows empty. If one does, I restore it from the log and escalate, before payroll runs on it.

$259m+

in back wages recovered by the US Wage and Hour Division in fiscal 2025, all violation types

US Department of Labor, 2025

176,957

workers who received those back wages, across every kind of employer

US Department of Labor, 2025

1946

the year the US Supreme Court shifted the burden to employers whose records are inadequate

Anderson v. Mt. Clemens Pottery

HOW I FLAG

"I see X on these rows; is this expected?"

Attach the rows. A question costs the owner thirty seconds, while a wrong conclusion stated as fact costs trust.

WHEN TO STOP

If the pattern grows, pause the deletions

Keep working the rows that pass all three checks, hold the rest, and say in the report how many are waiting and why.

LOGGED

Every removal, with the exact time

Whatever I remove or enter goes in the log with the exact times, so anyone who reads it can reverse the action. Errors are corrected with a dated line, never by deleting history.

EVIDENCE, NOT ADJECTIVES

This is evidence of knowing when not to delete.

Backlogs reward fast clearing, and most rows deserve it. The judgement is telling the cheap rows from the ones that carry somebody's work.

WORKED

An exception queue in the hundreds

Time records with an in and no out, or an out and no in. Each row got one of six actions: delete, apply the supervisor's rule, AM and PM edit, enter a supplied time, contact, or escalate.

LOGGED

Append-only, never overwritten

A dated log opened every morning, with counts derived only from its lines and checkpoints at midday and end of day. Missing data was written "not recorded", never guessed.

REPORTED

Patterns, not complaints

When a new timekeeping app started losing clock-outs and creating dozens of exceptions a day, the failures and placeholder entries went upward as named patterns with the rows attached.

THE HABIT

Ask what the record will prove after I act

Before any delete, overwrite or merge, I name what the record must still show afterwards. If a duplicate has no surviving original, it is escalated instead of deleted.

CREDENTIALS

Google Project Management Professional Certificate and Google AI Essentials

Plus Anthropic AI Fluency and Model Context Protocol. 31 certifications in total, every one independently verifiable.

> "Paul consistently demonstrated exceptional professionalism, accountability, and critical-thinking skills.
>
> Karene D. · Technical Support Specialist · PETLIBRO · Colleagues on the Intuit Quicken account

HOW TO START

Write your delete rule down before the next cleanup.

Most teams have a procedure that says what to remove, and few say when not to. Add the second half, and make it short enough to apply on row four hundred.

STEP 01

Read the whole day

Before touching a flagged entry, open everything that person has on that date. Look for a complete record, a pending request, and any sign of an edit, on this date and not the one beside it.

STEP 02

Apply the three checks

Same person, same date, complete record present. All three, or no deletion. Write the rule where the whole team can see it, so it survives a busy day and a new person in the seat.

STEP 03

Route the rest, and log it

If they asked, approve their request and clear the leftover. If the day would go empty, escalate with the rows attached. Log every action with the exact time, so any of it can be reversed.

A FREE PLAYBOOK THAT FITS

The Backlog playbook turns hundreds of exception rows into a few dozen decisions, with the escalation step built in. Free at me.kabuhayan.app/playbook.

Available now for remote work

Chief of Staff · Operations · Senior Executive Assistant · Project Manager

Tell me what your cleanup procedure says to delete, and what it says to keep.

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me.kabuhayan.app

Sources: US Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, Fact Sheet 21, "Recordkeeping Requirements under the Fair Labor Standards Act", revised July 2008, and 29 CFR Part 516; used for what must be recorded and how long it is kept; US federal minimums only, not legal advice. Ernst and Young payroll survey, released by Paycom, 22 December 2022; 508 respondents who work with payroll at US-headquartered companies of 250 to 10,000 employees; released by a payroll software vendor. US Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division data, fiscal year 2025; back wages across all violation types, not only record errors. Anderson v. Mt. Clemens Pottery Co., 328 U.S. 680, US Supreme Court, 1946. Deliberately excluded: the buddy punching share of gross payroll, which I could not trace to a published study. Figures are third-party research, not results I am claiming. Practice figures are banded from real work and describe patterns, not a client.