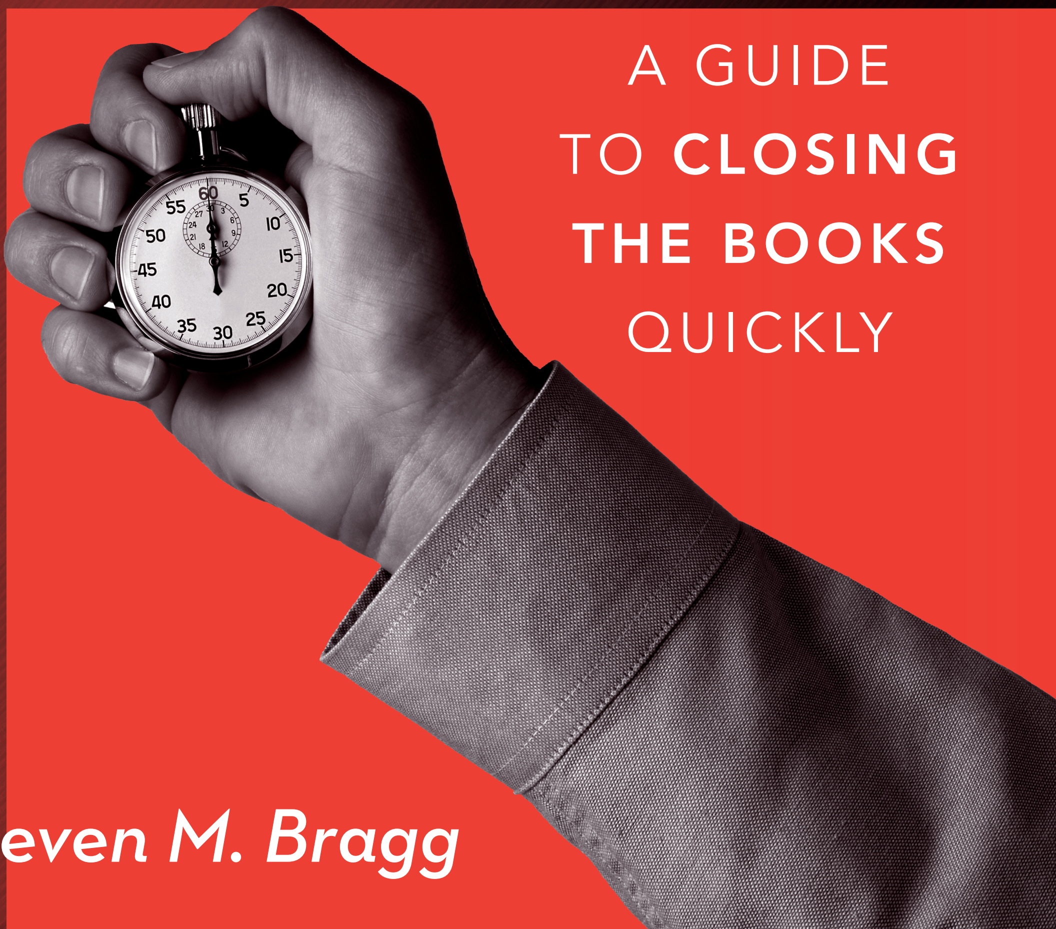
2nd EDITION

FAST CLOSE

A GUIDE TO **CLOSING THE BOOKS** QUICKLY



Steven M. Bragg

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Second Edition

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To Richard Souders,
who always operates at warp speed.

About the Author

Steven Bragg, CPA, CMA, CIA, CPIM, has been the chief financial officer or controller of four companies, as well as a consulting manager at Ernst & Young and auditor at Deloitte & Touche. He received a Master's degree in finance from Bentley College, an MBA from Babson College, and a Bachelor's degree in Economics from the University of Maine. He has been the two-time president of the Colorado Mountain Club, is an avid alpine skier and mountain biker, and is a certified master diver. Mr. Bragg resides in Centennial, Colorado. He has published the following books with John Wiley & Sons:

Accounting and Finance for Your Small Business

Accounting Best Practices

Accounting for Payroll

Billing and Collections Best Practices

Business Ratios and Formulas

Controller's Guide to Costing

Controller's Guide to Planning and Controlling Operations

Controller's Guide: Roles and Responsibilities for the New Controller

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Sales and Operations for Your Small Business

The Controller's Function

The New CFO Financial Leadership Manual

The Ultimate Accountants' Reference

Throughput Accounting

Also:

Advanced Accounting Systems (Institute of Internal Auditors)

Run the Rockies (CMC Press)

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Preface

One of the most common challenges for the controller is to close the month-end books and issue financial statements as fast as possible. The resulting statements are being demanded by corporate management, outside investors, and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) (for public companies) on the shortest possible timelines. However, the closing process has traditionally been a slow one—several surveys reveal that the average company requires about two weeks to close its subsidiary's books, followed by roughly another three weeks to roll up the results into corporate-level financial statements. Companies with more organized closing systems can reduce this process to about two weeks, and those companies with the best closing processes can reduce the entire interval to four days. These results represent a slight improvement in closing times over the past—few years, but there is no massive improvement trend. Thus, companies are clearly having a difficult time shortening the closing process.

This book walks the reader through the process of closing the books and creating financial statements faster much faster. The author uses the principles outlined in this book to issue financial statements for a multidivision company in one day and has been doing so for years. Some of the key improvement steps discussed in this book are:

- Shift the timing of closing activities out of the core closing period.
- Reduce the contents of the financial statements.
- Standardize and automate the use of journal entries.
- Standardize the chart of accounts.
- Centralize accounting functions.

- Adopt inventory tracking and cycle counting systems.
- Shift rebillable expense invoices out of the core closing period.
- Use a web-based timekeeping system for consulting staff.
- Streamline the commission calculation process.
- Optimize the approval process for accounts payable.
- Link supplier invoice accruals to the purchase order database.
- Layer consolidation software onto the existing accounting software.
- Integrate an ongoing improvement review into the closing process.

These bullet points are only a microcosm of the large array of changes recommended in this book. No single change will achieve a massive reduction in the closing interval. Instead, only by gradually working through the changes listed here, in the order presented within the following chapters, can one expect to arrive at a closing interval that may encompass as little as a single day.

This second edition of *Fast Close* includes two new chapters that address critical considerations in the closing process. Chapter 14 describes the lengthy and tortuous additional steps that a publicly held company must endure while it converts its financial statements into a quarterly or annual report that must be submitted to the Securities and Exchange Commission. The chapter notes a variety of techniques for compressing these additional activities. Chapter 15 describes a number of controls over the accuracy of the financial statements. This is a particularly important issue for controllers who want to ensure that there is sufficient documentation and transactional verification to reduce the risk of issuing misleading financial statements.

This enhanced second edition of *Fast Close* is the best possible guidebook for issuing accurate financial statements within the minimum possible time period. Enjoy the journey!

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Centennial, Colorado
April 2009

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Introduction

Achieving a fast close is a process improvement project that requires the full attention of the accounting staff for a long period of time. Before committing to such a project, one should be clear about what type of financial close works best for a company's specific needs, what kinds of benefits will result, and the general steps required to complete the close. This chapter provides answers to these questions.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF FAST CLOSE

Several variations on the fast close concept have appeared, causing some confusion about the nature of each one. The *fast close* is simply an acceleration of the standard closing process, resulting in approximately the same financial reporting package being issued (possibly somewhat stripped down). The focus of this approach is a careful examination of the closing process to strip out wait times, consolidate tasks, eliminate unnecessary functions, add transaction best practices, and selectively apply automation where necessary. It is a task in which an industrial engineer trained in efficiency improvements would feel quite at home.

The *soft close* is less labor intensive than a regular close, because it does not generate as much information. It is designed solely for internal corporate use, so its end product is only those management reports needed to run operations. With this reduced reporting goal in mind, the accounting staff can eliminate the use of overhead allocations. It may also be possible to stop some accruals and ignore the elimination of intercompany transactions, depending on the level of reporting detail desired. The soft close is most commonly seen in companies that issue only quarterly or annual reports to outside entities, leaving all other months available for the soft close.

The *virtual close* involves the use of a largely automated accounting system, one that can produce required financial information at any time, on demand. This approach is rarely used and only in the largest companies that can afford to install an enterprise resources planning (ERP) system that automatically consolidates and reports financial information. Also, the underlying transactions that feed into the ERP system must be essentially error free, so an accurate virtual close is really the result of a hefty software investment as well as years of continual process improvements. The financial reports resulting from a virtual close tend to be stripped-down versions of generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP)-compliant reports, because this approach avoids the need for such manual tasks as overhead allocation, accrual transactions, and the establishment of various reserves.

If achieved, a virtual close can be useful in fast-moving industries where financial results must be monitored frequently in order to make rapid-fire changes to a company's tactical or strategic direction, or at least to identify problem areas for fast management attention.

BENEFITS OF THE FAST CLOSE

There are numerous benefits to achieving a fast close, which vary based on the perspective of the recipient—company management, outside investors, auditors, and the accounting department. These benefits are:

- *Quicker access to financial information*. Company management generally feels that the primary benefit of the fast close is having access to financial information more quickly, allowing it to take rapid steps to improve a company's strategic and tactical position in the marketplace.
- *Marketing tool.* A company's marketing staff can use the rapid issuance of financial information to trumpet the company's openness to the investing public. This does not necessarily mean that the company will issue sterling financial results, only that it will issue results faster. Still, it implies some level of expertise on the part of the accounting department in processing transactions and compiling them into reports, and so may impart some level of comfort to investors in that regard.
- *More time for financial analysis*. Closing the books fast does not necessarily mean that one must issue financial statements sooner. An alternative is to spend additional time analyzing the preliminary financial statements in order to issue more complete notes alongside the financials at a later date.
- *Improved processes*. Because the fast close improvement process requires careful attention to process enhancement, there will inevitably be side-benefit improvements to many accounting processes, leading to heightened efficiency and fewer errors. Within the accounting department, this may be seen as the top benefit of the fast close. A variety of controls for financial reporting are discussed in Chapter 15.

- *Improved control systems*. Internal and external auditors appreciate the enhanced attention to control systems needed to ensure that information is compiled properly and fast.
- *More time, period*. Although some aspects of the fast close simply push activities into the period either before or after the core closing period, some actions are completely eliminated or at least reduced in size. This results in less total time required for the closing process, which can be used by the accounting staff for a variety of other activities.

Consequently, the wide array of fast close benefits results in multiple supporting constituencies—management, investors, auditors, and the accounting department.

LEGAL ISSUES IMPACTING THE FAST CLOSE

The Sarbanes-Oxley Act has made it more difficult to achieve a fast close. The problem is Section 302 of the Act, which requires formal management certification of the accuracy of the financial statements. Specifically, Section 302 requires that the financial statements of publicly held companies not contain any material untrue statements or material omissions or be considered misleading. Understandably, those signing this certification want to spend more time ensuring that the financial statements are indeed correct. Some recent surveys of the time needed to produce financial statements have indicated a slight *increase* in the time required since the passage of Sarbanes-Oxley, probably because of Section 302.

However, Section 409 of Sarbanes-Oxley requires that public companies disclose to the public on Form 8K any information on material changes in their financial condition or operations. This must happen within four days of the occurrence of a triggering event. This requirement calls for financial and operating systems that bring issues to the attention of management faster than might previously have been the case.

Finally, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has accelerated its requirement for the timely filing of quarterly and annual reports by publicly held companies. The rule change calls for a three-year decline in the reporting period to 60 days for annual reports and to 35 days for quarterly reports (down from 90 days and 45 days, respectively). This rule applies to domestic companies having a public float of at least $75 million and that have previously filed at least one annual report.

In short, corporate controllers and chief financial officers are caught between a rock and a hard place—they must file financial and operating information sooner but want to retain it in-house longer to ensure that it is correct. The solution is still the fast close—information is available quicker for filing requirements, while company management can still retain it for further review until the accelerated filing dates come due.

STEPS TO ACHIEVE A FAST CLOSE

Several steps are required to achieve a fast close, which are addressed in detail in the following chapters. They are listed in the following recommended order of implementation:

1. *Reviewing the closing process (Chapter 3)*. The first step in achieving a fast close is to examine the current state of the closing process and determine the time required to complete each functional area (i.e., inventory, billing, payroll, payables, and cash processing, as well as final closing activities). It is useful to summarize the results of this investigation into a timeline that can be used to spot which segments of the closing process are particularly in need of improvement.
2. *Altering the timing of closing activities (Chapter 4)*. A set of changes that are easy to implement and yet have a startling positive impact on the duration of the close is to shift many of the closing activities either into the preceding month or into the period immediately following the issuance of financial statements.
3. *Revising the contents of the financial statements (Chapter 5)*. The close will take less time if there is less information to report. There are several variations on this concept, such as eliminating custom reports entirely, shifting to electronic modes of report delivery, and reporting some operating or metric information separately from the financial statements.
4. *Optimizing the use of journal entries and chart of accounts (Chapter 6)*. Journal entries require excessive amounts of time, may be entered incorrectly, and do not always contribute to the accuracy of the financial statements. Thus, standardizing journal entries, eliminating inconsequential ones, and automating them can be of considerable assistance. Also, using a common chart of accounts or at least creating mapping tables will reduce the labor associated with consolidating results reported by subsidiaries.
5. *Standardization and centralization (Chapter 7)*. If a company has multiple locations, the closing process will be nearly impossible to improve unless the controller pays considerable attention to the standardization of accounting transactions so that they are completed in exactly the same way in all locations. Even greater closing improvements can be attained by centralizing accounting functions for the entire company in a single location.
6. *Closing the inventory function (Chapter 8)*. The topic of inventory makes many controllers shudder, because a combination of poor controls and large investments in this area makes the cost of goods sold an extremely difficult area to calculate, leading to massive time requirements during

the closing process. This problem can be reduced by implementing tight inventory tracking and cycle counting systems, as well as by adopting better materials management policies to reduce the overall level of inventory investment.

7. *Closing the billing function (Chapter 9).* Generating month-end invoices may be the bottleneck operation during the month-end close. This problem can be reduced by shifting recurring invoices and the rebilling of expenses out of the closing period, electronically linking the shipping database to the accounting department, and ensuring fast completion of billable hours reporting.

8. *Closing the payroll function (Chapter 10).* The payroll function principally interferes with the closing process because employees are late in recording their billable hours, which can be resolved through the use of automated time clocks and Web-based time recording systems. There are also several ways to streamline the commission calculation process so it takes much less time during the core closing period.

9. *Closing the payables function (Chapter 11).* Waiting for late supplier invoices to arrive, as well as pushing those invoices through a Byzantine approval process can seriously interfere with the month-end close. There are several approaches for streamlining the basic approval process, while the intelligent use of expense accruals, coupled with the purchase order database, can eliminate the wait for late invoices.

10. *Closing the cash processing function (Chapter 12).* Some controllers like to wait until the bank statement arrives in the mail before issuing financial statements, so they can first conduct a bank reconciliation. The postal float on the bank statement can be two or three days, which directly delays the issuance of financial statements. This can be avoided through the use of online bank reconciliations, while several techniques are available for improving the speed of processing incoming checks.

11. *Incorporating automation into the closing process (Chapter 13).* There are several ways to use automation to improve the closing process, ranging from a series of small efficiency-related improvements to workflow management software, a data warehouse, consolidation software, and an ERP system.

12. *Ongoing improvements in the closing process (Chapter 16).* Although the preceding action items may have achieved a considerable improvement in the speed of the close, there is always room for improvement. Consequently, constant attention to the process flow and measurement of key metrics will ensure that the fast close remains fast.

There are two other chapters that do not have a direct bearing on speed of issuing financial statements. Chapter 14 uses many of the techniques