

Commonwealth Boosts Productivity by Networking Users at Branches

With more than 500 employees working out of six offices, estimators and project managers at Commonwealth Electric of the Midwest can't waste time. That's one reason why this multi-state commercial/industrial contractor shifted to Win 12000 systems from McCormick—enabling it to network its computers in each branch location.

Commonwealth transitioned quickly from the Win 6000 system to the 12000, and it is reaping gains in estimating productivity. "We just did it earlier this year," says Matt Firestone, chief estimator. "Previously, we had a handful of keys at each branch, and the users were sharing them. We didn't have a key for each user. Now, we've eliminated that problem.

"But the big thing is that, over time, everyone had tinkered with the McCormick database. I guess we had, at one time, a lot of different databases—perhaps close to a dozen! We didn't have consistency across the company.

"Now, we have the software networked here at our headquarters (in Lincoln, Neb.), in Omaha, and in Des Moines (Iowa). I'm able to modify the database from my desktop."

Old but New Company

Commonwealth is an "old-line" company in one respect, in that founders Pat Campbell, David Firestone, Glen Moss, and Tom Price hail from a previous company where they had worked. At the company's 1987 start, there were 90 employees.

Despite that older-than-15-years history, the company isn't afraid of new things. Recently, Commonwealth started a voice-data-video (VDV) operation. It has two BICSI-registered communication distribution designers (RCDDs) on staff—one each in Omaha and Lincoln. The VDV operation has 20 technicians and 15



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New—Take-Offs On Your PDA!

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vehicles. David Firestone, Matt's father, is the chairman of NECA's VDV group (as well as serving as vice president for the association's District 7).

Matt Firestone started working in the company warehouse as a high school student. He began as a project estimator in 1997, the same year the company began a multi-year transition from DOS to Windows with its McCormick software.

"We purchased Windows in 1997, but didn't fully implement it until 2000," he notes. "Everyone was kind of comfortable with DOS. Getting everyone trained on the Windows version took a bit of time—and we wanted to make sure we had it right, and that everyone was just as comfortable with Windows.

"Of course, it's now a lot faster for all of us, and easier to use. Plus, today, when we bring someone new into the operation, it's a lot easier to bring them up to speed. Windows is the standard today, and it's easier to teach than DOS."

Commonwealth has at least eight full-time estimators. Additionally, project managers do some estimating at each company location. There are 30 McCormick users in Lincoln, Omaha, and Des Moines—and more than 10 at the company's three Arizona offices (Phoenix, Tucson, and Prescott).

Networking Advantages

Commonwealth's future will see more VDV work and more design-build. The company is now gearing up to take advantage of McCormick's CAD Estimating system. Additionally, Matt Firestone says, it will use more of the features embedded in the software.

"I don't think we're even scratching the surface on everything we can do with it," he says. "One thing we're starting to use more is the graph feature. We weren't in the habit of using it, but it's handy. When I started showing it to our managers, they liked the quick, easy visualization the graphs offer about what comprises a job. They can right away see the dollars instead of just a list of numbers.

"We've also used it with some general contractors and owners to show them specifics about their jobs. Numbers are one thing, but people find it a lot easier to understand information if you show them a bar chart or a pie chart."

At the same time, the company is reaping the advantages of using the Win 12000 system. "We have a tremendous advantage now, with everyone

on the same database," he claims. "We ran into problems the old way. If someone modified his database, we couldn't back up a job on one machine and run it on another.

"Now, we can move a job or split up jobs between estimators, and we know we are working with the same information when we compare one job to the next."



Bob Philipps (project manager – standing), Matt Firestone (chief estimator - center), and Paul Claus (project manager) review a current project in Commonwealth's Lincoln, NE office.

As a large, creative company, Commonwealth innovated when it went to the network. Often, a branch manager or vice president will review a bid—on screen. The company wanted managers to see bids but not get into the program and inadvertently make changes.

"With McCormick's help, we created a user called 'Manager'—a 'dummy' user," Firestone explains. "All we allow someone accessing the systems as 'Manager' to do is get to the bid summary. They can even adjust that, but they can't do anything else.

"When we're reviewing a bid, we can be on the speaker phone, looking at the same numbers—and we don't have to leave our desks. We explained to McCormick what we wanted. They actually called me the next day, and we got it set up.

"That's one of the big reasons we've stayed with McCormick—the support we get on the technical side. If and when we have questions or concerns, they are always there to help us out. I've used other software packages. The support we get from other software providers isn't anything close to what we get from McCormick." ✕

You Can Leave The Laptop At Home— Do Remote Take-Offs On A Handheld!

McCormick Systems now offers a new capability to its users: You can now do take-offs anywhere using a handheld personal digital assistant (PDA).

We've adapted our system so that you can load your company's estimating database (including special items and assemblies) right onto the PDA. After you've done the take-off at a remote location, you can send the data from your handheld to your office wirelessly or just download the data from PDA to your main system when you get to the office.

What's the big deal? Does anyone in your company do the following kinds of estimating:

- ✓ change orders?
- ✓ job walk-throughs, to get a better picture of the work that will need to be done in an existing building?
- ✓ estimates for service work?

If you had a "Yes" answer, you'll be able to boost your company's estimating productivity with the use of McCormick's new handheld take-off module. We've adapted the software to the capabilities of most PDAs—especially for those job "blocks" or walk-throughs. Let's say you want to count something (light fixtures needed) on a walk-through. You can just tap the button on the PDA once for each item...getting a lump-sum total at the end of your walk-and-count operation. Try doing that with a lap-top!

Contractors have told us that remote estimating takes place. We've listened to the problems you and your people have with dragging lap-top computers around. We've fashioned a solution that, literally, fits in the palm of your hand! For more information on the handheld take-off module, contact McCormick at 800-444-4890. ✕



Technical Corner

How to Speed Up a Program Launch



There are two ways to speed up the launch process of any program.

1. You can program the function keys (the F keys at the top of your keyboard).
2. You can also program a combination of Ctrl + Alt + "Shortcut Key" to launch applications. To do this, follow these directions:
 - a. Find the icon of the program you'd like to create a shortcut key for and right-click on the icon.
 - b. Choose Properties from the menu and make sure you're in the Shortcut tab.
 - c. Place your cursor in the Shortcut key field, pick a function key or a letter you would like to assign a shortcut with, and press it.
 - d. Hit Apply in the bottom-right corner.
 - e. To open the program, press Ctrl + Alt + "Shortcut Key" or the function key you assigned to it.

Hotkeys—for more functionality in assigning data (such as your email address) to keystrokes, download Hotkeys (www.zdnet.com/downloads/stories/info/0,10615,33989,00.html). This program not only lets you launch applications, but also it lets you reboot your computer, log off Windows, and more. ✕

Estimator's Corner

Starting the Take-Off: Estimating Procedures



When estimators leave an estimate for a period of time, their estimating procedures should allow them to start exactly where they left off. If an estimator cannot complete the estimate for any reason, another estimator should be able to pick up where he left off.

This can only be accomplished by using good, standardized estimating procedures. Creating such a standard company "approach" to estimating will help your company's estimating productivity. Colors of highlighters used, order of take-off, and so forth, really help a company get and maintain control of the estimating process.

Checking Drawings

Check the table of contents for the drawings; be sure that they are complete. If they are not complete, either obtain the missing drawings or make the time to satisfy yourself that you really don't need them. After thoroughly checking the specifications, compare the plans to the specs. It is a good practice to mark any areas affected by alternates with a colored highlighter so they won't be missed. Be sure to mark the drawings. Create the labels for the alternates in column 1, as shown below. Keep in mind that the deductive alternates need to be included in the base bid.

- ✓ Base Bid
- ✓ Alt. E-1 Add
- ✓ Alt. E-2 Add
- ✓ Alt. E-3 Deduct
- ✓ Alt. E-4 Add

Circle the drawing scale (as in, $\frac{1}{4}'' = 1'$) on **all** the drawings. Circle the scale of any insets on the same page. Then, **in large numbers**, write the scale on that part of the drawing using a colored highlighter. Check the scale on all the drawing and insets against a known measurement, like a door opening, a 2 x 4 lay-in (troffer), and other similar standards.

How about the order in which you do the take-off? Here's one "order of take-off" that works for one estimator:

1. Quoted items. (Lighting fixtures, panels & switchgear, systems, specials, etc.)
2. Feeders.
3. Devices.
4. Systems wiring.
5. Branch wiring. ✖

Next month: "More on the Take-Off."

Get Windows Training Now!

Standard Estimating

The class is structured to take you from "Job Startup" through "Bid Summary." It provides in-depth instruction, including good manual experience and "brush-up" exposure for those who want to get more out of the product.

Advanced Management

Designed for the database manager or chief estimator, this class drills down into the bottom of the program. You will learn how to build specification formulas, write reports and reports formulas, and more. Before taking the class, you should be proficient in all takeoff phases of the product and understand your company's needs.

Upcoming Schedule

Unless specified, all classes are at the training center in our office in Chandler, AZ. Classes start at 7 a.m. and wind up about 4 p.m. daily. We make hotel reservations using information from the registration forms sent in from participants. We must receive your registration form in order to reserve a space in our class. To obtain a registration form, call 800-444-4890. ✖

October 3-4
Standard Estimating
(before NECA Show in **Chicago**)

October 23-25
Standard Estimating

October 28-29 - **Baltimore, MD**
Standard Estimating

November 13-15
Advanced Estimating

November 20-22
Standard Estimating

December 4-6
Standard Estimating