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Insights

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The Art of Negotiation

Walkaround Inspection Representatives

Estimating to Project Management

The Latest Tools and Trends in Estimating

By Paul Wheaton

Estimating software is no longer a luxury; it is a must-have tool in the old tool belt. Contractors who are bidding new business are spending countless hours of wasted time if they are not using some sort of estimating tool. In the past, estimating software was a luxury; an expensive one. But with today's market and with software developers recognizing the need for a less expensive software, it is a cinch to purchase one and get it up and going in no time. Most software companies now offer several levels to their software, making it a lot more affordable and doable. They even offer some sort of trade-up program so that you are not stuck with a smaller version of the software forever.

What are you losing with these smaller programs? The answer is not much; most of these programs offer a full database of items and assemblies with labor units and easy ways to price update. Price updating is done through the national services or you can now directly update your estimating system through your local supplier. These smaller programs allow a smaller contractor to come up with the same numbers as a contractor with a full version of the software. What you are not getting with smaller packages are little things like project management features, customizability of reports or specifications of the software, and some speed features. Even with these missing features, by purchasing a smaller program, you are still going to save 50 to 75 percent of your time estimating. That is no small amount!

If you do decide to add on the project management features, a project manager will then be able to break up a job in manageable bites. Want to see how long it will take you to install the lighting on the second floor? No problem, run a report. The report can show you exactly what the man hours will be along with other information such as cost of material or totals of conduit, etc. Want to see a Gantt chart for a specific portion of the job? No problem, run a chart. Compare your actual numbers to the estimate breakdown to get an exact measurement of how you are doing compared to how you bid the job.

The next little piece of technology that is worth checking out is the on-screen takeoff programs. With these programs, you are saving even more time and money. Forget wasting your money by printing off plans and wasting your time by manually measuring and counting. With this program, you will be able to do all takeoff with a click of a button right on top of a PDF or any other file type. Take your laptop on a plane and finish your takeoff before you land! Also,



take control of your plans by keeping one working copy in a centralized place. This will push collaboration between your estimating and project management departments and keep everyone on the same page.

With on-screen takeoff programs, change orders are easier to complete, and it will minimize mistakes. Most of the on-screen programs have some sort of overlay feature. With this feature, you can take a revised plan and digitally overlay it on top of the original plan. This easily shows the estimator what exactly is different between the two plans, usually by showing the estimator different colored objects. Next, doing a bit of design build is also an easy task with this program. Easily draw in the feeder or branch circuits right over the top of a PDF file. Print several copies or simply e-mail this updated PDF to all of your project managers in seconds!

To sum it up, there are many tools out there now, many very affordable tools. Don't be the one to show up to the jobsite without your tool belt on. Estimating is one of the most important aspects of your business. It is something that you will use for the rest of the time you are in business. Make sure you invest in it.

INSIGHTS

Paul Wheaton is the Vice President of Sales for McCormick Systems. He has worked closely with the newer development of McCormick and is on the front line of computerized estimating. He also instructs on the McCormick line of estimating products and develops procedures for e-learning. Paul holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Management and is Project Management certified. Paul has been a guest speaker at numerous IEC Conventions and trade association meetings bringing insight into the electronic estimating world.

Wheaton's session, "The Latest Tools and Trends in Estimating," will take place Friday, September 27 at 3:15 p.m. at the 56th Annual IEC National Convention & Electric Expo in Portland, Oregon.