BEFORE YOU BUY AN ESTIMATING SYSTEM

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Fifteen years ago, when I was a small NECA contractor in Oregon, I bough my first computerized estimating system. The decision was fairly easy. I knew I needed help in my estimating so, I attended a three-hour NECA workshop. Representatives of three estimating systems were present and I could compare what they offered and make up my mind pretty quickly.

That's not the case today. There are lots of companies out there (including my own) competing for the business of electrical and other construction contractors. It's not easy for you, the contractor, to sort through all the competing systems to find the one that will work best for your company.

That's why it is important for all contractors to ask themselves a lot of questions before making that big decision. If I were still in the contracting business, these are some of the things I'd want to know:

1) Does the vendor's software fit your application? With so many software programs now tailored to a specific industry, there is no need to try to make a general contractors program work for the electrical contractor or an electrical program work for a GC.

2) How long has the vendor been in the software business? How many users does he have? When you purchase an estimating program, it should be the start of a long and friendly relationship with that vendor. You don't want to buy a program and find out a year later that the vendor is no longer in business. When talking to a potential. Vendor, ask for a complete list of all companies in your area using his software and make some calls. Estimator are tough. They will call a spade a spade.

3) How is the database set up? How many items will it hold? How user definable are the specifications of the items? Are assemblies important to you? If they are, how many items can be in an assembly? Will the program generate unit prices? Can the items be updated by a pricing service?

4) Is the program a "takeoff" program or is it an "input" program? Can it do both? (A takeoff program allows you to count and/or roll directly into the program with the use of electronic probes or special" count" keys; an input program requires takeoff onto paper and then manual input into the program) Can you take off more than one item at a time, i.e., count devices and roll branch at the same time? Can you take off materials by assembly or is at an "item only" program? Is this important to you?

5) How many jobs can be of a hard disk at one time? How is the job to be broken out? Can you break out by bid package, building, floor, and so forth? How hard is it to build and/or review and change an item and/or an assembly? Can this be done in the takeoff program? How long does it take to jump from fixtures to branch circuits? What about reports? Can you set them up yourself or are they hard coded? Can the extension break down into job cost reports? Will all reports write to a file for transfer to other programs?

6) How "user-friendly" is the program? Is it menu driven? Is it command driven? Do you have mouse control?

7) Are probes included in the package? How are the probes set up in the program? Can you count and roll at the same time? Can you count more than one thing at a time?

8) How are you trained to use the product? Do you go to the vendor or does he come to you? Does the vendor have scheduled classes or are they on a "need only" basis?

9) Does the vendor charge more than 10% of the purchase price for support? Are upgrades included with support or does he charge additional?

10) What kind of hardware does it run on? Can it be networked? (If you need more than one estimator to work from

common files on the same job, you will need networking)

11) How much does it cost?

There are many answers to the questions listed above; none of them "pat". One answer might be right for you and wrong for the next contractor. Keep in mind, however, that you will not be able to get 100% of what you are looking for. If you get 85% and the 15% that you loose is not a major concern, the program will work well for you.

Another point to remember: your company must have established good estimating practices before investing in a computer program. If you cannot estimate on paper, you very likely will not be able to estimate on a computer. An estimating computer will not "save" a company in trouble however, it will be a great asset to a company that is well organized and understands costs and procedures.

Knowing what I know now, here's how I would go about purchasing an estimating system:

1) Identify the software vendors who have programs that you might be interested in, but no more than six. Find them by word of mouth, Electrical Contractor, etc.

2) Ask them to send information about their product, their company, their support, and a list of people that use their product in your area. This information should be in your office within two weeks.

3) Sort through the information looking for answers to the questions detailed above and weed your list down to no more than four companies. You should, by now, have some specific questions regarding your needs and their claims.

4) Call the four targeted vendors to get answers to your specific concerns/needs.

5) Call several users that the targeted vendors have listed and get a feel from them about the company, the product and the support (but remember the vendor won't give you any "bad" users). By now, your list should be down to no more than three.

6) Now, cut your list to two (or three) and ask the survivors to demonstrate their product - but only if you are serious abut purchasing a program in the very near future.

7) Then, commit and purchase the system. Delaying a decision just leads to more confusion when you "gear" up to go through the process again.

If you did your homework, this will be one of the best investments you could make for your company.

Believe me, it will make a difference.