Estimating Software:
What to Look For

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There I was stuck on the shoulder of the interstate with a flat tire. Good thing I had my discount store socket set... or was it? My face winced as I strained to loosen the lug nut. Finally I sensed myself winning as the wrench slowly moved, and then... snap! The wrench broke.

Sound familiar? We’ve all had our share of purchasing a “good deal” only to find out the item worked as well as a wooden tire on a wheelbarrow. The same can be said for estimating software. As computers become a household word and more software becomes available, it is important to know what to look for.

Purchasing estimating software is an investment in your company’s future. The right investment will produce substantial dividends. Here are some guidelines to make your investment the right one.

Price Can Be Deceptive
When looking for software, initial price can often be deceptive. Some programs have a good price but work like my socket set did. Make a wise investment and know what you are getting for the price. Does it include training, technical support and updates? Also, some have a base price that looks good but have “optional” features that are really quite necessary.

Technical Support
After you purchase the system and you have a question, who do you ask? Will the meter start ticking when they answer the phone? Will the person on the other end know enough about estimating to help you? Will they make you feel like you interrupted
them when you call? Having qualified, enthusiastic technical support is an important factor.

**Training**

Is training part of the price? If so, how much? Is it conducted in a lecture hall with 40 other “new clients” from five other trades, or are sessions individualized?

**Updates**

Is the software ever updated? If so, how are updates handled and how much will they cost? As technology improves, will you have the opportunity to improve your system or will you have to scrap it and buy something else?

**Flexibility**

Some programs are great as long as you always encounter the same construction conditions, but get very difficult when encountering anything unusual. Unfortunately, for most construction, unusual conditions are normal. To handle them the estimating system must leave the estimator in control, not the software.

**Ease of Operation**

How easy is it for a person to learn? Some programs require little to no computer knowledge. Others require solid background.

**Databases**

A database is computer terminology for a list of items. Typically these items would include those you use to complete your takeoff. Metal studs, drywall, and screws are all examples of the items that would be in a drywall database. Similarly, grid, tile, and various fasteners would be in an acoustical database. Some software packages come with comprehensive databases. Others come with little to none. Don’t get caught short on this one. You could buy a system and then spend months making the database workable for your company.

**Brochures**

Everything looks good in a brochure. Read them with a grain of salt. The acid test is whether or not it will work for your company. You probably will have difficulty determining that from a sales brochure. Whenever possible see the system in action, whether in a demo or in the office of
a friend who has it. Try to get some names of clients who already have the system and call them.

**Analyze Estimator’s Tasks**

Stop and think about all your estimator does. Often it goes far beyond quantity takeoffs. Responsibilities such as communication with the field, projecting material needs for the next six months, and preparing the estimate for the accounting department are just a few tasks that can be done much faster with high quality software.

**What’s Available Now**

Today you can purchase everything from a glorified calculator/spreadsheet program requiring manual entry to a digitized system. A digitizer allows you to touch points on the plan and have the quantities automatically taken off. More advanced estimating systems will allow the digitized quantities to run all extensions, have prices applied, and produce schematic drawings for the takeoff. The better systems will also allow a detailed audit trail of your estimate that can be changed to accommodate addenda, etc.

In summary, purchasing a computerized estimating system is an investment in your company’s future. Price can be deceptive. Factors such as technical support, training, and updates, as well as the system’s flexibility, ease of operation, and available databases are all important consideration. Find something that will do the whole job—something that will free your estimator from being a numbers cruncher so that more time can be spent analyzing the job.