Do you feel that hand estimating provides a better feel and control of your job and that a computer would be too time consuming to learn? You’re not alone. Many who use computerized estimating today felt that way a few years ago. So rather than guess what changed their minds, I questioned some of the people using this technology.

The companies interviewed vary in size, longevity, and location. Despite their differences, they have some things in common. They are all interior contractors, all successful, and all use the same computerized estimating system. Below is a summary of the conversations.

The Contractors

Mike Hankins is President of Acoustics and Specialties, Inc., a 52 year old company in Memphis, Tennessee. His company does between $4 and $5 million a year in drywall, demountable partitions, acoustic ceilings, access flooring, and EIFS. He is a member of CISCA, ASA, and ABC. Mike’s responsibilities include everything from estimating and managing jobs to collections and taking out the trash.

Karen Wilder is the estimator for Kassel Tile, Inc., a family owned contractor in Jackson, Mississippi. They have been in business since 1979 and are members of AGC and ABC. They do about $2 million a year in commercial drywall, acoustical ceilings, and ceramic tile. Along with estimation, Karen handles the submittals, cut lists, and ordering of non-stock materials.

Jim Tribbie, Brent Allen, and Rich Myers all work for South Texas Drywall, a $10 plus million dollar contractor located in Columbus, Ohio. South Texas is a complete interior contractor with an emphasis on drywall. The company’s professional memberships include AWCI, ASA, AGC, as well as many more. Jim is the Vice President and General Manager. Brent does mostly project management, and Rich does most of the estimating.

The Introduction . . .

How were you introduced to computerized estimating?

Mike — From CISCA surveys and a meeting I attended at a convention.
Karen — I read an article in a trade magazine.
Jim — We have been monitoring them for a few years.

What was your opinion of computerized estimating before you were exposed to it?

Mike — I was afraid that it wouldn’t do as good a job as I could do by hand. I didn’t want just a fancy calculator.
Karen — I’ve always felt that if you can do something on a computer, you’re better off. My father (owner) resisted at first, thinking that it would not be cost effective. He has since changed his mind.
Jim — Very cautious. There were a lot of systems that were not tailored to our industry. We didn’t want to purchase a system that would not completely handle our needs and expand with them.

The Start up . . .

How much computer background did you prior to getting your estimating system?

Mike — We had exposure to some accounting packages and also had two other systems. We knew what we didn’t like from the other ones.
Karen — I’ve been familiar with computers for a while. I bought our company’s accounting system about seven years ago.
Jim — I had some exposure from an overseeing standpoint at a previous employer.
**How difficult was it to learn computerized estimating?**

*Mike* — Not difficult at all. We took some time up front on a daily basis. It’s like getting a fax machine. Working with it becomes second nature, then you don’t know how you ever got along without it.

*Karen* — It was easy. The salesman helped a lot when the system was installed. Everything flows in a very natural, logical fashion.

*Jim* — Fairly easy. We could use it to a limited extent immediately. Once we got a basic understanding, we just learned new things as we used the system.

**The Benefits . . .**

**How much has your yearly volume been affected after getting computerized estimating?**

*Mike* — It’s hard to say due to the economy. There’s definitely an increase in our ability to estimate more projects in less time. That gives us more time for project management.

*Karen* — It’s hard to say. We just got the system about five months ago. We didn’t expect an immediate difference in volume as much as better accuracy and cost control.

*Jim* — It is difficult to say given the present state of the economy. However, we have been able to produce about a third more estimates with it.

**How much faster are you with computerized estimating?**

*Mike* — A minimum of 60% faster.

*Karen* — It varies according to the job. It’s especially helpful when figuring alternates. Some things that would take most of the day I can do in an hour.

*Rich* — A typical job in the million dollar range is about two times as fast for me. As I progress, I expect that to increase.

*Jim* — We had a two phase project that was 3/32" scale. The digitizer made it very easy to estimate.

*Brent* — I have a $1 million dollar job that I broke into different phases easily with the system. This makes the day to day management much easier. I also use my reports as backup for change orders. I’ve gotten a lot of positive comments about how professional they look.

**Give an example of how the computer has helped you.**

*Mike* — One 400,000 SF ceiling had all diagonal walls. We were able to take it off very accurately and feel good about the quantities. We got the job.

*Karen* — It has helped in a lot of ways. Mainly in consolidating and breaking out materials. I can do a takeoff by floors and get a stocking report for each floor or one for all floors. Another way is that I don’t need to use a bunch of fudge factors because I can be more accurate on actual quantities. It’s also very easy to make last minute price changes.

*Jim* — One 400,000 SF ceiling had all diagonal walls. We were able to take it off very accurately and feel good about the quantities. We got the job.
How has your estimating system assisted you in dealing with the faltering economy?

Mike — It’s allowed us to turn around preliminary estimates much faster for owners, allowing them to make a quicker decision. This has resulted in us getting more work.
Karen — Mainly in helping with accuracy and feeling better about the bid.
Jim — It’s been especially helpful from a negotiating standpoint. We can quickly compile a set of documents to clarify our scope and justify our price.

Given today’s economy and knowing what you know of your estimating system, would you still buy your estimating system?

Mike — Yes. I think to stay competitive you will need something to keep up.
Karen — Yes. We’re not a volume oriented company; we just want a better bottom line.
Jim — Yes. For us the main issue wasn’t the initial price of the system as much as allowing someone time to learn it.

Helpful Suggestions . . .

In general, what are some comments you have regarding computerized estimating?

Mike — Don’t be scared of it. Trust the system and yourself. It takes a little getting used to the digitizers since it’s so much more accurate than measurements made by hand.
Karen — It releases me from the numbers crunching and gives me more time to analyze the job.
Brent — It’s a lot easier selling jobs and making fast changes that are so often needed. I use it daily for managing our jobs.

What suggestions can you give to someone who is considering purchasing an estimating system?

Mike — We have two awfully expensive programs that we don’t use because of difficulty building databases. The one we now use already had the stuff in it and was easy to adapt. You don’t need to waste your time trying to be a programmer. It needs to be as complete as possible. Also make sure you have the flexibility needed to work around problems that come up and that the people you buy it from can give you full support with quick answers.
Karen — Know what you’re looking for and make sure the one you buy does what you need. If you expect a lot out of it, you must look first class. We looked at a lot of systems and felt that the lower end ones did not do all that we wanted.
Jim — Give them time to get started. For us one tremendous help was the availability of support when we needed it.

I would like to thank Mike, Karen, Jim, Brent, and Rich for taking time out of their busy day to help others in their trade.