



ESTIMATING **ADVANCEMENTS** →

by / Don Procter

Advancements in job estimating software continue to come into the marketplace at a rapid-fire pace, all in an effort to make the world of the wall and ceiling contractor a little smoother. Here's a look at offerings from six software firms.



WinEstimator

On Center Integrator, a software program that interfaces cost estimating software with a program that does quantity takeoffs, will be introduced this spring by WinEstimator Inc., of Kent, Washington. While interface software isn't new, WinEstimator's program might be the most advanced on the market because it keeps the cost estimate current (real time) when there are design revisions that affect takeoffs, says Steve Watt, president and CEO of the company.

Here's how it works: If a contract calls for 2,000 lineal feet of metal stud interior walls an estimator will incorporate every element — right down to the last screw — required to build the wall into the WinEst software estimate. "If I change that 2,000 lineal feet to, say, 2,500 lineal feet without the interface, all of the numbers (for the cost estimate) become invalid. With our

interface we will correct those values to keep them in synch with the new 2,500 lineal feet of wall.”

Calling it “revision control,” Watt says he is not aware of any other interface program that performs the same task. On Center Integrator interfaces between WinEstimator and a takeoff program produced by Houston-based On Center Software called On-Screen Takeoff. By automating usage of quantity takeoffs into WinEst’s cost estimating software, double entries are eliminated.

Watt expects the interface program will catch on fast in the building industry. “Over the years we’ve had many requests from wall and ceiling contractors and our customers in general to build a connection between our cost estimating software and On Screen Takeoff.”

On-Screen Takeoff Version 3.7 is the newest addition to On Center Software’s takeoff product list. Released last fall, it is Windows 7 compatible and incorporates an Open Database dialogue that can be sorted by size and date to improve takeoff efficiency and organization. Among the new features are improved paging response time, DWFx image file compatibility, and view window visibility while changing takeoff and worksheet tabs. The program also includes multiple updates and fixes to improve performance and efficiency, says Sheridan Scott, spokesperson for On Center.

Coinciding with the takeoff program’s release is the company’s Quick Bid Version 4.9. The two programs are fully integrated to create faster, more accurate estimates, without wasting time on hard-to-navigate controls and risky glitches.

Despite the recession, according to the 2009 BIM SmartMarket Report by McGraw-Hill Construction, 33 per cent of GCs in the US use BIM and the numbers are expected to grow. That’s good news for companies like Vico Software, Inc., a pioneer in the development of BIM.

Vico has developed a platform that is “BIM neutral” which allows models from the architect, GC, and subs (including drywall contractors) to be analyzed and combined into Vico Office, the company’s 5D BIM platform, says Holly Allison, vice-president of marketing. “Imagine in 3D we can lay the models on top of each other and see where there are clashes (such as where a duct runs into a wall or window is above a ceiling).”

A takeoff for walls can include 10 different quantity attributes including gross and net area reference size, gross and net volume reference, and non-reference sizes, points out Allison. “It means the drywall subcontractor is getting a much more accurate quantity count so he can produce a much better schedule and estimate.”

She says Vico can build a schedule that is 10 per cent faster than the usual if it knows a drywall contractor’s quantities, the cost of the materials and labour, plus the productivity rate by location. Furthermore, it can quickly create cost plans, budgets, and see the earned value analysis by trade and location.

Also new from Vico is a project stakeholder licensing arrangement that allows the GC to share the software license with the architect, subs, and even the owner. It means that all parties can see what is being done with the model on Vico’s new 2D drawing application called Doc Set Manager, says Allison.

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The largest US provider of time and attendance equipment in the construction trades, Exaktime Inc., has just released the Pocket Clock for the Blackberry, which uses GPS software and a mobile time clock to track different jobs through the day for accurate timekeeping and more information on budgeting and future job estimates, says Scott Prewett, vice-president of technical services for the southern California-based company.

"It allows the office to verify the location of people when they are clocking in and out and it's free of a service charge."

Also new from Exaktime is the Fast Trakker Pro, a palm-sized device that allows users to track up to 1,000 cost codes. With a thumb roller, users can clock in a selected cost code. Subcontractors, for example, can track all of their activities on a site, such as drywall installation times, allowing them to check installation time estimates against real time installation, says Prewett. "If they find they are underbidding by 'x' number of hours this lets them know so they can make changes for the next job."

Prewett adds that Fast Trakker Pro allows subs to collect records off the clock through an infrared lens. By holding it up to a clock and tapping "collect" all records can be passed into a computer database with a simple USB connection. Both the Blackberry's camera and audio recorder are used to take field notes with pictures.

Advanced Estimating Systems

Improvements to digital images used as a measurement tool in The Edge estimating software suite have been an important development at Florida-based Advanced Estimating Systems, Inc. (AES). The images provide accuracy, speed up the estimating process, and

save commercial contractors big bucks on the price of downloading images from a planroom or builder's exchange, says Dave Chapman, senior sales consultant for the company.

Another recent development from AES is its partnering agreement with USG and Armstrong to input the companies' specialty and common acoustical ceiling systems into its database. Later this year the company plans to launch a software suite that interfaces with accounting, proposals, and job costing systems. "It's kind of a front bid to The Edge," says Chapman, adding that The Edge is now server-based so all users are working with the same data.

Viewpoint

Viewpoint Construction Software recently introduced two new enhancements to its V6 software, which is an ERP solution for construction contractors. It is geared to contractors doing more than \$15 million business volume annually. Rev. 6.2 comes with more than 300 enhancements to the previous version of V6, says Patrick Prothe, marketing and communications manager for the Oregon-based software firm.

The software integrates a company's operations and finance (everyone works from one database through a common

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server) so data doesn't have to be rekeyed. Detailed reports ready on the fly indicate up-to-date budgets and schedules. "It is software that can run an entire company and make sure everyone collaborates with each other." V6 Software is built on a solid technology foundation from Microsoft, employing Microsoft's industry leading SQL Server database and latest .Net development tools.

The company also just released a year-end tax update which includes submitting T5018 slips (statement of contract payments) and T4s. ■



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