A guide to buying construction estimating software

Save time, improve accuracy and increase profit

The facts

Did you know 86%* of estimates carried out on spreadsheets have errors in them? The need to duplicate and hand calculate data leaves room for error and miscalculation, make one change to the job and you've got to make sure its covered elsewhere; before you know it, a simple job can become a logistical nightmare.

And even if there aren't mistakes, many builders forget to account for certain hidden costs like wear and tear, inflation, wastage, VAT or even the profit margin itself in their estimates, preventing them from benefitting from the work they do.

After all, profit shouldn't be a welcome bonus – or a buffer to mop up errors and oversights!

The solution

There are now lots of construction estimating software packages out there that can do the job for you, and it's important to choose one that is well known in the industry to guarantee high-quality results. Choosing to invest in construction software can be a big step for a builder who has become accustomed to manually estimating. Ensuring the company you choose has a strong support system in place can be invaluable whilst you're getting to grips with your new programme.

Professional estimating software is an investment that pays for itself very quickly, cutting down on the amount of time you spend estimating and eliminating any room for error, with 100% accuracy. Its detailed cost breakdown of each build phase allows you to arrange for your contract to reflect payment at the correct times. The live merchant prices that the best packages provide ensures you're getting real time costs of materials. This means that at the end of every job you can feel confident your profit has remained unaffected.

So don't buy a cheaper alternative to the system you know would work well for your business.

All that's left to decide is which estimating software is the best for your business.

*Source: F1F9, 2013

Choosing your software

Don't let your software become a dust collector, make sure from the start it's exactly what your business needs.

The latest programmes are fast, intelligent and should follow a familiar logical process you understand. Make sure the software you're buying is tailored to your long-term business needs and estimating requirements. Don't go for something basic purely because it seems easy to use, the moment you want it to do something more complicated you might find it lacks the capabilities. Buying estimating software is a long-term investment; so make sure you've done extensive research.

After all, the right product could revolutionise your whole business.

Estimating software and takeoff systems

Takeoff systems measure plans and blueprints to estimate the amount of materials and labour needed to complete a project.

Estimating software will determine how much the estimated materials and labour will cost, and then produces a complete quote, professionally.

A few programmes do both; make sure you've chosen the right one for your business.

System requirements

When you're looking at software the first thing you need to know is your own PC's requirements.

Make a note of what the programme needs from your PC or MAC including RAM, Hard Drive storage space and processing speed. Make sure the two are compatible. It is worth noting that there are virtually no software programmes out there that are capable of running on a MAC, make sure you check this before you purchase. A way around this can be to see if your MAC is capable of running a Windows operating system on it, some software companies then offer packages that give you the extra components you need to run a Windows package on a MAC computer. It's worth checking this.

If your computer doesn't support the system requirements as laid out by the software then it can slow down your computer or become buggy. So, it's important to check that out before looking at what packages you think would work well.

Ticking all the boxes

There are some essential things you need to make sure you've researched before you make any decisions:

☑ **Cost:** Are you getting value for money? Double-check exactly what is included in the price of your programme. Don't forget, value is not the same as cheap; a slightly pricier programme can be a more affordable option long term. And remember to check for hidden costs, unwanted extras are sometimes added at checkout, so be aware.

☑ **Accuracy:** The whole point of estimating software is to eliminate the potential for human error. Look for a programme that takes all the little details into account and uses live price lists to get an accurate projection of a job and its costs.

☑ **Database make-up:** Make sure the databases include all the necessary materials, prices and discounts from a variety of merchants and can be customised to include your labour rates units, codes and prices as well as your own material suppliers.

☑ **Flexibility:** You want estimating software that can apply to any work you do, whether it's hanging a door to building houses, so the more built-in calculators a programme has, the greater its ability to cost a variety of projects. Don't go for a package which seems simple in the first instance but lacks the flexibility for more complicated work further down the line.

☑ **User-friendly:** Look for software that is easy to pick up and includes a comprehensive support manual. A learning curve is expected; anything else and you'll end up spending more than you ever bargained for. And don't forget to check who the product is pitched towards, if you're an IT novice, intensive technical jargon in the manual can be off-putting and discourage you from exploring your new software. Understand the level of expertise required.

☑ **Hidden costs:** When manual estimating many builders forget to account for significant critical costs, VAT, wastage, wear and tear and even their own profit. The best estimating programmes will take all of these into account – don't forget, these costs can really add up.

☑ **Exporting data:** A great advantage is a software package that lets you share a platform with various programmes to avoid error when re-entering data. Some companies offer technology that means you only need to input information once to use on all their software. For example, taking an estimate instantly from your plans, or using information you've put into their estimating software to then produce all the health & safety paperwork and the appropriate contract for a job.

☑ **Support:** Don't forget to check exactly what support comes with your software; you want help understanding how to work it in the first place. See what help they offer, anything from phone support to online webinars, quick 1-2-1 sessions to get you up and running fast and more can be available with the right company. Find out if they have limits on how much you can speak to their support team. Do they still offer support in year two?

☑ **Future Projects:** Costing projects in advance can affect profit levels, some of the more advanced software systems even account for rising costs over time so your quote reflects inflation rates!

Support after you purchase

Some companies offer 12 months Support & Updates as a free addition to the package when you purchase, if the company you've chosen doesn't you should still seriously consider investing. The unlimited phone assistance will be vital in the first few months whilst you're getting to grips with your new software – and if you need any help thereafter!

Staying fully updated

That's not the only reason paying for Support & Updates can be invaluable, construction estimating software needs to be kept fully updated. If the software provides merchant price lists you need to make sure they're kept in real time. An on the ball company will be working constantly on fixing any bugs that crop up in the software (even the best programmes have them!) and any additional features the company bring out can be applied to your software instantly so you can benefit from an expanding catalogue of products and tools.

Purchasing licences

When you buy a programme you're usually only buying it to use on one device. Demand for multi-user systems is increasing so don't forget to make sure your software can support additional licences.

Achieving your goals

Charles OKell of UK Pro Build had been looking for a way to make his quotes a lot more accurate – as materials costs have been very much on the increase. After investing in a new website, branded clothing and vehicles – they were looking to complete the package with professional quotes.

"Having reviewed the HBXL website in detail, I visited the HBXL office for a software demonstration and feedback session. I was very impressed. I then 'challenged HBXL' and used their Estimating Service to estimate for a very complex job so we could see what HBXL software had to offer. The end result was both accurate and very in keeping with the image we are looking to present.

"Matt was one of the best sales people I have ever encountered – he always rang when he said he would and never 'pushed' the product. My whole experience of the HBXL team, including the support I received from the tech guys and the Estimating Service estimators, was great – they are clearly used to dealing with builders and know how to fit communications around our busy working lives!

"The software has given us the insight, knowledge and confidence to know that our prices are right. We are able to say now, that's the price, no negotiation, if you don't like it, we don't want the business."

Charles OKell of UK Pro Build, Cheshire

Whether you're thinking of purchasing EstimatorXpress or just have a few more questions about estimating software, we're here to help! Call us on 0117 916 9878, email sales@hbxl.co.uk or visit our website www.hbxl.co.uk today.