



Estimators vs Bid Qualifiers

By Joshua Huck

Most of our new subcontractor clients ask us the following question: “Are you an estimator or a real estimator?” What they are trying to politely ask is: “Are you a well-qualified, experienced and seasoned construction professional with actual field experience, or are you one of those ‘pass thru’ General Contractor (GC) estimators?”

We get it — there are several “levels” of what can be considered an estimator, and they are all qualified in their own right ... as much as they need to be.

What are these different levels?

- There are the folks that work for the GCs that subcontract everything out, so most of what they do is scoping out bids. They figure out general conditions and perhaps do a rough carpentry takeoff. Their strong points are being well versed in the plan notes and project specifications, to ensure that the incoming bids are not lacking anything.
- There are the extremely well-versed GC estimators that can do it all and, while rare, do exist. They work for GCs who perform a lot of work in house, and/or they have the years of experience. They usually end up estimating most trades, so that there are no holes on bid day.
- There are the subcontractor estimators that have to be knowledgeable on one particular trade, and oftentimes come into that role from the field. These are the “been there done that” type of folks who know the trade inside and out.
- There are estimating company owners, such as myself, that have to be well informed regarding all trades, because we serve all the folks in the chain: suppliers, subs, GCs, designers and developers. A lot of us even teach estimating.

What’s the point of all this? Every level of estimator serves a certain purpose. When I get asked if I’m a real estimator, I don’t get offended; it’s a valid question. They want to make sure you have more than just book knowledge, and that you know what to do with the quantities once you get them from the plans. Years ago, when I was a GC estimator, I was really good at scoping bids and understanding specifications, but I couldn’t do a sitework takeoff to save my life. I learned how to do this and other trade takeoffs over time by going out in the field and observing. I learned by talking with the subcontractors in the field. I learned by taking classes. I learned by reading. I took the time to learn both in the field and out of it.

You don’t need to have poured a million yards of concrete to be a good concrete estimator. What you do need is some knowledge of the field through observation combined with

a thorough understanding of productivity rates, specific job site factors, and material quantities. This can be taught.

This can be learned outside of the field.

Experience is also a factor. We teach a lot of subcontractor and GC estimators, and while you can be armed with all of the knowledge in the world, it takes time. We can teach you how to estimate plumbing, but it will simply take time to learn all the ins and outs of the different types of systems. If you have a mentor, great; tap that person for every bit of knowledge you can. They can save you years of headaches and costly mistakes.

No matter what level of estimator you are, the most important part of your job — of any job — is communication. Talk to the people that do the work if you don’t do it yourself. For example, I was doing a very large concrete job recently and, while I understand what it takes to form walls and decks, I also am aware that my client really knows best, so I simply called them and had a ten minute conversation about it. Together we used his field experience and my overall industry knowledge to come up with a solid plan of attack to get the job properly estimated.

I’ve noticed that it is human nature to be hesitant to ask a question for fear of looking like we don’t know what we’re talking about. The ego is a delicate thing. I’ve been there. We are the estimators; we should be the ultimate sources of knowledge since the jobs start with us. We don’t want to come across as green to those around us. But we are human beings. We don’t know everything nor will we ever. The owner of the carpentry company is not going to scoff at you for asking a question about a process. They are usually going to talk your ear off about it, which is great, because you can pull the info you need from that conversation.

No matter what level you’re at in your estimating career, you can always learn something new and expand your skillset, even if it’s not needed at that moment. If you are not strong in a particular area, take a class. Then, talk to the people that do it. Most people love talking about what they do for a living. I’ve been doing it since the first word in this article. The biggest mistake an estimator can make is to assume that they don’t need to learn anything new, even about something with which they are already familiar.

What is the best kind of estimator? The one who is always learning and communicating with their fellow industry professionals.

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