

Estimates Become Critical as Owners Focus on Costs

Bringing a project in on budget, on time and with top quality

The estimator is a key member of the construction team whose job it is to bring a project in on budget, on time and with the highest possible quality. This team includes an estimator who determines what things will cost, a scheduler who determines in what order things get done, a project manager who actually gets it done and a value engineer who looks for a better way to do things. On complex projects, different people perform these functions. But often, the estimator does it all.

"You have to have the ability to wear many hats," says John Godwin, an estimator for Federman Design + Construction, a New York City-based cost consulting firm, whose clients are primarily owners and design firms. "On any given day, you may have to meet with a client, participate in a value engineering meeting, go on a sales call to make a presentation or help settle a dispute," he says. And, he has to analyze project drawings and chase down price quotes from subcontractors to put together his estimates.

But Godwin wouldn't trade the frenetic pace for any other line of work. "You get to see the designs of some of the world's greatest architects and analyze their drawings and help bring them to life," he notes. "It's very exciting."



CRITICAL COSTS Federman (right) and Godwin bring designs into the real world.

"You get a sense of completeness on the job when you see a project from day one at the conceptual phase right through to the actual construction," adds Paula Federman, Godwin's boss and president of the firm.

The job also has a growing sense of importance as owners become more conscious of controlling costs in order to remain competitive. "Nowadays, costs are the bellwether of whether a project will succeed," says Federman. "You can have the best design in the world but without a really strong cost estimate and schedule it is not going to go anywhere."

Godwin decided to major in construction management at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, because he was interested in how huge structures were put together. "It really satisfied my curiosity on how things work," he says.

He joined Federman right out of college but after a few years realized his education lacked an essential element—field experience. So, Godwin left to work three years as a site superintendent and project manager for a contractor before returning to Federman. "John

really needed that field experience to grow as an estimator," says Federman.

Don Greenland, chief operating officer of Nabholz Construction Corp., Conway, Ark., also looks for estimators with field experience and he likes to use his estimators as project managers. "Field work makes a good estimator and estimators make good project managers."

That is why Nabholz sent Greg Ferus, one of its cement finishers, to night school after he showed an interest in estimating. "Working on the jobsite, I was impressed with the estimator/project manager," says Ferus. "They are the leader of the project."

Another one of Nabholz's young estimator/project managers, Beth Montgomery, started out as an architecture student at the University of Kansas. "Then I realized what I really liked was the satisfaction of actually building the project," she says. Three years out of school, Nabholz has put Montgomery in charge of building the firm's new office building. "They say the client is your boss. This time it really is true," she says.

By Tim Grogan

THE ESTIMATOR'S CAREER PATH

POSITION	SALARY	EXPERIENCE	JOB DESCRIPTION
Entry level	\$40,093	0-2 years	Compiles data for bid proposal estimates; prepares routine estimates under supervision
Mid-level	\$54,887	3-6 years	Prepares bid packages, conceptual estimates, analysis of subcontractor bids
Senior	\$72,675	6-8 years	Coordinates preparation of estimates; resolves problems during negotiation and construction
Chief	\$96,582	+8 years	Administers department, sets standards and procedures; responsible for final review

Source: FAS Inc. Salary is average annual total compensation.