

The New Estimator

By Dan Frondorf, CPE

For many in my profession, traditional roles and duties have developed into something that “old school” estimators wouldn’t necessarily recognize. Maybe a better verb for the previous sentence would be “transformed”, or perhaps more appropriately, “evolved”. It isn’t uncommon for the modern day estimator to wear even more hats than they always have. We’ve always had to have some of the same skills that other professionals have, even those outside of the construction industry. Sharing skills with architects, engineers, lawyers, and accountants has always been critical to the success of the estimator, but what we do with those skills is what has changed, particularly in the past 10 years.

It’s not enough anymore to simply review plans and specs, perform takeoffs, and assemble a cost estimate (and eventually a bid, quote, or budget) from the information derived from those processes. The modern estimator has evolved into a risk manager, a negotiator....a “pre-construction specialist”, and often a “post pre-construction manager as well”. Depending on their employer and the type of projects they chase, and on the project delivery method, many estimators are involved in projects long before they ever break ground, during construction, and until the owner takes

occupancy. This is especially true in the design-build delivery method, and the construction management method as well. Negotiating with subs prior to bid day and during buy-out, and managing those subs once construction starts have become common duties. These are some of the duties that have been traditionally performed by project managers, but it seems as if project management is the job of the estimator in many companies. Some refer to this as “eating what you kill”, but whatever it’s called, it adds new responsibilities to the job description of the estimator, almost rendering the job title obsolete. “Estimator” has always had a pre-construction connotation to it, but it seems less relevant today.

Why are we seeing this in our profession? Are contractors and CM firms wanting to live with fewer employees, or is the nature of the business forcing this change? Did the economic downturn of 2007-2010 force employers to learn to do more with less, and now that the construction economy is definitely on its way back up, have they gotten used to the smaller staffs? Have they learned that having the same staffers involved all the way through the lifecycle of the project is good for the performance of the whole team, and perhaps leading to safer, better managed, and more profitable jobs? Or have the skills of estimators simply been better harnessed to provide more value to the employer.....have our employers finally wised up to how talented we really are? I’d love to believe that is true.

There still exists a need for estimators on the purely cost predictive side of the equation. Budgeting, feasibility studies, and go/no-go decisions still rely heavily on the skills of the estimator, especially those who shouldn’t have a role in the post bidding phase. The pre-construction phase still needs cold hard facts on which financial decisions can be based, so I don’t think the traditional estimator will ever completely fade away. As estimators employed by contractors are more likely to have these new construction management duties thrust upon them, many owners and CM firms are realizing the value of the independent estimating consultant who can provide the cold hard facts they need to make those decisions. This is what makes me excited about my particular niche of the construction and engineering world. Independents can provide necessary services very cost effectively, and very objectively as well – we have no horse in the race that depends on winning a bid to help keep the lights on, so owners can be assured that their budgets are as unbiased as possible.

In summary, the estimator as we knew it might be a thing of the past. Students studying to be construction managers by and large have no interest in being “estimators” upon graduation, and I don’t think it’s simply because of the long held misconceptions that estimating is boring, monotonous, or even “uncool” – I think it’s because they realize the traditional roles and duties of bid prep are outdated and not in line with current expectations of employers. I also think we’ll see a greater utilization of consultants in the future. As a profession, we have to understand how the industry is changing and we have to figure out how to adapt to the new expectations. Expecting it to stay the same, to meet the traditional roles and duties of the past, will only lead to us being left behind and “what was”.

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