



Precision Light Shines

by Morris D. Carey, Jr.

Until very recently, I hated estimating programs made from spreadsheets. Spreadsheet-based programs always look great on the monitor: They're like working with a sheet of paper on-screen, you get to see all the estimating data at once, and they're easy to learn to use.

But that's about where the good ends. When it comes to printing reports, adding or eliminating items of work, and general versatility, they're usually lousy. I've seen so many bad spreadsheet-based programs that, when someone asks me to look at one, I get queasy.

But all that changed recently when I was asked to take another look at the Precision series (which looks like a spreadsheet-based program) from Timberline Software. You see, I already had tried a test copy of Precision in 1986. At that time, two guys from Timberline Software were at San Francisco airport waiting to catch a plane, and the three of us got together and did the review. They plugged their computer into a receptacle at a United Air Lines luggage counter, and we did the evaluation. It wasn't the easiest review I ever did: We only had 40 minutes, and everyone who passed by thought we were trying to break into the United computer system to get free tickets.

I left the airport disappointed. The program looked good on the screen, but I knew it couldn't be worth much because it was a spreadsheet. I never asked Timberline to send me a copy of the program - I just didn't want to review another spreadsheet overlay.

Well, I finally looked at it three years later, and boy was I wrong.

What a program! It looks like a spreadsheet, but it doesn't act like one. Precision Estimating Light actually is a good program, and it only costs \$295.

Light appears on-screen to be a spreadsheet - it even has full on-screen editing capabilities. But, in fact, it is a database-style program. This gives it superior data-management and reporting capabilities.

It shines with features like an unlimited database, which is broken down into divisions, subdivisions, and items. And, it has on-board formulas, sophisticated pricing controls, a pop-up calculator, clean reports, several user-definable options, and the fastest program speed I've ever seen.

It's not very easy to learn to use, which is surprising for a low-cost estimating system. It has so many features that ease of use will come only after lots of practice. There are a lot of keyboard commands, menu screens, and functions to learn. In the end, however, it's worth the trouble.

Once you get into the estimating screen, things really become clear and easy to understand. The on-screen editing feature allows you to edit any data you wish, no matter what was brought to the estimate from the database.

Prices are estimate-specific. Changes to prices in the database do not affect prices in the estimate, which is nice for holding prices given to the customer (but lousy if you like estimate prices updated when the database is changed).

As with most estimating programs, there is a database available, but as I always preach, it should be used only as a guide to help you create your own.

Pulling items from the database into a bid from the keyboard is as quick as I've ever seen. You bring the database onto the screen, and simply tap a key, and the item is in the bid. The hitch here is that once all the items are in the bid, you have to go back through the entire list a second time and insert takeoff quantities to go with each item. When a bid has 175 items in it, that can consume unnecessary time. That is the only real drawback to the system that I found.

There aren't very many copies of Precision Estimating Light currently in use, but I do know that Timberline has been working hard on the system for several years, and the company is among the most reputable in the industry.

For those of you with more computer experience, you'll be pleased to know that different databases can be loaded into multiple subdirectories, and that the program can be called up via pathing for quick and easy multiple database use - no fuss, no bother.

Overall, I would say that Precision Estimating Light is well worth its \$295 price tag. Although it is slightly difficult to learn to use, it is extremely fast on-screen and one of the most versatile and powerful programs on the market in its price range. You can contact Timberline Software at 9405 SW Gemini, Beaverton, OR 97005; 503/644-8155.

Your Questions

Q: We have a Laser brand computer which is compatible with the Apple IIe. We would like to find some estimating software to use in our business, but have been unable to. Everything seems to be for a Macintosh or IBM. Do you know of any building software for Apple? We cannot afford to buy another computer.

Roger A. Fangsrud
Missoula, Mont.

A: There used to be a program for the Apple IIe called "BuilderComp." I recently tried to reach the company at its old phone number and was unsuccessful. Maybe a reader might help us locate either the company or a copy of their program. Short of that, you have two alternatives: Use a spreadsheet to create your own estimating program, or purchase another computer.

Q: I have a very close friend who is also a general contractor. He uses a Macintosh estimating system -- MacNail 2.2 with Excel spreadsheet. This setup has proven to be extremely accurate. On

jobs (new) in the \$120,000 price range, this system will be within \$1,000 of the actual cost of the job, and is consistently more accurate in estimating than the typical pencil, pad, and guess-work.

I have an IBM Model 30 PS/2 system. Are there any MS-DOS estimating programs on the market that are capable of providing such quality pricing for jobs in new construction in the same price range as MacNail (\$295 plus the cost of the spreadsheet)?"

Alvin A. Baker
Rio Rancho, N.M.

A: This month's article was written for you. And, once you've paid for Timberline's Precision Light, you won't have to worry about spending more money to get a spreadsheet like Excel to run it.

Q: Your article, "Why Bother with Computers?" lists computer estimating software for NCS, Master Builder or CMS. Does a person have to buy their brand of computer to operate these software packages, or can they be used on an IBM clone?

John Meyer
Annandale, Minn.

A: John, you're in luck. All the programs mentioned in that article work on IBM and IBM clones. Actually, the clones - for the most part - are better than what IBM offers.

Q: We always look forward to your informative articles in State-of-the-Art Contractor. Computers and the right software are an essential tool for any builder, large or small.

One software alternative your readers may not know about yet is Shareware and Public Domain Software. For between \$5 and \$75, excellent programs are available for estimating, project management, scheduling, accounting, and finance. These programs are complete, and they also act as a good introduction to computing.

I don't think there is any reason for the small-to-medium builder to buy the "mega-programs" the first time out. You don't have to spend thousands of dollars to automate your office and make your operation more productive -- spend \$5 first.

Dennis Spors
Detroit, Mich.

A: Dennis, you are partly right. In 1987, IBM cataloged over 10,000 public domain programs that were available for the cost of a floppy diskette and postage. The modem communications program I use is a \$35 shareware program called PC Talk III (over-the-counter communications programs run \$100 to \$400). PC Magazine offers its subscribers hundreds of free programs each year.

However, I do not endorse public domain programs across the board. Only a few are in wide use and, for that reason, only those few are time-tested and safe. Until a program is in wide use, and until that program has been used with a full set of data without crashing, it could be risky. ■

Morris D. Carey is a partner with Carey Bros. Construction, a remodeling firm based in Pittsburg, Calif. In addition, he has reviewed hundreds of construction-related computer products, and conducts computer seminars for The Journal of Light Construction. If you have a question about computing in construction, address it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, c/o JLC, RR#2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.