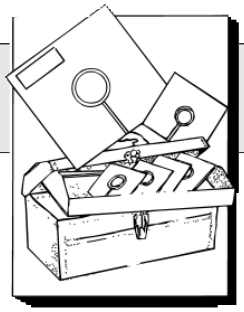
STATE-OF-THE-ART CONTRACTOR

A Quantum Leap in Estimating



by Craig Savage

A common thread running through many Windows estimating programs is the use of a three-tiered scrolling menu for quantity takeoff. Any time you need to find a specific item in the database, you're never more than three mouse-clicks away — from Division to Phase to Item level, successively. Chosen items are then added to a running list on an estimate screen.

Most programs using this scheme, however, don't display both the database and the estimate on screen at the same time. To some estimators, this is merely an annoyance, but to others, the ability to refer easily to the estimate during takeoff is a necessity that helps to maintain continuity. Easy access to the full estimate not only helps you keep your place during takeoff, it makes it easy to change data — prices and quantities, for example — while the reason for doing so is still fresh in your mind.

One exception to this rule is a new player on the block — *Quantum Leap*, from Lantron Technologies. The top half of the takeoff screen in this new Windows estimator is a spreadsheet-like work area that holds the accumulated estimate, while the bottom half displays all three tiers of the database (see Figure 1). The ability to watch as items selected from the database are added to the estimate makes it easy to navigate around in the program, and it keeps you from getting lost.

The database display box is subdivided into three sections, one for each tier. I found myself wishing the bottom-most box — the one that holds the line items of the database — were larger, because it's where most of the work of estimating gets done. Fortunately, all three sections can be resized. By reducing the display area for Divisions and Phases, you can make room to expand the Item display to six lines.

Another group of three boxes that are always displayed on the takeoff screen keep track of the estimate totals. The one labeled "Job Cost" shows the running total cost of the line items that have been deposited on the estimate sheet; another shows the "Average Markup" applied to the estimate items. The sum of these two boxes is displayed in the "Total Estimate" box.

The net effect is that everything the typical estimator wants to keep an eye on — the database, the takeoff list, and the estimated price — is conveniently displayed on one screen.

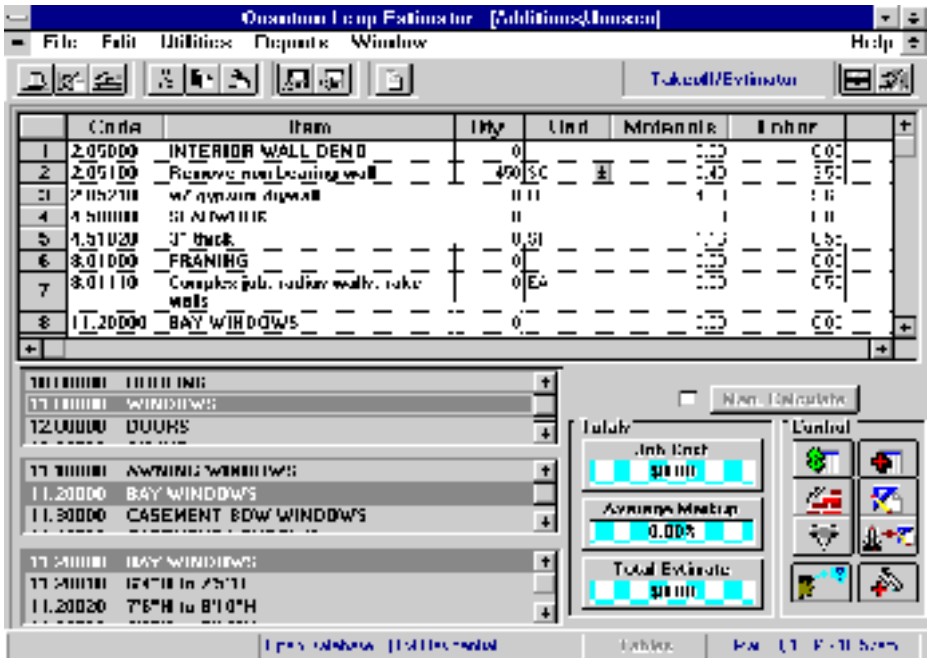


Figure 1. *The top half of the Takeoff/Estimator screen in Quantum Leap displays a running list of takeoff items, while the bottom half simultaneously displays the database and the total estimated price. Eight control buttons (lower right of screen) can be used to navigate to other features of the program.*

Hot Buttons

Also displayed on the estimate screen, in the lower right corner, are eight "control" buttons labeled with icons. Each button is a "hot key" to another part of the program. One button takes you to the Job Setup screen, for example, where you can enter new client information (name, address, etc.) to start a new estimate. Another button "filters" the estimate display, either reducing or increasing the number of data columns you can view without scrolling.

A third button provides a way to play "what if" with your markup. As you change the average markup percentage, the program displays the new total estimate cost. When you find a price you like, you can distribute the markup dollar amount evenly to every item in the estimate.

Quantum Leap, *version 1.2 ($495 from Lantron Technologies, 429 Catalpa Ave., North Plainfield, NJ 07603; 800/235-6726). Minimum requirements: 386SX processor (DX recommended), Windows 3.1, 2 MB RAM (4 MB recommended), and a mouse.*

There's also a hot button that takes you to the Note Listing screen, where you can add or edit text that will become part of the estimate. This note-taking feature is very handy both for keeping an estimate log during takeoff, and for inserting instructions to the production crew in the field, who will eventually have to make sense of the work you did in the office.

Assemblies. One of the remaining four buttons takes you to a screen where you can build assemblies. An

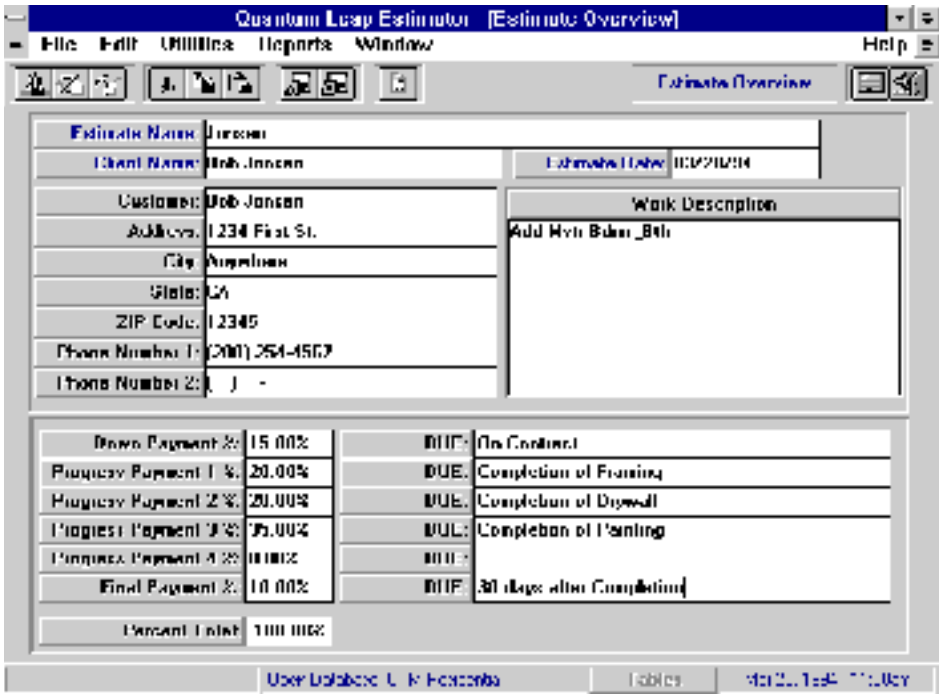


Figure 2. *In addition to holding client information, the Estimate Overview screen provides a box where you can enter progress payment percentages (lower left of screen). The program automatically converts these percentages to dollar amounts and pastes them into the job contract, which can be written with the program's text editor.*

assembly combines a group of items — materials, labor, subcontracts, and equipment — into a natural takeoff unit. One linear foot of a "standard" 2x4 wall assembly, for instance, might include 11 lin. ft. of 2x4; 8 sq. ft. of stucco, drywall, and insulation; 1/6 duplex outlet (assuming you want one outlet every 6 linear feet of wall); and 8 sq. ft. of vapor barrier and paint, along with the appropriate labor to install each of these items. Whenever you want to include an assembly in your takeoff, the Assembly List button opens a dialog box where you can pick from among all of the assemblies you have named and saved.

Templates. Two of the three remaining control buttons provide a way of copying and pasting a part of an estimate into a template. You can create, for example, three different bathroom templates — a low-, medium-, and high-priced version — and store them under separate names. The next time you do an estimate that calls for a bathroom, you can click on a control button to open a list of templates you've stored. All of the items included in the template you choose are transferred to the estimate screen, where you can fine-tune them to the job at hand. After you've worked with Quantum Leap for a while, you will have accumulated enough templates to quickly rough out most estimates by simply pasting together previous takeoffs.

Payment schedule. Quantum Leap also provides a text editor that, like a word processor, enables you to write contracts and proposals. One difference, however, is that you can use a control button to enter percentages for up to six progress payments (Figure 2). The program converts the percentages to dollar amounts, then automatically pastes them into the contract agreement you write for the job.

CAD Link

Quantum Leap can also be linked directly to the *Chief Architect* CAD program (see *State-of-the-Art Contractor*, 11/93). Once the material list has been imported into the takeoff grid, you can add costs, generate a proposal, and perform all of the other manipulations available for an estimate built from scratch.

Other program features include a library of reference tables that can be opened from anywhere in the estimate. The tables include formulas and conversion factors that are useful when taking off concrete, roofing, siding, and several other phases of a job. The newest release (version 1.5, due to be released about the time you read this) will include formulas that automatically calculate quantities based on data you supply.

The program also comes with both commercial and residential databases. Although I am always suspicious of canned material and labor costs, the data can easily be modified with the program's database utility.

Quantum Leap fits the Windows mold to a tee, using multiple screens and scrollable windows as well as any estimator I've seen. It's a perfect match for point-and-click estimating, and is certainly worth a look. ■

Craig Savage, a longtime builder and computer user, owns Savage Co., in Carpinteria, Calif., and publishes the Macintosh Construction Forum *and* Window On Construction *newsletters.*

If you have a question about computing in construction, address it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, JLC, RR2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.