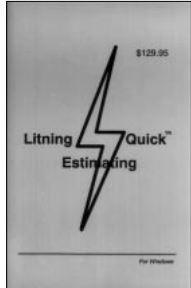
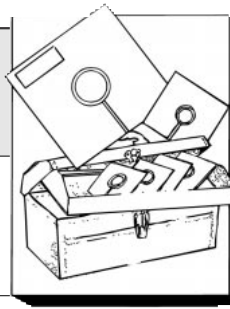


STATE-OF-THE-ART CONTRACTOR

Struck By "Litning"

by Craig Savage



LitningQuick (\$129) requires Windows 3.1 and is available directly from Litning Software, 245 Peratta Blvd., Suite 119, Fremont, CA 94536; 800/333-6675.

There are two main types of construction software: "stand alone" programs that do just one thing, like estimating or accounting; and "integrated" software that combines several programs — estimating, job cost, accounting, scheduling, and even CAD — into a single system. The advantage of integrated software is that data entered one time can be used by several different modules without re-keying. Unfortunately, integrated software packages are complicated and take a long time to learn to use. It can be six months or more before everything is up and running smoothly.

In the middle ground are stand-alone programs that integrate with just one other program. Lately, I've been interested in programs that connect to Quicken and QuickBooks, the popular bookkeeping software from Intuit. One estimating program that

does a nice job of sending a budget to QuickBooks is called LitningQuick Estimating from Litning Software. This Windows-based program is in its third version, and shows a lot of maturity from earlier versions. If the promise of total integration has eluded you, don't despair — there are off-the-shelf answers, and LitningQuick is one of them.

Class codes. Before you can start estimating, you need to select a set of categories, or Class Codes, that will organize the estimate data. LitningQuick provides three sets: the 16 CSI (Construction Specifications Institute) divisions; the National Association of Home Builders categories; and a standard set of 13 codes built into the program. You can add or delete predefined class codes, or use the Your Company tab to create your own codes (Figure 1).

Incidentally, the display screens in LitningQuick use several sets of tabs, just like the tabs on manila folders. When you click on a tab, the menu "unfolds," displaying a list of choices. The tabs are a wonderful way to present large amounts of information in an easy-to-understand metaphor.

Rates and percentages. The next step is to select the Labor tab from the Lists section of the Main Menu to set

labor rates. The program already has several Labor Items, such as "lead carpenter," "carpenter," and "laborer," but you can change or delete these labels and add new ones of your own. (An Equipment tab allows you do the same for excavating equipment, staging rentals, and so on.) You can assign a wage rate to each labor category, which the program uses to calculate base labor costs. Another tabbed window accepts percentages for labor burden, as well as for overhead and profit. These amounts will be added to base costs to calculate the total price of the estimate.

Quantity takeoff. The Estimate menu allows you to choose from a list of existing estimates to work on or change. If you want to start a new estimate, accepting the estimate number assigned by the program or supplying a number of your own automatically moves you to the Estimate Header tab, which is where you enter general estimate information. The name, address, and phone number of your client, as well as the date and any notes about the job entered here will all appear at the beginning of the estimate and on any printouts.

Most of your work will take place in the three-part screen behind the Estimate Entry tab, which is laid out in a way that makes pointing and clicking quick and efficient. LitningQuick enables you to enter takeoff quantities following the natural order of construction. To build an estimate, you "drill down" through the hierarchy of Class Codes to find Cost Codes — the individual items, such as footing steel, framing lumber, and framing labor, that make up your takeoff. Double-clicking on an item in the Add A Cost Line screen opens a box into which you can enter quantities for the five cost codes categories: materials, labor, equipment, subs, and miscellaneous (Figure 2, next page). If a class or cost code isn't listed, you can click on the Add A Class Code or Add A Cost Code buttons to add them "on the fly."

There is one caveat: LitningQuick does not come with a complete database. You will have to enter most cost items from scratch. Of course, after you have completed a couple of estimates, most of the common construc-

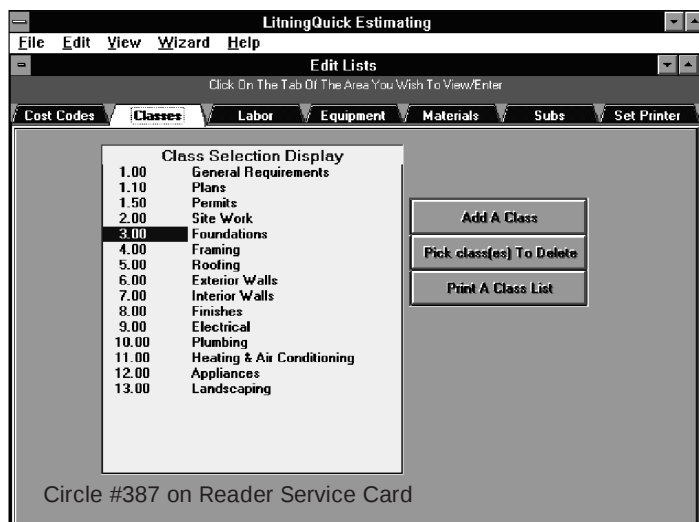


Figure 1. LitningQuick comes with three ready-made sets of database categories, called Classes. You can add or delete classes, or build your own custom list. The database is incomplete, however. Most items, called Cost Codes, will have to be entered from scratch before you can start estimating.

Figure 2. Individual items, or Cost Codes, are added to the estimate on the Add A Cost Line screen. Quantities affect any one or more of the five categories associated with the item: materials, labor, equipment, subs, and miscellaneous.

Figure 3. Before exporting a LitningQuick estimate to QuickBooks, make sure the categories in both programs match. Once an estimate is transferred, the data can be used for job-cost accounting.

tion items you use will be stored in the database, and the estimating process will be much faster.

Export to QuickBooks. While estimating, you can select Review Estimate at any time to view and edit every item in the bid. Once everything is just the way you want it, the Estimate Reports tab opens a booklet of nested tabs that offer the choice of sending reports to the screen or printer, or to a file. You can print an estimate that shows all item detail or that summarizes totals by class only; similarly, you can include or exclude overhead and profit figures.

Finally, you can send the estimate to QuickBooks (Figure 3). Before doing so, however, you need to go to the QuickBooks set-up menu to match the accounts in QuickBooks to the categories in LitningQuick. Once the categories are in synch, the transfer works smoothly, and the estimate data can be used in QuickBooks to do job-cost accounting.

On-screen help. LitningQuick does what you expect it to do without requiring much effort on the part of

the user. And if you run into something confusing, there is usually an explanation in the handy pink help bar. (Presumably, pink makes the bar easier to see. But I'm color-blind, and I had no trouble finding and using it.)

If you need more detailed help, you can activate the Help Wizard, a large window that pops up over your work screen. The down side is that the Help Wizard soon becomes a nuisance because it pops up even when you don't need help. Fortunately, you can turn the Wizard off again once you are familiar with the software.

LitningQuick is an inexpensive off-the-shelf program that's simple to learn and use. Better yet, it links to QuickBooks, another inexpensive off-the-shelf program that's simple to learn and use. That makes it a hit in my book. ■

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