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# Win the Bidding Rat Race...by Using a Mouse

Software for bidding, estimating, and excavation management can give computer-savvy firms an edge.

By Janis Keating  
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Getting work is sometimes a rat race—the more bids you can make, the more likely one of those will be a “win.” However, the maze of traditional takeoff and estimating takes so many man-hours that not everyone can bid on all the jobs they might like. To gain an edge, some firms, instead of using a man for all that work, employ a mouse.

For most of its life, Atlas Excavating has used HeavyBid software made by Heavy Construction Systems Specialists (HCSS) in Houston, TX. “We’re ‘21-year members,’” says Casey Dillon, head estimator for West Lafayette, IN–based Atlas. “We first bought it when it was offered on DOS; they’ve kept us as customers ever since. We have a network version, so four estimators on different PCs can log in at the same time.”

As he grew up in the family business, Dillon doesn’t know “life before HeavyBid,” but he knows some who do. “I’ve heard old estimators say they quadrupled their output with this software,” he says.

Many of Atlas Excavating’s 300 jobs per year are performed for municipalities: “We do excavating, for water and sewer pipes, and roads. However, about 25% of our business is highway work, and Indiana DOT requires that we submit electronic bids,” Dillon says. “Now I can’t imagine having to drive to Indianapolis to file bids—we can send them in electronically, 10 minutes before the bid closes.”

Dillon uses the program every working day and likes its ease of use. “You put in all labor and equipment rates, and then the crews, to build an activity code book to which you’ll refer when you make a bid. Because you know the crews, materials, and average production rates, you can make a bid very quickly, even after changing certain items on a job. HeavyBid also interfaces with our accounting program. We can export budgets with the click of a button.”

With similar projects, bids don’t have to be built from scratch: “We tweak data from similar bids,” he says. “We use our own histories, picking items one at a time if needed. HeavyBid is very database oriented. We can even compare ourselves to competitors by using the feature of ‘average bid prices.’ That also helps us get an idea of the size of a job; when we import the bid form from IN DOT, we get average unit prices from past bids.”

Knowing the size of a job—and what part of that job could be the company’s—allows Atlas to bid smarter. “My assistant downloads the bid forms, and I’ll tell her what we will bid on; we pick out which jobs we’ll go after. We aim for those that will be 100% our job but nothing less than us getting 75% of subcontractor work. Since the DOT site tells us what cost codes they’re opening for bids, that tells us which jobs we could do, what percentage of the job could be ours. Then we can only bid on the jobs we really want to go after.”

Businesses go where the work is, and Atlas bids on out-of-state jobs as well. “We do some Illinois, Ohio, and Kentucky jobs, too,” Dillon says. “Ohio and Illinois are also ‘easy-to-do’ DOT jobs. HeavyBid gives me all the states, so I can get the bid items they use on a regular basis—it’s right in there.”

HeavyBid’s *best* quality? “I’m the most impressed with their tech support. We have their stickers on all our office phones. You pick up the phone and get a person who will help us fix everything—even stuff that isn’t their product, like printers! Even at 2:30 a.m., someone will talk with me. During all my calls, I’ve never been able to stump them with a question.

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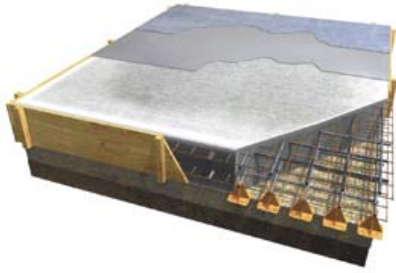
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Credit: Maxwell Systems  
3D views allow users a virtual peek at construction.

do five a month, now we can do 50," says professional estimator Daniel G. Frondorf, principal and chief estimator for DG Frondorf and Associates in Cincinnati, OH. Frondorf is a member of the American Society of Professional Estimators, which is dedicated to the advancement of the profession of construction estimating.

Frondorf, who established his company in 1999, uses Maxwell Systems' Quest Earthwork and Cross Section in his work.

"I had been a construction estimator since 1994, and had worked for two excavating firms before going on my own. Before then I worked for the city of Cincinnati, in Zoning Plans. My company, a small four-person firm, does construction estimating work, and related technical services for contractors, architects, engineers, and construction managers. We work regionally, primarily. Most of the projects we work on are in Ohio, but due to the Net, we can work all over the country. Occasionally clients will want us to look at a projects onsite, but the bulk of our work is off the blueprints."

For the first two years, Frondorf's firm did all takeoffs by hand without computer assistance. "We've been using Quest Earthwork since 2001. Keep in mind, though, every project is a little different, no two are the same. Our primary clients are excavating or grading contractors, but we can use the software for exterior plumbing projects, et cetera. Earthwork enables us to do more work, and our clients to do more work, which has increased our sales."

Their customer support is just amazing. They have classes and user group meetings during which they ask us, 'What do we need to fix?' Users will vote on an issue. If 50% of the users want it, HCSS will change the program. We also use HeavyJob for job costings, and some suggestions we've made have already been incorporated into the program. Even during Hurricane Ike, when Houston was getting hit, they stayed in business from remote offices and would get back to us on their cell phones. We've looked at other programs from time to time, but HCSS is still the best choice," Dillon concludes.

#### Making the Grading by Computer

"Doing grading estimating by hand is very time consuming, so we investigated software that could help us. What used to take several days now takes a few hours for the same end product. We used to

His firm does not set the price for his clients, "...although the information we give them helps them do that. Clients bring us the information on the project, saying, 'Here's what we do well, can you do the background work?' Most of the specs for site work—the infrastructure, water lines, pavement, sewers, et cetera—come from the state's DOT, and the state's cities follow those guidelines. We have familiarity with ODOT's spec book; other states, we have to look up. For example, Indiana's spec book on gravel base is different than Ohio's. We have to know what to put in, referring to it by that state's spec book. But the software has nothing to do with it.

"The software helps us with number crunching," he continues. "Quest Earthwork is not a cost-estimating software; however, Maxwell does make a product like that. Earthwork creates a lot of graphical features, cross-sections, and grids. It takes what the engineer designed, and quantifies what has to be done.

Earthwork will tell you how much cut and fill, how many square yards, the topsoil stripping depth. We also use Cross Section to reach our figures. Math is

our strong suit; once our clients know the earthmoving information, they can use their estimating software to determine the cost. For example, let's say you want to wallpaper a room. Once I had your room measurements, I would tell you how much paper you need. You'd take that information to the store to purchase the paper."

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