

Estimator/Project Manager

One Role or Two?



Estimating and Project Management are two primary activities in an electrical contracting business. At some point, all companies have to decide whether to treat these two roles as one or to separate the functions and hire both a professional Estimator *and* a Project Manager. The reason for choosing one approach over the other depends on a number of factors.

Size of Company – A small company may not have the volume of business that is needed to support both a full-time estimator *and* a project manager. Mid-sized companies may have the resources for one estimator and several project managers while a large company would usually employ several estimators and project managers. The first thing you need to do is assess your company's needs. If your company's workload is not sufficient to support a full-time estimator, the obvious solution is to combine the functions into an estimator/project manager role. This responsibility can be challenging during critical points in the project cycle. To help alleviate the stress of such a position, careful scheduling of jobs and training other office personnel to handle routine responsibilities will ease the workload during those peak times.

Resource Allocation – Estimators focus on the future and the next job while project managers are primarily concerned with what is happening right now. The estimator is preparing bids for future projects; meanwhile current projects are either just getting underway, are in full swing or are at the critical final phase. A project manager whose attention is diverted to estimating new jobs will not be able to effectively address and complete the current projects just as new bids will not be as carefully prepared if the estimator's attention is occupied by current job demands. Also, you should take into account the number of jobs your project manager typically supervises. The responsibility of keeping track of several jobs in progress further limits the project manager's time. Remember, the most critical part of a project comes in the final phases; 90% of the project manager's work is done in the last 10% of the job. This is when more attention to detail and schedules is critical. Missed milestones can mean extra cost and delays.

Proficiency – The estimator must have the ability to follow procedures and develop processes to ensure that the bid is accurate and that errors have not, and will not, be made. Ideally, the estimator should have some engineering experience in order to uncover flaws in the design when reviewing plans. Problems with design regarding building codes, constructability and other safety factors can add to the project's bottom line and cut into profits. Through value engineering, an experienced estimator not only helps bring the project in the door, but can also add to project efficiency once construction is underway.



Estimating provides the information required for managing the material costs and labor hours efficiently and effectively. This job management information is important to the project manager for job costing and tracking. Without a good solid estimate, project management is no more than putting out fires and responding to crisis situations. Project managers need to be task-oriented people with a strong sense of urgency and must also focus on starting and finishing tasks on schedule. The project manager's knowledge of their crews strengths and weaknesses as well as the working conditions on a job site and their own experience in the field make them best suited to schedule the right people for the job to complete the project on time.

Specialization – Look at estimating and project management as a production line. Estimators estimate, and project managers manage. The split between these two job professions allows each to become more efficient. A full-time estimator becomes more proficient and able to complete accurate bids quickly. The experience in the field for a full time project manager develops his or her team management skills and product expertise to complete the project on schedule. Both individuals improve their skills because they specialize in their profession.

Communication – An advantage for the individual who is both the estimator/project manager is that there is no miscommunication between the two job functions. When the estimator is also managing the project, he or she is more familiar with details and conditions of the job thus saving time in turning the project over. Just be sure to avoid the temptation to delay decisions to the project management stage when you are performing both roles...the result could be a loss of time and money.

When the roles are separated, it is essential that the estimator and the project manager communicate effectively with each other. The project manager has specific knowledge of the work required for the job and is, therefore, an important resource for the estimator in producing an accurate estimate. A good estimator is laying the framework for the project. If the estimate is done completely and accurately, the project manager will experience fewer problems on the job.

The success of both the estimator and the project manager requires a cooperative team environment of encouragement and support. Both roles are critical to the success of your company. Skilled project management is often the difference between a profitable job and one that produces a loss. Effective estimating and job planning of labor schedules and material procurement are major factors in determining the actual cost of a project. Ultimately, it is careful job planning and precise plan execution that is the necessary groundwork that will reap desired benefits and profits for your company whether you hire one individual as your estimator/project manager or separate the two roles between two individuals.

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