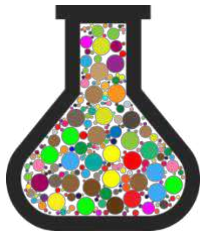


## The Difference Between a Good and Great Estimator

**Executive Summary:** Estimators are difficult to find, but one way to determine whether you have a good or great estimator on your staff, or in the interviewee chair, is whether or not they talk productivity rates or unit prices.



**What is construction estimating?** A construction estimator has many skills – takeoff, scope analysis, means and methods knowledge, equipment capacities, etc. And you likely have heard that “estimating is both science and art”, so (s)he should be malleable when it comes to figuring the numbers.

A good estimator can speak to all of these subjects, and put together a complete price with scope breakdown to the client.

**The language of Estimating.** If you’re married (uh, or not anymore) you’ve probably heard of the book by Gary Chapman called *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts*.

In the language of Estimating, does your estimator speak the language of productivity rates or just unit prices?



**Let’s talk productivity rates.** A great estimator knows unit costs and productivity rates.

When I say productivity rates I’m talking about knowing that not many people on the planet are going to get municipal 12” ductile iron water line installed at a rate better than 0.08 manhours/lineal foot. I also know that the best sustained gangform placement rate I’ve seen on cast-in-place concrete tank wall is 28 square feet/manhour.

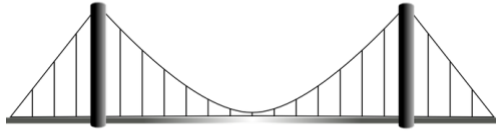
What I’m not saying is that I know I can get waterline installed at \$75/lineal foot and concrete wall installed at \$7.50/square foot. No, I’m using productivity rates, not dollars, to lead and verify my estimates.

There are two main benefits to knowing productivity rates versus unit costs:

1. **Geographical indifference** – whether you’re working in Bothell, Washington, Troy, Missouri, or Weymouth, Massachusetts, you know how to estimate the work – plugging the cost of a manhour and material costs then becomes simple data entry. My example above of 0.08 manhours/lineal foot is easy to apply to an estimate if you have this production history.
2. **Quick cost check in the field** – because for many of us labor is our biggest risk, knowing for example, that manholes were estimated at 15 manhours/manhole makes it easy for an executive or a foreman to quickly check his/her production. If I have five guys on my crew and it takes me three hours, I’m on budget! And this can be checked by walking out in the field and taking a headcount.

**Gather this data, it’ll make you better.** If you’re a foreman, superintendent, project manager, or executive, knowing these rates will make you better. You’ll be able to speak

more intelligently in meetings with clients and have a better grip on the work out in the field.



**My story.** We used to place concrete riprap under bridges on job after job after job. Regardless of the site conditions, we always priced this item (riprap concrete) at \$150/cubic yard for furnish and install to our client. My supervisor was one of the best estimators I ever worked with, but I never agreed with his approach on this item. To me access to the work, joint patterns in the concrete, and the sizes of

the pours all came into play on determining the true cost, but he never really considered any of that. Of course I was just a kid then and that company is wildly successful now!