

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO ESTIMATING FOR TRADESPEOPLE

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Build Your Own Labour-Time Database,
Price with Confidence, and Win More Work



LABOUR-TIME DATABASE

Example Task

First Fix - Lighting Circuit	
Estimated Hrs	12.00
Actual Hrs	11.50
Variance	-0.50
Labour Cost	£402.50
Material Cost	£132.75
Total Cost	£535.25
Cost Per H	46.54
Date	15/04/2025



LABOUR & MATERIAL ESTIMATE

TASK	LABOUR (HRS)	MATERIAL (£)	TOTAL (£)
1. Site Preparation	2.50	85.00	235.00
2. First Fix	12.00	312.00	936.00
3. Second Fix	8.00	210.00	610.00
4. Finishes	6.00	145.00	505.00
5. Testing & Commissioning	2.00	40.00	140.00
			2,425.00
SUBTOTAL			363.90
OVERHEADS & PROFIT (15%)			£2,789.90
TOTAL PRICE			

467
TASKS ACROSS
15 TRADES
WITH GOOGLE SHEETS
TRACKING SYSTEM
INCLUDED



BREAK JOBS
INTO TASKS



PRICE FROM REAL
COSTS



BUILD YOUR OWN
LABOUR DATABASE



AI CROSS-CHECK
METHOD



ADD GENUINE
RISK & PROFIT



WIN MORE
PROFITABLE WORK



TRADE SKILLS HUB
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THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO ESTIMATING FOR TRADESPEOPLE

Build Your Own Labour-Time Database, Price with Confidence, and Win More Work

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This book is intended as general guidance for tradespeople and small business owners. It does not constitute legal, financial, tax, or professional advice, and should not be relied upon as a substitute for advice specific to your own circumstances. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information at the time of writing; however, regulations, rates, and standard practices change, and readers should independently verify anything relevant to their own business before relying on it.

Any figures, rates, and worked examples in this book are illustrative only, intended to demonstrate a method rather than to be used as pricing data. Readers are responsible for building and validating their own figures using their own costs, local market conditions, and professional judgement.

Introduction

Ask ten tradespeople how they arrive at a price, and most will describe some version of the same thing: a rough figure in their head, built up over years of doing the work, adjusted a little for how the job feels on the day. It works, more or less, right up until it doesn't — until a job runs long, a margin turns out thinner than expected, or a competitor's quote undercuts by a number that makes no sense against the same scope of work.

The problem is not experience. Experience is exactly what makes a good estimator — this book has no interest in replacing it. The problem is that experience, kept entirely in one person's head, is hard to check, hard to hand to someone else, and hard to improve on deliberately rather than by accident. A gut-feel price cannot be interrogated the way a task-by-task, cost-built one can.

The Method This Book Teaches

Every chapter in this book, from the foundations in Part 1 through the forty worked estimates in Part 4, follows the same underlying process: break a job into its individual tasks, price each task from real labour and material costs, add genuine, statable risk, and check the result against true cost before it goes anywhere near a client. None of that is new — it is how good estimators have always worked, made explicit and repeatable rather than left as instinct.

What is new is the role artificial intelligence plays inside that process — and it is worth being precise about that role from the outset, because it is easy to get backwards. This book does not ask you to trust an AI tool's labour-hour figures, and it does not treat AI-generated numbers as a finished price. Chapter 3 introduces the AI Cross-Check Method used throughout the rest of the book: an AI tool drafts a first estimate for a task, sourced and reasoned as far as possible, and that draft is then checked against your own real job history — not accepted on its own authority. Time and again through this book's worked examples, that cross-check is what catches a figure that looks plausible but is quietly wrong, or confirms one that turns out to be more reliable than it first seemed.

That cross-check is only as good as the real data sitting alongside it. An AI tool has no way of knowing that your team chases skirting boards faster than most, or that a particular supplier's pack sizes always leave you rounding up. Only your own job history knows that. Which leads to the practical heart of this book, and the thing it asks you to build alongside reading it.

Your Own Labour-Time Database

Published rate books and generic pricing guides go stale the moment they're printed, and they were never built around your business, your suppliers, or your patch. This book takes a different approach: instead of handing you a fixed table of figures to use as-is, it teaches you to build your own — a growing, personal record of estimated versus actual hours and costs, job by job, trade by trade, that becomes more accurate the longer you use it.

To make that practical from day one, this book comes with a companion task library and tracking system, built in Google Forms and Google Sheets so that no special software or

licence is needed to use it: 467 individually scoped tasks across fifteen trades, from a single socket outlet to a full property rewire, each already broken down the way Chapter 2 teaches you to break down a job by hand. Submit a completed job through the form, and it lands in a linked spreadsheet as a new row in your own labour-time database — the same database the AI Cross-Check Method checks its figures against, and the same one Chapter 16 and Chapter 52 show you how to keep feeding as every job closes out.

Where to find it

Appendix G summarises the full task library — which trades, how many task categories each, and how units are handled.

Appendix N is the step-by-step setup guide: how to make your own copy of the form and sheet, the full field reference, and how to build the logging habit that makes the whole system work.

Nothing about using it requires reading this book cover to cover first — many readers set it up after Chapter 3 and start logging real jobs immediately, then work through the rest of the book with their own data already coming in.

The chapters that follow use this same system throughout. Part 3's trade-by-trade reference chapters are drawn directly from the task library. Every worked estimate in Part 4 is built the way the form guides you to build your own. By the time you reach Part 5's chapters on quoting and winning work, the pricing behind the quotation should already feel like yours — not a number borrowed from a book, but one built from your own jobs, checked against a tool that knows to defer to them.

Start with Chapter 1 if you want the reasoning laid out in full before you touch a spreadsheet. Or turn straight to Appendix N, make your own copy of the form, and start logging your next job today — the book will still be here when you get back to it

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Chapter 1 — Why Accurate Estimating Matters

Every quote you send out is a promise. It promises the customer a price, but underneath that price it also carries a quieter promise to yourself — about how long the job will actually take, what it will really cost you to deliver, and what you'll have left once the van is loaded up and you drive away. Get that promise right, and the job pays you fairly for your skill and time. Get it wrong, and you can find yourself working long days for very little, no matter how good you are with the tools.

This chapter sets out why accurate estimating deserves to be treated as a core business skill, not an afterthought squeezed in between jobs. Everything else in this book — the method, the labour-time database, the AI cross-checks, the worked examples — only has value if you understand why getting this right, matters in the first place.

The Difference Between Estimating, Costing, Pricing and Quoting

These four words get used interchangeably on site and in conversation, but they describe four separate stages of the same process. Mixing them up — or skipping straight from a gut feeling to a number on an invoice — is where a lot of estimating problems begin.

Estimating

Estimating is the process of working out how long a job will take and how much material it will need, based on the best information available at the time. An estimate is a professional judgement, not a promise. It can, and should, change as more information comes to light — during a site survey, once walls are opened up, or once a customer changes their mind about the finish they want.

Costing

Costing takes that estimate and attaches real numbers to it: labour hours multiplied by what an hour of your time genuinely costs to provide, materials at what you will actually pay for them, and a fair share of your overheads. Costing answers one question — what will this job actually cost me to deliver?

Pricing

Pricing is the commercial decision of what to charge the customer, built on top of your costing. It includes your margin — the profit that keeps the business viable, funds its growth, and absorbs the jobs that don't go entirely to plan. Costing tells you your floor. Pricing is the decision of how far above that floor you need to be.

Quoting

A quote is the price you actually put in front of the customer, usually in writing, with terms attached — what's included, what's excluded, how long the price stands, and how payment works. It's the only one of these four stages the customer ever sees, but it is only as reliable as the estimating, costing and pricing that sit behind it. A beautifully presented quote built on

a rushed, ten-second estimate is still a rushed, ten-second estimate — just with better formatting.

A great deal of underpricing in the trades happens because someone skips straight from a glance at the job to a number in their head, without ever separating out these four stages. Slowing down enough to move through them in order, even briefly, is the single habit this book is built around.

Why Tradespeople Underestimate Jobs

Underestimating is far more common than overestimating, and it tends to come from a small number of very human habits rather than a lack of skill.

Optimism and hindsight

Most estimates are built from memory of how a similar job went — and memory is naturally kind to us. We tend to recall the job that went smoothly, not the one where the floor was uneven, the customer changed their mind twice, or the parking was a nightmare. Without a genuine record to check against, an estimate quietly drifts toward the best-case version of the job rather than the realistic one.

The hidden time nobody prices for

Tool-in-hand time is only part of a job. Loading the van, travelling, unloading, setting up, protecting floors and furniture, making tea, answering the phone, popping out for a missing fitting, and clearing away at the end all take real time — and all of it is invisible if an estimate only considers the time spent actually doing the work. Chapter 3 covers this in detail, but it is worth naming here as one of the single biggest sources of underestimating in the trades.

Pricing to win the job, not to profit from it

In a competitive market, there is a constant pull toward shading a price down to win the work, particularly when the diary looks thin. A little of this is normal commercial reality. Too much of it, done repeatedly and without noticing, quietly turns a profitable business into one that is simply busy — which is a very different, and much more dangerous, thing.

Turnover Versus Profit

Turnover is the total amount of money coming into the business. Profit is what is left once every cost of earning that money — labour, materials, overheads, vehicle, insurance, and everything else — has been paid for. They are not the same thing, and confusing them is one of the most common and costly mistakes a growing trade business makes.

It is entirely possible for turnover to rise year on year while profit stays flat or even falls — usually because labour time has been consistently underestimated, so more jobs are being completed, but each one is quietly eating into the margin that should have been protecting the business. A business can look successful from the outside — a full diary, a van on every job, a growing team — while actually earning its owner less, per hour worked, than an employed tradesperson down the road.

As an illustration only: a business turning over £120,000 a year sounds healthy. If underestimated labour time means every job is really taking 20% longer than priced for, a

meaningful share of that £120,000 is being spent covering hours that were never actually charged for. The turnover figure never reveals this on its own — only accurate estimating, and comparing estimate against actual (Chapter 16), brings it into view.

The Consequences of Getting Labour Time Wrong

Labour time sits at the centre of almost every estimate a tradesperson produces, and getting it wrong cuts both ways.

Underestimating

Underestimating labour time means effectively working part of the job for free. It squeezes cash flow, since the job takes longer to complete than the money coming in accounts for. It encourages rushing to try to claw back the lost time, which raises the risk of mistakes, rework, and cutting corners on quality or safety. Done repeatedly, it is a direct route to burnout — working harder and longer while somehow never quite getting ahead.

Overestimating

The opposite mistake matters too, and is often overlooked. Consistently overestimating labour time makes quotes uncompetitive, loses winnable work to other tradespeople, and can quietly damage a reputation for fair pricing — even though the intention was simply caution. Accurate estimating protects against both directions of error, not just the more commonly discussed one.

Why Being Busy Does Not Necessarily Mean Being Profitable

A full diary feels like proof that a business is doing well, and it is a genuinely reassuring feeling — but on its own, it proves nothing about profitability. Being busy simply means demand exists. Whether that demand is being served at a price that actually pays fairly for the time and skill involved is an entirely separate question, and it is the question accurate estimating exists to answer.

This is sometimes called the 'busy fool' trap: taking on more and more work without ever checking whether each job is genuinely profitable, until growth in workload simply means growth in the scale of a problem that was already there. The antidote is not working less — it is knowing, job by job, whether the price charged genuinely reflects the time and cost involved. That is what the rest of this book is built to help with.

A Note on the Figures in This Book

Later chapters — particularly Chapter 3 and the trade-by-trade tables in Part 3 — include labour-time figures, some drafted with the help of an AI cross-check method described in full in Chapter 3. Every one of these figures is a starting point, not a guarantee. They are offered as a reasonable, sourced range to help a reader who has no better information of their own get started, and to be tested, challenged, and where necessary overwritten by that reader's own experience and their own recorded job history.

Nobody's job history is quite like anybody else's. Access, tools, van setup, working speed, and local conditions all vary. The most reliable labour-time figure any tradesperson will ever

have is the one drawn from their own completed jobs, logged honestly over time — not a figure printed in this book, or any other. Chapter 16 sets out exactly how to build that personal record, and why it should always take priority over any published starting figure, including the ones in this book.

Summary

- Estimating, costing, pricing and quoting are four separate stages — treating them as one step is where many estimating problems begin.
- Underestimating labour time is usually caused by optimism, hidden non-tool time, and pricing to win rather than to profit — not a lack of skill.
- Turnover and profit are not the same thing; a growing business can still be earning its owner less per hour over time.
- Both underestimating and overestimating labour time carry real costs — one to cash flow and quality, the other to competitiveness.
- A full diary is evidence of demand, not proof of profitability.
- Every labour-time figure in this book is a starting point to test against your own experience and job history — never a guarantee.

Chapter 2 — Breaking a Job into Tasks

Every accurate estimate starts in the same place: not with a labour-time table, not with a materials list, and not with a gut-feel number scribbled on the back of an invoice pad. It starts with breaking the job down into the individual tasks that make it up. Skip this step, or rush it, and everything that follows — the labour hours in Chapter 3, the materials in Chapter 5, the final quotation in Chapter 15 — inherits the same gaps and guesswork. Get it right, and the rest of the estimating process becomes far more mechanical, because you are pricing a list of known tasks rather than a vague impression of "the job."

This chapter covers the three steps that turn a customer enquiry into something you can actually price: surveying the job properly, writing a clear scope of work, and breaking that scope into measurable tasks. It also introduces the categories of cost — labour, materials, plant and equipment, subcontractors, and the easily-forgotten "invisible" costs like waste disposal and travel — that every task on your list needs to be checked against before you move on to costing anything.

Surveying the Job

An estimate is only as good as the information it is built on, and that information comes from the survey. A five-minute walk around a property with a tape measure and a phone camera, done properly, will save far more time than it costs — because every detail missed at survey stage becomes a detail guessed at pricing stage, and a detail guessed at pricing stage becomes a variation, an argument, or a job you lose money on.

A proper survey covers more than dimensions. At minimum, aim to capture:

- Accurate measurements of the areas or elements you will be working on, not rough estimates by eye
- Photographs of every area involved, including access routes, not just the work itself
- Access — doors, stairs, lifts, parking, and anything that will make getting materials, tools or waste in and out harder than a straightforward ground-floor job
- Existing services — what electrics, plumbing, gas or drainage are already there, and their condition
- Site conditions that affect how the job will run — whether the property is occupied, whether other trades will be working alongside you, and what hours you will realistically be able to work
- Material storage and parking — where materials and waste skips or bags can sit, and how far they will need to be carried
- The customer's own requirements and expectations, including anything they mention that has not been asked for directly but clearly matters to them

A survey checklist, covered in full in Chapter 9 and provided as Appendix E, takes the guesswork out of this stage. Use one every time, even on jobs that look simple — the jobs that catch tradespeople out are rarely the complicated ones, they are the "straightforward" ones where nobody checked the detail.

Creating a Scope of Work

Once the survey is done, the next step is turning what you have seen and heard into a written scope of work: a plain description of exactly what is, and is not, included in the job. This is not the same as the task list that follows it — the scope of work is the customer-facing statement of the job as a whole, written in clear language, before it gets broken down into anything measurable.

A good scope of work answers three questions for anyone reading it, including you in six months' time when a dispute arises over what was agreed:

- What work is being carried out, described specifically enough that two different tradespeople reading it would price the same job
- What is explicitly excluded — the things a customer might reasonably assume are included, but are not
- What assumptions the price is based on, so that if conditions turn out to be different once work starts, there is a written basis for a variation rather than an argument

Exclusions and assumptions deserve particular attention because they are where most estimating disputes come from. "Supply and fit a new consumer unit" sounds complete, but it says nothing about whether fault-finding on the existing installation is included, whether making good to plaster around the unit is included, or whether the customer is expected to have cleared the area beforehand. None of that is obvious to a customer — it is obvious to you, because you do this for a living. Write it down anyway.

Worked example — from enquiry to scope

Customer enquiry: "Can you refurbish our bathroom?"

Scope of work (extract): Strip out and dispose of existing bathroom suite, wall tiles and flooring. Supply and fit new suite, shower enclosure, wall tiles and vinyl flooring to customer's chosen specification (allowance included, upgrades charged as a variation). Reconnect existing pipework and electrics; any faults found in existing pipework or wiring during strip-out are excluded from this price and will be quoted separately. Making good to plaster limited to areas disturbed by this work. Excludes: replastering the whole room, replacing the bathroom door, and any structural work behind walls or floors not visible before strip-out.

Notice what that extract does: it commits to a clear standard of work, and it protects both sides by naming the things that are genuinely unknown until the strip-out happens. That is the job of a scope of work — not to predict the future perfectly, but to be honest about what can and cannot be known before the walls come off.

Breaking Work into Measurable Tasks

With a scope of work agreed, the job can be broken down into individual tasks — the level of detail an estimate actually needs. A task is something you can put a labour time and a materials list against on its own. "Refurbish the bathroom" is a scope; "remove and dispose of existing bathroom suite" is a task.

This is the point where a lot of estimating goes wrong, in one of two directions. Break the job down too little, and you end up pricing by feel again — a handful of vague lines that hide dozens of smaller jobs inside them, each with its own labour time you have not actually thought about. Break it down too far, and the estimate becomes so long it is impractical to build or to read, without making it any more accurate.

As a working rule, a task should be:

- Specific enough that you could hand it to another competent tradesperson and they would know exactly what to do
- Small enough to have a sensible labour time attached — a few minutes to a few hours, not "two days"
- Distinct enough from the tasks around it that it makes sense to record its own actual time against it later, when you come to compare estimate against actual in Chapter 16

A full bathroom refurbishment, for example, typically breaks down into somewhere between thirty and fifty individual tasks once strip-out, first fix, second fix, tiling, decorating and making good are all accounted for separately — Chapter 10 works through exactly this example in full. Part 3 of this book gives you a starting task list for every trade covered, built the same way, so you are rarely starting from a blank page.

Labour, Materials, Plant and Equipment, Subcontractors

Every task on your list needs to be checked against the same set of cost categories before it is ready to price. Missing a category on even a handful of tasks is one of the most common reasons an estimate comes in under the true cost of the job.

Labour

Who is doing the work, how many people it genuinely needs, and how long it will take them — covered in full in Chapter 3, which is the central chapter this whole book is built around.

Materials

What has to be bought in to complete the task, in what quantity, allowing for waste and pack sizes rather than the bare theoretical amount — covered in Chapter 5.

Plant and Equipment

Anything beyond your normal hand tools: powered access equipment, skips, generators, specialist tool hire, or heavy equipment that has its own hire cost and delivery time to account for.

Subcontractors

Any element of the task that will be carried out by someone outside your own team — a specialist trade, or simply extra hands brought in for a particular job — priced and added at this stage rather than absorbed silently into your own labour figure.

Not every task will touch every category. A short task like "first fix a single socket outlet" is almost entirely labour and a small amount of material; a task like "excavate and lay a new

drainage run" may touch all four. The point of checking every task against all four categories is not that every box gets filled in — it is that nothing gets missed by default.

Waste Disposal, Travel, Access and Setup, Making Good, Testing/Commissioning, Administration

Alongside labour, materials, plant and subcontractors sits a second group of costs that are easy to leave out entirely, because none of them feel like "the job" — they are what surrounds the job. Left unpriced often enough, and across enough jobs, this group is where a busy, fully-booked business quietly stops being a profitable one.

Waste Disposal

Skip hire, licensed waste collection, or simply the time spent loading and running a van to the tip. On a strip-out heavy job this can be a genuinely significant cost, not an afterthought.

Travel

Time and fuel getting to and from the job, and between suppliers and site during the job. On a single local job this may be negligible; on a job requiring multiple trips for materials, or work some distance from your usual area, it adds up quickly.

Access and Setup

Time spent protecting floors and furniture, setting up dust sheets or barriers, bringing tools and materials into the property, and clearing them out again at the end of each day. This is real, recurring time on every job, not a one-off.

Making Good

The finishing work needed to leave the area properly complete once the main task is done — filling, patching, touching up paintwork disturbed by the work itself. Decide, and state clearly in your scope of work, exactly how far making good extends.

Testing and Commissioning

Electrical testing and certification, pressure testing pipework, or simply running and checking a system before handing it over. This is often a legal or regulatory requirement, not an optional extra, and it takes real time that needs its own line.

Administration

Time spent producing the quotation itself, ordering materials, arranging deliveries, and handling the paperwork that closes the job out. It is easy to price only the hours spent physically on site and forget the hours spent running the job around it.

None of these six categories needs to be priced with the same precision as the main labour and materials on a task — but each one needs a conscious decision, not silence. A short checklist, applied to every task list you build, is enough: has waste, travel, access and setup, making good, testing, and administration been considered and either included or deliberately excluded and stated as such?

A reminder from Chapter 1, worth repeating here:

Every figure and every task list in this book is a starting point to be tested against your own experience — not a guarantee of how long any individual job will take.

With the job surveyed, the scope agreed, and the work broken into a clean task list checked against every cost category, you are ready for the step that turns this list into real numbers. Chapter 3 introduces the method this whole book is built around: how to put an honest, defensible labour time against every task on that list, using your own judgement alongside AI as a cross-check rather than a substitute for it.

To read the full title, please purchase the book. Thank you.