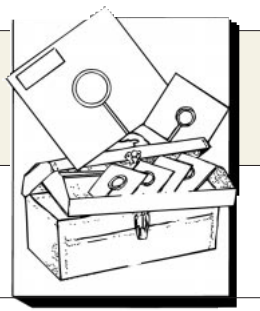
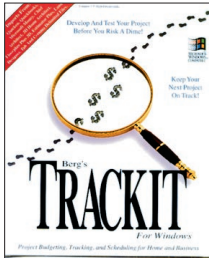


# STATE-OF-THE-ART CONTRACTOR



## Tracking Costs

by Craig Savage



**Berg's Trackit for Windows (\$39.99)** is available from Berg Mechanical Corp. (19 Hammond, Suite 507, Irvine, CA 92718; 800/600-2374).

Three-quarters of the computer-related calls I receive are from people looking for a simple, cheap estimating system; the other 75% want an inexpensive, easy-to-use application to do job-costing. (My math isn't wrong — half of the callers want both.) There are plenty of the expensive, hard-to-learn variety available. But there hasn't been an application that tackled both estimating and job-costing head on, while retaining the elegant simplicity and low cost of a program like, say, Quicken.

Until now, that is. Chris Berg of Berg Mechanical Corp. has written a program he calls *Trackit* that may be as close as you are going to get to a low-cost solution. Trackit estimates, schedules, and tracks the costs of your jobs, and does it all quickly with very little setup required.

Most of the work in Trackit is done in one window (Figure 1). Along the top there are buttons to create, save, and delete a new project, as well as to

add the categories and items you will be using to estimate and analyze job costs. You can also use the Time button to switch to the schedule view, which presents the job as a bar graph. The Analyze button displays a comparison of estimated costs to actual costs by category.

Three buttons along the bottom of the main screen toggle the display between three views of your job information: Actuals, Budget, and Compare. Finally, a set of buttons along the bottom right-hand side of the screen performs item maintenance, such as Save, Delete, Copy, Paste, and Print. A Filter button lets you “query by example” — find and sort information by project, or even across projects, in a variety of ways.

**Budgets.** Work flow in Trackit starts with the Budget view, where you click on and are presented with an Add Item form. You can type in items one at a time, or pick them from the drop-down list. If you type in an item that isn't in the list, Trackit prompts you to add the item to the list (Figure 2). Budget items can also be imported from Quicken, QuickBooks, Microsoft Money, Chief Architect, 3D Home, and Estimator Plus, as well as from plain tab- or comma-delimited files generated by spreadsheets and databases.

Date	Qty /Hours	Items	Unit	Price /Rate	Category	Sub Category
10/27/94	5	Sheet Rock 1/2" & Mud	SqFt	\$0.27	Material	DryWall
10/28/94	5	Vista Paint Inv 8998		\$11.00	Material	Paint
10/28/94	14	DryWall & Taping	SqFt	\$0.62	Material	DryWall
11/1/94	8	Payroll - Painting	Hrs	\$24.28	Labor	Painting
11/1/94	55	Jones Tile Invoice 1267	Ctr		Sub-Contr	Tile Setting
11/10/94		B&B Plumb & Heating Inv 578	Ctr		Sub-Contr	Plumbing
11/11/94		JR Electrical Co. Inv 4555	Ctr		Sub-Contr	Electrical
11/12/94	10	Photoshop Layout	Hrs	\$46.00	Labor	Framing

**Figure 1.** The main Trackit screen displays a list of estimated items and their corresponding job-cost categories. Buttons on the tool bar at the top of the screen handle files and help you navigate to other parts of the program.

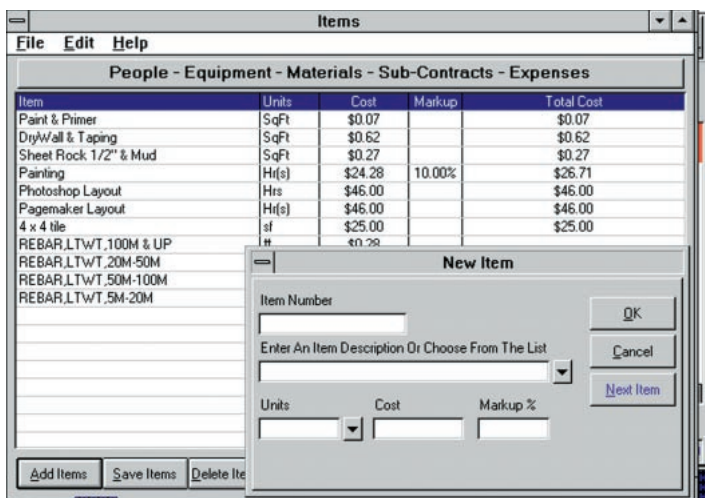
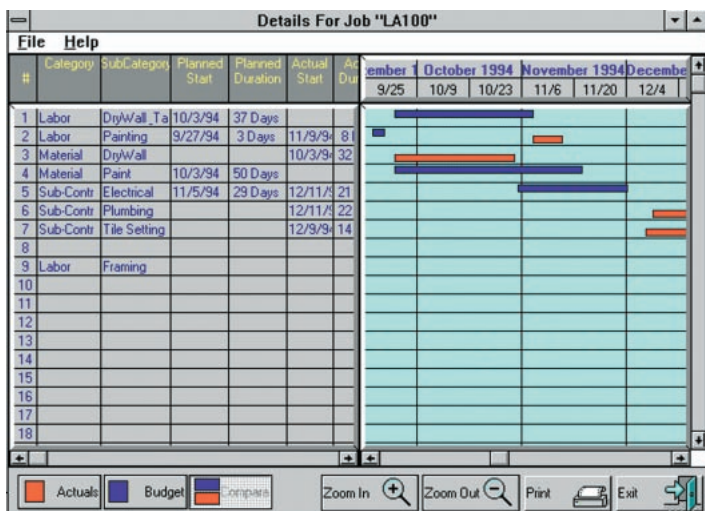


Figure 2. In the Budget view, you can add items to the estimating database (left). If you include the starting date and duration of each task, Trackit will display the project schedule in a Gantt chart (below).



You can also input the duration and starting date of an item or task, information that is used to schedule the project and present it in a Gantt chart.

**Job-costing.** As costs accumulate, they are entered in the Actual section of the program on a form much like the Add Item form. To fill out the form, you can enter actual costs from invoices and time cards, or import costs from Quicken or Quickbooks.

Once actual costs — and actual durations — are entered, you can analyze the data in the Compare section of the program. Here the actual costs and estimated costs (or duration) are superimposed one above the other, where it's all too easy to see the differences.

Trackit can keep you happy as long as you don't expect more from the software than it was designed to deliver. For example, Trackit doesn't offer many options for customizing reports, and you can't manipulate the schedules it produces the way you can with more complicated programs. You'll also have to build your item database from scratch — the program doesn't come with one.

On the other hand, for a surprisingly low investment of time and money, Trackit gives you the ability to perform some very useful job-cost analysis. In addition to examining overall job performance, you can also sort for specific information common to all jobs. At the end of the year, for example, you could use Trackit to find out which jobs made you the most money. You could dig a little deeper to find out which tasks were completed above or below estimated costs. The results of this kind of analysis can help you focus marketing efforts, qualify future job leads, and sharpen production methods. ■

*Craig Savage is an associate editor of the Journal of Light Construction.*

If you have a question about computing in construction, address it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, JLC, RR2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477; or e-mail to: SavageCBC@aol.com.