Recommended Practice (Draft): Cost Estimate Classification System

Revised March 3, 1997

PURPOSE

As a recommended practice of AACE International, the Cost Estimate Classification System provides guidelines for applying the general principles of estimate classification to asset cost estimates. Asset cost estimates typically involve estimates for capital investment, and exclude operating and life-cycle evaluations. The Cost Estimate Classification System maps the phases and stages of asset cost estimating together with a generic maturity and quality matrix that can be applied across a wide variety of industries.

This guideline has been developed in a way that:

- provides common understanding of the concepts involved with classifying project cost estimates, regardless of the type of enterprise or industry the estimates relate to;
- fully defines and correlates the major characteristics used in classifying cost estimates so that enterprises may unambiguously determine how their practices compare to the guidelines;
- uses degree of project definition as the primary characteristic to categorize estimate classes; and
- reflects generally-accepted practices in the cost engineering profession.

An intent of the guidelines is to improve communication among all of the stakeholders involved with preparing, evaluating, and using project cost estimates. The various parties that use project cost estimates often misinterpret the quality and value of the information available to prepare cost estimates, the various methods employed during the estimating process, the accuracy level expected from estimates, and the level of risk associated with estimates.

This classification guideline is intended to help those involved with project estimates to avoid misinterpretation of the various classes of cost estimates and to avoid their misapplication and misrepresentation. Improving communications about estimate classifications reduces business costs and project cycle times by avoiding inappropriate business and financial decisions, actions, delays, or disputes caused by misunderstandings of cost estimates and what they are expected to represent.

This document is intended to provide a guideline, not a standard. It is understood that each enterprise may have its own project and estimating processes and terminology, and may classify estimates in particular ways. This guideline provides a generic and generally-acceptable classification system that can be used as a basis to compare against. If an enterprise or organization has not yet formally documented its own estimate classification scheme, then this guideline may provide an acceptable starting point.

INTRODUCTION

An AACE International guideline for cost estimate classification for the process industries was developed in the late 1960s or early 1970s, and a simplified version was adopted as an ANSI Standard Z94.0 in 1972. Those guidelines and standards enjoy reasonably broad acceptance within the engineering and construction communities and within the process industries. This recommended practice guide and its addendums improves upon these standards by:

1. providing a classification method applicable across all industries; and
2. unambiguously identifying, cross-referencing, benchmarking, and empirically evaluating the multiple characteristics that define the class of cost estimate.

This guideline is intended to provide a generic methodology for the classification of project cost estimates in any industry, and will be supplemented with addendums that will provide extensions and additional detail for specific industries.

CLASSIFICATION METHODOLOGY

There are numerous characteristics that can be used to categorize cost estimate types. The most significant of these are degree of project definition, end usage of the estimate, estimating methodology, and the effort and time needed to prepare the estimate. The "primary" characteristic used in this guideline to define the classification category is the degree of project definition. The other characteristics are "secondary."

Categorizing cost estimates by degree of project definition is in keeping with the AACE International philosophy of Total Cost Management, which is a quality-driven process applied during the entire project life cycle. The discrete levels of project definition used for classifying estimates correspond to the typical phases and gates of evaluation, authorization, and execution often used by project stakeholders during a project life cycle.

Five cost estimate classes have been established. While the level of project definition is a continuous spectrum, it was determined from benchmarking industry practices that three to five discrete categories are commonly used. Five categories are established in this guideline as it is easier to simplify by combining categories than it is to arbitrarily split a standard.

The estimate class designations are labeled Class 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. A Class 5 estimate is based upon the lowest level of proj-

	Primary Characteristic	*Secondary Characteristics*			
	Level of Project Definition	**End Usage**	**Methodology**	**Accuracy Range**	**Preparation Effort**
Estimate Class	Expressed as % of complete project definition	Typical purpose of estimate	Typical estimating method	Typical +/- range relative to best range index of 1 [a]	Typical degree of effort relative to least cost index of 1 [b]
Class 5	0% to 2%	Screening or Feasibility	Stochastic or Judgment	10 to 20	1
Class 4	1% to 5%	Concept Study or Feasibility	Primarily Stochastic	5 to 10	2 to 4
Class 3	10% to 40%	Budget, Authorization, or Control	Mixed, but Primarily Stochastic	3 to 6	3 to 10
Class 2	30% to 60%	Control or Bid/Tender	Primarily Deterministic	2 to 3	5 to 20
Class 1	50% to 100%	Check Estimate or Bid/Tender	Deterministic	1	10 to 100

Notes: [a] If the range index value of "1" represents +10/-5%, then an index value of 10 represents +100/-50%.
[b] If the cost index value of "1" represents 0.005%, then an index value of 100 represents 0.5%.

Figure 1—Generic Cost Estimate Classification Matrix

ect definition, and a Class 1 estimate is closest to full project definition and maturity. This arbitrary "countdown" approach considers that estimating is a process whereby successive estimates are prepared until a final estimate closes the process.

DEFINITIONS OF COST ESTIMATE CHARACTERISTICS

The following are brief discussions of the various estimate characteristics used in the estimate classification matrix. For the secondary characteristics, the overall trend of how each characteristic varies with the degree of project definition (the primary characteristic) is provided.

Level of Project Definition (Primary Characteristic)

This characteristic is based upon percent complete of project definition (roughly corresponding to percent complete of engineering). The level of project definition defines the extent and types of input information available to the estimating process. Such inputs include project scope definition, requirements documents, specifications, project plans, drawings, calculations, learnings from past projects, reconnaissance data, and other information that must be developed to define the project. Each industry will have a typical set of deliverables that are used to support the type of estimates used in that industry. The set of deliverables becomes more definitive and complete as the level of project definition (i.e., project engineering) progresses.

End Usage (Secondary Characteristic)

The various classes (or phases) of cost estimates prepared for a project typically have different end uses or purposes. As the level of project definition increases, the end usage of an estimate typically progresses from strategic evaluation and feasibility studies to funding authorization and budgets to project control purposes.

Estimating Methodology (Secondary Characteristic)

Estimating methodologies fall into two broad categories: stochastic and deterministic. In stochastic methods, the independent variable(s) used in the cost estimating algorithms are generally something other than a direct measure of the units of the item being estimated. The cost estimating relationships used in stochastic methods often are somewhat subject to conjecture. With deterministic methods, the independent variable(s) are more or less a definitive measure of the item being estimated. A deterministic methodology is not subject to significant conjecture. As the level of project definition increases, the estimating methodology tends to progress from stochastic to deterministic methods.

Accuracy Range (Secondary Characteristic)

Estimate accuracy range is in indication of the degree to which the final cost outcome for a given project will vary from the estimated cost. Accuracy is traditionally expressed as a + or - percentage range around the point estimate (after application of contingency) with a stated level of confidence that the actual cost outcome would fall within this range (+/- measures are a useful simplification, given that actual cost outcomes have different frequency distributions for different types of projects). As the level of project definition increases, the expected accuracy of the estimate tends to improve, as indicated by a tighter +/- range.

Note that in figure 1, the values in the accuracy range column do not represent + or - percentages, but instead represent an index value relative to a best range index value of 1. If, for a particular industry, a Class 1 estimate has an accuracy range of +10/-5 percent, then a Class 5 estimate in that same industry may have an accuracy range of +100/-50 percent.

Effort to Prepare Estimate (Secondary Characteristic)

The level of effort needed to prepare a given estimate is an indication of the cost, time, and resources required. The cost measure of that effort is typically expressed as a percentage of the total project costs for a given project size. As the level of project definition increases, the amount of effort to prepare an estimate increases, as does its cost relative to the total project cost.

RELATIONSHIPS AND VARIATIONS OF CHARACTERISTICS

There are a myriad of complex relationships that may be exhibited among the estimate characteristics within the estimate classifications. The overall trend of how the secondary characteristics vary with the level of project definition was provided above. This section explores those trends in more detail. Typically, there are commonalties in the secondary characteristics between one estimate and the next, but in any given situation there may be wide variations in usage, methodology, accuracy, and effort.

The level of project definition is the "driver" of the other characteristics. Typically, all of the secondary characteristics have the level of project definition as a primary determinant. While the other characteristics are important to categorization, they lack complete consensus. For example, one estimator's "bid" might be another's "budget." Characteristics such as "accuracy" and "methodology" can vary markedly from one industry to another, and even from estimator to estimator within a given industry.

Level of Project Definition

Each project (or industry grouping) will have a typical set of deliverables that are used to support a given class of estimate. The availability of these deliverables is directly related to the level of project definition achieved. The variations in the deliverables required for an estimate are too broad to cover in detail here; however, it is important to understand what drives the variations. Each industry group tends to focus on a defining project element that "drives" the estimate maturity level. For instance, chemical industry projects are "process equipment-centric"—i.e., the level of project definition and subsequent estimate maturity level is significantly determined by how well the equipment is defined. Architectural projects tend to be "structure-centric," software projects tend to be "function-centric," and so on. Understanding these drivers puts the differences that may appear in the more detailed industry addendums into perspective.

End Usage

While there are common end usages of an estimate among different stakeholders, usage is often relative to the stakeholder's identity. For instance, an owner company may use a given class of estimate to support project funding, while a contractor may use the same class of estimate to support a contract bid or tender. It is not at all uncommon to find stakeholders categorizing their estimates by usage-related headings such as "budget," "study," or "bid." Depending on the stakeholder's perspective and needs, it is important to understand that these may actually be all the same class of estimate (based on the primary characteristic of level of project definition achieved).

Estimating Methodology

As stated previously, estimating methodologies fall into two broad categories: stochastic and deterministic. These broad categories encompass scores of individual methodologies. Stochastic methods often involve simple or complex modeling based on inferred or statistical relationships between costs and programmatic and/or technical parameters. Deterministic methods tend to be straightforward counts or measures of units of items multiplied by known unit costs or factors. It is important to realize that any combination of methods may be found in any given class of estimate. For example, if a stochastic method is known to be suitably accurate, it may be used in place of a deterministic method even when there is sufficient input information based on the level of project definition to support a deterministic method. This may be due to the lower level of effort required to prepare an estimate using stochastic methods.

Accuracy Range

The accuracy range of an estimate is dependent upon a number of characteristics of the estimate input information and the estimating process. The extent and the maturity of the input information as measured by percentage completion (and related to level of project definition) is a highly-important determinant of accuracy. However, there are factors besides the available input information that also greatly affect estimate accuracy measures. Primary among these are the state of technology in the project and the quality of reference cost estimating data.

State of technology—technology varies considerably between industries, and thus affects estimate accuracy. The state of technology used here refers primarily to the programmatic or technical uniqueness and complexity of the project. Procedurally, having "full extent and maturity" in the estimate basis deliverables is deceptive if the deliverables are based upon assumptions regarding uncertain technology. For a "first-of-a-kind" project there is a lower level of confidence that the execution of the project will be successful (all else being equal). There is generally a higher confidence for projects that repeat past practices. Projects for which research and development are still under way at the time that the estimate is prepared are particularly subject to low accuracy expectations. The state of technology may have an order of magnitude (10 to 1) effect on the accuracy range.

Quality of reference cost estimating data—accuracy is also dependent on the quality of reference cost data and history. It is possible to have a project with "common practice" in technology, but with little cost history available concerning projects using that technology. In addition, the estimating process typically employs a number of factors to adjust for market conditions, project location, environmental considerations, and other estimate-specific conditions that are often uncertain and difficult to assess. The accuracy of the estimate will be better when verified empirical data and statistics are employed as a basis for the estimating process, rather than assumptions.

In summary, estimate accuracy will generally be correlated with estimate classification (and therefore the level of project definition), all else being equal. However, specific accuracy ranges will typically vary by industry. Also, the accuracy of any given estimate is not fixed or determined by its classification category. Significant variations in accuracy from estimate to estimate are possible if any of the determinants of accuracy, such as technology, quality of reference cost data, quality of the estimating process, and skill and knowledge of the estimator vary. Accuracy is also not necessarily determined by the methodology used or the effort expended. Estimate accuracy must be evaluated on an estimate-by-estimate basis, usually in conjunction with some form of risk analysis process.

Effort to Prepare Estimate

The effort to prepare an estimate is usually determined by the extent of the input information available. The effort will normally increase as the number and complexity of the project definition deliverables that are produced and assessed increase. However, with an efficient estimating methodology on repetitive projects, this relationship may be less defined. For instance, there are combination design/estimating tools in the process industries that can often automate much of the design and estimating process. These tools can often generate Class 3 deliverables and estimates from the most basic input parameters for repetitive-type projects. There may be similar tools in other industry groupings.

It also should be noted that the estimate preparation costs as a percentage of total project costs will vary inversely with project size in a nonlinear fashion. For a given class of estimate, the preparation cost percentage will decrease as the total project costs increase. Also, at each class of estimate, the preparation costs in different industries will vary markedly.

ESTIMATE CLASSIFICATION MATRIX

The five estimate classes are presented in figure 1 in relationship to the identified characteristics. Only the level of project definition determines the estimate class. The other four characteristics are secondary characteristics that are generally correlated with the level of project definition, as discussed above.

This generic matrix and guideline provide a high level estimate classification system that is nonindustry specific. Refer to subsequent addendums for further guidelines that will provide more detailed information for application in specific industries. These will provide additional information, such as input deliverable checklists, to allow meaningful categorization in that industry.

REFERENCES

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ANSI Standard Z94.2-1989. **Industrial Engineering Terminology: Cost Engineering.**◆