Manage Finances

The Art of Estimating Fees

Why Fee Estimation Is a Leadership Discipline

Based on the webinar presentation by Douglas Teiger, FAIA

bqe

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Introduction: Why Fee Estimation Is a Leadership Discipline

"How do you come up with your fees?" It is a question that comes up early in almost every client conversation, and one that carries more weight than it seems. Clients are trying to understand what they are committing to, and firms are often working through a mix of experience, expectations, and uncertainty in real time.

There is rarely a single, consistent way that firms arrive at a fee. Decisions are often shaped by past projects, market pressure, or a sense of what feels appropriate for the opportunity. The number may make sense in the moment, but its implications tend to become clearer once the project is underway.

"My intention is not to tell you what to charge. It is to give you a way to understand whether your fee will actually work, so you can deliver a successful project and maintain a healthy profit from start to finish."

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

That is when the relationship between the fee and the work begins to take shape. Scope expands in small increments. Decisions take longer than expected. Coordination becomes more involved. Each shift feels reasonable on its own, yet over time they begin to add up. What started as a straightforward proposal becomes more difficult to manage, and the margin within the project starts to tighten.

A more deliberate approach begins earlier. Fee estimating becomes part of how a project is defined, not simply how it is priced. Scope is clarified in a way that creates alignment. Construction cost is grounded in experience and current conditions. The fee is considered within the context of what it will take to deliver the work, and the proposal is structured to reflect that understanding.

When these elements are connected, the fee starts to function as a framework rather than a standalone number. It shapes expectations, guides how the team approaches the work, and provides a reference point for decisions as the project moves forward.

Over time, this approach creates consistency. Projects become easier to plan and manage. Teams operate with a clearer understanding of what is expected. Clients move through the process with greater confidence. The firm spends less time reacting and more time guiding the work.

This ebook builds on that perspective. It draws from Douglas Teiger's methodology and translates it into a clear, repeatable process that can be

applied across projects. The goal is to provide a structure that supports better decisions from the beginning and carries through to completion.

For firm leaders, the way fees are developed influences how projects are scoped, how teams are aligned, and how work is delivered. Seen in that light, fee estimating becomes an integral part of leadership within the firm.

The Fee Estimation System

High-performing firms follow a structured fee process that connects every decision to how the project will actually be delivered.

1. Define the Scope

Establish exactly what is included, what is not, and what success looks like.

2. Ground the Project in Reality

Develop a realistic construction cost based on experience, market conditions, and project type.

3. Establish the Fee Framework

Use both top-down (market context) and bottom-up (project requirements) perspectives to validate the fee.

4. Structure the Proposal

Clearly define services, boundaries, and optional elements to align expectations from the start.

5. Translate Into Execution

Break the project into phases, define milestones, and align the team around how the work will be delivered.

6. Manage and Adjust

Monitor progress, identify drift early, and maintain alignment throughout the life of the project.

The result:

A fee that supports the work, a team that understands expectations, and a project that stays aligned from start to finish.

Start With Scope and Cost

There is a natural tendency to begin with the fee. A client asks for a number, a proposal is due, or a project needs to move forward. In those moments, it is easy to rely on experience, reference a similar project, or apply a percentage based on what feels appropriate.

That approach can work, but it often leaves important questions unanswered.

A more reliable process starts by stepping back and understanding the project itself. Before a fee can be established with confidence, the scope needs to be clearly defined and the project grounded in a realistic view of cost. Without that foundation, the fee is built on assumptions that may not hold up once the work begins.

"Understanding fees first starts with a clear definition of the project scope. From there, you need a realistic understanding of the project itself so you can set expectations early and build a framework that actually supports the work."

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

Defining Scope to Create Alignment

Scope is often documented as part of a proposal, but its role extends well beyond that. It sets the expectations for what will be delivered and how the project will move forward.

When scope is loosely defined, the project tends to evolve in ways that are difficult to track. Additional requests come up during design conversations. Details are refined beyond what was initially anticipated. Coordination expands as more information is introduced. Each step feels reasonable, yet the overall effort gradually increases.

This is where misalignment begins.

A clearly defined scope creates a shared understanding between the team and the client. It outlines what is included, what is not, and how decisions will be made as the project progresses. That clarity supports better communication and makes it easier to manage changes when they arise.

It also provides a reference point for the team. When expectations are defined early, decisions throughout the project can be made with greater consistency.

Establishing a Realistic Construction Cost

With scope in place, the next step is to develop a realistic view of construction cost. This is often done through a Rough Order of Magnitude, or ROM, based on past projects, local market conditions, and the specific characteristics of the project.

This number is not intended to be precise, and it is not meant to be used as a commitment to the client. It is an internal tool that helps establish a clear understanding of the scale of the project.

Construction cost can vary significantly depending on location, quality level, materials, and the team involved in building the project. Having a grounded perspective on these variables is essential. When the cost assumption is off, the decisions that follow are affected as well.

There is often a gap between a client's initial expectations and what a project will realistically require. Closing that gap is an important part of the early conversation. It requires context, examples, and a willingness to guide the discussion so that expectations are aligned before moving forward.

When this step is handled thoughtfully, it sets a steady foundation for everything that follows.

Bringing Scope and Cost Together

Scope defines the work. Construction cost defines the scale. Together, they create the context for the fee.

When both are clearly understood, the fee can be evaluated in a more meaningful way. It reflects the level of service required and supports how the project will be delivered. When either is unclear, the fee becomes more difficult to manage and more likely to shift over time.

Spending the time to define these elements early in the process makes the rest of the work more predictable. It creates a starting point that can be carried through the proposal, the planning process, and the execution of the project.

Two Ways to Build a Fee

Once scope and construction cost are clearly defined, the conversation around fees becomes more grounded. The project has shape. The scale is understood. Decisions can be made with more context.

At this stage, many firms rely on a single method to determine their fee. A percentage is applied based on project type, or a number is set based on past experience. These approaches can be useful, but on their own they rarely tell the full story.

A more dependable process looks at the project from multiple perspectives and tests whether the fee holds up.

"I like to have as many data points as possible when looking at any project. The fee is one part of it, but you also need to consider the client, the market, your team, your experience, and whether the project actually makes sense for your firm."

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

The Top-Down Approach

The top-down approach begins with construction cost. A percentage is applied based on project type, complexity, and what feels appropriate for the market.

This method is widely used because it is efficient. It provides a quick way to establish a fee range and compare opportunities. It can also be helpful early in a conversation when limited information is available.

It offers a useful reference point, but it comes with limitations. Projects that appear similar on paper can require very different levels of involvement. The client's expectations, the level of detail required, and the composition of the team can all influence how the work unfolds.

A percentage alone does not account for those differences. It provides context, but not certainty.

For example, a project with a construction cost of $2.8 million might suggest a fee of roughly $140,000 based on a percentage. For one firm, that may be entirely appropriate. Another firm, with a different team structure or level of involvement, may find that the same project requires a different level of effort to deliver successfully. The percentage provides a reference point, but it does not determine what the project will actually demand.

The Bottom-Up Perspective

The bottom-up perspective starts by looking at the work itself.

The project is considered in phases. The level of effort required in each phase is evaluated. The team structure and schedule are taken into account. The goal is to understand what it will take to move the project from one stage to the next in a way that is consistent with the defined scope.

This way of thinking brings a different level of clarity. It connects the fee to how the project will actually be delivered. It also makes it easier to evaluate whether the plan is realistic before the work begins.

When the structure of the project is understood in this way, it becomes easier to manage as it progresses. Expectations are clearer, and decisions can be made with a stronger sense of direction.

Using Both to Build Confidence

Each approach offers something different. The top-down method provides a sense of where the fee sits within a broader context. The bottom-up perspective provides a clearer understanding of how the work will unfold.

When both are considered together, they begin to inform each other.

The top-down approach helps answer whether the fee feels appropriate for the project.

The bottom-up perspective helps determine whether the project can be delivered within that framework.

When those two perspectives align, the fee becomes more reliable. When they do not, it is an indication that something needs to be revisited. That adjustment may come through refining the scope, rethinking the approach, or having a more direct conversation with the client about expectations.

Thinking in Data Points

Beyond these two approaches, strong decisions are supported by a range of inputs.

Past projects provide the most valuable reference point. Looking back at similar work and understanding how it performed offers insight that external benchmarks cannot match. It reveals patterns in how the team operates, where effort tends to expand, and what it takes to deliver at the level the firm expects. Over time, this becomes one of the most reliable tools in the fee estimation process.

The current workload of the team also plays a role. A project that fits well within available capacity will be approached differently than one that stretches resources. The complexity of the work, the level of coordination required, and the experience needed to deliver it all influence how the project will unfold.

There is also an intuitive layer to this process. Early conversations often reveal signals that are difficult to quantify but important to recognize. Clarity of communication, alignment on goals, and how decisions are made can all shape the trajectory of a project. Paying attention to these signals can help identify potential challenges before they become embedded in the work.

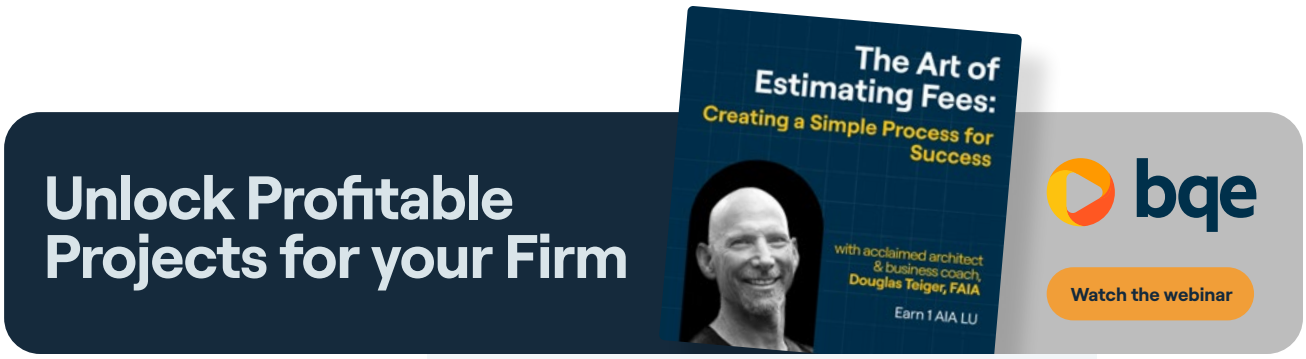
Looking at a project through multiple data points creates a more complete picture. It shifts the decision away from a single number and toward a broader evaluation of fit.

A Process That Improves Over Time

This approach does not need to be fully defined from the start. It can be developed and refined over time.

Each project adds another reference point. Assumptions can be tested, adjusted, and improved. Patterns become easier to recognize. Decisions become more consistent.

Over time, what begins as a structured process becomes part of how the firm operates. The goal is not perfection, but clarity and continuous improvement.



The Art of Estimating Fees

Structuring the Fee and the Proposal

Once a fee has been evaluated and tested, the next step is translating that thinking into a proposal the client can understand and respond to.

This is where many important decisions become visible. The structure of the proposal shapes how the fee is interpreted, how conversations unfold, and how the project is carried forward. It sets the tone for the working relationship and establishes a shared understanding of what the project will require.

A well-structured proposal does more than present a number. It defines the work in a way that can be clearly understood and managed over time.

"It's important to be clear about what is included and what is not. When you structure your proposal so the client can choose the level of service they need, it creates clarity for them and protects the integrity of your work."

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

Two Ways to Structure a Fee

There are many ways to organize a proposal, but most approaches fall into two general categories. Each reflects a different way of guiding the client through the scope of the project.

Full-Service (Lump Sum)

A full-service proposal presents the project as a complete scope. The work is defined across all phases, and the fee is delivered as a single number or structured through phase-based payments.

This approach works well when the scope is well understood and the firm has a consistent way of delivering it. It simplifies the decision for the client and keeps the focus on the outcome rather than the individual components.

It also requires discipline within the firm. The scope must be defined with precision, and the team must understand how the work will be executed within that framework. When that structure is in place, a full-service proposal provides a clear path forward for both the client and the team.

Tiered or Selective Services

A selective services approach introduces a different way of structuring the conversation. The project is organized in layers, beginning with a defined base scope and followed by optional services that can be included as needed.

One of the most practical ways to apply this is through the distinction between a permit set and a more fully developed architectural scope. A permit set may satisfy regulatory requirements, but it does not always include the level of detailing, coordination, and refinement that some clients expect as the project progresses.

By structuring the proposal around this distinction, the client is able to see what is required to move the project forward and what can be expanded based on their priorities. The conversation shifts from negotiating a single number to understanding the scope of work and making informed decisions about it.

This structure also provides a way to manage how the project evolves. Optional services are not absorbed gradually. They are identified, discussed, and incorporated intentionally.

Defining the Level of Service

One of the more difficult aspects of structuring a proposal is determining the appropriate level of service for each stage of the project.

Projects tend to expand when the boundaries between what is required and what is preferred are not clearly defined. Drawings are taken further than necessary. Details are developed beyond the original intent. Coordination extends into areas that were not part of the initial scope.

These decisions are often made with good intent, but over time they change the nature of the work.

A more deliberate approach involves defining what is needed to move the project forward at each stage. This includes understanding what a permit set requires, what level of development is appropriate during design, and how much detail is necessary to support construction.

When these expectations are established early, the team can work with greater focus. The project progresses in a way that reflects the original plan, and optional work can be addressed as it arises.

Separating High-Variability Work

Not all parts of a project can be predicted with the same level of confidence. Some phases follow a more defined path, while others are influenced by external factors.

Construction administration is a common example. The level of involvement depends on the pace of construction, the contractor, and the number of issues that arise in the field. Treating this work as a fixed effort can introduce unnecessary risk.

Separating this work within the proposal allows for a more realistic approach. It provides a structure for discussing expectations and adjusting the level of involvement as the project progresses.

This principle can be applied more broadly. When areas of variability are identified early, they can be managed more effectively throughout the project.

The Role of Language in Shaping the Conversation

The way a proposal is written influences how it is received.

Describing additional services as "optional" presents them as deliberate choices. It gives the client a clear understanding of what is available and how it relates to the overall project. Describing the same services as "add-ons" can shift the tone of the conversation and make the work feel incremental rather than intentional.

These distinctions may seem minor, but they shape how the proposal is understood. Clear, direct language supports a more productive discussion. It helps the client understand the scope of work and the decisions involved, rather than focusing solely on the fee.

When the proposal is structured thoughtfully and communicated clearly, it becomes a tool for guiding the project from the outset.

Translating Fees Into Schedule, Team, and Execution

A fee begins as a decision. It becomes meaningful when it is translated into how the work will actually be carried out.

Up to this point, the focus has been on defining scope, understanding cost, and structuring the proposal. Those steps establish direction. The next step is to turn that direction into a plan the team can follow and adjust as the project moves forward. Without that translation, the project tends to unfold in response to immediate needs. Decisions are made as they arise, effort expands to meet expectations, and the original assumptions behind the fee gradually fade into the background.

"When you start to lay this out, you begin to see how the project actually works. You are connecting the scope, the schedule, and the team in a way that lets you understand whether the plan makes sense before the work begins."

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

A more deliberate approach connects the fee directly to how the project will be executed. That begins by organizing the work into phases that reflect how the project will progress. Each phase represents a stage of development, with its own set of decisions, deliverables, and coordination requirements. Thinking in phases creates a structure for the work and establishes natural points to step back and evaluate how the project is moving forward.

These phases become much more useful when there is a shared understanding of what progress actually means. Terms like 25 percent, 50 percent, and 75 percent are often used, but they can mean very different things depending on who is interpreting them. Without a common definition, teams may believe they are aligned when they are not.

A more effective approach is to define what completion looks like at each stage. This does not require rigid standards, but it does require clarity around the level of development expected as the project advances. In practical terms, that often looks like:

- 25 percent: Establishing overall direction, key assumptions, and the primary design approach

- 50 percent: Developing the project to a point where the direction can be evaluated with confidence
- 75 percent: Refining and coordinating the work so that it is approaching completion

Having a PDF example of a similar project defining what 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100% looks like is critical to setting expectations for all of your staff members working on the project. In addition, having a QA/QC checklist for each of the percentages above, in addition to a graphic example of the deliverables, is ideal. When I talk about systems and processes, this is one of the critical ones to assist firm profitability.

Among these milestones, the midpoint carries particular importance. By the time a project reaches 50 percent, enough work has been completed to understand how it is taking shape. Early decisions begin to show their impact, and patterns start to emerge. This creates an opportunity to step back and assess whether the project is moving in the right direction.

At that point, the questions are straightforward but important. Is the work aligned with the intended outcome? Is the level of development appropriate for this stage? Are there areas where the approach should be adjusted before moving forward? Addressing these questions at the midpoint allows for meaningful changes while there is still time to make them. Later in the process, the ability to shift direction or confirm progress in alignment with billing becomes more limited.

As the phases and milestones are defined, the schedule begins to take shape. This is where it becomes important to distinguish between time and effort. A project schedule reflects more than the work itself. It includes client review periods, coordination with consultants, permitting timelines, and other factors that influence when decisions are made. As a result, the duration of a phase does not always correspond directly to the level of effort required.

Recognizing this distinction helps create a more realistic plan. It allows the team to account for pauses in progress as well as periods that require more focused attention. It also supports better coordination across the broader project team, where timing is often influenced by factors outside the firm's control.

Even with a well-defined plan, variability is part of every project. Conditions change, decisions evolve, and not every assumption will hold. One way to account for this is to introduce a modest internal buffer within the project framework. This is not something presented to the client, but a way of managing the work with greater consistency.

By planning with a slightly reduced internal target, the team creates room to absorb smaller shifts without losing momentum. This approach provides flexibility within a structured process and reduces the likelihood that minor issues grow into larger challenges. Over time, it becomes a practical way to maintain stability across projects, even as conditions vary.

At this stage, the fee has been translated into something the team can work with. The phases are defined, expectations are clearer, and the schedule reflects how the project will unfold. The final step is making sure that understanding is shared across the team.

When expectations are communicated early, decisions tend to align more closely with the overall direction of the project. The team has a clearer sense of how the work should progress and how each stage connects to the next. This does not require rigid control. It requires a consistent understanding of the plan and a willingness to revisit it as the project evolves.

Managing the Fee Throughout the Project

A well-structured fee creates a strong starting point for a project. How it is managed determines how the project unfolds.

It is common for the level of discipline applied during proposal development to ease once the work begins. The project moves forward, decisions are made, and progress is measured by milestones and deliverables. Over time, the connection between the original plan and the day-to-day work can begin to loosen.

> **"The goal is to think through the process at the beginning, but just as important is tracking it through the life of the project so you can stay aligned and maintain a healthy profit."**
>
> —Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

This shift is gradual. It rarely comes from a single decision. More often, it develops through a series of small adjustments. A request from a client leads to additional coordination. A design iteration takes longer than expected. A decision is revisited. Each step is reasonable in isolation, yet the cumulative effect can move the project away from its original framework.

Managing the fee is the process of maintaining that connection.

It begins with maintaining visibility into how the project is progressing relative to the plan. This does not require complex systems, but it does require consistency. At regular intervals, the project should be reviewed with an understanding of where it stands and how it is moving forward. The goal is not to control every detail, but to remain aware of how decisions are shaping the overall trajectory of the work.

In practice, this often comes down to a small set of recurring questions:

- Is the project progressing as expected for this stage?
- Are we working at the level of development that was intended?
- Have there been changes that should be addressed now rather than later?

These conversations are most effective when they happen early and consistently. Adjustments made at the right time tend to be smaller and more manageable. When they are delayed, the options become more limited.

As the project progresses, patterns begin to emerge. Areas of the work may require more attention than anticipated. Coordination may expand. The scope

may evolve in ways that were not fully defined at the outset. Recognizing these shifts early allows for a more thoughtful response.

This is also where communication becomes essential. When expectations are discussed with the team at the beginning of each phase, there is a clearer understanding of how the work should move forward. The team is better positioned to make decisions that align with the overall direction of the project, and there is a stronger sense of shared responsibility.

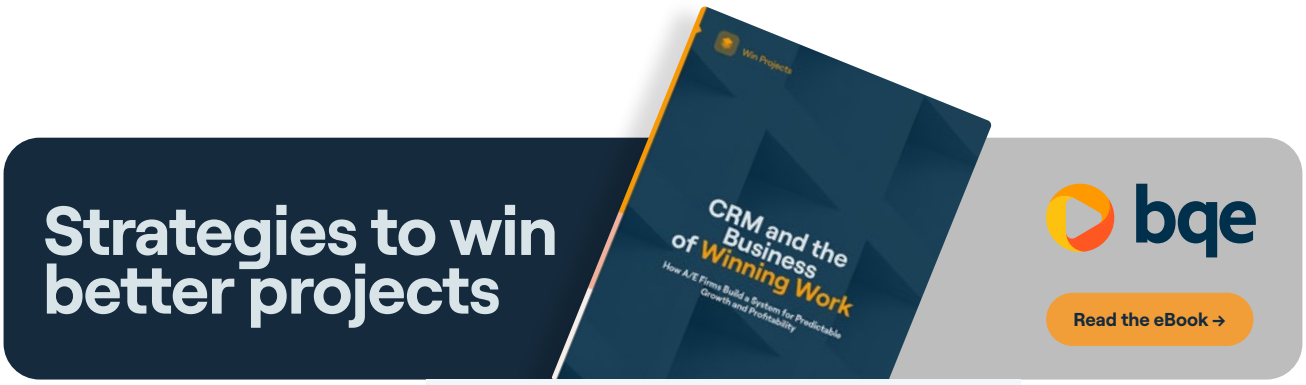
In many cases, it is helpful to involve key team members in the proposal stage as well. Early input can provide a more realistic perspective on how the work will be approached and can create a stronger connection between the plan and its execution.

When changes do occur, having a defined structure makes it easier to respond. The original scope provides a reference point. Decisions can be evaluated against that framework, and conversations with the client can be grounded in a clear understanding of what was intended. This allows adjustments to be addressed directly, rather than absorbed gradually into the work.

Timing matters in these conversations. When additional services are identified and discussed before the work is fully completed, they can be incorporated in a way that feels natural and aligned with the project. When they are addressed after the fact, the conversation becomes more difficult.

Over time, each project becomes a source of insight. Patterns develop around where effort tends to expand, where assumptions hold, and where they need to be adjusted. Capturing that information creates a stronger foundation for future decisions.

This is how the process becomes more consistent. Each project builds on the last, refining the approach and strengthening the connection between how fees are developed and how projects are delivered.



Conclusion: Designing Fees That Lead to Better Firms

Estimating fees is often treated as a step in winning work. A number to define, present, and move past as the project begins. In practice, it plays a much larger role. The way a fee is developed influences how a project is defined, how decisions are made, and how the work is carried forward. When that process is inconsistent, those same challenges tend to surface during execution. When it is structured and intentional, it creates a steady foundation from the outset.

"Plan your projects, define the scope, understand the cost, and build your fee around a system that supports the work. When everything is aligned, the project becomes much easier to manage and much more likely to be profitable."

—Douglas Teiger, FAIA, Founder at Teiger Consulting

Throughout this ebook, a clear approach has taken shape. Projects begin with a defined scope and a realistic understanding of construction cost. Fees are considered from multiple perspectives and evaluated within the context of how the work will be delivered. Proposals are structured to reflect that thinking and to establish clear expectations. The project is then organized into phases, supported by a schedule, and aligned with the team responsible for carrying it forward. As the work progresses, that structure provides a reference point for evaluating decisions and maintaining direction.

Each part of the process reinforces the next, creating a more consistent way of working over time. Projects become easier to plan and manage. Teams operate with a clearer understanding of what is expected. Conversations with clients are more grounded, and decisions are made with greater awareness of how they affect the overall outcome. This also strengthens the connection between the work being delivered and the results it produces, allowing projects to move forward with a clearer sense of purpose and direction.

This process does not need to be implemented all at once. It can be developed gradually, with each project serving as an opportunity to refine how scope is defined, how fees are structured, and how work is managed. Over time, patterns emerge, decisions become more consistent, and the process becomes part of how the firm operates.

For firm leaders, this represents a shift in perspective. Estimating fees becomes part of how projects are designed, not just how they are priced. It shapes how teams are aligned, how expectations are set, and how work is delivered from beginning to end. Firms that approach it this way do more than improve their proposals. They build a more stable, more predictable, and more intentional way of working.

Turn your fee strategy into a system

The process outlined in this ebook works best when everything is connected. BQE CORE brings your projects, financials, and team planning into one place so you can manage fees with clarity from start to finish.

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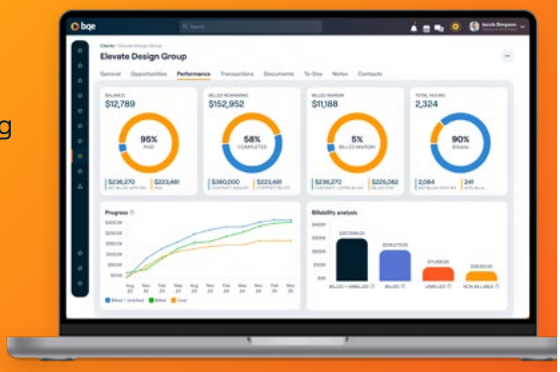

About the Author

Douglas Teiger, FAIA

Founder, Teiger Consulting

Douglas Teiger is an architect, advisor, and founder of Teiger Consulting, where he works with architecture firms to strengthen how they define scope, structure fees, and manage projects. With more than 40 years of experience in practice, his work is grounded in a deep understanding of how firms operate and how they grow.

Doug began his career working in architectural firms before opening his own practice in 1989. In 1999, he co-founded Abramson Teiger Architects, where he served as managing partner for two decades. During that time, the firm grew from six to more than thirty people, earning a reputation for consistently strong design work. A key part of that success came from Doug's focus on streamlining operations, allowing the firm to dedicate more time and attention to design and project research.

That experience now informs his consulting work. Doug helps firm leaders connect the business side of architecture with the work itself, bringing structure to areas that are often handled informally. His approach to fee estimating reflects that perspective. He teaches firms how to align scope, cost, and delivery into a cohesive system that supports both project outcomes and financial performance.

Beyond project and financial strategy, Doug works closely with firm principals on broader aspects of practice. His work often includes strategic planning, operations, marketing, and business development, along with guidance on team structure and long-term growth. He is known for acting as a sounding board for firm leaders, helping them think through decisions with greater clarity and confidence.

At the core of his work is a commitment to mentorship. Doug focuses on helping emerging and growing firms accelerate their development while building a more balanced and sustainable approach to practice. He brings a practical, experience-based perspective to that work, shaped by decades of leadership and hands-on involvement in projects.

Douglas holds a B.A. in Architecture from Cornell University, where he graduated with honors, and is a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (FAIA), a distinction recognizing his contributions to the profession and his impact on architectural practice.

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Running a better architecture or engineering firm takes more than experience. It requires clear insight, practical tools, and guidance you can trust. This is where we can help. Our resource library is built for firm leaders who want to improve financial performance, strengthen project delivery, and make more confident decisions. Inside, you will find webinars that turn complex topics into clear actions, articles that challenge how firms operate and grow, and reports and ebooks grounded in real data and experience.

You can also put ideas into practice with tools, templates, and checklists designed for immediate use, connect with peers through user groups, and learn from real customer success stories. Every resource is created with one goal in mind: to help you run a better firm. Explore what is most relevant to you and take the next step forward

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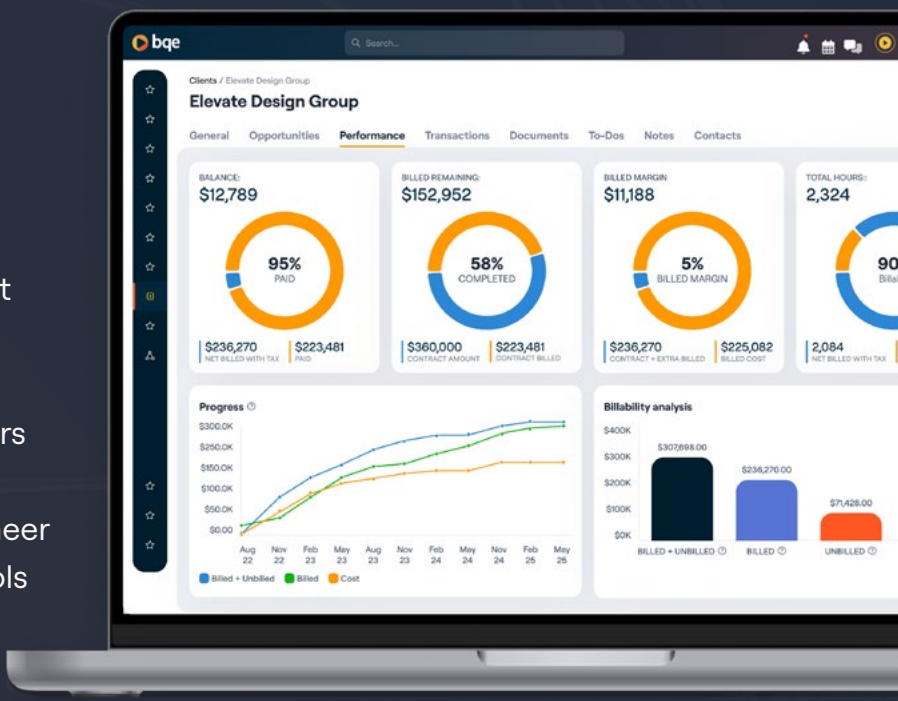
BQE CORE

If you're serious about improving efficiency and profitability, you need access to technology that makes the process of tracking Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) straightforward. BQE CORE is an all-in-one firm management platform with integrated accounting and project management tools that's backed by a company with over 30 years of experience and countless end users worldwide. It was designed by an engineer and architect to give their firms the tools they needed to thrive. Thus all of the built-in features are designed to address the pain points A/E firms typically face.



BQE CORE can streamline your business processes, while simultaneously providing groundbreaking insights that will help grow your firm, all from the convenience of a desktop computer, laptop, or mobile device. BQE CORE makes it easier than ever to collaborate with both your team and clients.

Running your business should be exciting, not chaotic. That's why we're here, and most importantly, why we developed CORE.

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