

# A Comparative Study of Cost Estimation Models for Web Hypermedia Applications

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## Abstract

Software cost models and effort estimates help project managers allocate resources, control costs and schedule and improve current practices, leading to projects finished on time and within budget. In the context of Web development, these issues are also crucial, and very challenging given that Web projects have short schedules and very fluidic scope. In the context of Web engineering, few studies have compared the accuracy of different types of cost estimation techniques with emphasis placed on linear and stepwise regressions, and Case-based Reasoning (CBR). To date only one type of CBR technique has been employed in Web engineering. We believe results obtained from that study may have been biased, given that other CBR techniques can also be used for effort prediction.

Consequently, the first objective of this study is to compare the prediction accuracy of three CBR techniques to estimate the effort to develop Web hypermedia applications and to choose the one with the best estimates.

The second objective is to compare the prediction accuracy of the best CBR technique against two commonly used prediction models, namely stepwise regression and regression trees.

One dataset was used in the estimation process and the results showed that the best predictions were obtained for stepwise regression.

## 1. Introduction

Software practitioners recognise the importance of realistic estimates of effort to the successful management of software projects, the Web being no exception. Having realistic estimates at an early stage in a project's life cycle allow project managers and development organisations to manage resources effectively.

In the context of Web development, cost estimation is also crucial, and very challenging given that:

- Web projects have short schedules and a fluidic scope (Pressman, 2000).
- There is no standard to sizing Web applications since they can be created using diverse technologies such as several varieties of Java (Java, servlets, Enterprise java Beans, applets, and Java Server Pages), HTML, JavaScript, XML, XSL, and so on.
- Web development differs substantially from traditional approaches (Reifer, 2002)

- Web project's primary goal is to bring quality applications to market as quickly as possible, varying from a few weeks (Pressman, 2000 ) to 6 months (Reifer, 2002).
- People involved in Web development are represented by less experienced programmers, users as developers, graphic designers and new hires straight from university (Reifer, 2002).
- Typical project size is small, using 3 to 7 team members (Reifer, 2002).
- Processes employed are in general ad hoc, although some organisations are starting to look into the use of agile methods (Ambler, 2002).

Several techniques for cost and effort estimation have been proposed over the last 30 years in software engineering, falling into three general categories (Shepperd et al., 1996):

1) **Expert judgement (EJ)** – EJ has been widely used. However, the means of deriving an estimate are not explicit and therefore not repeatable. Expert opinion, although always difficult to quantify, can be an effective estimating tool on its own or as an adjusting factor for algorithmic models (Gray et al., 1999).

2) **Algorithmic models (AM)** – AM, to date the most popular in the literature, attempt to represent the relationship between effort and one or more project characteristics. The main “cost driver” used in such a model is usually taken to be some notion of software size (e.g. the number of lines of source code, number of pages, number of links). Algorithmic models need calibration or adjustment to local circumstances. Examples of algorithmic models are the COCOMO model (Boehm, 1981), the SLIM model (Putnam, 1978).

3) **Machine learning (ML)** - Machine learning techniques have in the last decade been used as a complement or alternative to the previous two categories. Examples include fuzzy logic models (Kumar et al., 1994), regression trees (Selby and Porter, 1998), neural networks (Srinivasan and Fisher, 1995), and case-based reasoning (Shepperd et al., 1996). A useful summary of these techniques is presented in (Gray and MacDonell, 1997b).

An advantage of AM over ML and EJ is to allow users to see how a model derives its conclusions, an important factor for verification as well as theory building and understanding of the process being modelled (Gray and MacDonell, 1997b). Algorithmic models need to be calibrated relative to the local environment in which they are used, considered by some to be an advantage (Kok et al., 1990; DeMarco, 1982).

Over the past 15 years numerous comparisons have been made in software engineering between the three categories of prediction techniques aforementioned, based on their prediction power (Gray and MacDonell, 1997a; Gray and MacDonell, 1997b; Briand et al., 1999; Briand et al. 2000; Jeffery et al., 2000; Jeffery et al., 2001; Myrtveit and Stensrud, 1999; Shepperd et al., 1996; Shepperd and Schofield, 1997; Kadoda et al., 2001; Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001; Kemerer, 1987; Angelis and Stamelos, 2000; Finnie et al., 1997; Schofield, 1998; Hughes, 1997). However, as the datasets employed had differing characteristics (outliers, collinearity, number of features, number of cases etc) and they engaged different comparative designs, it is of little surprise that no convergence has been obtained to date.

In addition, Shepperd and Kadoda (2001) suggest that there is a strong relationship between the success of a particular technique and training set size, nature of the “cost” function and characteristics of the dataset (outliers, collinearity,

number of features, number of cases etc), concluding that the “best” prediction technique might not be the right idea to follow.

Most cost estimation comparisons in the software engineering literature use size attributes (e.g. lines of code, function points) of conventional software as effort predictors. This paper looks at cost estimation modelling techniques based on size attributes of Web hypermedia applications instead.

The World Wide Web (Web) has become the best known example of a hypermedia system. To date, numerous organisations world-wide have developed thousands of commercial and/or educational Web applications. The Web has been used as the delivery platform for two types of applications: Web hypermedia applications and Web software applications (Christodoulou et al., 2000). A Web hypermedia application is a non-conventional application characterised by the authoring of information using nodes (chunks of information), links (relations between nodes), anchors, access structures (for navigation) and its delivery over the Web. Technologies commonly used for developing such applications are HTML, JavaScript and multimedia. In addition, typical developers are writers, artists and organisations who wish to publish information on the Web and/or CD-ROM without the need to know programming languages such as Java. These applications have great potential in areas such as software engineering (Fielding and Taylor, 2000), literature (Tosca, 1999), education (Michau et al., 2001), and training (Ranwez et al., 2000).

A Web software application, on the other hand, represents any conventional software application that depends on the Web or uses the Web's infrastructure for execution. Typical applications include legacy information systems such as databases, booking systems, knowledge bases etc. Many e-commerce applications fall into this category. The technology employed here are COTS components, components such as DCOM, OLE, ActiveX, XML, PHP, dynamic HTML, databases, and development solutions such as J2EE. Typical developers are young programmers fresh from a Computer Science or Software Engineering degree, managed by a few more senior staff.

Over the last three years our research has focused on proposing and comparing (Mendes et al., 2000; Mendes et al., 2001a; Mendes et al., 2001b; Mendes et al., 2002a; Mendes et al., 2002b) cost estimation techniques for Web hypermedia applications. The techniques used are Case-based Reasoning (CBR), linear and stepwise regressions. The only previous study that compared all three techniques, using only one type of CBR, showed better prediction accuracy for CBR. However, as design decisions (e.g. similarity measure, analogy adaptation), when building CBR prediction systems, are influential upon the results (Kadoda et al., 2000), we believe results obtained previously may have been biased, given that there are others CBR techniques that could also be used for effort prediction.

Consequently, this paper has two objectives: the first is to compare the prediction accuracy of three CBR techniques to estimate the effort to develop Web hypermedia applications and to choose the one that gives the best estimates, according to several measures of accuracy. The second objective is to compare the best CBR technique, according to our findings, against two commonly used cost modelling techniques, namely stepwise regression and regression trees.

Our research objectives are reflected in the following questions:

- 1) Will different combinations of parameter categories (e.g. similarity measure, analogy adaptation) for the CBR technique generate statistically significantly different prediction accuracy?

2) Which of the techniques employed in this study gives the most accurate predictions for the dataset?

These issues are investigated using a dataset containing 37 Web hypermedia projects developed by postgraduate and MSc students attending a Hypermedia and Multimedia Systems course at the University of Auckland. Several confounding factors, such as Web authoring experience, tools used, structure of the application developed, were controlled, so increasing the validity of the obtained data.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review and places this paper in the context of existing research. Section 3 describes the cost modelling techniques we employ in this study. Section 4 gives details on the dataset used. Results of our comparisons are presented in Section 5 and Section 6 presents our conclusions and comments on future work.

## 2. Related Work

To our knowledge, there are relatively few examples in the literature of studies that compare cost estimation techniques for Web hypermedia applications (Mendes et al., 2000; Mendes et al., 2001b; Mendes et al., 2002a; Mendes et al., 2002b). Most research in Web/hypermedia engineering has concentrated on the proposal of methods, methodologies and tools as a basis for process improvement and higher product quality (Garzotto et al., 1993; Schwabe and Rossi, 1994; Balasubramanian et al., 1995; Coda et al., 1998).

Mendes et al. (2000) (**1<sup>st</sup> study**) describes a case study involving the development of 76 Web hypermedia applications structured according to the Cognitive Flexibility Theory (CFT) (Spiro et al., 1995) principles in which length size and complexity size measures were collected. The measures obtained were page count, connectivity, compactness (Botafogo et al., 1992), stratum (Botafogo et al., 1992) and reused page count. The original dataset was split into four homogeneous datasets of sizes 22, 19, 15 and 14 respectively. Several prediction models were generated for each dataset using three cost modelling techniques, namely multiple linear regression, stepwise regression, and case-based reasoning. Their predictive power was compared using the Mean Magnitude of Relative Error (MMRE) and the Median Magnitude of Relative Error (MdmRE) measures. Results showed that the best predictions were obtained using Case-based Reasoning for all four datasets. Limitations of this study are: i) some measures used were highly subjective, which may have influenced the validity of their results; ii) they applied only one CBR technique, measuring similarity between cases using the unweight Euclidean distance and calculating the estimated effort using 1 analogy and the mean for 2 and 3 analogies; iii) they compared predictions using only MMRE and MdmRE. As MMRE in fact measures the spread of  $z$  ( $z$ =estimate/actual) rather than the accuracy (Kitchenham et al., 2001), other measures, such as boxplots of residuals and boxplots of  $z$ , should be used as alternatives or complement to summary statistics.

Mendes et al. (2001b) (**2<sup>nd</sup> study**) describes a case study in which 37 Web hypermedia applications were used. These were also structured according to the CFT principles and the Web hypermedia measures collected were organised into five categories: length size, complexity size, reusability, effort and confounding factors. Size and reusability measures were used to generate top down and bottom up prediction models using linear and stepwise regression techniques. They compared the predictive power of the regression models using the MMRE measure. Both techniques presented similar

results. Limitations of this study are: i) they applied two very similar techniques, omitting techniques such as CBR and regression trees. ii) they compared predictions using only MMRE.

The work we present in this paper is an extension of the **2<sup>nd</sup> study**. We use the same dataset to investigate CBR techniques and regression trees, and compare results using MMRE, MdmRE, Pred(25), boxplots of residuals and boxplots of  $z$ . We compare different cost modelling techniques based on training and validation sets, randomly generated from the original dataset. All models generated are top-down.

Mendes et al. (2002a) (**3<sup>rd</sup> study**) presents a case study where size measures of 37 Web hypermedia applications were collected. Those measures correspond to three size categories, namely Length, Complexity and Functionality. This work also used the same dataset employed on the **2<sup>nd</sup> study**, however this time we investigated if different size measures would lead to statistically significant different predictions. The aim was not to look for the “best” technique, but to compare size measures, organised in three categories. Length and Complexity size measures had been collected when the data was initially gathered. Functional size was manually measured for each Web application developed, which had been saved on a CD-ROM. The COSMIC-FFP (1999) approach was used to measure functional size. For each size category we generated prediction models using linear and stepwise regressions and assessed the prediction accuracy using boxplots of the residuals (Kitchenham et al., 2001). Results suggested that all the models offered similar prediction accuracy, indicating that relative to this dataset, it would not matter which size category is used. The work presented in this paper uses size measures that reflect two categories (length and complexity). We have limited our analysis to size measures which reflect current industrial practices for developing multimedia and Web hypermedia applications (Cowderoy, 2000; Cowderoy et al., 1998). We also believe that functional size measures are more suited to Web software applications, as they reflect applications exhibiting high degree of functionality manipulating structured data, in contrast to Web hypermedia applications, which exhibit unstructured data and high navigability with low functionality.

Mendes et al. (2002b) (**4<sup>th</sup> study**) applies on another Web hypermedia dataset (25 cases) (DS2) the same three CBR techniques we are employing in this paper. Regarding DS2, each application was developed by subject pairs. The size measures collected were the same we use here, except for RMC and RPC. Despite DS2 presenting very different characteristics to the one we employed in this paper, e.g., there is no linear relationship between size and effort, collinearity is 2/5, several outliers. The best results were also obtained using the weighted Euclidean distance, where higher weights were given to Page count (total number of HTML files) and Media count (total number of media files). They measured prediction accuracy using MMRE, MdmRE and Pred(25). The limitation of this study is that it did not use boxplots of residuals or boxplots of  $z$ . Both results converged suggesting that measures such as Page count and Media count may indeed be strong candidates as effort predictors for the type of Web application we focus. In practice, we have come across several Web consulting organisations who use those two size measures when costing Web hypermedia development projects. Therefore, our results are an indication that we are at least heading in the right direction.

### **3. Cost Modelling Techniques**

#### **3.1 Choice of Techniques**

Several cost modelling techniques have been compared in the Software engineering literature. Three of which, multiple linear regression, stepwise regression and case-based reasoning, have also been compared in the Web engineering literature.

For the scope of this paper we selected a subset of techniques based on the following criteria:

- **Can the technique be automated?** (Briand et al., 1999)

Similar to (Briand et al., 1999; Briand et al., 2000), we use a computationally intensive cross-validation approach to calculate the accuracy values, opting for automated techniques.

- **Has the technique been used previously in Software or Web engineering?** (Briand et al., 1999)

By choosing techniques that had been used in Software and/or Web engineering would give the opportunity to compare results, where applicable, looking for convergence with other techniques previously used.

- **Are the results easy to understand from a practitioner's point of view?** (Briand et al., 1999)

If cost modelling techniques are to be used by practitioners they should be easily understood to aid facilitation.

- **Do the techniques chosen assume a highly contrasting approach to generate a prediction?**

We wanted to compare techniques that generated predictions with a high degree of difference, similarly to (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001).

- **Does the technique represent an area of significant research activity by the software metrics community?**

We wanted to use techniques that represent areas of research activity in the community, also similarly to (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001).

Based on the criteria aforementioned we chose the following techniques:

- Case Based Reasoning (CBR)
- Stepwise Regression (SWR)
- Regression Trees (CART)

### 3.2 Case-based Reasoning

The rationale for CBR is the use of historical information from completed projects with known effort. It involves (Angelis and Stamelos, 2000):

- Characterising a new active project  $p$ , for which an estimate is required, with attributes (features) common to those completed project stored in the case base. In our context most features represent size measures which have a bearing on effort. Feature values are normally standardized (between 0 and 1) such that they have the same degree of influence on the results.
- Use of this characterisation as a basis for finding similar (analogous) completed projects, for which effort is known. This process can be achieved by measuring the “distance” between two projects, based on the values for the  $k$  features for these projects. Although numerous techniques can be used to measure similarity, nearest neighbour algorithms

(Okamoto and Satoh, 1995) using unweighted Euclidean distance measure have been the most widely used in Software and Web engineering.

- Generation of a predicted value of effort for project  $p$  based on the effort for those completed projects that are similar to  $p$ . The number of similar projects normally depends on the size of the dataset. For small datasets typical values are 1, 2 and 3 closest neighbours (analogies). The calculation of estimated effort is often obtained by using the same effort value of the closest neighbour, or the mean of effort values (2 or more analogies). In Software engineering and Web engineering a common choice is the nearest neighbour or the mean for 2 and 3 analogies.

When using CBR there are a number of parameters to decide upon (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001):

- Feature Subset Selection
- Similarity Measure
- Scaling
- Number of analogies
- Analogy Adaptation

Each parameter in turn can be split into more detail, and maybe incorporated for a given CBR tool, allowing several CBR configurations.

Each parameter is described below. We also indicate our choice and the motivation for each within this study.

All the results for CBR were obtained using CBR-Works (Schulz, 1995), a commercially available CBR tool.

### 3.2.1 Feature Subset Selection

Feature subset selection involves determining the optimum subset of features that give the most accurate estimation. Some existing CBR tools, e.g. ANGEL (Shepperd and Schofield, 1997) optionally offer this functionality by applying a brute force algorithm, searching for all possible feature subsets. CBR-Works does not offer such functionality, therefore every time we had to obtain an estimated effort, we used all features in order to retrieve the most similar cases.

### 3.2.2 Similarity Measure

Similarity Measure measures the level of similarity between cases. Several similarity measures have been proposed in the literature, however the ones we will describe here and use in this study are the unweighed Euclidean distance, the weighted Euclidean distance and the Maximum distance. Readers are referred to (Angelis and Stamelos, 2000) for details on other similarity measures. The motivation for using unweighed Euclidean (UE) and Maximum (MX) distances is that they have been previously used with good results in cost estimation studies (UE: Shepperd and Schofield, 1997; Mendes et al., 2000; MX: Angelis and Stamelos, 2000) and are applicable to quantitative variables, as in our case. The weighted Euclidean was also chosen as it seemed reasonable to give different weights to our size measures (features) in order to reflect the importance of each, rather to expect all size measures to have the same influence on effort. Our dataset has seven size measures (section 4.2), representing different facets of size. Each similarity measure we used is described below:

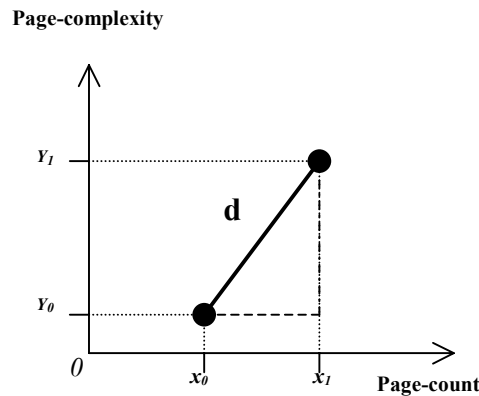
*Unweighted Euclidean distance:*

The Unweighted Euclidean distance measures the Euclidean (straight-line) distance  $d$  between the points  $(x_0, y_0)$  and  $(x_1, y_1)$ , given by the formula:

$$d = \sqrt{(x_0 - x_1)^2 + (y_0 - y_1)^2} \quad (1)$$

This measure has a geometrical meaning as the distance of two points in the n-dimensional Euclidean space (Angelis and Stamelos, 2000). Figure 1 illustrates this distance by representing co-ordinates in E2. The number of features employed determines the number of dimensions.

**Figure 1 - Weighted Euclidean distance using two size attributes**



*Weighted Euclidean distance:*

The weighted Euclidean distance is used when features vectors are given weights that reflect the relative importance of each feature. The weighted Euclidean distance  $d$  between the points  $(x_0, y_0)$  and  $(x_1, y_1)$  is given by the formula:

$$d = \sqrt{w_x(x_0 - x_1)^2 + w_y(y_0 - y_1)^2} \quad (2)$$

where  $w_x$  and  $w_y$  are the weights of  $x$  and  $y$  respectively.

In the context of this investigation we have used all features to generate every estimation. However, when using the weighted Euclidean, we attributed weight=2 to those features that presented statistically significant correlation ( $\alpha=0.01$ ) with Total effort, based on Pearson correlation coefficient test. Remaining features were given weight =1. The choice of weights, despite being subjective, was not decided blindly. The three features that received the highest weights were the same three selected by the stepwise regression technique, demonstrating that they were clearly the ones strongly related to total effort. However, the choice of weights is still an opened research question which needs further investigation.

*Maximum measure:*

The maximum measure computes the highest feature similarity, which is the one to define the closest analogy. For two points  $(x_0, y_0)$  and  $(x_1, y_1)$ , the maximum measure  $d$  is equivalent to the formula:

$$d = \sqrt{\max((x_0 - x_1)^2, (y_0 - y_1)^2)} \quad (3)$$

This effectively reduces the similarity measure down to a single feature, although the maximum feature may differ for each retrieval episode. In other words, although we used 7 size features, for a given “new” project  $p$ , the closest project in the case base will be the one that has at least one size feature that has the most similar value to the same feature for that project  $p$ .

### 3.2.3 Scaling

Scaling or Standardisation represents the transformation of attribute values according to a defined rule such that all attributes have the same degree of influence and the method is immune to the choice of units (Angelis and Stamelos, 2000). One possible solution is to assign zero to the minimum observed value and one to the maximum observed value (Kadoda et al., 2000). This is the strategy used by ANGEL. We have scaled all features used in this study by dividing each feature value by that features range, similarly to ANGEL.

### 3.2.4 Number of Analogies

The number of analogies refers to the number of most similar cases that will be used to generate the estimation. According to Angelis and Stamelos (2000) when small sets of data are used it is reasonable to consider only a small number of analogies. Several studies in software engineering have restricted their analysis to the closest analogy ( $k=1$ ) (Briand et al., 1999; Briand et al., 2000; Myrveit and Stensrud, 1999). However, we decided to use 1, 2 and 3 analogies, similarly to (; Jeffery et al., 2001; Angelis and Stamelos, Schofield, 1998; Mendes et al., 2000; Mendes et al., 2001a; Jeffery et al., 2000).

### 3.2.5 Analogy Adaptation

Once the most similar case(s) has/have been selected the next step is to decide how to generate the estimation for the “new” project  $p$ . Choices of analogy adaptation techniques presented in the Software engineering literature vary from the nearest neighbour (Briand et al., 1999; Jeffery et al., 2001), the mean of the closest analogies (Shepperd and Schofield, 1997), the median (Angelis and Stamelos, 2000), inverse distance weighted mean and inverse rank weighted mean (Kadoda et al., 2000), to illustrate just a few. In the Web engineering literature, the adaptations used to date are the nearest neighbour and mean of the closest analogies (Mendes et al., 2000; Mendes et al., 2001a), and the inverse rank weighted mean (Mendes et al., 2002b).

We opted for the mean, median and the inverse rank weighted mean. Each adaptation and the motivation for using it are explained as follows:

- **Mean:** Represents the average of  $k$  analogies, when  $k > 1$ . Typical measure of central tendency, that has been used often in the Software eng Web engineering literature. Treats all analogies as being equally influential on the outcome.
- **Median:** Represents the median of  $k$  analogies, when  $k > 2$ . Another measure of central tendency, a more robust statistics when the number of closest projects increases (Angelis and Stamelos, 2000). Although this measure when used by Angelis and Stamelos (2000) did not present good results, measured using MMRE and Pred(25), we wanted to observe how it would behave for our dataset.
- **Inverse rank weighted mean:** Allows higher ranked analogies to have more influence than lower ones. If we use 3 analogies, for example, the closest analogy (CA) would have weight = 3, the second closest (SC) weight = 2 and the last one (LA) weight = 1. The estimation would then be calculated as  $(3*CA + 2*SC + LA)/6$ . It seemed reasonable to us to allow higher ranked analogies to have more influence than lower ranked ones, so we decided to use this adaptation as well.

### 3.3 Stepwise Regression

Stepwise regression (Schroeder et al., 1986) builds a prediction model by adding to the model, at each stage, the variable with the highest partial correlation to the response variable, taking into account all variables currently in the model. Its aim is to find the set of predictors that maximise  $F$ .  $F$  assesses whether the regressors, taken together, are significantly associated with the response variable. The criteria used to add a variable is whether it increases the  $F$  value for the regression by some specified amount  $k$ . When a variable reduces  $F$ , also by some specified amount  $w$ , it is removed from the model.

Stepwise regression has been frequently used as a benchmark (Shepperd et al., 1996; Kadoda et al., 2001; Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001; Mendes et al., 2001b) and is regarded by some as a good prediction technique (Kok et al., 1990).

All statistical analyses presented in the paper, except for CBR and CART models, were conducted using the statistical software SPSS v.10.01 (Kinnear and Gray, 1999).

### 3.4 Regression Trees (CART)

The objective of CART (Brieman et al., 1984) models is to develop a simple tree-structured decision process for classifying an observation *obs*. The partitioning criteria are simple tests on single features: for numerical variables numerical thresholds are used (e.g., Q: is  $MeC > 1.5$ ); for categorical variables feature values are used (e.g., Q: is authoring experience high?).

Trees used for problems with numerical features are often called *regression trees* and trees used for problems with categorical features are often called *classification trees*. As all our features are numerical, we are using in this study a regression tree.

CART models build a binary tree by recursively partitioning the predictor space into subsets where the distribution of the response variable is successively more homogeneous. The partition is determined by splitting rules associated with each

of the internal nodes. Each observation is assigned to a unique leaf node, where the conditional distribution of the response variable is determined.

The best splitting for each node is searched based on a "purity" function calculated from the data. The data is considered to be pure when it contains data samples from only one class. The least squared deviation (LSD) measure of impurity was applied to our dataset. This index is computed as the within-node variance, adjusted for frequency or case weights (if any). For most cases we set the maximum tree depth to 5, the minimum number of cases in a parent node to 2 and the minimum number of cases in child nodes to 1. We looked to trees that gave the small risk estimates (SRE), which were set at a minimum of 95%, and calculated as:

$$SRE = 100 * \left( 1 - \frac{\text{node - error}}{\text{explained - variance}} \right) \quad (4)$$

where *node-error* is calculated as the within-node variance about the mean of the node. *Explained-variance* is calculated as the within-node (error) variance plus the between-node (explained) variance.

By setting the SRE to a minimum of 95% we believe that we have captured the most important variables.

Our regression trees were generated using SPSS Answer Tree version 2.1.1.

## 4. Data Collection

### 4.1 Description

All analysis presented in this paper was based on a dataset containing information for 37 Web hypermedia applications developed by postgraduate students.

Two questionnaires were used to collect the data. The first<sup>1</sup> asked subjects to rate their Web authoring experience using five scales, from no experience (one) to very good experience (five). The second questionnaire<sup>2</sup> was used to measure characteristics of the Web applications developed (suggested metrics) and the effort involved in designing and authoring those applications. On both questionnaires, we describe in depth each scale type, to avoid any misunderstanding. Members of the research group checked both questionnaires for ambiguous questions, unusual tasks, number of questions and definitions in the Appendix.

To reduce learning effects, subjects were given a coursework prior to designing and authoring the Web applications, which consisted of:

- Creating a simple personal homepage.
- Designing a multi-page Web application.
- Creating a Web site the Matakoho Kauri Museum<sup>3</sup>, improving on their existing site.
- Loading the Web pages onto a Web server.

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<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire is available at <http://www.cs.auckland.ac.nz/~emilia/Assignments/exp-questionnaire.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire is available at <http://www.cs.auckland.ac.nz/~emilia/Assignments/questionnaire.html>.

Finally, all subjects received training on the Cognitive Flexibility Theory authoring principles for approximately 150 minutes.

#### 4.2 Measures

Each Web hypermedia application provided 46 variables (Mendes et al., 2001b), from which we identified 8 (Table 1), to characterise a Web hypermedia application and its development process. These variables form a basis for our data analysis. Total effort is our dependent/response variable and the other 7 variables are our independent/predictor variables. All variables were measured on a ratio scale.

Table 2 outlines the properties of the dataset used. The original dataset of 37 observations had three outliers where total effort was unrealistic compared to duration. Those outliers were removed from the dataset, leaving 34 observations. Collinearity represents the number of statistically significant correlations with other independent variables out of the total number of independent variables (Kadoda et al., 2001).

Summary statistics for all the variables are presented on table 3.

**Table 1 - Size and Complexity Metrics**

Measure	Description
Page Count (PaC)	Number of html or shtml files used in the application.
Media Count (MeC)	Number of media files used in the application.
Program Count (PRC)	Number of JavaScript files and Java applets used in the application.
Reused Media Count (RMC)	Number of reused/modified media files.
Reused Program Count (RPC)	Number of reused/modified programs.
Connectivity Density (COD)	Total number of internal links divided by Page Count.
Total Page Complexity (TPC)	Average number of different types of media per page.
Total Effort (TE)	Effort in person hours to design and author the application

**Table 2 - Properties of the dataset**

Number of Cases	Features	Categorical features	Outliers	Collinearity
34	8	0	0	2/7

**Table 3 - Summary statistics for all variables**

Variable	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Std. deviation	Skewness
<b>PaC</b>	55.21	53	33	100	11.26	1.85
<b>MeC</b>	24.82	53	0	126	29.28	1.7
<b>PRC</b>	0.41	0	0	5	1.04	3.27
<b>RMC</b>	42.06	42.50	0	112	31.60	0.35
<b>RPC</b>	0.24	0	0	8	1.37	5.83
<b>COD</b>	10.44	9.01	1.69	23.30	6.14	0.35
<b>TPC</b>	1.16	1	0	2.51	0.57	0.33
<b>TE</b>	111.89	114.65	58.36	153.78	26.43	-0.36

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hmu.auckland.ac.nz:8001/gilchrist/matakohe/>.

All the measures collected, apart from total effort, were checked against the original Web hypermedia applications to ensure that variables were precisely measured. Total effort was calculated as:

$$Total\text{-}effort = \sum_{i=1}^{i=n} PAE + \sum_{j=0}^{j=m} MAE + \sum_{k=0}^{k=o} PRE \quad (5)$$

where *PAE* is the *page authoring effort*, *MAE* the *media authoring effort* and *PRE* the *program authoring effort* (Mendes et al., 2001b). When the dataset was collected, two levels of granularity were used to measure the total effort to develop a Web hypermedia application: the first level (**L1**) collected effort with respect to coarser sub-tasks related to the application's development process (e.g., effort to plan the interface, effort to test all links in the whole application); the second level (**L2**) collected effort with respect to finer levels of granularity related to sub-tasks at the page, media and program levels (e.g. effort to create links for each page, effort to digitise each media etc). To record the finer levels of granularity subjects were given forms created using a spreadsheet, similar to those used in the PSP method (Humphrey, 1995). Although forms do not prevent the introduction of error in the data collection activity (Johnson and Disney, 1999), we chose to use total-effort based on the finer granularity measures. We used a Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test ( $\alpha = 0.01$ ) to check if L1 and L2 came from the same population. No statistically significant results were obtained. Although these results do not mean that the two samples come from the same population, we cannot prove that they do *not* come from the same population.

### 4.3 Threats to Validity

In this section we give our comments on the validity of the case study based on three types of threats to validity of an empirical study (Kitchenham et al., 1995):

- Construct validity, that represents to what extent the predictor and response variables precisely measure the concepts they claim to measure.
- Internal validity, that represents to what extent conclusions can be drawn about the causal effect of the predictor variables on the response variables.
- External validity, that represents the domain to which a study's findings can be generalised.

#### 4.3.1 Construct validity

The criteria used to select our size measures was (Cowderoy, 2000): i) practical relevance for Web hypermedia developers; ii) measures which are easy to learn and cheap to collect; iii) measures which can be estimated early in the development. This applies in particular to PaC, MeC and RMC. iv) counting rules which were simple and consistent.

All size measures were re-measured to ensure that the information given by subjects was correct.

Some of our size measures (PaC and MeC) are currently used by Web consulting organisations to give preliminary costs to develop an application.

Effort, as mentioned earlier, was collected using two levels of granularity, L1 and L2, where L1 used a questionnaire to gather effort data on coarser sub-tasks related to the application's development process (e.g., effort to plan the interface, effort to test all links in the whole application); L2 gathered effort with respect to finer levels of granularity related to sub-tasks at the page, media and program levels (e.g. effort to create links for each page, effort to digitise each media etc). Subjects had to fill in three different spreadsheets, related to page, media and program effort respectively, leading to a time consuming activity. Further investigation of the data revealed that most values for effort, for a specific item (create a link, create an image, scan an image etc), were either very similar or quite often the same, suggesting that subjects used values they previously agreed upon, rather than measuring their own separately. It seemed as if they all had spent the same amount of time to create an image, write a link and so on. As all students had very similar Web authoring experiences and one could argue that the same effort is a consequence of having the same experience, although not possible to justify for all 34 subjects.

Effort is notoriously difficult to measure accurately, even within the same organisation (Maxwell, 2001). A recent study (Shepperd and Cartwright, 2001) described a case in which the total effort gathered for the same project, by three different sources in the same organisation differed in over 30%.

We do not wish to claim that our effort data has not been biased, however, when one of the authors inquired some Web development organisations whether the total effort values given would be realistic in practice for the types of Web hypermedia applications developed, the answers obtained indicated that they were.

We are aware that unless effort and duration are collected automatically, there will always be a very high probability to have obtained biased data. In light of that we have developed a measurement tool, to be used in an experiment in the second semester/2002, that measures automatically effort and duration. This tool will be available free of charge for the metrics community, hoping that it will help academics and organisations alike to gather reliable effort and duration data.

#### 4.3.2 Internal validity

There were four confounding factors in the case study evaluation:

- Subjects' Web development experience.
- Maturation effects, i.e. learning effects caused by subjects learning as an experiment proceeds.
- Structure of the application.
- Tools used to help develop the Web hypermedia application.

The data collected revealed that:

Subjects' development experiences were mostly scaled little (experience=2) or average (experience=3), with a low skill differential<sup>4</sup>. A scatterplot between experience and effort was used to investigate their relationship. Most datapoints fell within the same clusters, either for experience 2 or 3. Consequently the original dataset was left intact.

Prior to developing the Web hypermedia applications, subjects had to develop a small Web hypermedia application as part of a previous coursework. In addition, they all received training in the CFT principles, reducing maturation effects.

Notepad (or similar text editor) and FirstPage were the two tools most frequently used. Notepad is a simple text editor while FirstPage is freeware offering button-embedded HTML tags. Although they differ with respect to the functionality offered, a scatterplot between total-effort and tool revealed that for both tools most datapoints fell within the same clusters. Consequently, confounding effects from the tools were reduced.

The instrumentation effects in general did not occur in this evaluation; the questionnaires used were the same.

#### 4.3.3 External validity

The results may be domain dependent as all subjects answered the questionnaires based on their experience in developing Web hypermedia applications for education. This evaluation should therefore be repeated in domains other than education if the results are to be generalised to other domains.

The web hypermedia applications developed were all static, having a mean of 55 pages, 24 original media files and 42 reused media files per application. Recently one of the authors had to search on the Web for several examples of static Web hypermedia applications and, out of a total of 30 applications, more than half had on average 25-30 pages, well below our average of 55. Therefore, we are convinced that our applications can be representative of small to medium size (Lowe and Hall, 1998) static Web hypermedia applications.

Our dataset contains 34 projects. This is not a large dataset. However, if compared to the size of software datasets publicly available<sup>5</sup>, 34 is above their median of 26 projects.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that subjects had only two weeks to develop their applications, which would roughly correspond to an average effort of 0.9 person/month. Despite Web projects normally lasting for a short period of time (often less than one of two months) (Pressman, 2000), or up to six months (Reifer, 2002), two weeks would only be representative of projects that are very short. Consequently, further investigation based on Web hypermedia projects with longer duration are necessary in order to make results applicable to a wider range of projects.

In terms of financial risks for stakeholders, and assuming our dataset to be representative of Web hypermedia projects, our comments are as follows:

If we estimate a project to use 111 person/hours (effort mean), and it uses another 24 person/hours (roughly 3 working days), that would represent an increase of 21.6% on schedule and costs. Suppose that the organisation developing the application charges 100 dollars per person/hour. The total cost of 11,100 dollars would have an increase of 2,160 dollars. If our reality represents small organisations and small clients, that increase in costs would be significant.

Subjects had very similar Web authoring experience and were either final year undergraduate students or MSc students. It is likely that they present skill sets similar to Web professionals at the start of their careers (Reifer, 2002).

Each Web hypermedia application was developed by one subject. This might not be representative of typical Web projects involving 3 to 7 team members. However, if our focus is on small Web development organisations where sometimes the total number of employees is not greater than a handful, having a single person developing a Web hypermedia application

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<sup>4</sup> low difference between skill levels

<sup>5</sup> Albrecht with 24; Atkinson with 21; Desharnais with 81; Finnish with 38; Kemerer with 15; Mermaid with 28. Information obtained from (Shepperd

is more likely to occur. The organisation might employ, for example, one graphics designer who does all the graphics and interface design, and a few programmers who develop applications on HTML + Javascript. If that is the case, our prediction models do not need to assume large project teams such that individual performance be cancelled out. In addition, for small organisations, it is more likely that they will employ individuals who already have a reasonable expertise in what they do, in order to reduce risks.

Finally, the use of students as subjects was the only viable option for this case study.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Summary statistics and Measures of Prediction Accuracy

The most common approaches to date to assess the predictive power of effort prediction models have been:

- The Magnitude of Relative Error (**MRE**) (Kemerer, 1987)
- The Mean Magnitude of Relative Error (**MMRE**) (Shepperd et al., 1996)
- The Median Magnitude of Relative Error (**MdMRE**) (Myrtveit and Stensrud, 1999)
- The Prediction at level  $n$  (**Pred(n)**) (Shepperd and Schofield, 1997)

MRE is the basis for calculating MMRE and MdMRE, and defined as:

$$MRE = \frac{|e - \hat{e}|}{e} \quad (6)$$

where  $e$  represents actual effort and  $\hat{e}$  estimated effort.

The mean of all MREs is the MMRE, which is calculated as:

$$MMRE = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^{i=n} \frac{|e_i - \hat{e}_i|}{e_i} \quad (7)$$

The mean takes into account the numerical value of every observation in the data distribution, and is sensitive to individual predictions with large MREs.

An option to the mean is the median, which also represents a measure of central tendency, however it is less sensitive to extreme values. The median of MRE values for the number  $i$  of observations is called the MdMRE.

Another indicator which is commonly used is the Prediction at level  $l$ , also known as  $Pred(l)$ . It measures the percentage of estimates that are within  $l\%$  of the actual values. Suggestions have been made (Conte et al., 1986) that  $l$  should be set at 25% and that a good prediction system should offer this accuracy level 75% of the time.

Although MMRE, MdMRE and  $Pred(l)$  have emerged as the de facto standard evaluation criteria to assess the accuracy of cost estimation models (Stensrud et al., 2002), recent work by Kitchenham et al. (2001) shows that MMRE and  $Pred(l)$  are respectively measures of the spread and kurtosis of  $z$ , where  $(z = \frac{\hat{e}}{e})$ . They suggest boxplots of  $z$  and boxplots of the

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and Kadoda, 2001).

residuals ( $e - \hat{e}$ ) (Pickard et al., 1999) as useful alternatives to simple summary measures since they can give a good indication of the distribution of residuals and  $z$  and can help explain summary statistics such as MMRE and Pred(25) (Kitchenham et al., 2001).

Therefore, we compare the accuracy of different techniques using boxplots of  $z$  and boxplots of residuals and also show summary statistics such as MMRE, MdMRE and Pred(25). In some circumstances, we have also used the EMRE (Magnitude of Relative Error relative to the Estimate) (Kitchenham et al., 2001). This measure, unlike MRE, uses the estimate as the divisor, and is defined as:

$$EMRE = \frac{|e - \hat{e}|}{\hat{e}} \quad (8)$$

In addition, we computed the absolute residuals, used to test the statistical significance of all the results. Since all absolute residuals for all the models used in this study were not normally distributed, as confirmed by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for non-normality, we used robust tests. When the data was naturally paired we used the Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test and the Mann-Whitney U Test otherwise, setting the confidence limit at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

## 5.2 Comparison of CBR Techniques

To compare the CBR techniques we used the jackknife method (also known as leave one out cross-validation). It is a useful mechanism for validating the error of the prediction procedure employed (Angelis and Stamelos, 2000). For our dataset, we repeated the steps described below 34 times (34 cycles), as we had 34 projects. All projects in our dataset were completed projects for which actual effort was known.

Step 1: Project number  $i$  (where  $i$  varies from 1 to 34) is removed from the case base such that it is considered a new project for the purpose of the estimation procedure.

Step 2: The remaining 33 projects are kept in the case base and used for the estimation process.

Step 3: The CBR tool finds the closest analogies, looking for projects that have feature values similar to the feature values for project  $i$ .

Step 4: Project  $i$ , which had been removed from the case base, is added back.

For each cycle we calculated the MRE, residual, absolute residual and  $z$ . In some cases we also calculated the EMRE. Therefore, the results in Table 4, figures 2 and 3 have been obtained by considering three similarity measures (unweighted Euclidean (UE), weighted Euclidean (WE) and Maximum (MX)), three choices for the number of analogies (1, 2 and 3) and three choices for the analogy adaptation (mean, inverse rank weighted mean and median).

Weighted Euclidean shows slightly better estimations than Unweighted Euclidean, where the best on both cases were obtained for the closest analogy. This result corroborates previous work (Kadoda et al., 2000; Briand et al., 1999; Shepperd and Schofield, 1997) where they did not find any statistical significance to support the hypothesis that accuracy improves when using more analogies.

The Maximum distance presented the worst results, suggesting that at least for Web hypermedia applications, one sole size measure is unlikely to be the most adequate choice. In general, all the results for UE and WE were good, if we

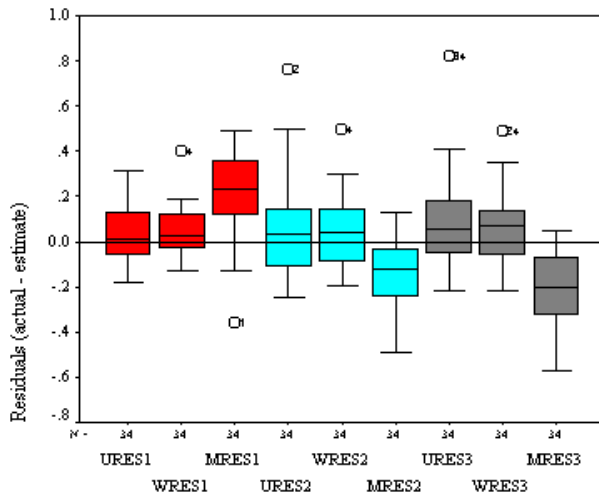
consider that an MMRE  $\leq 25\%$  suggests good accuracy level (Conte et al., 1986), similarly to an Pred(25)  $\geq 75\%$  (Conte et al., 1986).

**Table 4 - Comparison of CBR techniques**

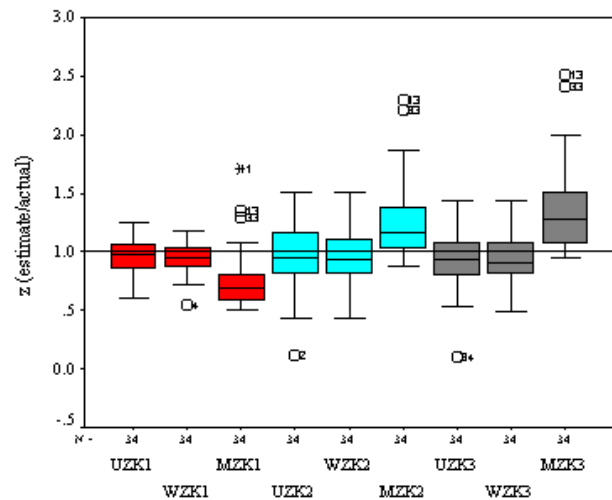
Distance	K	Adaptation	MMRE (%)	MdMRE (%)	Pred(25)	MEMRE (%)
Unweighted Euclidean	1	CA	12	10	88.24	14
		Mean	15	12	82.35	18
	2	IRWM	13	11	85.29	15
		Mean	14	11	82.35	17
	3	IRWM	13	12	85.29	16
		Median	14	10	76.47	15
CA		10	09	94.12	12	
Weighted Euclidean	2	Mean	13	11	94.12	15
		IRWM	12	11	97.06	14
	3	Mean	13	09	88.24	15
		IRWM	12	12	94.12	16
		Median	14	10	82.35	14
	Maximum	1	CA	32	34	26.47
Mean			23	17	67.65	
2		IRWM	25	23	58.82	
		Mean	25	15	76.47	
3		IRWM	23	16	67.65	
		Median	31	17	58.82	

CA – Closest Analogy      IRWM – Inverse Rank Weighted Mean

**Figure 2 – Boxplots of Residuals**



**Figure 3 – Boxplots of z**



Boxplots of the residuals suggest that:

- except for the maximum distance for 2 and 3 analogies, all medians presented values above zero, indicating that the estimates were biased towards underestimation.
- there was no symmetrical distribution.

- both UE and WE for one analogy, the ones that presented the best predictions according to the summary statistics, showed positively skewed distributions, where WE has a tighter spread and is more peaked than UE.

Both boxplots of residuals and boxplots of  $z$  suggest that WE for 1 analogy gives better predictions than other models: the box length and tails are smaller than the box length and the tails for other models. In addition, the outlier for the WE model for 1 analogy is less extreme than outliers from other models.

Most CBR models used in this study tend to underestimate, observed by the number of medians above zero, for boxplots of the residuals, and below one, for boxplots of  $z$ . These are not promising results for CBR, based on our dataset, as in most cases overestimates are less serious than underestimates (Kitchenham et al., 2001).

Although boxplots are useful as a graphical method of comparing predictions, they cannot confirm whether one technique is significantly better than another (Kitchenham et al., 2001). Therefore we tested the statistical significance of all CBR results using paired absolute residuals, since they are less vulnerable to bias than the MRE (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001). The results are presented in Table 5. Unsurprisingly, the Maximum distance, for 1 and 3 analogies, gave statistically significantly worse results than WE and UE. We found no significant differences in medians between WE and UE using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test.

If we take that MMRE and MEMRE measure respectively the variability of  $z$  and  $q$ , where ( $q=1/z$ ) (Kitchenham et al., 2001), we conclude that WE is less variable than UE, in particular for 1 analogy, suggesting that WE is better than UE. Based on all measures employed as summary statistics (MMRE, MdMRE, Pred(25) and MEMRE) ( Table 4) and boxplots of residuals and  $z$ , it is clear that, as the best result for the Weighted Euclidean distance uses the closest analogy, we did not need to compare the statistical significance within the WE group. Therefore, the technique we selected as the best CBR was the **Weighted Euclidean using the closest analogy**.

The answer to our first question was, for our dataset, *positive*. Different combinations of parameter categories for the CBR technique gave statistically significantly different prediction accuracy.

**Table 5 – Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for paired absolute residuals**

K	Distances	Wilcoxon test	K	Distances	Wilcoxon test	K	Distances	Wilcoxon test
1	WE vs. UE	-1.19 (a)	2	WE vs. UE	-0.82 (a)	3	WE vs. UE	-0.25 (a)
	MX vs. UE	-4.52* (b)		MX vs. UE	-1.37 (b)		MX vs. UE	-2.31* (b)
	MX vs. WE	-4.66* (b)		MX vs. WE	-1.63 (b)		MX vs. WE	-2.35* (b)
* statistically significant at 5%			(a) based on positive ranks			(b) based on negative ranks		

### 5.3 Comparison of CBR to Stepwise Regression and Regression Trees.

This section presents the results obtained when we compared the best CBR to stepwise regression and regression trees. To determine their accuracy we used a three-fold cross-validation approach, similarly to (Briand et al., 1999; Jeffery et al., 2001; Kadoda et al., 2001). Cross-validation involves dividing the whole dataset into multiple training and validation sets, calculating the accuracy (MRE, EMRE, residual, absolute residual,  $z$ ) for each project in a validation set  $v$ , and then aggregating the accuracy (MMRE, MdMRE, Pred(25), MEMRE) for that validation set  $v$ . A three-fold cross-validation yields three different training-validation set combinations. Each validation set is randomly generated from the original

dataset, and we use the remaining projects as the training set. There is no standard to what is the best size for training sets. However, as it seems that larger training sets reduce prediction errors (measured as absolute residuals) (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001) we decided to use two different types of split where there were always more projects in the training set than in the validation set, similarly to (Briand et al., 2000). The first (**SP1**) was a 66% split (23 observations in the training set and 11 in validation set) and the second (**SP2**) was a 86% split (29 observations in the training set and 5 in the validation set). We therefore had in total six different combinations for each technique employed. Having training sets of different sizes would also give an opportunity to compare their prediction accuracy using absolute residuals.

In addition to estimating effort based on training sets, we also used as estimated effort the mean effort, to assess if any cost estimation techniques would give significantly better results than the simple mean effort.

For the stepwise regression model we addressed several issues (Myrtveit and Stensrud, 1999):

- Does the model use the right and most important attributes?
- Is the formal model correctly specified?

To investigate the first issue we performed a Pearson's correlation looking for those attributes significantly correlated to total effort ( $\alpha=0.01$ ). Three attributes, namely Page Count (PaC), Media Count (MeC) and Reused Media Count (RMC), were commonly selected. This result supports information obtained from several practitioners regarding those attributes taken into consideration when bidding for Web hypermedia development projects.

To investigate the second issue we verified the distribution of the residuals looking for any unusual patterns. The analysis of the residuals did not indicate any non-linearity.

The final linear models for stepwise regression presented very high  $R^2$  (adj.) (Table 6), making it difficult not to choose stepwise regression as the best cost estimation technique for our dataset.

**Table 6 - Formulas for the Stepwise Regression Models**

Split	Version	Formula	$R^2$ adj.
SP1	v1	$5.107 + 1.276 \text{ PaC} + 0.644 \text{ MeC} + 0.490 \text{ RMC}$	0.957
	v2	$10.068 + 1.226 \text{ PaC} + 0.626 \text{ MeC} + 0.470 \text{ RMC}$	0.945
	v3	$5.712 + 1.256 \text{ PaC} + 0.653 \text{ MeC} + 0.495 \text{ RMC}$	0.967
SP2	v1	$5.295 + 1.284 \text{ PaC} + 0.619 \text{ MeC} + 0.490 \text{ RMC}$	0.97
	v2	$4.710 + 1.298 \text{ PaC} + 0.6 \text{ MeC} + 0.484 \text{ RMC}$	0.986
	v3	$5.325 + 1.292 \text{ PaC} + 0.589 \text{ MeC} + 0.476 \text{ RMC}$	0.985

Summary statistics for  $z$ , organised by split and versions, are presented in Table 7.

Boxplots of residuals<sup>6</sup> (Figures 4 and 5) suggest that stepwise regression gives the best prediction accuracy for SP1 and SP2, confirmed by the tests of significance using absolute residuals (Table 8). Boxplots of  $z$  (Figures 6 and 7) show very similar pattern for SP1 as presented by boxplots of residuals, however for SP2, some boxplots for CART (versions 2 and 3), although with distributions of higher spread than those for SW, did not show any statistical significance based on absolute residuals. All tests of significance were the same when we used paired MREs. These results were confirmed by the Wilcoxon Signed rank test based on absolute residuals (Table 8).

<sup>6</sup> CART variables are identified as RI, which stands for rule induction.

Predictions based on Stepwise regression models also presented statistically significant better predictions, measured using absolute residuals, than those using predicted effort as the mean total effort.

**Table 7 - Prediction Accuracy for the Techniques compared in this study**

Split	Version	Summary statistics using training set				Summary statistics using mean effort				
		Model	MMRE (%)	MdMRE (%)	Pred(25)	MMRE (%)	MdMRE (%)	Pred(25)	MEMRE (%)	
SP1	v1	CBR	12	09	90.91	14	20	13	63.64	16
		SW	03	03	100	03	29	25	54.55	23
		CART	22	11	81.82	16	29	25	54.55	23
	v2	CBR	16	15	63.63	18	29	24	54.55	22
		SW	04	04	100	04	35	25	54.55	24
		CART	15	08	81.82	13	35	25	54.55	24
	v3	CBR	09	06	90.90	11	23	11	81.82	19
		SW	03	02	100	03	18	18	81.82	18
		CART	13	11	90.91	17	18	18	81.82	18
SP2	v1	CBR	18	15	80	26	15	17	100	18
		SW	02	01	100	02	13	14	100	15
		CART	10	07	80	09	13	14	100	15
	v2	CBR	10	09	100	11	22	19	80	21
		SW	04	03	100	05	20	14	80	18
		CART	23	10	80	17	20	14	80	18
	v3	CBR	15	15	100	17	22	19	60	20
		SW	05	04	100	06	29	21	60	24
		CART	11	08	80	10	29	21	60	24

Except for CBR, SP1 v1, all boxplots of residuals showed skewed distributions, where Stepwise and CART tended to overestimate, and CBR tended to underestimate.

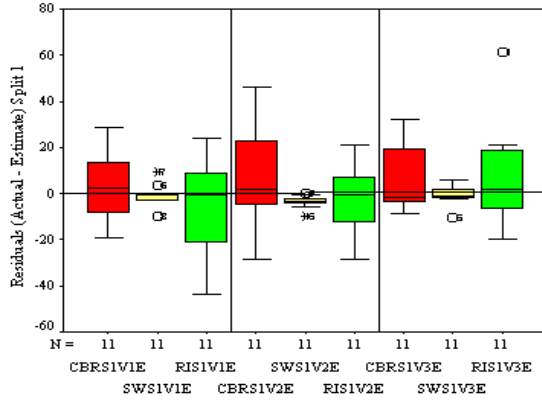
Regarding the variance of  $z$ , measured by MMRE, stepwise regression presented the lowest variance on both splits. For SP1, CBR presented lower variance than CART 2 out of 3 times, whereas, for SP2, CART was the one that presented lower variance than CBR 2 out of 3 times. This pattern was also observed for MEMRE and MdMRE.

Regarding Pred(25), which measures the extent to which the distribution of  $z$  peaks around its central value (Kitchenham et al., 2001), stepwise regression had the highest value 3 out of 3 times for SP1. For SP2, it shared the highest value with CBR twice and had the highest value 1 out of 3 times. CBR presented excellent values for Pred(25) for SP2, however, on average, similar results to CART for SP1.

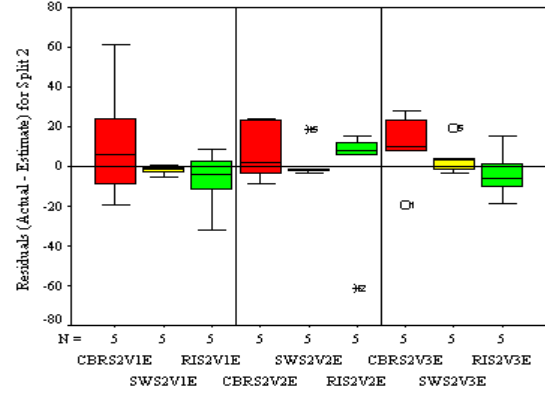
We did not find any statistical significance between CBR and CART, using absolute residuals. Boxplots of residuals and  $z$ , for SP1, show no striking differences between both techniques. However, when we examined boxplots (residuals and  $z$ ) for SP2, there was a noticeable difference between the spread of the distribution between CBR and CART, where CBR presents a larger spread and flatter distribution, in contrast to CART, that presents shorter spread and more peaked distribution.

It was surprising that, according to boxplots of residuals and  $z$  for SP2, CART presented better prediction accuracy than CBR, given that regression trees should, in principle, be used when there is a large number of nominal and ordinal scale variables and when there is no underlying linear model (Pickard et al., 1999).

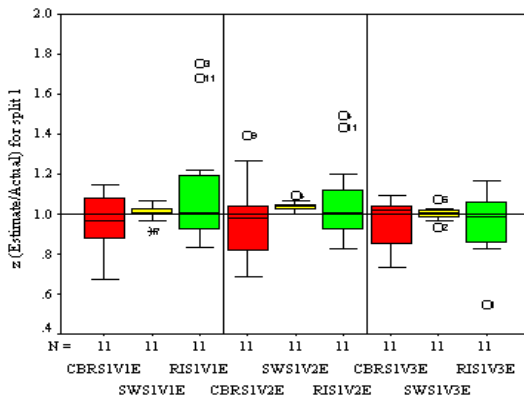
**Figure 4 - Boxplots of the Residuals for SP1 using model-based estimated effort**



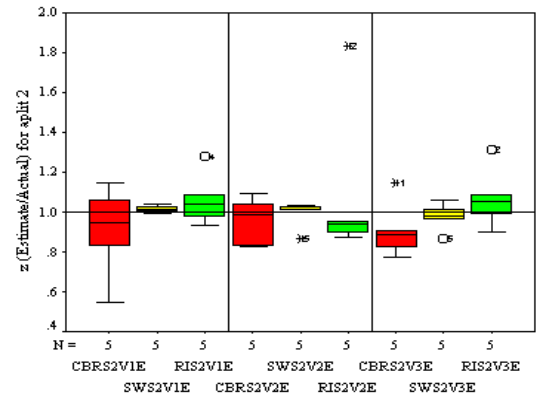
**Figure 5 - Boxplots of the Residuals for SP2 using model-based estimated effort**



**Figure 6 - Boxplots of z using model-based estimated effort**



**Figure 7 - Boxplots of z using model-based estimated effort**



Further investigation of the trees generated by the CART technique revealed that it only used three measures, PaC, MeC and RMC, the same also selected by the stepwise technique. This might explain the favourable results CART obtained for SP2.

We did not find that boxplots of the residuals are better behaved than boxplots of z, in terms of symmetry, as suggested in (Kitchenham et al., 2001).

Concerning CART and CBR, we did not find any statistical significance, based on absolute residuals, between predictions generated using the training sets and those using the mean actual effort, suggesting that, based on the characteristics of our dataset, it would make no difference if predictions were generated using CBR, CART or simply the mean effort. However, boxplots of z for CBR (Figure 8) and CART (Figure 9) show that often the predictions generated using a model are more accurate than those obtained using the mean actual effort.

**Table 8 - Comparison of Techniques**

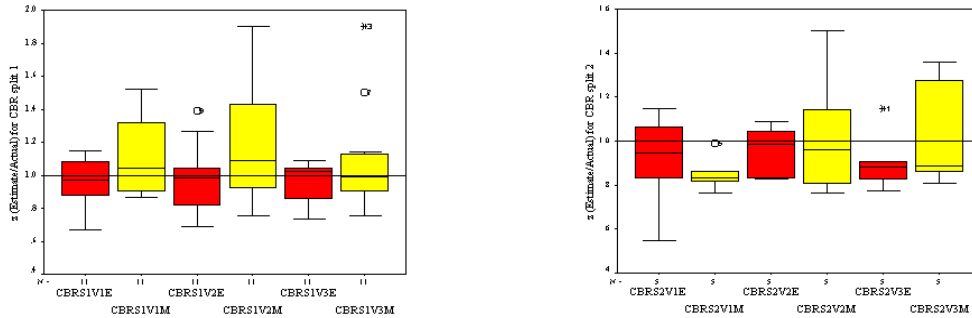
Split	Version	Models	Wilcoxon test	Split	Version	Models	Wilcoxon test
SP1	v1	SW vs. CBR	-2.93** (a)	SP2	v1	SW vs. CBR	-2.02* (a)
		CART vs. CBR	-1.16 (b)			CART vs. CBR	-0.94 (a)
		CART vs. SW	-2.76** (b)			CART vs. SW	-2.02* (b)
	v2	SW vs. CBR	-2.40* (a)		v2	SW vs. CBR	-1.75 (a)
		CART vs. CBR	-0.09 (a)			CART vs. CBR	-0.14 (b)
		CART vs. SW	-2.49* (b)			CART vs. SW	-1.48 (a)
	v3	SW vs. CBR	-2.67** (a)		v3	SW vs. CBR	-2.02* (a)
		CART vs. CBR	-0.71 (b)			CART vs. CBR	-1.21 (a)
		CART vs. SW	-2.85** (b)			CART vs. SW	-0.67 (b)

(a) based on positive ranks (b) based on negative ranks \* statistically significant at 95% \*\* statistically significant at 99%

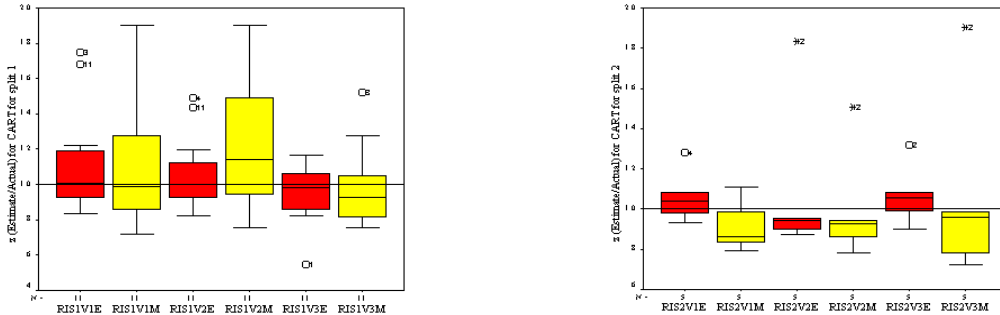
The answer to our second question is therefore **stepwise regression**, as it was the technique that gave the most accurate predictions for the dataset.

We generated Q-Q plots (Figure 10) for our measures (total effort, page count, media count, reused media count, connectivity density and total page complexity) in order to investigate if their values were normally distributed. Program count and reused program count have been omitted as they did not have enough points to conclude anything. As these plots did not show any large deviations from the straight line, we consider that our dataset had the characteristic “normal + collinearity” (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001). Therefore, our results confirm previous work where, for normal datasets with collinearity, stepwise regression had better prediction accuracy more often than CBR or CART (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001).

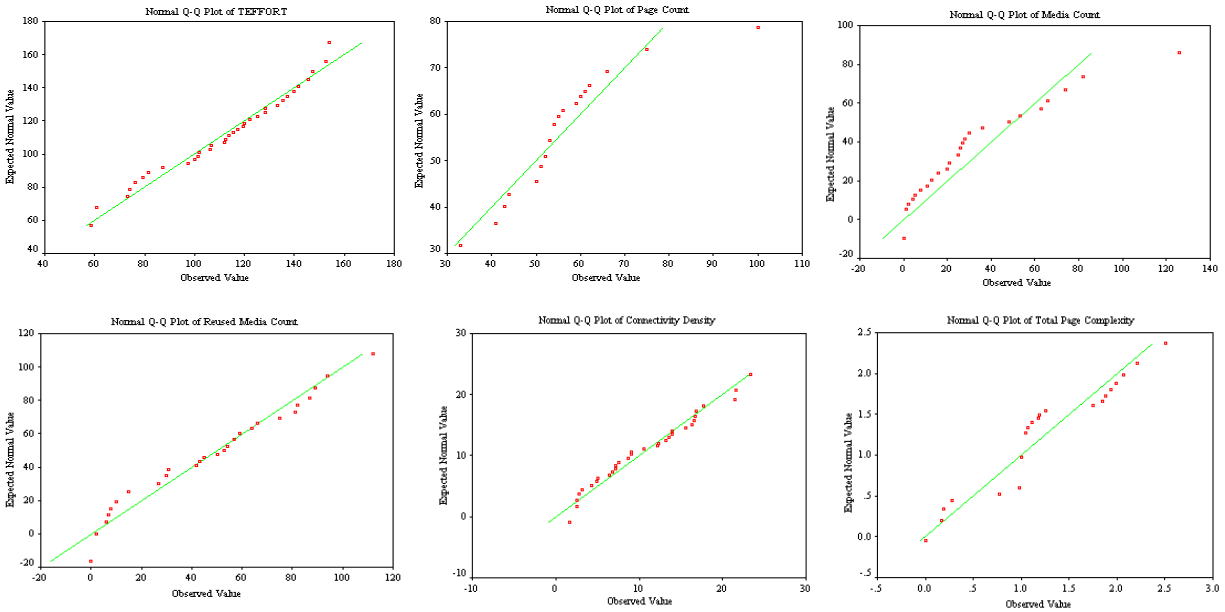
**Figure 8 - Boxplots of z for CBR for SP1 and SP2**



**Figure 9 - Boxplots of z for CART for SP1 and SP2**



**Figure 10 – Q-Q plots for dataset**



No statistical significance was found, based on the Mann-Whitney U test for absolute residuals, between results obtained for SP1 and SP2, for each different technique.

We found that boxplots of residuals and  $z$  were a useful aid to investigate prediction accuracy. In addition, except for SP2 v2, good accuracy, indicated by the boxplots of  $z$ , was always linked to small variance (small MMRE) and peaked distribution of  $z$  around the central value (high Pred(25)). These results might be dataset-related, and further investigation is necessary.

## 6. Conclusions and Future Improvements

In addressing the first question, our results show that the CBR technique that gave the most accurate results used as similarity measure the Weighted Euclidean distance, for the nearest neighbour.

In addressing the second question, our results show that given the characteristics of our dataset, stepwise regression showed the most accurate predictions, according to boxplots of residuals and  $z$ . This result confirms previous work (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001) where for a dataset with similar characteristics to ours, stepwise regression showed the best prediction accuracy most of the time.

We agree with (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001) that looking for “the best” technique applicable to any dataset is unlikely to lead us to the same conclusions and to lead us to converging results.

In the context of Web hypermedia cost estimation, the lessons learnt via this study are as follows:

- The size measures suggested, in particular PaC, MeC and RMC, seems reasonable size measures to be used by those involved in cost estimation for Web hypermedia projects.

- Our dataset represented Web hypermedia applications, so results should not be generalised to other contexts such as Web software development.
- The data presented a strong linear relationship between size and effort, leading to a high adjusted R squared. Although there is a strong indication that size and effort do indeed have a linear relationship (Dolado, 2001) for conventional software, further investigation into Web development is necessary in order to confirm the same trend for Web hypermedia/software applications.

Other more general conclusions are as follows:

Will datasets with strong linear relationship, but higher variance in the data values, give similar results to those obtained in this study?

Although CBR did not present good prediction accuracy, based on boxplots of residuals and  $z$ , compared to stepwise regression and even CART, there is still more to be investigated regarding this technique. For example, questions we wish to address as part of our future work are:

- What weights would give the best results for CBR?
- Would adaptation rules increase the prediction accuracy? What sort of adaptation rules?
- What other CBR techniques might give better results, given a dataset with similar characteristics to the one used in this study?
- To what extent feature subset selection helps obtaining more accurate predictions?

We are on the process of replicating this study using another dataset of Web hypermedia projects, addressing not only the questions asked in this paper, but also questions such as:

- What are the typical dataset characteristics that may be found in a Web hypermedia project dataset?
- To what extent do those datasets show similar characteristics to Web software project datasets and conventional software project datasets?
- Will our results on other datasets also converge with those found in (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001)?
- What are the best size measures for each type of Web application? To what extent is it dependent on a technological solution?

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Lionel Briand for his fairness and all the reviewers for their valuable comments.

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**Keywords:** Web hypermedia applications, effort prediction models, prediction accuracy, Case-based reasoning techniques, multiple regression models.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire is available at <http://www.cs.auckland.ac.nz/~emilia/Assignments/exp-questionnaire.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire is available at <http://www.cs.auckland.ac.nz/~emilia/Assignments/questionnaire.html>.

<sup>3</sup> low difference between skill levels

<sup>4</sup> Albrecht with 24; Atkinson with 21; Desharnais with 81; Finnish with 38; Kemerer with 15; Mermaid with 28. Information obtained from (Shepperd and Kadoda, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> CART variables are identified as RI, which stands for rule induction.