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How to Hire Architects, Engineers and Contractors

by James A. Kerns, P.E.

Whether starting fresh, remodeling, or simply doing repairs, there are times when you'll need the help of professionals to get things done right. When it comes to construction projects those professionals often come in the form of architects, engineers, and contractors. Unfortunately, finding the right firms for the job can sometimes seem like a daunting task. However, by following some simple guidelines, you can eliminate much of the guess work.

1. Define Goals

Before searching for a firm to work on your project, make sure you have a clear idea of what you want. You don't need to have every detail planned out, but having well defined goals will lead to more accurate estimates and a smoother process. Make sure you've thought through how the space will be used, how much space you need, where the project will be located, and what kind of budget you have.

2. Compile a Referral List

When you're ready, the first step is to compile a list of candidate firms. Ask friends, relatives, and colleagues about any experiences they've had. Try to find out how well firms performed, what it was like working with them, and what kinds of problems might have come up. If you don't know anyone that has undertaken a project similar to yours, you may want to look around your area for completed projects that are similar and find out who was involved in the work.

3. Narrow Down Choices

Once you have a list of potential firms, it's time to start narrowing it down. Call the firms on your list, describe the project, and ask if it's something they could do. You're not making any final decisions here, but this will let you know who is actually available and interested in working with you. Some firms might decline the project if it's too big, too small, or the firm's current workload is too large. If a firm does say they can't take on the project, always ask if there is another firm they would recommend. If a firm is interested, ask if they could send you some literature about the company including qualifications, experience, and possible references.

4. Reputation and Meetings

You need to feel very comfortable with the firm you select and one that can work within your budget. Before asking for quotes and pricing information, try to gather more information on the remaining firms. It might be helpful to check with organizations like the Better Business Bureau to see if any of the firms have a history of complaints and to make sure they are licensed and insured.

Once you are sure the firms are reputable, schedule a meeting with each firm to discuss your project in more detail, get some pricing information, and learn more about them. One of the most important reasons for these meetings is to find out which firm you feel you are most confident with in terms of communication. Ask to meet with people that might handle your project and make sure they can answer your questions clearly and really understand what your project is all about.

5. Estimates

During these meetings you should also begin to get cost estimates and discuss how fees are structured. There are few different ways firms might handle pricing – including charging a fixed fee for the project, an hourly rate, a percentage of the total construction cost, or a combination of these methods. Understanding how your project will be priced is important and can be very helpful in predicting additional costs, should something need to be changed later on.

While the total cost estimate is very important, don't let price be your guide. Cutting corners often leads to higher prices later, so don't assume the lowest estimate is the best deal. Similarly, the highest price doesn't always yield the highest quality. The most important factor is how well you communicate and how well a qualified firm understands your project.

6. References and Contracts

When meeting with firms, it may also be helpful to ask for additional references and to see some past projects they've done. Speaking with previous clients of the firm and seeing the results of completed projects can be an important factor in making the final decision.

After you've selected a firm, make sure you get everything in writing. The contracts should contain a detailed description of your project, budget, services included, timetables, and fee structure. Go over the contracts carefully and discuss anything you don't understand with the firm.

By following these guidelines you can be confident in your selection and well prepared for the process of bringing your project to life.

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