

How NOT to select a building design consultant

Five common mistakes when selecting architects & engineers

A building construction project, whether for a new building, renovation, addition or repair, represents a significant financial commitment by the project owner. The technical design and details of the project, largely decided upon by the project architect and engineers, will dictate a large percentage of the project costs. Yet despite significant trust and project control afforded to architects and engineers, project design teams are often assembled casually, utilizing poor selection criteria. Add value to your next project by avoiding the following common mistakes when selecting an architect or engineer.

1. Assume all licensed design professionals are the same
Not all architecture or

engineering stamps are created equal. Engineers and architects possess diverse backgrounds and professional experiences, rendering any one professional either more, or less, prepared for your specific project needs. For example, while some professionals are well suited for new design projects, others are more experienced with the intricacies of working with existing buildings. Understand the unique background of prospective project team members and ensure an appropriate match with your project type. Be wary of design consultants that represent themselves as capable of handling “any and all” types of projects. Instead, retain consultants that know their professional limits

and are willing to practice within those limits. Develop professional relationships with more than one architect and engineer, and work with the consultants best suited for your current project.

2. Expect to get more than what you pay for

We all want a good deal when purchasing goods or services. That same motivation is present when procuring professional design services. Resist the urge to select a consultant based solely upon lowest fee. While fee cannot be ignored, the low-cost provider of professional design services often does not represent the best value to a building construction project. Do you really want the architect and engineers willing to

work for the least fee deciding upon the floor plan, windows, roofing, foundation system and roof structure for your building? Will low design fees result in incomplete drawings and specifications that ultimately cost you much more in delays and change orders, or even defects? Design fees represent a small percentage of the total project cost, yet the services they retain will significantly influence the success and quality of the project. When entering into contracts with architects and



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engineers, consider the project phases that occur after the design phase is complete. For example, the construction phase can be the most important part of a project; design professionals can continue to add value to the project by conducting jobsite observation visits, responding to contractor questions, addressing unforeseen conditions and entertaining last minute

changes.

3. Skip the referrals
The phone book and Internet

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are not where you want to find an architect or engineer. The design and construction industry is well-suited for offering and receiving reliable referrals. Experienced and qualified architects and engineers have proven themselves on past projects, demonstrating their competencies to the contractors, design professionals and owners of those projects. These are the people from whom you want referrals. Architects usually hire engineers as sub-consultants. Want a great

referral for an engineer? Ask an architect. Engineers often work with multiple architects and can compare and contrast their skills and attributes. Want a great referral for an architect? Ask an engineer. And don't forget contractors, who can assess the "constructability" of an architect's or engineer's designs, something that will directly affect the bids for your project.

4. One size does not fit all

Many small design firms are formed when the principal of a larger firm breaks away to form a new firm. These smaller firms often possess a wealth of industry knowledge and experience. The

owner of a smaller firm may be more frequently involved with your project, representing an opportunity to receive more customized and personal services. A larger firm may be the right fit for your project when the schedule is aggressive and large quantities of human resources are needed over a shorter period of time. A larger firm also offers increased staff redundancy, which may prove beneficial for a long duration project, or for projects that require near-constant accessibility to the design team. Either way, don't confuse firm size with experience or competency. Instead, focus

upon the professional experience and attributes of the individuals within those firms that would consult on your project.

5. Don't consider personalities

A building design and construction project can often last many months, and even years. Life is short, and we spend a large part of our waking hours working to support our families. Overlooking the human aspect of the design team can often lead to a sense of drudgery, or even resistance, when project meetings and similar commitments are needed. Can you personally work well with the prospective architect and engineers? Is this a

person that will be an asset to the project team chemistry? When there's a problem, can you trust them to work with you honestly and effectively? If needed, could the engineer or architect be called upon to clearly articulate complex design options to non-technical decision makers? While technical competency is paramount, don't forget to consider the personality behind the stamp.

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