

How to choose an engineering firm

BY TAMMY WORTH

Having a good rapport is important when it comes to choosing an engineering firm.

"You are working to achieve a vision together, so it's important that the parties are comfortable with each other well," said Arthur Schwartz, deputy executive director and general counsel for the National Society of Professional Engineers.

For a project to succeed, he said, firms must communicate openly with clients, and clients should be able to express what they want for the project.

When choosing an engineering firm, business owners also should do their homework on candidates for a project.

The first step can be checking out publications such as *Engineering News Record*, a magazine published by The McGraw-Hill Cos. that lists top design firms in various regions of the country.

Associations such as the National Society of Professional Engineers also have lists on their Web sites with detailed information about and qualifications of member engineering firms.

Visiting the firm's office is another good idea, Schwartz said. During a visit, a prospective client can look around, meet the staff and get a sense of who they are and what they do. Many firms will have models of previous projects available for viewing.

Finally, the most valuable references are previous clients. When requesting references, Schwartz recommended visiting different sites to get a sense of what the completed projects look like and to ask the people who work there how happy they are in the facility.

The most important consideration

is the firm's qualifications, Schwartz said. These include experience and prior projects. Whatever the nature of the client's project — public or private, office building or manufacturing plant — the engineering firm should have experience in that specific area.

Depending on the scale of the project, learn what kind of in-house capabilities a firm has, as well.

For small projects, much of the work can be done internally. For more sophisticated or specialized construction, a client should make sure the engineering firm has the capacity to complete the job. This may include in-house mechanical, electrical, structural or geotechnical engineers. If a firm doesn't have in-house specialists, a client should make sure proper outside contractors will help on the project.

A client also should ensure an engineering firm has professional liability insurance. Potential clients should find out the firm's carrier, its insurance and deductible limits, its exclusions and whether the policy faces any current claims.

"Policy limits are aggregated," Schwartz said. "If there is a \$1 million policy and there is a current claim for \$500,000, there is only \$500,000 remaining on the policy. Clients should be aware of this."

Although not everyone asks to see a firm's insurance certificate, Schwartz said a company should be willing to give a copy if one is requested. If a project will span a number of years, a client may want to request a copy annually.

In addition, the contract should provide a clear definition of the scope of work to avoid any unmet expectations.

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