

Experience counts in hiring an engineering firm

Dorah Held Maslla and Nick Sargent

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When engineering a building project for optimal long-term usability and function, the small- to mid-sized-business owner should find the design team that best meets his needs based on more than one level.

“Cost should not be the top factor” in the selection process, said Stephen Sessler, a partner at Newcomb & Boyd, a global multidisciplinary consulting and engineering firm headquartered in Atlanta. “If you don’t have the top expertise — a team with creativity, responsiveness and who understands your business model — you are achieving a reduction in your up-front costs at the expense of your long-term owning and operating costs.”

Expertise above all else, stressed local and national experts, is priceless.

In most cases, the fees from an engineering firm will account for about 6 percent to 10 percent of the total project, said **Arthur Schwartz**, acting executive director and general



Pond
Pond & Co.

counsel for the **National Society of Professional Engineers**, based in Alexandria, Va. But selecting a firm that doesn’t meet the needs of the project or the client can cost the business owner exponentially more in

delays, repairs and, in the worst cases, liability costs for poor workmanship.

The most important aspect of the decision-making process to consider is the firm’s experience level, said Al Pond, president of Atlanta-based multidisciplinary architecture and engineering firm Pond & Co.

“Make your selection based on qualification, not price,” he said, and ensure the firm under consideration has a high level of expertise and experience with the type of project being planned.

An important step in selecting the right engineering firm is to know what the project requires and what types of engineering services are needed, Schwartz said.

There are many kinds of engineers — civil, electrical, mechanical, etc. — to fulfill diverse building needs,

Schwartz said. Some firms will have all disciplines of engineers on staff; others will sublet out the work.

Make certain that the firm has enough employees on staff to handle the assignment or that if it does sublet some work out, it has had experience and success doing so, said Schwartz.

Business owners should request proof of the certifications of the engineers who would be employed on the project, said Schwartz. Each state has its own certifications.

Schwartz said that the best way to review an engineering firm’s abilities is to put out a request for qualifications, in which a firm shows how it is qualified to complete the project in question. After evaluating the requests for qualifications from a number of firms, Schwartz advised asking the top contenders more detailed questions about how they have handled similar projects in the past.

Also ask to see proof that the firm has professional liability insurance coverage. But even more important, Schwartz said, is making sure the company follows the rules of a professional code of conduct, whether set by itself or an outside organization.

He pointed to what happened with



the "Big Dig" project in Boston during summer 2006. Shortly after the project was finished, a woman was killed when one of the three-ton ceiling tiles fell on her car while she was driving through the tunnels.

Once the list of qualified engineering firms has been narrowed, said the experts, it's time to negotiate a fee that meets the standards of all parties. While the business owner should be certain that he is not being overcharged, he should also be careful not to select based on price alone.

"The importance of good design cannot be understated," Schwartz said. "The design fee is very worthwhile. The fees could be low in the short term, but it could cost you a lot in the long term."

HOW TO

FIND AN ENGINEERING FIRM

Helpful hints to aid the search:

- ▶ Choose an engineering firm based on qualifications and fit, not cost.
- ▶ Remember that different types of buildings will require different types of engineers.
- ▶ Do a request for qualifications. Ask competing engineering firms to demonstrate how they are qualified to work on the project in question.
- ▶ Check with state engineering associations for more information or with national organizations such as the National Society of Professional Engineers (www.nspe.org).