

# Quality should trump cost when searching for engineers

*Matching talent with firm's needs often results in long-term relationships*

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Sometimes, the bottom line simply isn't the bottom line. When it comes to hiring an engineering firm, experts say price should almost never be the main factor in the decision.

"A lot of times, fee is the biggest driver for project owners, but the delta between fees is not going to be that great," says **Michael Quigley**, senior associate in the Boston office of **WB**

**Engineers**, which specializes in tenant improvement and data center projects.

"We all know the market and the difference in engineering costs on a

50,000-square-foot project will be pretty insignificant in the grand scheme of things," he continued. "When you think about the possibility of added construction costs and change orders and delays — if you save upfront, you may pay for that down the road."

Quigley and other industry insiders say it makes far more sense to identify the most qualified firm first and then focus on negotiating a price with the chosen firm.

"The firm should have and show a passion for the project," Quigley says. "When you talk to them, they should have already thought about it and have questions that show they've given it some time and attention."

"The first thing is to know what problem you're trying to solve," says **Jim Lambrechts**, assistant professor of

civil, construction and environment at **Wentworth Institute of Technology** in Boston.

"Being able to specifically define what you're trying to do will help find the right firm," he said. "The second thing is to keep in mind that the cheapest option might not always be the cheapest. You get what you pay for."

Lambrechts, whose private-sector experience includes work on the design of the MBTA's Orange Line extension and the Turnpike-Expressway interchange part of the Big Dig, says the qualifications-based selection process used on many publicly funded projects is a good model for private projects as well.

Qualified firms may even be able to reduce overall project costs by using their experience to identify project

HOW TO SELECT AN

**Engineering Firm**

**ENGINEERING A CHOICE**

- Look for the most qualified engineering firm for your needs, and negotiate a fee when you have a final selection.
- Qualified firms may even be able to reduce project costs by identifying project components upfront.
- For more information, check with state engineering associations or with national associations such as the National Society of Professional Engineers ([www.nspe.org](http://www.nspe.org)).



components upfront in certain situations — a brownfield-reclamation, for example.

“Some firms may give you a cheap design upfront and leave you to handle those contamination issues during construction,” says Lambrechts. “Others may do a more thorough review upfront and identify some of those pitfalls. That may mean two months less time in construction, which means two more months earlier, the owner can start collecting rent on the other end.”

Some project owners prefer to let their architects or project managers handle the selection of engineering firms, though a growing number are hiring the firm directly or as part of the original development team.

Often, property and project owners will find an engineering firm they can trust and turn to them for mul-

tiple projects. That was an approach **Jim Cline**, now office director for **AMEC Earth & Environmental Inc.** in Westford, used when he was a project manager for United Technologies.

Cline advises businesses to get to know the members of the project team they’ll be working with directly.

Often, projects managers will be assigned because of their specific experience and a project owner will want to be assured that professional engineer won’t be pulled away to leave a more junior person overseeing their project.

“Local knowledge is also important,” Cline says. A firm that has a track record of getting approvals from local permitting authorities may be able to help significantly reduce the time it takes to get through those reviews.

Another question to ask is what type of quality assurance program

does firm has in place.

AMEC, for instance, uses a peer-review process in which a senior employee in another part of the company will review the work being produced by an engineer.

“You want to feel assured that the quality of the project will be up to high standards,” Cline says. “That will cut down on those costly mistakes.”