

Focus on communication when choosing an engineering firm

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Most business owners would say that having a good rapport is important when it comes to their banker, accountant or lawyer. The same goes for an engineer, said **Arthur Schwartz**, deputy executive director and general counsel for the National Society of Professional Engineers.

"It is a relationship between the client and the engineering firm," he said. "You are working to achieve a vision together, so it is important that the parties are comfortable and able to communicate with each other."

For a project to succeed, firms must communicate openly with clients, and clients should be able to express wants and needs for the project.

Carrington McVeigh, CEO of Jacksonville-based McVeigh & Mangum Engineering Inc., said businesses need to make sure their project isn't treated like one of many projects.

A good working relationship is just one of many factors to consider.

Business owners should talk to a number of firms, Schwartz said. Research-

ing candidates is important and should be an easy task.

First, check out publications such as Engineering News Record, published by The McGraw-Hill Cos. The magazine lists top design firms around the country.

Associations such as the National

Society of Professional Engineers also have lists on their Web sites that provide detailed information about and qualifications of member engineering firms, Schwartz said.

Visit the firm's office as well, he said. 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.

Request references from previous clients and visit different sites to get a sense of what the completed projects look like.

Carol Worsham, vice president in the Jacksonville office of HDR Engineering Inc., suggested businesses ask previous clients whether the firm provided the requested services on time. 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 that the potential firm can complete the job. This may include

in-house mechanical, electrical, structural or geotechnical engineers. If a firm doesn't have in-house specialists, make sure proper outside contractors will assist on the project.

"You have to go to the professional that specializes in what you want to do," said Leerie Jenkins Jr., CEO of Jacksonville-based Reynolds, Smith & Hills Inc.

Ensure that an engineering firm is able to produce necessary paperwork, Schwartz said.

Every firm should have professional

liability insurance. Ask about 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 and have complete understanding of these issues."

Schwartz said a company should be willing to give a copy of its insurance certificate, if one is requested.

"Professional liability is a must for firms," Worsham said. "Most contract documents and state and local and federal laws require firms to have professional liability."

Contract documents also should be well prepared. Most firms will have this paperwork, but standard document preparers, such as the American Institute of Architects, also provide "fair, balanced and reasonable" documents, Schwartz said.

Contract documents should provide a definition of the scope of work. All parties should understand the scope of a project to avoid unmet expectations.

Schwartz said fees should be negotiated after a firm is chosen. Once you've chosen a firm, a design scope will be set and the fees will be negotiated based on services needed.

"A client often has a budget, and it is important to understand that budget, but the client should understand that there are certain aspects of the work that need to occur in order for a facility to be built," Schwartz said.



McVeigh

How to: CHOOSE AN ENGINEERING FIRM

QUICK TIPS

In choosing an engineering firm, make sure it:

- Has experience on similar types of projects.
- Has its documentation in order, including contracts and insurance.
- Can provide references upon request.

