

# Hiring a Contractor

## Ten Reasons for Hiring a Pro

Renovating your home should be a positive experience - free from worry and stress. You should have full confidence in your renovator and know that you are getting the best. That's why you should choose a professional renovator.

- **From start to finish.** A professional renovator will help you to put it all together - from ideas to design, products to plans, and construction to completion.
- **Experienced advice.** A professional renovator has the experience and knowledge to help turn your ideas into great results. They listen, make suggestions, and look for the best way of doing things.
- **Technical know-how.** Professional renovators understand construction, how to deal with challenges and problems, and how to improve the comfort of your home.
- **Expert teamwork.** Behind every professional renovator, there is a solid network of staff, subtrades and suppliers ready to go to work for you.
- **A proven track record.** Their business is an open book. You are invited to talk with past customers, look at their previous work and check out their reputation.
- **Accurate pricing.** No need to be concerned about low-ball costing, inferior work or escalating prices once the job begins. Experienced renovators know what it takes to do something right and how much it costs, and they'll tell you upfront.
- **A written contract.** Trust alone is not enough. Professionals back it up with a written contract that spells your project out in detail-what, how, who, when and how much.
- **Liability insurance and workers' compensation coverage.** Better safe than sorry. In the unlikely event of an accident or damage to your own or neighbouring properties, a professional renovator's coverage protects you from liability and cost.
- **Warranty.** Like any other consumer purchase, a professional renovation comes with a warranty on labour. And with professional installation, there is no risk of voiding the manufacturers' warranties on materials and products.
- **Service, service, service.** Professional renovators are in business for the long term. They work hard to earn your trust and make every renovation a great experience.

## What is a Professional Renovator?

Hiring a professional renovator is your best assurance that you will get the results you want and the best value for your money.

A professional renovator is a general contractor, sometimes referred to as a renovation contractor, who can put your whole project together. The renovator will assume complete responsibility for the work contracted and give you a warranty once it's completed.

- A professional renovator has an extensive business network of suppliers, trades, installers and experts that they draw on as required for your project.
- A professional renovator understands the technical aspects of construction in detail and knows how houses work. They can assess your project and explain what is involved, as well as identify potential problems and provide solutions.
- If your project requires design services, your contractor can advise you on the most suitable approach and recommend a design professional. Design-build renovators offer both design and construction services, and you may hire them for one service or both. Alternatively, professional renovators are also experienced in working with architect's drawings.
- A professional renovator has extensive knowledge and experience with the latest products and materials. They keep up-to-date and can help you make the selections that will work best for your project and budget.
- Professional renovators are familiar with the regulations and bylaws in your community and how the system works. When needed, they can look after permits and inspections on your behalf.
- Professional renovators can work with you on the financial aspects of your renovation. They know what things cost and can help you set a realistic budget to achieve your renovation goals. And they know how to stretch your budget without compromising quality.
- A professional renovator ALWAYS uses a written contract that clearly describes the work, materials to be used, timelines, price, responsibilities of both parties and other details as appropriate.
- A professional renovator knows how to organize and manage a project-scheduling workers, trades and delivery of materials; keeping track of expenses; maintaining a clean and safe work site; and minimizing the inconvenience to you. When necessary, they know how to deal with the unexpected and the surprises that sometimes occur in renovation.
- Most importantly, professional renovators put their customers first. They listen carefully so they know what you want. They provide you with names of previous customers so you can check out the company's track record yourself. They explain the process so you know what to expect, and

once the work begins they give you regular updates so you always know what's going on. They also encourage you to voice any questions or concerns you may have as the work progresses. In brief, they work for you and with you to make sure that you are satisfied and happy with the final results

## Finding a Renovator

Finding the right contractor for your renovation project is key to getting the results you want. The sooner you get someone involved, the more you can benefit from their knowledge and expertise. With a little legwork, you should have no trouble finding the person who is best suited for your project.

**Get the names of renovator members of your local Home Builders' Association.** Membership in an industry organization is a solid indication of professionalism. Association members have access to training and the latest information on all aspects of renovation, and they agree to the Association's Code of Ethics, which sets out a framework for fair and honest business practices.

**Ask friends, family, co-workers and neighbours for recommendations.** Also look around your neighbourhood for renovation projects underway and talk with the homeowners. Most people enjoy sharing their renovation experiences.

**Visit home shows.** This is a perfect opportunity to meet the professional renovators in your community, check out their displays and pick up company literature. Many local Home Builders' Associations also have a booth at home shows where you can get helpful information.

**Ask suppliers and retailers of building materials, products and hardware.** Visit your local outlets and ask for the names of professional renovators that would be suitable for your project.

**"Let your fingers do the walking".** Look in the Yellow Pages™ under renovations, renovation contractors, home improvement, home builders, building contractors, alteration contractors and construction for the names of contractors. Keep in mind that anyone can advertise in a phonebook. Look for ads that tell you a little about the company's expertise and check for logos that indicate the professionalism of the company, such as membership in the local Home Builders' Association. Make sure you investigate the renovator thoroughly before making any decisions about hiring.

**Check local advertising.** Look in your community newspaper for advertisements by established, reputable companies, and review flyers and other promotional materials that come to your door. Again, you need to be cautious and take your time to get to know anyone you find through advertising, before hiring them.

**By the way...** If your renovation project is modest, you may think that the "top" renovators in your community are beyond your budget. This may not be the case. In reality, most companies work on a range of projects, from small- to large-scale renovations.

**Above all, take your time.** Investing a little of your time upfront to find a renovator will be well worth it in the long run. When you begin with a list of professional renovators, the next steps are easy-interviewing, checking credentials and hiring the company that is right for your project.

## What to Look for in a Renovator

As you collect names of suitable renovators, you need to think about how you will judge the renovators you choose to interview.

- **Presentation.** Professional renovators operate in a business-like manner. They respect your schedule and show up for appointments on time. They present themselves well, are organized and deal with your questions and concerns directly. They earn your confidence because they follow through on promises - if they say they will call you back tomorrow, they do. How a renovator deals with you before a contract is signed tells you a lot about how you can expect to be treated once the job begins.
- **Communication.** Renovation is a "people business" and good renovators are good listeners and communicators. Professional renovators must "translate" your ideas and goals into a workable plan and a pleasant experience. This requires a solid working relationship and good rapport. If you're not comfortable with renovators you interview or don't feel you can communicate with them effectively, you should keep looking to find the right person for your job.
- **Skills and experience.** Renovating a home can be a far more complex task than building it in the first place. It takes years of experience in the business before most renovators are ready to manage a major project on their own. It also involves a lot of different types of work, some of which require specialized expertise. Whatever the scope and nature of your project, your renovator needs to have solid experience with that type of work.
- **Professional reputation.** Established renovators will provide you with references from previous customers, and in fact, you shouldn't even have to ask for them. They also work with a network of other businesses within your community-banks, material suppliers and trades. It's a good idea to ask a renovator for references to any of these people to find out about their reputation within the industry itself.

## **Interviewing Renovators**

Once you have a list of renovators, your next step is to meet them and discuss your project. These initial interviews will help you determine who is qualified to handle your project, and what each can offer in terms of ideas, suggestions and guidance in developing your plans.

Initial interviews provide the opportunity to get to know renovators - their background, experience, business stability and trustworthiness. Take your time and ask lots of questions. Don't be afraid you will offend potential candidates. Professional renovators welcome the opportunity to tell you about their experience and services.

Many homeowners wonder how many renovators they should interview before deciding who to hire. While there is no simple answer, normally three should be adequate. If you can't establish a comfortable rapport with a renovator, or if you feel your questions are not answered properly, then you should talk to someone else. On the other hand, if you find someone who you have a high level of confidence in and are certain they are right for your project, don't hesitate to choose them.

It is important to be organized for these interviews and to bear in mind that your goal is to find the right renovator for your job.

## **Checking References**

In order to select the best renovator for your project, you need the right information. A renovation contractor's past customers are probably the most reliable source of information available to you.

Each renovator you interview should be able to provide references from previous customers. Ideally, these past projects should be similar in scope and scale to yours.

Once you have the list, make the calls. Surprisingly, many people who ask for references never actually follow through and check them. This is a mistake.

Don't feel you are imposing. If the homeowners were not willing to be contacted, they would not allow the renovator to give you're their names.

## Getting Bids

Price is a critical aspect of your renovation project. What will it cost to do the job you want? Alternatively, how far can you go on a set budget?

Determining the cost of a small project is usually fairly simple. On larger projects, it often happens as a series of discussions between you and a renovator as you develop the vision and fine-tune the plans for your home.

On some projects, it may be a good idea to hire someone to develop the design and the plans first as a separate job. Many renovators offer a full range of services, including design and plans development. Alternatively, you may choose to work with a designer or architect and then tender the actual work to renovators.

### "Guesstimates"

Experienced renovators can sometimes offer an educated opinion or price range on the spot, based on similar jobs they have done in the past - for instance, a per-square-foot estimate for additions or basement recreation rooms, or a rough cost estimate for upgrading your bathroom. This can be helpful upfront to make sure that there is a realistic fit between what you would like to do and the budget you have in mind. However, be aware that the cost of a project can vary greatly, depending on many factors, including the current condition of your home and the types of products you want to use.

### Bids, or estimates

For all intents and purposes, bids and estimates are the same, if written down - a renovator's offer to perform your renovation for a specified price, based on a detailed description of the work to be done. It will specify materials, products, labour, subtrades and so on, with accompanying costs. A written offer is legally binding and becomes part of the contract between you and the renovator, should you accept it.

Make sure that you provide each renovator with exactly the same information; otherwise you will not be able to compare bids. This information may include plans, ranging from simple sketches or diagrams to full construction drawings needed for projects that involve altering the structure of your home.

Specifications are detailed descriptions of the materials and products you want to be used in your project.

How many bids should you get? There are no hard and fast rules. On large projects, it is not uncommon for homeowners to interview several renovators, check their references and previous projects, and then choose one company to work with throughout the whole process, including developing plans and budgets as well as doing the actual work.

In the end it comes down to trust and confidence - trust that you have chosen the right renovator for the job, and confidence that you will get what you want.

### **Don't get caught by the unexpected**

Even the most experienced renovator cannot always predict the hidden challenges in your project. Dangerous electrical wiring from a previous renovation, rotted wood due to old leaks, lead flashing under the old roof shingles...these are just some of the problems that your renovator may uncover once the work gets underway.

Unpredictable problems can mean additional cost beyond the contract price. It may be a good idea to set aside a small portion of your budget as a contingency fund. Also talk with your renovator - what are their recommendations?



## **Deciding Who to Hire**

Once you have interviewed renovators, checked their references and received written price quotes from those you are interested in hiring, it's time to decide who will be doing your job.

Renovators should be allowed adequate time to prepare a bid for your project, and you must ensure that each renovator is working with the same plans and specifications. For all but the simplest projects, you should expect the renovator to present their bid in person, so that they can discuss each aspect with you and answer any question you may have.

Once you have met with the renovators who are bidding on your job, you should review each set of bid documents carefully before deciding who to hire.

Compare every aspect of their bids - the description of the work, specifications (materials and products), price and allowances, deposit and payment milestones, project schedule and any additional recommendations or ideas for your project.

Review the information you collected during and after your initial round of renovator interviews - your initial impressions of each renovator, and what their previous customers had to say about them.

Decide the importance of each aspect of your evaluation. While overall price is important, it is only one factor. Many homeowners who have successfully completed major home renovations speak about the importance of "peace of mind" - working with a renovator they trusted and felt confident in.

If you have a particularly strong sense of confidence in one of the renovators, they are probably your best choice, even if their price is not the lowest. In the end, you should choose the renovator based on your sense of the overall value they can provide to you.

## **I Want to Do the Work Myself**

For many homeowners, do-it-yourself home renovation and repair projects are a source of considerable enjoyment and pride.

The best advice we can offer is to consider your own skills and abilities carefully when planning your projects. Getting in "over your head" can end up costing more money than hiring professional help in the first place.

- Do you have any knowledge of building codes and good building practices which is essential for many projects?
- Do you have the time to research, plan and do the work properly?
- If required, do you know trade contractors and subtrades that will do a good job on your home? And will you be able to schedule their work without overlaps or lengthy delays?
- If you act as your own contractor and hire someone to work for you, do you know how to protect yourself against liabilities in case of accidents or mistakes? Or against damage to your home in the course of the work?
- Do you have the proper tools to do a good and attractive job?

If your primary reason to do the work yourself is to save money, talk to one or several renovators before you make a final decision. An experienced renovator may be able to suggest ways of reducing the cost of your project while still using professional services, such as modifying the design or substituting products. You can also save by doing the finishing work yourself, such as painting or wallpapering