

Selecting and Working with a Contractor

Find the right fit.

Your home is one of your biggest assets. That's why it's sometimes a smarter choice to hire a professional, rather than take on the job yourself. The last thing you want to do is rush into a decision and say yes to the first contractor you talk to or the one who gives you the lowest price.

You want to take your time and find a contractor who, just like your home, is a perfect fit for you and your family.

Choosing the wrong contractor can lead to stress, added expenses, delays, subpar work and even legal problems – things every homeowner wants to avoid.

On the next page are 12 questions to ask a contractor when you meet with them. Asking the right questions will mean the difference between having a successful renovation versus making a decision you'll regret.

When you start interviewing potential contractors do your best to observe their level of professionalism. Courtesy, respect, honesty, punctuality and good communication are some of the most important attributes a contractor can have, next to their basic technical competency.

No matter how good someone is on paper, if they don't click with you on these points, don't hire them. Remember, a contractor could be around your family for days, weeks, or even months while working on your home. You'll need to establish a good working relationship, so if you don't like a contractor for any reason, don't hire them. Period.

Go with who you know.

The contractor you've already had a positive experience with will most often be your best choice.

The next best option is to go with a reliable referral from a family member or friend who has had direct personal experience with the contractor.

Alternatively, if you have had no direct experience with the contractor you may consider them based on their reputation. Don't be shy about asking them for references. Any good contractor should have no problem providing them. You also can check out potential contractors through a trade association or general advertising. Pulling names from the phone book or on-line should be your last resort. If you must do this, be extra cautious and ask all of the questions attached here.

Be wary of contractors who solicit business door-to-door or with cold calls. Also, avoid contractors who quote you a price that changes if you don't accept it immediately.

Licensing, insurance and you.

Having a license and insurance demonstrates a contractor's credibility and knowledge. A trade license (where applicable) shows that the contractor has taken an exam and proved they know building codes and processes. All Journeypersons

and registered apprentices in Nova Scotia carry a photo ID that specifies their trade. For more details on hiring a Journeyperson, visit the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency at: nsapprenticeship.ca/employers-industry/hire-journeyperson



If a contractor doesn't have insurance and a worker gets hurt on your project, you could be liable. It is your right to know what kind and what amount of insurance a contractor carries. You can also contact the Better Business Bureau (atlanticprovinces.bbb.org) to see if a contractor is in good standing.

Tips for a Successful Renovation

- Start with a written plan – describe exactly what the project involves and what you expect.
- Interview more than one contractor.
- Have a comprehensive contract.
- Keep a file that has all the details of your renovation.
- Delays happen. Be realistic

Get it in writing. Have a detailed contract in place before work begins.

Sometimes it may feel like your contractor and the folks at your local hardware store speak a totally different language. Before you start your renovations it may be useful to brush up on your terms so you know exactly what your contractor is referring to.

Still Need Help? Check out these websites:

hiringacontractor.com

publications.gc.ca/site/eng/333064/publication.html

chba.ca/renovation-roadmap/get-it-in-writing.aspx

When it comes to a renovation contract, you can never have too much information. Your agreement should always include:

The contact information for the contractor, including a physical address from which they conduct business.

A complete description of all work to be completed.

A materials list, specifying the types of materials to be used, equipment types and ratings, fixtures and all other items supplied by the contractor. If a specified brand for a part hasn't been agreed upon yet, the contract can include upper limits/allowances such as "up to \$500 for a front door".

A statement of warranty describing the warranty terms and what is and is not covered.

A payment schedule describing the exact terms for payment. On large jobs, payments should be made in stages based upon a percentage of work completed. Smaller jobs may require only one or two payments. Pay only for the work completed and avoid doing business with a contractor who demands an up-front payment.

A start date, daily start times and an estimated completion date. While most contractors may be unwilling to agree to a "penalty clause" tied to a completion date, having them commit provides some incentive as well as protection for you.

A statement describing the contractor's responsibility for job site clean-up. In projects involving an occupied home, daily clean-up may be necessary. Clean-up agreements must be tailored to the specific job and should describe the clean-up needs required. If you have any particular requirements (e.g., not starting before 9 AM, and no evenings or weekends) outline them clearly in the contract.

A statement that all permits and inspection fees are the responsibility of the contractor.

A statement that the contractor will provide a signed lien waiver when the job is completed and BEFORE final payment is made. If the contractor will use sub-contractors to do some of the work, lien waivers should be completed by each sub-contractor. These forms help protect you from the liability created if a contractor does not pay a sub-contractor or supplier.

Signatures for both parties. Never sign a contract containing blank sections. Any changes should be acknowledged in writing by both parties.

Screening Questions

Contractor Name: _____

When you interview more than one contractor about a home renovation project, it's easy to lose track of who said what. The following questions are designed to help you talk to contractors and record their answers. We recommend bringing a copy of this page to your meetings and evaluating each contractor using the scales provided. Write the score for each answer in the box and add up the total at the end.

1. How long have you been in business?

SCORE

BEST (5)

In business for 5+ years with the same name and professional associations.

GOOD (3)

In business 1-5 years with the same name.

FAIR (1)

A new business for under a year.

REJECT (X)

This will be their first job.

2. What kind of renovations do you do?

BEST (5)

Gives you a comprehensive list of the services offered.

GOOD (3)

Informs you upfront about the types of services they do not perform.

FAIR (1)

Provides only a vague list or says "I can do anything."

REJECT (X)

"I'm willing to try anything once."

3. How much experience do you have doing my renovation type?

BEST (5)

Specializes in the type work that you want completed.

GOOD (3)

Can do the work you want but also performs other types of work.

FAIR (1)

Can do the work, but prefers to do other types of work.

REJECT (X)

Has little or no experience in the type of work that you want completed.

4. Where are you located? How can I reach you?

BEST (5)

Has a physical business office nearby.

GOOD (3)

Works from a home office and provides you with contact details.

REJECT (X)

Fails to provide you with a number and claims they will call you as needed.

5. Can I see proof of your insurance? Amount: \$ _____ Expiry Date: _____

BEST (5)

Has both Workman's Compensation & General Liability Insurance. Provides the policy details and amounts.

GOOD (3)

Has General Liability only (body injury and property damage).

REJECT (X)

Fails to provide you with the information, or has no insurance.

6. Do you contract out any of the work, or complete everything yourself?

BEST (5)

Hires other tradespeople as necessary. All are bonded and have worked together for years. Contractor provides names and references for them.

GOOD (3)

Informs you that if a sub contractor is required, (s)he will let you know before contracting.

REJECT (X)

Claims they will find people as necessary. Does not provide names or references.

7. Do you provide a written contract?

BEST (5)

Yes. A comprehensive sample is given on the spot.

GOOD (3)

Yes, though it is limited in scope. Contractor is willing to modify it as needed.

FAIR (1)

Yes, though it is limited in scope. Contractor is reluctant to modify it.

REJECT (X)

No. Contractor doesn't believe in contracts and feels a handshake is all that's needed.

8. Do you offer a warranty on all work performed?

BEST (5)

Yes. A comprehensive sample is provided.

GOOD (3)

Yes, though it is limited in scope. Contractor is willing to modify it as needed.

FAIR (1)

Yes, though it is limited in scope. Contractor is reluctant to modify it.

REJECT (X)

No. Contractor doesn't believe in warranties and ensures all work will be done correctly.

9. What is your typical payment structure? What is your usual hold-back?

BEST (5)

Contractor provides a comprehensive sample of the payment structure.

GOOD (3)

A sample payment structure is provided, though it is limited in scope. Contractor is willing to modify it as needed.

FAIR (1)

A sample payment structure is provided, though it is limited in scope. Contractor is reluctant to modify it.

REJECT (X)

Contractor requires the full payment upfront, or will ask for cash when needed.

10. Do you have references that I can get in touch with?

BEST (5)

Provides references from at least 5 clients—all positive.

GOOD (3)

Provides 1-4 positive references from past customers.

REJECT (X)

No real references provided, or references are all negative.

11. Do you have references for the suppliers you deal with for materials etc.?

BEST (5)

Provides references from at least 3 current suppliers—all positive.

GOOD (3)

Provides 1-2 positive references from current suppliers.

REJECT (X)

No real references provided, or references are all negative.

OVERALL: Did the contractor listen to you and answer your questions?

Did they make useful suggestions about your project? Did they try to talk you out of—or into—any aspects of your project?

BEST (5)

Contractor listened and offered useful suggestions to improve my original project design.

GOOD (3)

Contractor listened and was prepared to produce a comprehensive proposal of the work to be completed.

FAIR (1)

Contractor listened and was in general agreement about the project. Remained vague on some or all details.

REJECT (X)

Contractor tried to talk me out of the project. They made it seem as though my project design was incorrect or a waste of time.

TOTAL:

Notes:

Adding it Up:

OVER 50

The contractor really knows what they're doing. You should feel confident working with them.

35-50

The contractor is sound.

Less than 35

Proceed with this contractor only with a very solid personal recommendation.

One or more REJECTS (X)

Hiring this contractor is not recommended.