

Home Sweet Home

IMPROVEMENT



Finding the right contractor makes all the difference in home improvement efforts.

You're a proud homeowner, and you finally have the funds and the motivation to remodel your outdated kitchen. So how do you begin? By checking out design magazines? Scanning cabinet catalogues? Studying paint chips? Actually, selecting a contractor has a far greater impact on the success of your project than your selection of kitchen faucets or wallpaper. Making the effort to hire a reputable and skilled contractor will help save both time and money and ensure that the job gets done right.

DIY vs. DIFM

Me or them? A generation ago, most people did their own improvements around the house (that's DIY, or Do-It-Yourself). However, with today's busier schedules, there's less time to devote to your home renovation. As a result, using a contractor (that would be DIFM, or Do-It-For-Me) has become an even more viable option for your home improvement.

It's who you know

The good ones are always busy. The best way to find a contractor, painter, plumber or electrician is through a direct referral from someone you know who has had similar work done. Just ask around: friends, neighbours, co-workers and business contacts are all good sources for a great referral. If you still have trouble, your local home improvement store, hardware store or lumber yard may be able to suggest a few names.

Get at least three bids

Comparison shopping pays off. The bid alone can tell you a lot about the contractors you're considering. Before making a bid, a contractor should visit the site to make sure he or she understands everything that is involved in the job. Once you receive the bids, don't be surprised if there is quite a variance. One contractor may have a reputation for always "building beyond the code" and using top-of-the-line materials, while another bid may

be exceptionally low. Simply use your best judgment; be wary of going with a lowball bid, as you may end up paying more in the long run for a substandard job.

Check their paperwork

License? Check. Insurance? Check. Requirements for a license vary from province to province and even city to city. Hiring a licensed contractor means you're hiring an individual that complies with local regulations and standards. Liability insurance may not be required in your province, but if the contractor is working in your home, it's best to make sure they have it. Ask for proof of insurance before any contracts are signed.

Ask for references

Seeing is believing. Ask the contractor for a list of references where he or she has completed similar projects. Visit these homes and ask the former customers if they are happy with the end product and how they liked working with the contractor.

It's all in the contract

If it isn't in the contract, don't assume it's gonna happen. Basically, don't assume the contractor will clean up if it's not in writing. A well-written contract is necessary to guarantee the work is performed as you envisioned and that you are protected in case of dissatisfaction.

Before you spend money on materials and labour, consider hiring a designer:

- So the style of the project matches the rest of your home and reflects your taste, you might consider hiring a designer to help you make more informed choices.
- Also, designers have a number of contractors they've worked with in the past that they could possibly refer to you.

TIP: Should you decide to work with a contractor, it is helpful to ask them to provide you with leftover materials, such as extra tiles or a partial/extra roll of wallpaper for any future touch-ups or repairs.



A CONTRACT CHECKLIST

A contract specifies all the details of your project: who, what, where, when and at what cost. It should be detailed and complete.

Use this checklist as a guide to help review a contract before you sign it.

- Contractor contact info**
The contractor's name, address, phone number and license number.
- Payment schedule**
Deposits should never be more than 50% of the total price. Other details should include how payment will be made to the contractor, subcontractors and suppliers.
- Permits**
It is the contractor's job to obtain permits—make sure this is included in the contract.
- Change Orders**
If you ask for any changes or additions to the job after the contract has been signed, a Change Order form documents these requests. Often, a project's schedule and budget will be affected, so make sure you're clear on how the contractor handles Change Orders.
- Product details**
List the colour, brand name, size and product number of all materials. (This information is extremely useful to have when it's time to order an extra roll of wallpaper.)
- Warranties**
If the contractor offers a warranty, it should be referenced in the contract. Make sure that the articles covered by the warranty (usually materials and workmanship) are listed, as well as the names and addresses of the parties who honour the warranty (such as the contractor, distributor or manufacturer). Also, make sure that the contract states the length—and any limitations—of the warranty.
- Promises**
Any promises made verbally should also be made in writing.
- Work Schedules**
A schedule that states when work begins and the project completion date.

Looking to maximize your remodelling dollars? According to Appraisal Institute of Canada 2004 survey, the projects listed below were the remodelling projects that added the greatest amount of resale value to a home.

Remodel Project	Job Cost	Expected Return	Average Payback
Minor Kitchen Remodel	\$3,000	\$2,300-\$3,000	75%-100%
Major Kitchen Remodel	\$25,000	\$18,800-\$25,000	75%-100%
Bathroom Remodel	\$8,500	\$6,400-\$8,500	75%-100%
Basement Remodel	\$7,000	\$3,500-\$5,300	50%-75%
Fireplace Addition	\$3,000	\$1,500-\$2,300	50%-75%
Deck Addition	\$6,000	\$3,000-\$4,500	50%-75%
Heating System Replacement	\$4,000	\$2,000-\$3,200	50%-80%
Window Replacement	\$6,000	\$3,000-\$4,500	50%-75%
Major Landscaping	\$10,000	\$2,500-\$5,000	25%-50%

Adapted from the Appraisal Institute of Canada's Renovation Worksheet, available at www.aicanada.ca/e/resourcecenter_renova.cfm

INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

Questions to ask a contractor during an interview:

- How long have you been in business?
- Are you licensed and registered?
- How many projects like mine have you completed in the last year?
- Will my project require a permit?
- May I have a list of references?
- Will you be using subcontractors on this project?
- What types of insurance do you carry?

