

September 19, 2008

Who knew? You should like your general contractor

Not too long ago, a general contractor was an individual or company that self-performed a whole range of construction services.

While self-perform construction companies still exist, the term "general contractor" has expanded to include construction managers — companies that manage subcontractors and the whole construction and preconstruction process. They may or may not do construction work themselves.

Whether an owner or owner's representative is looking for a traditional general contractor or construction manager, the needed qualities are the same.

"It's really the exact same skill set," said Donald Oldmixon, first vice president and manager of real estate and construction at Hobbs Brook Management LLC in Waltham. "Either way, you need implementation of the project. You want somebody who is experienced, has done that kind of project before and has the right people for the job."

"Fit" is probably the first criterion an owner should look for.

"Certain contractors are better for some projects than others," Oldmixon said. "A giant contractor for a \$900,000 project may not be the best fit. They've got overhead and other general conditions they have to meet because of their size. You've got to marry the right firm to the right job."

Experience is also part of the right fit. Does the general contractor or construction manager have similar experience? Can they meet your needs? Have they done this type of project before? Where have they done it before? What were the circumstances?

"Some people can get a little too crazy about similar experience," said **Chris Oldham, executive vice president at Maynard-based contractor J.M. Coull Inc.** "They come to me and say, 'I need you to provide me a list of projects you've done exactly like my project.' There really are no projects exactly alike. They have different time constraints, different sites."

Part of experience is reputation. What is the firm's reputation? Can it bring a job in on time? On budget? What is the quality of its work? How does it handle problems? Can the firm meet your timetable?

"Scheduling is money," Oldmixon said. "The sooner you get the project up, the sooner you can use it. Somebody may have a method to get a project up faster than somebody else. It may be worth a premium to go with them."

Who are the people who will be working on your project?

"People are huge," **Oldham** said.

"We have seen a move in that direction by clients who want to meet our people which we appreciate. We had clients who never wanted to meet our people. We value our folks and what they bring to the table. When customers say 'give me a number' and don't want to interview us, I know right off it is probably a job we don't want to be involved in. What customers should be looking for are the people producing the job. We all look good on paper. We all talk a good game. You really need to meet the people in person, the project manager, the supervisors. You are going to interface with these people every day. It's important to interview them and meet them."

And like them.

"Frankly, life is too short to have to deal with people you don't want to," Oldmixon said. "If the project manager does not fit your lifestyle, your team, work style, you may just decide that particular person is not worth the extra half percent savings that company may bring to the job."

As important as chemistry is trust. Do you trust this team?

Paul Hewins, area general manager for New England at Skanska USA Building Inc. in Boston, agreed: "People want good value. That doesn't just mean cost and scheduling. It means bringing the best, end-of-the-day cost, the best people, a proven track record, bringing good information, depth of resources, particularly lately with the interest in innovation and green building. If it's an institutional client, they want to know that you can work on their campus and not disrupt the day-to-day operations of their faculty and students. If it's a specialty building, a lab or research facility, they want expertise in that particular type of work. That all brings value to the client."



