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Selecting an architect

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The selection of the architect for a building project is an important first step in the process of realising the project. When the architect is appointed (along with other specialist consultants) you have selected a professional team that ultimately will be judged by the financial, functional, design quality and cost/time outcomes of the project.

The architect will work throughout the design and construction process as an advisor, coordinator and creative leader for your project. For a period of months or, for some projects, years, the architect effectively becomes a partner with you or with your organisation. Obviously selecting the right architect for your project should be a thoughtful and considered process.

These guidelines for the selection of an architect provide a fair and efficient process that reviews a range of criteria by which competing architects or architectural firms should be evaluated. The process avoids the situation where architects are required to spend considerable time and resources complying with the selection criteria of potential clients. As a general rule, the Australian Institute of Architects recommends the appointment of architects based on experience and credentials. If a design competition is considered to be an appropriate part of the selection process, it should be conducted in the manner recommended by the Institute's Competition Guidelines.

The Institute recommends the following selection procedure:

Prepare a shortlist of architectural firms

Prepare a shortlist of three or four appropriate architectural firms with relevant experience in the particular project type. This list can be made from personal experience or the experience of family, friends or colleagues. You may also include architects who have completed projects that you admire that are similar to your project.

For probity or other reasons, it may be necessary to advertise for registrations of interest by calling for a brief statement of capability and experience from interested architects.

Some organisations that regularly commission architects, may find it appropriate for the short list to be made from a register of architectural consultants which the organisation maintains and regularly reviews and updates.

Invitation to submit credentials

Prepare a clear description of the project, including:

- the scope of work
- project budget
- any time limitation
- proposed building procurement method
- an indication of the services required
- the selection criteria that will be used in the evaluation process

Architects should be invited to register their interest in the project and provide their credentials, including:

- capability
- relevant experience
- design, technical and management approach
- proposed personnel
- referees

Architects should not be requested to prepare any project analysis or design ideas because these activities require a close working relationship with the client in order to produce useful outcomes.

Evaluation

An assessment of the abilities of each of the architects to service the project should be based on the following criteria:

- expertise in the type of project
- ability to develop brief/functional requirements
- technical and management skills
- previous experience and track record
- methodology and project control methods
- time, cost and quality performance on previous projects
- design approach and ability
- qualifications, experience and availability of key personnel

In making the assessment, each of these criteria should be weighted according to the nature of the project. For example, on some projects, ability to control budgets may be more important than a track record in the particular project type.

Based on this evaluation, two or three firms should be interviewed.

Interview

The interview process should be directed to confirm:

- the relevant experience of the architectural firm
- the available resources to meet the project needs
- the process the firm proposes to adopt for the project
- the ability of the proposed personnel to work compatibly with you or your organisation as a team throughout the project

Visits to current and recent projects and discussions with their owners may be appropriate to develop a clear understanding of the capabilities of the architects under consideration.

Negotiation and confirmation of appointment

After the interviewed firms have been ranked in order of preference, negotiations should be commenced with the top ranked firm regarding the:

- scope of services required for the project
- conditions of engagement
- appropriate architectural fees

The Institute publishes Conditions of Engagement for architects which may assist you in these negotiations to define the services that you expect the architect to provide.

Fees are negotiated on a project by project basis and will reflect the scope of services that have been agreed. This is one of the reasons why it is unrealistic to ask for a fee proposal until the scope of services are clearly understood by both you and the architect. Clients and architects are free to establish any fee they feel appropriate for the project and this may be in the form of an hourly rate, a lump sum or a percentage of the total value of the project.

If a fair and equitable agreement cannot be reached with the top ranked architect, the negotiations should be terminated and negotiations then commenced with the second ranked architect. The process should continue until agreement has been reached with an architect and the appointment has been formalised.

In negotiating architectural fees it should be recognised that these fees represent a relatively small part of the total lifecycle cost of the project and should not be given undue emphasis relative to other criteria, such as building performance, which will have a greater long-term effect on the economic viability of your project.

Unsuccessful consultants

All unsuccessful architects should be advised of the outcome as soon as possible after a selection has been finalised.

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