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Electrical contractors should help plug in savings

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With trends such as integrated project delivery taking hold in the building world, many subcontractors are becoming involved in projects earlier than ever. That is increasingly true for electrical contractors, who can lend significant expertise in terms of cost savings and energy efficiency if brought on board early in the project planning phase.

Christine Law, a LEED-certified associate at **Margulies Perruzzi Architects Inc.**, in Boston, said architects and others who oversee building projects want a contractor who works well as part of a larger team.

“We look for someone who asks about drawings before proceeding and someone who thinks ahead,” she said. “We need someone who can coordinate with the other disciplines and not work in a vacuum.”

Good contractors also bring ideas to the table, such as suggesting design tweaks early in the process, or proposing that an architect make a design substitution that reduces project costs.

Unfortunately, the tough construction market and turbulent economy require that project owners be extra diligent when it comes to choosing a contractor, said David Moeller, national market manager for **Graybar Electric Co. Inc.**, a distributor of electrical supplies.

“Especially in cases where the owner has a startup date and can begin making money or losing money depending on if that project is done, they need to make sure they choose a contractor who can finish the job in a timely manner,” Moeller said. “We’re seeing a massive shift in the business and the impact of a contractor not being able to complete a job can be enormous in terms of delay and added expense.”

Reputation and longevity are good indicators, but not guarantees, he added. Good firms will be able to obtain bonding for a project — and bonding firms are being

more selective than ever on which firms and projects to back. “You want to make sure they have the wherewithal to make it through to the end of a project,” Moeller said.

A good electrical contractor will also offer ways to build in energy savings during construction. “It costs less to save energy during the construction phase,” Moeller said. “You want to hire a contractor who has competency and experience in energy savings and some ability to make recommendations for how to find those savings. Even though green building is getting a lot of attention, those contractors aren’t all that common.”

Mike Burns, assistant manager of real estate, construction and leasing at **Hobbs Brook Management LLC**, a real estate developer and property management firm based in Waltham, said while it may be tempting to turn over selection of subcontractors and specialty contractors to a general contractor or project manager, a project owner should have a hand in choosing an electrical contractor because of the importance of the role.

“It is in the best interest of the owner to select the electrical contractor,” Burns said. “The building owner is the one who has to live with the outcome long after construction is complete and the tenants have moved in.”

Often, such contractors are chosen based on bids, but not all bids are created equal, Burns said. A comprehensive bid submission will take a variety of factors and contingencies into account, minimizing the need for costly and frustrating change orders as the project progresses. “The proposal needs to be complete, including all drawings,” he added. “No one wants to see change orders.”

Andy Coull, president of **J.M. Coull Inc.**, a general contracting firm based in Maynard whose recent projects include the renovated and expanded corporate headquarters for **Caliper Life Sciences** in Hopkinton, said some basic research should include checking a contractor’s workers’ compensation experience modification rating (EMR) data, which a firm should be willing to disclose and is also publicly available.

One project saw Coull reap some \$300,000 in savings by value engineering the project with help from specialty contractors.

Another important question is how a project will be carried out. “Find out how many licensed electricians work for the firm and how they plan to staff your project. Get assurance that the same foreman will be with the project from start to finish,” he added. “A good firm is willing to make a commitment in terms of time, price and quality and then lives up to that commitment — consistently.”