

Seismic Construction Buyers Guide

What to Ask When Hiring a Contractor for Your Seismic Retrofit Project
By the Seismic Retrofit Association

Is the contractor specifically experienced with seismic retrofitting?

General contractors are typically not experienced in seismic retrofitting. This is comparable to the difference between a family doctor and a cardiologist (heart specialist). If a patient requires heart surgery, it is unlikely that a family doctor will possess the knowledge and experience necessary to perform the best possible triple by-pass surgery.

For this reason, a building owner should not use a general contractor for commercial seismic projects.

A firm that specializes in seismic work can save their clients money. One example of this savings is when the specialized contractor suggests alternate engineering designs or hardware when it is evident that the details are expensive. In other words, the contractor ensures the building owner receives a cost-effective retrofit.

In addition, specialized contractors know the appropriate techniques for this type of project.

To find out if the contractor you plan to use has the necessary experience, ask them how many commercial seismic retrofits they have performed over the last year. If they answer “more than 30 per year over the last 4 to 5 years” the company is experienced in seismic retrofitting.

Is the contractor using his or her own crew to complete the seismic work?

Many firms subcontract projects to other contractors. If a company is experienced in seismic retrofit, but their work is subcontracted, a building owner cannot be assured quality due to the possible lack of experience of the subcontractors.

Ask your seismic retrofitting company if they only use their in-house crew, or if they use subcontractors.

What experience does the crew possess and what is the average length of time an employee has worked for the company?

A company’s experience in seismic retrofitting is only pertinent if there is consistency in its crewmembers.

Reputable companies typically hire high quality individuals. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and building owners prefer not to test new, inexperienced employees for their project.

Ask how much experience the average crewmember has on their seismic team. If the experience level is as low as 3 to 5 years, consider other firms unless you feel confident in the new employees’ abilities.

How does the contractor monitor the quality of craftsmanship performed by their employees?

A deputy inspector will check certain aspects of commercial seismic work, though companies should ascertain the quality of work performed by their employees internally. Some companies include quality assurance as part of their duties by requiring the foreman to check all employee work at the end of every shift.

Ask how the construction company ensures the quality of the work performed by their employees. If each employee checks their own work, the quality of their performance is questionable.

Does the contractor compensate foremen for building professional tenant relationships and following safety procedures while working on a project?

Often the most critical concern for building owners performing a seismic retrofit is the tenant relationships. Building owners or managers cannot risk losing tenants and income from intrusive contractors.

Ask how the construction company ensures a good relationship between the tenants and construction crew. Some companies offer foremen a bonus for outstanding tenant relations. Discover the program they use and consider if it makes sense. Ask yourself, "If I were a foreman, would this plan result in a good tenant relationship?"

How does the contractor schedule and perform work without disruption to the tenant's operations?

Because contractors know the quickest and most effective method for completing a retrofit, when they enter a building they know the best place to start and finish. Many times this procedure is planned before discussing options with the tenant.

Ensure the contractor coordinates work with tenant operations, thus reducing tenant workflow interruptions.

Ask the contractor if they coordinate their work with the tenant or if they "bid" the most cost-effective solution for them, which may disrupt the tenant's operations.

Does the contractor provide a detailed line-item proposal, displaying specific costs for seismic details?

Most proposals are simple and include only the final price. Few companies break down the cost per detailed item so that in the event of a plan change, the building owner can determine the true final cost.

For example, imagine a contractor has almost completed a project and the engineer adds 10 new details not accounted for in the initial plans. The building owner can look at a detailed bid to discover the actual price of the new details. If there was no detailed bid, however, the contractor could charge an exorbitant price for this change.

When the detail cost is described in the proposal, the building owner can roughly estimate the cost change and confirm the additional charge is appropriate.

Ask your construction company if their proposal includes a line-item report which states the true cost of each detail and phase of the project.

Does the company have an RFI process used during the bidding process, and continuing throughout project completion?

Questions will arise throughout the duration of a project. The contractor inevitably generates many questions (RFIs) for the engineer when discrepancies exist between the retrofit plans and existing conditions. Often the engineer is required to visit the jobsite.

The engineer's cost for time spent is passed down to the building owner or manager.

Ask the contractor if they have a better method for obtaining information. Ask them how many times, on average, the engineer has to visit the jobsite. If their answer is more than twice for field discrepancies, this is excessive. Search for a firm that places a high value on your money.

Does the contractor have a proven track record of value engineering and/or cost saving alternates?

Unfortunately, many contractors will attempt to work on over-designed plans at the client's expense in order to maintain their profits, or worse, they may not know any better.

Ask the contractor to share three stories about instances in which they received plans from an engineer, only to return them for rework, which reduced the cost of the project, thereby decreasing their profits.

Ask the contractor for referral letters from recent clients, including owners and engineers.

As you read through old testimonials, be sure the praise given to the company involved their current workforce. Much can change in a year or two. A contractor could lose its best foreman, the company may be under new ownership, or it could be stretched too thin between projects.

The most effective method for discovering current work practices is to inspect recent testimonials. You should request testimonials from the last 3 to 4 months. When performing 30 or more projects per year, the firm should possess numerous testimonials written in the last 3 to 4 months.