

4 Tips for choosing renovation contractors in South Africa

When looking for contractors in South Africa and in particular, renovation companies in Pretoria, the property owner should consider the following key points before appointing someone:

1. Track record

Unfortunately, there are far too many fly-by-night, opportunistic, and unscrupulous contractors in our country who are only in the industry in an effort to make a quick buck. It is therefore crucially important for a property owner contemplating renovation work to do a background check on the track record of the contractor. Some things the potential client can check include:

- **Testimonials.** A reputable renovation contractor would market himself by amongst other things supplying testimonials from existing or previous clients. Such a contractor would definitely not mind if the potential client calls such clients to check on the quality and service he provided.
- **Site checks.** Obtain the address of a project the contractor is currently working on. Visit the site unannounced. Speak to the owner if at all possible.
- **Find out who the main supplier of material of the contractor is and check the creditworthiness of the business.**
- **Check whether the contractor has a valid public liability and contractors' all-risk insurance policy in place.**

2. General/first impressions

You know that "gut feel" that you sometimes get? Trust it when it comes to choosing a renovation contractor. This is probably a very subjective issue, but look at the following pointers:

- **Punctuality.** If a contractor is late for a site/quotation meeting without prior arrangement, it shows disrespect and a general disregard for time constraints.
- **Tidiness.** Look at the way the contractor presents him/herself at the first meeting, including the state and cleanliness of the vehicle, personal hygiene, etc.
- **Knowledge.** One gets a fairly quick idea of the technical knowledge of the contractor by simply talking to him or her about the impending project. An experienced contractor will give useful inputs and suggest practical alternatives. Watch out for know-it-alls!

3. Management/operational model

Although there is probably not really a “right” and “wrong” way for contractors to manage their businesses, it may be helpful for the potential client to check the following:

- **Supervision.** What is the situation regarding supervision of the renovation crew on site? Is there site management, or are workers dropped off in the morning and picked up again in the afternoon? What is the line of accountability?
- **Project Management.** Because any work in the property renewal industry comprises a project, it follows that some basic principles of project management have to be followed. Who will manage the project? What is this person’s knowledge level on project management?
- **Quality control.** Property owners need to check beforehand how quality control on the project will take place. Who will be doing the quality management and what will the procedures be?

- **Customer service approach. Who seems to be central for the contractor? Watch out for lip-service when asking the contractor about this aspect. Talk to other clients and find out if the approach is client-centred as it should be.**

4. Putting money where mouths are

It is the easiest thing for anybody to say that they offer the best this and the best that, but these statements unfortunately often remain only empty promises. To test the commitment of the contractor to this beforehand, one needs to check the following:

- **Nature of contractual agreement – apart from the written quotation, the owner and contractor should enter into a contractual agreement. Ideally, this contract or an annexure should contain the full scope of the work that the contractor will be doing. It should also contain a payment schedule that parties will agree on and that will not be changed unless the specifications of the project change.**
- **Workmanship guarantees – any reputable contractor should offer standard or diversified workmanship guarantees. The period may be anything from 6 months to 3 years and should be specified in the contractual agreement.**
- **After-sales service – One of the biggest tests of the reputability of a renovation contractor is probably the quality of its after-sales service. If there is a workmanship guarantee, the potential client should check from previous clients whether the guarantee was honoured. Even if there isn't a valid and agreed-on guarantee in place, the reputable contractor will go back to fix a problem that surfaces after project signoff.**

A renovation project can become a nightmare if the wrong contractor is chosen. If one follows some basic guidelines and a good deal of common sense, the project can actually be a pleasant experience.