

A Guide to Selecting a Suitable Electrical Contractor

There are a number of Key Areas to consider

- 1. Competence & Capability**
- 2. Health & Safety**
- 3. Quality Standards, Capacity & Reliability**
- 4. Financial Stability**
- 5. Specification and Quotation**

You should consider a number of important factors before selecting an electrician or engineer to work on or inspect your electrical installation, whether a single circuit or complete design and build:

1) Competence and Capability

When it comes to electrical work, it is essential you choose a contractor with the relevant technical knowledge and qualifications as if work is designed or implemented incorrectly; the consequences could be highly destructive and even fatal.

Both the [National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contractors \(NICEIC\)](#) and the [Electrical Contractor's Association \(ECA\)](#) maintain lists of approved members, with demanding registration conditions and ongoing annual inspections.

The ECA is the leading trade association representing electrical contractors throughout the UK. the benefits conferred of membership include performance bonds, warranties and work completion guarantees for the protection of members and their clients.

The latest and seventeenth edition of the wiring regulations, [BS7671: 2008](#) came into effect from July 1st 2008, with significant changes concerning RCD protection. This is of particular relevance to domestic electrical installations. A competent and reliable electrical contractor (individual or company) should comply fully with Part P Regulations. Membership of the government-backed Trustmark Scheme is also a good indicator of competence and experience.

If you have servicing requirements for an aged or unusual electrical or security system or a variety of complicated requirements it would be wise to look for signs of experience within the individual or company.

Ask Questions.

- How long have they operated in this market?
- What is their range of experience?
- What testimonials can they offer as evidence of their work quality?
- Can you speak with any of their customers who have had similar work done in the past?
- When were they originally trained?
- Have they kept up to date with industry developments?
- How recently have they attended an approved training course?
- Do they regularly attend recognised industry training courses?
- Do they offer inspection and testing services?

Being technically qualified to do the work is one thing, having the knowledge to confidently apply the right solution in a complex situation comes from years of experience is quite another. The cost of

such knowledge and experience is a premium usually worth paying.

It is wise practice to use a Registered Electrical Contractor, even if this does mean paying a little extra. Be wary of potential bogus claims of registration. The influx of new migrant workers, many of whom will have had initial training and experience outside the UK, means that many electrical contractors may have staff who are not familiar with UK standards. Check who will be working on your project and what training they have received.

The Electrical Contracting Industry has a well-established grading scheme that recognises the competence levels operatives within the electrotechnical industry are working to. The scheme recognises all operatives from initial trainee to fully qualified senior engineer. Always check out claims of Registration. These may be easily checked by contacting the relevant industry trade bodies.

2) Health and Safety

You may have special requirements for Health and Safety depending on your industry sector or type of property. If this applies to you then look for what experience the contractor has in working in different business sectors. Have they experience in working with public authorities, in public buildings including schools, hospitals and health centres. If relevant, have they worked in hazardous industries such as chemical manufacture?

Your safety and the safety of your employees, the public, property and the environment is an essential part of the contractual arrangements to be agreed.

A reputable contractor should be registered with either [CHAS](#) or [ConstructionLine](#), who independently assess of systems to satisfy the most demanding construction and public sector clients.

Request details of the Insurance Cover held by the contractor. A minimum of £2

million employer's liability insurance and £2 million public liability insurance should be in place. Ask to see copies of Certificates of Insurance as part of your quotation request process. Firms using contractors should also have professional indemnity and contractors' all risks cover in place. You may need to request additional insurance cover for large projects or those involving additional risks on special or hazardous locations. Ask if such cover is required if it can be arranged and how quickly.

Risk assessments, method statements and permits to work may also be required. If your project is likely to involve elevated work ask what experience the contractor has of working with scaffold towers, platforms and podiums as well as Mobile Elevate Work Platforms (MEWPs). Are their direct or contract staff trained and licensed to operate any equipment that is required to complete the specified tasks.

Compliance with your Health & Safety Legal Responsibilities is a prime consideration here. It is wise to remember that most aspects of current Employment Law involving Health & Safety Issues, particularly Fire Safety, take the position that the Employer is presumed guilty until proven innocent.

3) Quality Standards, Capacity and Reliability

The vast majority of electrical contractors, over 80% employ less than 3 people ([source ECA](#)). A good contractor will be in demand and it is difficult to satisfy multiple clients at the same time with a business of this size. Inevitably this will lead to delays or rushes and administration may suffer. The contractor may not be used to managing larger projects and may not have the in-house capacity and will therefore be compelled to use external sub-contractors. Over reliance on subcontractors poses risks to consistency of service and reliability.

What Guarantees does the contractor offer on work standards and completion dates? Is there any form of Service Level Agreement in place? Do they have any

form of Customer Satisfaction Documentation or Charter?

4) Financial Stability

What are the implications if your chosen contractor is unable to complete the agreed work? A recognised issue within the electrical contracting industry is the number of smaller operations that fail financially. An unfinished project may cause major inconvenience, incur delays and almost certainly will result in additional cost. Unfortunately this is an alarmingly regular occurrence, which has been heightened by the recent economic situation.

Look for evidence of ability to utilise the ECA Guarantee of Work Scheme. This means that if for any reason an ECA member is unable to complete a job or if there is a complaint the ECA will appoint another member to complete the work.

Always obtain a written quotation from your contractor to ensure you understand the scope of work quoted for. Ensure you are being quoted for the work you have requested and that the specification matches your requirements. Proposed additional work should be detailed and explained to ensure it is a necessary requirement. In the event of having to bring in another contractor to complete unfinished work this will help avoid misunderstandings that could result in additional costs or even safety issues. If you are unsure or require more information then ask for clarification. A fixed price quotation is legally binding.

The level of administrative support within a contractor is an important indication of the level of stability within the business. Whilst there are plenty of competent single operators available, larger projects often require more administrative support and back up than be provided by the typical 'One Man Band'.

Electricians are not always good paperwork people. Certification, invoices, statements, risk assessments, pre qualification questionnaires, insurance documents, tenders, contracts... are all evidence of a well run business that not only gets the job done but is likely to last. Efficient administration saves time and money and makes things simpler and straightforward.

5) Specification and Quotation

Although cost is an important factor it is never the most important. Knowledge combined with experience results in wisdom and the cost involved in benefiting from this is usually worth paying. The cost of not benefiting from it can usually not be afforded.

However tempting it may be to take the cheaper option, the old adage of "*you get what you pay for*" applies as much to electrical contracting work as it does to anything else.

Price might often be considered first, but certainly the overall cost is a result of the contractor's approach to all the other factors. What is the cost if the installation fails or is not completed on time?

A common source of frustration is that the specifications contained in tender requests are often incomplete, inaccurate and sometimes over-specified.

This means the tender or quotations value submitted by most contractors will be significantly less than the total price ultimately paid by the client through variation orders and additional works necessary for completion but not considered at the time of tender.

Discuss your project with the contractor. Go over the specification in detail with the, noting errors and omissions and get their agreement to it and an acknowledgement of a fixed and final price. A reputable contractor will be happy to do this before quoting a price for the work.