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## Finding the perfect handyman

There's no magical formula, but lots of smart steps to take along the path to a happy renovation

By Daniel Drolet, The Ottawa Citizen September 4, 2010

Mike Martin runs Luxury Renovations, an Ottawa firm that specializes in renovations and additions: Anyone you hire -- even for a small job -- should be insured with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, he advises.



Photograph by: Julie Oliver,  
the Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

Anyone who has ever watched the legendary Mike Holmes on television knows how horribly wrong home renovation projects can go when carried out by inexperienced or unscrupulous tradespeople.

Any homeowner who's ever had a to-do list dreams of finding that gem of a handyman -- one who's honest, efficient, experienced and speedy.

Unfortunately, say people in the home renovation business, there's no magic formula for finding the perfect handyman.

But there are plenty of things a homeowner can do to improve the chances of ending up with 'the right one.' Getting a referral from someone you trust is a good place to start.

"When someone is really pleased with work, there's a reason," says Ottawa designer Ulya Jensen, who often has to hire contractors for clients.

So ask around.

"Don't be afraid to talk to your neighbours," she adds, noting that she often gets passersby ringing her doorbell to ask who did the stonework in her yard.

And don't just take someone's word that a certain handyman did a great job.

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If possible, go have a look for yourself.

"What might be great work to one person might not be so great to you," warns Jensen, adding that some people are so pleased to have a new bathroom they overlook the fact the tiles are crooked.

Can't get a referral? There are plenty of other places to look for names -- the Yellow Pages, for example, or the Ottawa Pennysaver, or even notice boards in grocery or hardware stores.

You can even get creative. Jensen says you might consider contacting trades schools in search of students eager to take on work as part of a class project or as a way of earning experience.

The Better Business Bureau of Eastern Ontario ([www.ottawa.bbb.org](http://www.ottawa.bbb.org)) has a handyman section where you can search for BBB-accredited firms in the region.

You can also check out renovators accredited under the RenoMark program -- see [www.renomark.ca/Ottawa/index.asp](http://www.renomark.ca/Ottawa/index.asp).

Badr Gebara of Ottawa's bluDot Interiors says it's important to know in advance what you want done -- and to plan it out in as much detail as you can before you talk to people.

For example, if you are hiring a painter, have your paint colour picked out. It will speed the process. If you're hiring someone to put up tile in your bathroom, have the tiles and the grout colour picked and ready to go.

Once you have a name, contact the people and ask them to quote on the job.

"I'll recommend having three prices done," says Ryan Gillespie, owner of Gillespie Handyman Services at 1300 Richmond Rd. He says multiple quotes are particularly important for big jobs.

And the quote is *not just a money figure*.

Gillespie says it should include information on what your payment options are -- can you pay by credit card, for example -- and details about what work will be done.

He says clients can also ask precisely where the money will be spent. That may give the client options for saving money.

For example, one homeowner who is ready to do some of the work himself may be able to lower the estimate. Another who can't be bothered may be prepared to pay a bit more for a turnkey solution.

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How a contractor behaves when giving the estimate can be a good indication of how he or she will behave on the job, adds Gillespie.

"If you show up for an estimate in dirty clothes and then you tell me that you are going to clean up at the end of the job, there is a small disconnect there," says Gillespie.

And did they show up on time? "Anybody can be late, but who doesn't have a cellphone these days?" he says. "We always call if we're going to be late so the customer stops looking out the window."

Gebara likes to check out their vehicles. She says people who take the time to put decals on their trucks, or who hand out promotional magnets and such, are at least showing they are serious about their business.

The estimate is also a good time to watch for red flags.

Good tradespeople are in demand. It's rare that they are available to start a job tomorrow.

If someone is available immediately, that could signal a problem. So is arriving late for the estimate.

"And if a guy says he specializes in everything, that's a red flag too" says Gebara.

After you have an estimate, you need to evaluate it.

Gillespie says the best way to avoid problems is to do your homework -- "due diligence," he calls it.

Mike Martin agrees. He runs Luxury Renovations, an Ottawa company that specializes in renovations and additions. He's also the chair of the Ontario Renovators' Council of the Ontario Home Builders' Association and vice-chair of the Canadian Home Builders' Association Canadian Renovators' Council.

Martin says you should always ask for references -- and then check them. "Especially in Ottawa," he says. "It's a small town, and word travels pretty quickly in this business." So get the estimates. Check the credentials.

"Even if you are spending \$1,000, make those few extra phone calls," says Martin.

Check also to see that the person is insured.

Martin says anyone you hire -- even for a small job -- should be insured with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board.

He adds that a good handyman is not just about money.

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One of the great temptations for many people is to try to save money having the work done under the table. Martin says the temptation has grown with the introduction on July 1 of Ontario's harmonized sales tax.

"Before the HST, there were statistics out there showing that about 50 per cent of renovations in Ontario were being done in the underground economy," says Martin. "It's up to about 75 per cent now." But Martin warns that people working for cash may not be insured. And if they get injured on the job, the homeowner is ultimately responsible.

Once you have done due diligence, you will have to choose.

One important element in making a choice is your gut feeling about the person.

"Often, it does come down to personality, and you connect to that person," says Gillespie.

Why is that important? Because if you connect to a person, then you will feel free to discuss job issues as they arise. "I think in any renovation, the relationship is vital." When you're ready to go, finalize everything in writing.

"You should have a detailed contract for what you are doing," says Martin.

Oh, and hold onto your money.

"The big thing I hear complaints about from clients is that they get a quote, and then because they are so eager to get started, and so eager to secure a place in the queue, they give all the money up front," says Jensen.

That, she says, is a mistake.

Some handymen will ask for a certain amount of money up front before starting a job. That can be a reasonable request when the contractor has to go buy materials to do the work.

But Jensen warns against giving too much money up front. She thinks *25 per cent* of the final balance is reasonable.

"It gives them incentive to show up and get the work completed," she says.

"Trades workers generally take on more than one job. If you don't create a sense of urgency for them, they won't have one." Tanya Curtis learned about that the hard way.

She and her husband live in Riverside South. Earlier this year, they decided they wanted to spruce up their 11-year-old home. On the list were the removal of a closet, enlarging the entryway, scraping the stipple off the ceiling, adding potlights, and a number other similar jobs.

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It was going to add up to about \$20,000 worth of work.

After getting recommendations from people at work, they picked one individual and gave him a deposit for materials.

He said on June 7 that he would start June 15. But Curtis says that more than two months later, he's hardly done any of the work.

At one point, in early July, he stopped answering phone calls and e-mails. "My husband thought he was dead. He was checking the obituaries," she says.

He resurfaced, asked for more money for materials, and promised he'd do the work in August when they were away for two weeks.

He didn't. His excuse, says Curtis, was that he had to handle emergencies at the homes of other clients.

Curtis and her husband are at their wit's end, fearing that if they make him angry he'll walk away and they'll never see their money again.

"We're going to hope for the best," she says. "But if we ever renovate again I am going to do much more homework and ask many more questions."

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