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How to Choose *your* Renovator of Choice...

10-steps to selecting a qualified, professional Renovator and ensuring a successful, high-quality renovation that is done right.





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Your complete guide to choosing a professional Renovator

Something that few homeowners consider when starting their renovation is the fact that their home is temporarily depreciated when construction begins. This is true whether you are renovating a single room or adding a two level extension.

Of course, if you engage the services of a professional Renovator, this will be a brief and quickly forgotten phase of your renovation: a minor blip on the way to great rewards and enjoyment.

This is why it's so important to investigate your contractors thoroughly before agreeing to any work. You want absolute assurance that your renovation project will be done right – and that it will add both pleasure and value to your home.

How do you go about finding a trustworthy and qualified Renovator? It's actually quite easy if you do the right due diligence and ask the right questions. That's what you'll find here: 10 easy to follow tips and guidelines for helping you quickly and objectively assess any Renovator's qualifications – and ensure you hire a professional for the job.

In summary, here they are:

1. **Check Renovator qualifications**
2. **Get a detailed proposal**
3. **Do they have a proven planning and project management system?**
4. **Are they a Design and Build Renovator?**
5. **Do they practice environmentally friendly construction methods?**
6. **Do they guarantee their work?**
7. **How will they respect and take care of your home?**
8. **How will changes be handled?**
9. **How many years have they been in business?**
10. **Have they won any awards?**

For each guideline, we've given you some interesting background information about why each one is important and provide you with more detailed questions to ask. You may be surprised by some of the facts!

We hope you find these guidelines useful as you set out to make an important decision: who will be your Renovator of choice?

Sincerely,

John Liptak
President, OakWood





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1. Check Renovator qualifications

Many homeowners ask for **customer referrals** to check a Renovator's references. Although this can be useful, it does not guarantee objectivity. After all, no Renovator would give you the names of individuals who will provide a bad reference! Whether they give you five or 50 references, you can be sure they're all going to be good.

If references from customers are not the best way to evaluate Renovator qualifications, what is? You really need to check whether your Renovator of choice is trustworthy and respected in the industry. Here's how:

- **Make sure the Renovator has industry recognized credentials.**

At minimum we recommend looking for the **RenoMark** (www.renomark.ca/ottawa) and **GOHBA** (**Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association** www.gohba.ca) designations.

The Renomark program is dedicated to raising the level of professionalism in the local building industry. You may be surprised to learn that currently out of over 430 so called Renovators in Ottawa, less than 7% are actually interested in meeting the qualifications established by the RenoMark Program.

GOHBA represents recognized home building and renovation professionals in the Greater Ottawa region and supports the professionalism of its members.

These logos are the marks of a professional: look for them on your Renovator's website, proposal or promotional material:



"Less than 7% of Renovators are actually interested in meeting the qualifications established by the RenoMark Program!"

- Check the **Better Business Bureau** (www.bbb.org/canada/) and **PPSA** (www.ppsa.ca) websites.

You may not know that a high debt renovation company can actually put you at risk of not having your project completed. That's because if they are not paying their sub trades and trade partners or suppliers, a **mechanics lien** goes on your property to guarantee payment. Until the debts are paid, the homeowner does not own a clear title. Few homeowners understand this and yet it unfortunately happens frequently.





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Doing BBB and PPSA checks will give you confidence that the Renovator is a financially stable and well run business. Use the BBB to find out if there are any complaints or warranty claims against a Renovator. The PPSA tells you if the Renovator owes money to subcontractors or material suppliers or if there are any liens registered.

You can also check the **Ministry of Labour** website for contractors who have been charged for health and safety violations. If you do not hire a professional Renovator then this is important because ultimately it is you, the homeowner, who is responsible for all health and safety issues.

Doing these kinds of reference checks will tell you how respected the Renovator is in the City and most importantly whether you will feel comfortable and trust them in your home.

If you also decide to check customer references we recommend:

- Checking for projects that have similar scope and complexity to what you are planning, and
- Ask for projects that were completed more than five years ago.

Any Renovator can do good work for a couple of years. It's much more challenging to do consistently good work for five to ten years or more.

Checking references for work completed over five years ago will also enable you to see how any potential warranty claims were handled by the Renovator.

2. Get a detailed proposal

Here's a surprising fact: the average renovation project racks up 27% more in costs due to "extras". That's because many Renovators purposefully bid the project low and come to you with an extra when the project is completed and demand payment without you having any options. Here's how you can avoid unpleasant surprises like this after your renovation has started – or finished.

First, the devil is in the details: a detailed proposal shows you that the Renovator knows what they're doing. Many Renovators will give you a skimpy three to five page proposal that is vague on details. You shouldn't accept this because it is a recipe for extras and hidden costs once the renovation starts.

"We recommend you get a detailed room-by-room description of your renovation project to know what you are building – right down to the number of electrical outlets per room and their specifications."

We recommend you get a detailed room-by-room description of your renovation project to know what you are building – right down to the number of electrical outlets per room and their specifications. This kind of detail shows the Renovator knows what they are doing. If you are not getting this, you are not getting enough detail to know what you are actually buying.





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A room-by-room proposal also enables you to fairly **compare apples to apples**. If one Renovator is significantly lower, there is a reason for this and there is definitely a different scope of work being priced. Finishes and materials can vary greatly in price.

Make sure the proposal is based on using licensed sub contractors and a qualified certified team: certified and experienced workers cost more than “handymen” but are worth every penny.

We also recommend getting a fixed price quote because this doesn't allow the contractor to deviate from the scope of work that was quoted and effectively eliminates wiggle room.

Finally, we recommend you review the proposal with each Renovator thoroughly.

3. Do they have a proven planning and project management system?

For a detailed proposal to be worth its salt, it really needs to be part of an overall plan. You have to know what you are building; what materials you are using – right down to the number of electrical outlets per room and their specifications. A plan forces a Renovator to nail down the project details before they start any work.

A good plan also provides the Homeowner with a roadmap for their entire project. The plan you get should anticipate all costs and timelines. For example, we use a simple GANTT chart that gives you all milestones for your project from start to finish.

Good planning goes hand in hand with **project management**. The last thing you want your Renovator doing is showing up with their morning coffee and spending the first hour trying to figure out where they left off or what they did last.

Ask your Renovator how you will be updated on the progress of your renovation. At minimum you should be updated on a weekly basis – ideally this should happen daily. For example, at OakWood, we:

- Hold a “pre-construction” meeting and provide you with weekly onsite meetings once your project gets started.
- Use a CRM system to update our schedules every day.

Also, our project managers are equipped with tablet and mini PCs and they can review up-to-date scheduling information on a daily basis as required, right in your home while doing their site visits.

Ask your Renovator if they have a computerized project management system and if not how will they update their project schedules – and keep you informed.

“Poor planning is the #1 reason project budgets and timelines go off the rails”





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Renovators with good planning and project management skills will also usually provide you with a single point of contact throughout your project. And make sure they can provide a real person with direct telephone lines that you can contact them during working hours!

4. Are they a Design and Build Renovator?

Having your design done by one company and the building done by another is a prescription for problems. Here's why: a designer will always give the homeowner exactly what they want without necessarily providing an updated cost to build. That's why over 50% of projects that start with a designer or architect never get built.

The only way to avoid this disconnect is by going through a design process that links the design to a plan that drives a detailed scope of work that you can have confidence in. The design phase has to drive the plan and the detailed proposal that follows.

You can avoid these problems by looking for an integrated design and build solution. This ensures nothing falls between the cracks from concept to plan to construction.

“Over 50% of projects that start with a designer or architect never get built.”

This is why we recommend our clients choose a Renovator with proven in-house Design and Build capabilities. In our experience, a design and build firm will greatly enhance the chances of identifying the true scope of work and ultimately giving you a successful renovation and within your budget.

5. Do they practice environmentally friendly construction methods?

Green building or sustainable building practices are a fast changing part of our industry. New technologies and products are constantly being developed. A good Renovator will not only incorporate green practices into their way of doing business but also provide you with expert advice on how to design and build your renovation in a way that reduces the impact on the environment.

Make sure your Renovator of choice is up-to-date and can provide you with expert advice on green material and eco-friendly options. What kind of things should you look for?

For starters, make sure your Renovator doesn't just haul material to the landfill – especially asbestos products!

Do they use sustainable materials and methods that use fewer resources to build, less energy to operate, have a reduced impact on the environment whenever possible, and when economically feasible?

Ask if your Renovator actively supports the **Canada Green Building Council** mission to lead and generate the transformation to high-performing, healthy green buildings, homes, and communities throughout Canada. The overriding goal of the CGBC is to help the construction industry achieve large





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scale reductions in green house emissions for all types of building and renovation projects. CGBC supports renovation professionals who share their philosophy and commitment to the planet and that use sustainable and renewable resources.

When it comes time to select your materials, can your Renovator provide a wide range of energy saving and green material options in key product categories – such as dual flush toilets, LED light fixtures, flooring products that use natural, biodegradable materials, and many other new options?

6. Do they guarantee their work?

When the job is finished, what kind of warranty will you get? Will your Renovator of choice stand unconditionally behind their workmanship?

Remember, if something goes wrong, it won't fail in the first few months. A guarantee matters down the road. What type of "hoops" do you need to go through to get action on your problem?

Ideally the warranty is with your Renovator who will represent your interests to any third party manufacturers and other contractors where applicable. At minimum, a comprehensive 5-year warranty should be in place. An optional 10-year warranty would be excellent.

A good indication that the Renovator will have the ability to warranty your project is the length of time they have been in business. A Renovator who has only been in business for 4 years does not have any credibility giving you a 5 year warranty!

Warranty guidelines that we recommend to our homeowners on their renovation are the TARION guidelines (www.tarion.com). Tarion Warranty Corporation has been around for over 30 years protecting new home owners in Ontario with a mandatory warranty that must be provided by the builder – and guaranteed by Tarion. Although the Tarion guidelines are designed for new home construction they are just as applicable to home renovations.

"At minimum, you should expect a comprehensive 5-year warranty to be in place. An optional 10-year warranty would be excellent."

Ask your Renovator of choice whether they will respect and follow the Tarion warranty guidelines and ensure you have proper protection.

"Ask if your Renovator of choice supports the Canada Green Building Council mission."





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7. How will they respect and take care of your home?

Any renovation results in a certain amount of upheaval that can be stressful for some homeowners. A good Renovator will take specific steps to minimize the disruption while also protecting your home.

Here are a few examples of what your Renovator of choice can do to give you a smooth, worry free renovation that minimizes any inconvenience:

- **Dust protection:** covers for all stairs and flooring, vent protection, protection over tubes and shower bases, dust protection walls, etc.
- **Zippered plastic barriers** from work areas to clean areas.

Once your renovation begins:

- **Broom clean** home at end of every day with a **major clean-up** at end of every week.
- **No-Go-Zones** in your home where Trades and workers cannot go so that you are assured privacy.

8. How will changes be handled?

The most detailed plans can't anticipate hidden structural issues or problems that are concealed behind a wall. Even the best Renovators do not have X-Ray vision! The question is this: how will your Renovator deal with problems or changes to ensure you don't get any surprises at the end of your Renovation project?

Here's how we handle this at OakWood:

- We provide you with a fixed price for a clear scope of work.
- Any changes are professionally addressed with a change order process that allows you to say "yes" or "no".
- We will supply you with a written quote for any change before proceeding or giving you the opportunity to say "yes, go ahead" or "no, we'll deal with this in another way" – otherwise we'll move forward without that change.

The bottom line is you are always in complete control. This approach ensures you get exactly what you pay for and there are no surprises





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9. How many years have they been in business?

This is a demanding business and only the good survive. The number of years a Builder has been in business is a good indication of how long they will be in business.

The fact is, 93% of all construction companies do not stick around long enough to celebrate their 10th birthday. The majority of those go out of business within the first two years. That means a five year warranty may have little value.

Any builder can do good work for a couple of years. It's much more difficult to do consistently good work for five, ten, fifteen years or more. That's why we recommend choosing a Renovator with a minimum of five years business experience under the same name.

"The fact is, 93% of all construction companies do not stick around long enough to celebrate their 10th birthday."

It's also why we strongly recommend you check their credentials and ensure they have a professional address other than working out of a truck or a PO box! A good indication of how seriously they take their business is by their primary telephone number. If you see a mobile phone number as their primary number on signs, vehicles and cards then you know they are not serious. A professional Builder will provide you with professional results. **They will build it right!**

AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST...

10. Have they won any awards?

Awards are a good indication that your Renovator of choice has been independently acknowledged for excellence in some category – and they will provide quality workmanship. However, not all awards are equal in terms of the assurance they provide you, the homeowner!

One of the most important awards in any industry is the **Consumers' Choice Awards** (www.ccaward.com). We consider these awards particularly important because a Renovator and Home Designer cannot enter these awards. It is done by an independent consulting company using telephone surveys to businesses and consumers. That's why these awards are so much more meaningful and a good indication of the quality and professionalism of the Renovator and Home Designer: They are based on the consumer experiences.





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About OakWood

OakWood is Ottawa's largest and most established renovation expert with over 50 years experience. OakWood prides itself on providing high quality "worry-free" renovation services that are completed on-time and on-budget.

Well honed processes and specialized expertise guide each step of an OakWood renovation project. Our unique approach and in-house services include:

- 3D concept and design
- Materials selection
- Unmatched warranty support
- Fixed cost – no charge for extras

From small to large projects, see why OakWood is your best choice for a trouble free renovation.

Call or Book a Meeting for a QuickQuote. Visit www.oakwood.ca

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Consumers' Choice Award Winner:

The "Best Home Designer" and "Best Renovator" categories were opened in 2008.

OakWood is honored to have been chosen in both categories in 2008; and have won every year since.

