

HOW TO HIRE AN ARCHITECT

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Hiring an architect for your project isn't as simple as googling "architects near me" and just picking one. Think about how important it is for your business to operate as smoothly and efficiently as possible, and give your customers an experience that keeps them coming back.



The space that you're in has a lot to do with that, so it really matters how that space is designed and built.

That's why it's important to choose an architect who's experienced with your type of business, and who you feel confident will understand your needs and translate them into an attractive, functional, and affordable design.

There are several things to consider when you're ready to hire an architect. Read on for our recommendations on what you should be looking for!

BUT FIRST, WHY DO I NEED AN ARCHITECT?

Wondering if you even need to hire an architect for your project?

The answer is it depends on what you're doing. If you're moving your business into a space that only needs minor cosmetic work like painting and new flooring, you may not need one. But more extensive work – where you're moving walls, adding doors or windows, moving electrical outlets, and plumbing, or re-laying out the space, it's likely you'll need to have an architect on board. And if you're building a new building, it's a must.

The reason is that, regardless of whether your project involves renovation or new construction, you'll need a building permit from your city or municipality. They'll need to approve the design and inspect the work to make sure it's completed safely and in accordance with whatever building codes are applicable.

In order to apply for a building permit, you have to submit drawings (called CONSTRUCTION DOCUMENTS) stamped by a licensed architect. These drawings will show the proposed work and how it complies with building codes and other regulations.

Of course, the benefits of hiring an architect go way beyond building permits. Architects are creative problem solvers, and they will design your space so that it's tailored to your business, and will help you serve your customers as effectively as possible.

HOW SHOULD I FIND POTENTIAL ARCHITECTS?

There are several ways you can find potential architects to evaluate and choose from.

CHECK YOUR LOCAL AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS CHAPTER

The [American Institute of Architects](#) (AIA) would be a great starting point. AIA is basically a trade group for architects, and they have chapters in all 50 states. Some chapters have a member directory on their website, but if your local chapter doesn't, you can contact them for more information and referrals.



You can not only get the names of architects by asking other business owners who they've used, but you can also hear what their experience was like working with them. If you've visited a business recently and liked the way the space looked and felt, that might be a good indicator that you should consider working with the same designer.

Also keep an eye out for buildings under construction, because they'll often have a sign or a banner onsite with the names and logos of the companies working on the project.

ASK A COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE BROKER

Most commercial real estate brokers have experience with building projects in the area, so they may be able to give you referrals to architects that they've worked with.



HOW SHOULD I EVALUATE ARCHITECTS?

ASK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH YOUR TYPE OF PROJECT

This is one of the most important things you should evaluate. If your business is a restaurant, for example, you should choose an architect that has designed several restaurants. That's because there are space needs, functional needs, and codes that are specific to restaurants – so you want to work with someone who's very familiar with those things.

Healthcare spaces also have unique needs, so choosing an architect who has designed several healthcare spaces is important. And for retail, you want an architect who's familiar

with the latest trends, customer expectations, and can meet the fast schedule that retail projects require.

Is it possible to hire an architect who doesn't specialize in the type of space your business needs? Yes. They can do the research and figure it out, but that will take longer and won't be as efficient. And they may not be as aware of industry trends and concerns.

Our recommendation is to treat this evaluation factor as the most important one. Start your architect search by identifying 2-3 architects who specialize in whatever type of space you need, and continue your selection process from there.

ASK ABOUT THEIR WORKLOAD AND WHETHER THEY CAN MEET YOUR TIMELINE

Businesses like retail stores, restaurants, and medical clinics need to open as quickly as possible to be making money – so the design and construction timelines for this type of project are usually very short.

When you're talking with potential architects, be sure to tell them as much as you can about your timeline and goals. Be honest about when you'll be ready to start with the design and when you're expecting to be open, so that they can make sure they have the manpower to meet those dates.

They'll also be able to help educate you about the process for getting a building permit and about how long the design and construction periods will take, so that you'll know whether your timeline is realistic or not.

TO FEE, OR NOT TO FEE?

Asking architects to give you a fee upfront is tricky, because you don't necessarily know how much work they're going to be doing. After all, you're hiring them to work with you to come up with ideas and solutions, so the direction your project may take is unknown at this stage.

If you ask a few different architects to give you a fee proposal for your project, you may get a wide range that will make it difficult to compare between them. So even though it may make sense to get bids from contractors for the construction work later on, it often doesn't make sense to get "bids" from architects – their work is different.

We recommend choosing your architect based on their qualifications, ability to meet your schedule, and how well you feel like you'll work with them. Then you can negotiate a fee with them – and when they know that they've been chosen to work on the project, you're likely to get a better fee at that point.

If you do feel like you have to compare numbers, one possible way would be to ask for their fee as a percentage of the construction cost. So, for example, you could tell them that you have a budget in mind of, say, \$250,000, and ask what percentage of that they'd charge.

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ASK ABOUT THE LATEST TRENDS AND BEST PRACTICES IN YOUR INDUSTRY

If the architect you're talking with has a good amount of experience in your field, they should be knowledgeable about the things that are important in your space to make your business run as smoothly as possible.

For example, a lot of restaurants right now are trying to figure out the best way to incorporate a waiting area for delivery drivers that's [separate from](#) the waiting space for dine-in customers.

Architects who work on a lot of restaurants will probably have some good insights about this – and that's how you'll know that they're familiar with the types of issues that your business faces, and can design solutions that are customized for you and the way you work.

CHECK THEIR REGISTRATION OR LICENSE

Why do architects need to be licensed?

The work they do affects the health and safety of the public. A poorly or incorrectly designed building can pose all kinds of hazards to the occupants, so each state requires that the architect who leads the project and stamps the drawings must be licensed. To get a license, architects must meet certain [educational requirements](#) and pass a series of exams. So if they've done this, you know that they are qualified.



It is perfectly legal for unlicensed architects-in-training to work under the supervision of a licensed architect, so it's possible that some of the people you work with may not be licensed

themselves. As long as there's a licensed architect supervising the project, checking their work thoroughly, and signing off on it, this shouldn't be cause for concern.

To verify an architect's license, you can do a Google search to find the website of your state's architectural licensing board and do a search from there.

CHECK THEIR INSURANCE COVERAGE

Architects are required to carry a type of insurance coverage called [Professional Liability](#) in addition to the other usual insurance policies a business carries, like general liability and worker's compensation. Professional liability insurance for architects is kind of like malpractice insurance for doctors – it covers claims of negligence, errors, and omissions in their work.

Mistakes do occasionally happen, and mistakes that affect your building can be costly. That's why you'll want to verify that they have this coverage. Proof of insurance is something that most architects commonly get asked to provide, so it shouldn't be an issue if you ask them.

INTERVIEW THEM

Just like with [General Contractors](#), you want to know that you can feel comfortable and trust the professionals who will be designing your space. So even after you've checked all of your architect's qualifications and you feel satisfied that they have the expertise you need, there's no substitute for interviewing them and making sure that you feel you can work well together.

Some of the things you can ask about in your interview are:

- Other recent, similar projects they've done
- What types of challenges often come up with businesses like yours
- What their design process looks like
- How often you'll get updates or be asked to provide input on the design
- How they'll know if what they're designing is in line with your budget
- How often they'll visit the jobsite to check on the quality and accuracy of the work (note – this will depend on their fee, so if you feel it's important to have them inspect the work regularly, make sure that's part of the fee negotiation).

PUT IT IN WRITING

Anytime you're hiring someone for a job that is so important to your business, you should have a contract in place. In fact, in most states it's illegal for architects to begin work without some form of written agreement (in [California](#), for example, they have to either have a contract signed or a communication from the client, in writing, directing them to start work).

Many architects like to use [standard form contracts](#) that are published by the AIA, but that certainly isn't a requirement. We recommend working with an attorney on this to make sure that you're protected.

Choosing an architect may seem like a lot of work, and it definitely does require quite a bit of research on your part. But it's also worth it! Architecture is part art, part science, and really important to the success of your business.

After all, your space is what your customers will experience – it'll be their first impression and a big part of the reason why they come back. Your space is what they'll associate with you. In short, your space is your business, in their minds. So take the time to choose the right professional to design your business' new home!