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ASK THE CONTRACTOR

## Why Shouldn't I Accept the Lowest Bid for a Construction Job?

By EDWARD LEWINE

**REETZ:** The issue is the spread. If you have bids within at most 15 percent of each other, there's probably no reason not to go with the lowest bid. On the other hand, if one bid is 25 percent lower than the rest, there is a problem. It should set off alarms. **PASTER:** Generally, the low bid will come from someone who hasn't thought through the job properly, or doesn't have enough experience to understand what the job entails, or might be looking to get the job and make up some money with add-ons once you get started, or is looking to cut corners on materials and insurance and things you don't want him to cut corners on. **FANUKA:** I won't tell you never to accept the lowest bid. You might get lucky and find a contractor who is really good but desperately needs a job to fill in a space in his calendar and keep his guys working. Ask for at least three references. Check to see there are no complaints against him and that he's fully licensed and insured.

### Should I install a built-in piece of furniture like a bookcase, a window seat or a media center?

**Licht:** Built-ins are expensive, so they don't make sense if you are planning to stay in your place a short time. On the other hand, built-ins do wonders in smaller rooms because they take up less space than the equivalent piece of free-standing furniture, and since they can be painted the color of the walls, they tend to recede visually. Also, you can fit them into quirky spaces, which can be great for older homes. **Paster:** I love built-ins because I'm a contractor, and I'd rather build something for you than have you buy it. Also, there's a tax saving. A built-in is a tax deduction as long as it is within a larger construction project, because it is a capital improvement. That said, built-ins can open up problems. You'll need to recreate the original baseboard around it. You may need to bring electrical outlets from the wall to the edge of the built-in. **Dardick:** You can't change a built-in easily, and this can be a problem with desks or media cabinets. Don't design a built-in to work with a specific television or computer, because you are going to want to upgrade that technology sooner than you think.

### Can I heat my home without resorting to unsightly radiators?

**Slovak:** There are essentially two ways to do it. Radiant heat works through plastic tubing or

electric coils placed under the flooring. When hot water is passed through the tubes, or electricity heats the coils, the warmth rises into the room. In a forced-hot-air system, the air is heated by the boiler and delivered through ducts in the floor or ceiling like central air-conditioning. Hydro air is a type of forced-air system, but the air is heated by water-filled coils.

**Holbrook:** Hydro air is better than forced air, because the hot-water coils only heat the air to about 180 degrees. In forced air, the boiler gets the air much hotter and that bakes the moisture from the air. You'll need a humidifier. **Teschky:** Radiant heat is great. The heat is uniform, and it makes the floor quite comfortable. The problem is the heat only goes so far up, so it is less effective in rooms with tall ceilings and in old houses that leak cold air. **Licht:** The good old radiators really do the best job and are the most efficient heating system. With radiant heat or forced air, when the system stops, the heat stops. But old-fashioned radiators, being made out of iron, remain hot after the boiler shuts down.

### **What's more economical, buying a move-in-ready home or buying a home that needs work?**

**Licht:** The first question you need to ask is, how long are you planning to live in the home? If the answer is less than seven years, you should choose the move-in-ready home. The renovation will always take longer than you think. **Grosswendt:** The turn-key home is the way to go. Your most expensive component in life and contracting is time. If you really want to save yourself money, then save yourself time. **DiSalvo:** Unless you find a finished home done by someone with exactly your taste, you are going to be paying a premium price for work you don't love. You may think the finished home is fine, but once you live in it for a year, things are going to start bothering you. Then you'll be paying to fix work you've already paid for.

### **What's the best flooring for my kitchen?**

**Grosswendt:** For high-end homes these days, the first choices are always wood or natural stone. Midlevel would be porcelain or ceramic tile, and at the lower end, you have vinyl flooring. Wood floors require maintenance, because they don't do well with water and there is a lot of water in kitchens. Stone is susceptible to stains. Tiles and vinyl are more durable. **Fanuka:** Wood looks warm and is comfortable on the feet. It works well in a big kitchen. But for a smaller kitchen that will get more intense foot traffic, I would choose tile or stone. **Slovak:** Remember, too, if you are in a kitchen that has a door to the outside, glazed tile and polished stone get slippery when wet. Think about using a rougher surface like slate or a honed stone.

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