

Choosing a Qualified Contractor

Five Attributes Your Audiovisual Integrator Must Have to Take on a Mission-Critical Project.

///// by John Laughlin

The AV contractor you choose is crucial to the success of your next conference room or classroom project. If it's a mission-critical room, you want to be absolutely certain they will finish the AV system successfully, it will work reliably, and they will support it effectively.

At Conference Technologies, we believe there are five key attributes that the best AV integrators all share.

1. EXPERIENCE

Has the contractor successfully completed projects similar to yours? Have they been consistently successful with the work they take on?

It takes years of experience to learn to do great work, especially on the more innovative audio, video and collaborative systems. Find out how long the contractor has been in business and ask for the resumes of their executive management and the project manager, programmer and installers who will work on your job. How long have each of them been in the AV industry? How long have they worked at this company?

2. REPUTATION

Check the contractor's references, and when you do, go beyond the three or four names that they hand out to everyone.

Look at their website. That's a place where they should highlight the most complex, innovative and difficult-to-execute projects they've done. Ask to talk to those customers. Did these featured projects go well? Ask, too, for references from people in your own industry, even if the jobs the contractor did for them were small.

When you talk to a reference, ask specific questions on the issues most important to your job. Are the control system screens easy to understand? Is the system being used as much as they expected? Were there particular problems or challenges with this job?

Not every installation goes smoothly, and often the reasons it doesn't are



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outside the contractor's control. The crucial question is not whether there was a problem but how they handled it. Did they take the initiative and work through to a good solution?

Red flags affecting reputation include pending litigation, past bankruptcies of the company or its owners, or unusually high workman's compensation claims. Ask about these issues, and if you uncover a problem, be sure there's a good explanation.

3. FINANCIALS

Is the contractor financially stable? Will they be able to buy the components needed to finish your job, pay staff and any subcontractors?

To find out, start by checking Dun and Bradstreet. If it's a big project, ask for audited financials and, in the middle of the year, unaudited quarterlies to confirm they are still on track. A rule of thumb is that you would not give a contract to a company if your job would exceed 20 - 30 percent of their total revenues.

Talk to their suppliers. Do they pay their bills on time? What's their credit limit?

If they are healthy, they should be growing. Even in today's economy, the best AV integrators have been growing at 5-10 percent or more.

It's a good idea to ask for the total value of other jobs they have booked during the timeframe they will be working on your project. If they have an unusually large amount of work for that period, they may have trouble finishing yours.

On the other hand, a financially healthy integrator should have a substantial amount of work under contract. I don't like to hire people who can start tomorrow. Good contractors are like good restaurants. If the parking lot is empty the food may not be good.

Sometimes buyers require AV contractors to buy various types of bonds to ensure that they keep their promises. I don't necessarily advocate that you require bonding—few CITI customers do—but I do suggest that you check on the size of the performance bond that the contractor is able to buy. If a surety company will issue, say, a

\$5 million performance bond, you can be sure they feel comfortable that the contractor can and will finish a \$5 million project.

When you check bonding capacity, be sure the contractor is using a nationally-known bonding company. The quality of the company standing behind their work is an important indication of their stability.

4. CERTIFICATIONS

We believe that InfoComm CTS (Certified Technology Specialist) training is crucial to any AV contractor's skill set. Your contractor should have achieved at least a Sapphire AVSP (Audio Visual Solutions Provider) rating for their company, earned when 25 percent of their technical, sales and customer service staff maintain CTS certification. In addition, they should have at least two or three installers with CTS-I (Installation) status and, if they will be designing your AV system, at least one engineer with CTS-D (Design) certification.

Their staff should also be trained and certified for the product lines crucial to the success of your project. For example, if Barco projectors will be used extensively, they should have technicians on staff who are factory-trained by Barco.

Depending on the project, Crestron Certified Programmer or AMX ACE Certification, Tandberg,

Polycom or LifeSize certification, Biamp AUDIA certification, and, for Crestron DigitalMedia projects, DMC-E certification can be crucial. They should also have a long-term relationship with each of the key vendors for your project and be authorized to perform warranty work.

Membership and involvement in Infocomm and other industry groups can indicate their desire to excel at the work they do. Higher level certifications—for example in Tandberg or Polycom infrastructure products—indicate that they have a deep knowledge of the technology.

A trend in the industry is to use outside programmers, but we believe it's a red flag if a contractor does not have at least one certified Crestron or AMX programmer on staff. If they don't, it can mean they only rarely take on complex jobs or that they are too unattractive as an employer to hire skilled help.

It's worth checking on licensing and insurance. I'd eliminate anyone who does not meet local or state low-voltage licensing requirements or who does not carry adequate general and professional liability, auto liability and worker's compensation insurance.

5. VISION

Take a look at the intangibles crucial to the success of

your project.

Do the key people on your contractor's staff seem genuinely interested in your success? Do they understand and embrace the newest technology, in particular trends toward unified communications and digital infrastructures? Ideally, you should have a chance to sit down, at the contractor's office, with the project manager, the head of engineering, and the programmer who will work on your job.

Pay attention to the kinds of questions they ask you. If, for example, you're installing a video conferencing system, someone should ask if you've thought about lighting, furniture, and the physical environment where the equipment will be installed. Such questions indicate whether they understand the key issues behind an effective system and are as interested in your success as they are in getting a sale.

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