

The Builder's Engineer

Do Consultants Cost You Money?



By **Tim Garrison**,
CEO ConstructionCalc.com

Whatever consultant you want to talk about: engineer, architect, accountant – you name it, their number one job should be to save you money. But consultants don't work for free, so how can they actually *save* money? Allow me to illustrate.

A client of mine, we'll call him Mister Eggplant, is building a large, lakefront home. His architect, Mrs. Radish, designed the most inefficient, expensive stained concrete deck imaginable. The elaborate structural system consisted of plywood, torch-down membrane, wood I-joists, beams, posts and footings. When it came to me for engineering, I immediately asked why we couldn't simply use a composite metal deck. There was no good answer, so that is precisely what I designed, saving Mister Eggplant thousands.

Now, I could have easily put on my blinders and analyzed the original deck. My fee would have been about the same either way. But, I am by nature a cheapskate, so I try to save money whenever I can. And I don't care who's money it is: mine, yours, Red Robin's (I constantly hound my kids to use only as many paper towels as they really need), whoever.

Let's examine the bigger picture. What exactly is a consultant anyway? Isn't it someone with specialized knowledge or experience who performs tasks someone else doesn't have the time for? In general, most of us are smart enough to do most things in the construction industry if we're given enough time to learn them. I don't view consultants as smarter than anyone else, they're just specialized in a particular area. I'm sure lots of builders could also be engineers or architects or accountants if they really wanted to. In fact, many would be superior at these occupations because they actually understand the real world – where the rubber meets the road.

It is amazing how much money a bad consultant can cost you. Here are a few examples:

- It is a consultant's job to stay current with the latest industry trends in their area of expertise. If any consultant is still rooted in the 70's or 80's they're probably costing you money recommending antiquated methods or materials.

- Bad consultants are often too slow or too fast. Too slow causes delay ripples up and down the project chain. Too fast is only a problem if it's also too sloppy or not thorough, in which case re-do's will occur, again, causing delays. Delays anger clients, costing you future business. Also, if borrowed money is being used, delays cost real dollars burning interest.
- Bad consultants don't really get it. Sure, they may be book-smart, but if they don't really understand the nuts and bolts of what you do and how you do it, they won't likely get it right. Mistakes cost by a factor of three: 1-doing, 2-undoing, and 3-redoing.
- Bad consultants don't keep up with current laws and ordinances. There really is no excuse for not knowing the rules. I understand that even the rule-enforcers don't always know their own rules, but a good consultant will not only know the most current rules, but also how the local jurisdiction interprets and enforces them.

If you haven't guessed where this is leading, here it is: *Builders, too, are consultants*. It just happens that their occupation involves a lot more field work than their white-collar counterparts.

The upshot is this. First, if you are a builder, don't use bad consultants. They'll cost you time and money and cause knuckle-pounding frustration. Second, keep in mind that you, yourself, are a consultant. Make sure to provide your clients the *best value* possible. When they ask for bone-headed things, politely point out something more cost effective. After all, isn't it truly a consultant's job to *save* money?

Tim Garrison of ConstructionCalc.com, is a professional engineer, author, and software producer for the building industry. Send e-mail to buildersengineer@constructioncalc.com. Tim reads every one.