

# The Consultant Conundrum

FINDING A WELL-VERSED LEED CONSULTANT CAN PROVE TO BE A PRECIOUS RESOURCE.

>> BY TOMMY LINSTROTH, LEED AP

**D**o you hate the “C” word? The use of consultants comes with all sorts of stigmas. Added cost, outsiders who don’t know the team, hired guns with nothing to lose — all of these are often associated with bringing in outside consultants for any sort of problem, and using a LEED consultant can be no different. But that doesn’t have to be the case, and in fact, using a LEED consultant on your first project can be one of the best investments for future projects that you will ever make. The LEED certification process is a complicated beast: Not only do you need to figure out what strategies to incorporate into your building, you then need to maneuver through the LEED documentation maze to actually earn certification. And that is where a qualified LEED consultant can pay dividends.

Using an experienced LEED consultant can help you analyze which strategies are right for your project — and more importantly — which ones have worked in the past and will keep working in the future. All too often, strategies are just picked from the LEED reference guide or glossy product marketing materials to achieve LEED credits. But what is the track record of those products? How will they function after two years? Which work better in office settings than in retail or residential?

A good LEED consultant can help you navigate through these questions and do so in a cost- and time-efficient manner. They will also know precisely what the USGBC requires for documentation for the certification process. Remember, implementing the strategies is half the battle; the other half is actually getting the certification.

Finally, using a LEED consultant is a valuable learning tool to use for future projects. By working closely with a consultant, you will learn those same strategies that work, and more importantly, how to correctly document each credit you are attempting. This is a real life learning opportunity — much different than just sitting in on a one-day LEED workshop. While you might spend a few more dollars on the soft costs of a consultant, the lessons you learn through the process will last a lifetime.

## FOCUS ON THE TANGIBLES

Can you pour through the reference guide and do it yourself? Sure you can — but it’s a balance



of time and cost. Is it worth paying a consultant if it saves you 200 hours of your time? 150? 100? That is something you have to determine for yourself. Odds are you have better things to do than continuously muddle through the reference guide. Use a good consultant, learn along the way, and keep working to green your buildings.

How do you pick a good LEED consultant? As LEED has exploded across the country, more and more people advertise themselves as qualified LEED consultants. However, having read the reference guide or becoming an Accredited Professional does not make someone a qualified LEED consultant. A LEED consultant should offer the experience and expertise to not only help guide you through the process, but to help you achieve a high-performance, healthy building with little to no cost premium.

First and foremost is experience. After all, the idea is that you’ll benefit from the consultant’s journey up the learning curve. LEED has been around since 2001; your consultant should be able to demonstrate a healthy portfolio of projects that have received certification. If he or she hasn’t gone through the certification process numerous times, odds are you won’t gain the time and cost efficiencies you are paying for.

What should you expect from a consultant? At a minimum, you should expect to find someone who can assist you in budgeting, green product specification, and quality control. Product specification alone is huge: researching, vetting, and selection of sustainable materials and technologies is a service that is both critical and daunting given the rapid changes in products and performance of sustainable products.

Depending on what phase your project is in you can expect a LEED consultant to be helpful in establishing design team member roles, and even conducting an eco-charette to get your project on the right path. Also included in the scope of services you should expect is oversight of sub-contractors to ensure compliance with LEED guidelines, material application, recycling, salvage and waste disposal.

A LEED consultant may also be able to help you evaluate your environmental impact, ranging from carbon footprint analysis to waste reduction to carbon neutral solutions. These specialized solutions are not only good for the planet — they offer money saving opportunities through operational efficiencies.

## CHOOSING YOUR CONSULTANT

Those are the tangibles; pay attention to the intangibles as well. You will likely spend a lot of quality time together, often times through the tough process of changing policies or capital improvements. You’re going to want to select a consultant you get along with.

Look also for a consultant that is open-minded to your unique situation. While many strategies can work in multiple applications, each situation is unique and requires an individual assessment. So talk to a few folks, get recommendations, and check references. Finding a consultant you like and that really knows the LEED process can save you hundreds of hours of time and provide you with a solid baseline of knowledge to certify a future project yourself — no consultant needed. Finally, look for consultants who can demonstrate a portfolio of projects that have received certification. If a consultant hasn’t gone through the certification process numerous times, odds are you won’t gain the time and cost efficiencies you are paying for. If this person is going through it for the first or second time, it may be the same as you doing it yourself. **SF**



Tommy Linstroth, LEED AP, is head of Sustainable Initiatives with Melaver, Inc. Melaver owns and manages approximately 1.5 million square feet of LEED-certified space. Look for more columns from

Linstroth in coming issues of Sustainable Facility.