

To DIY, or not to DIY?

Amy Hamilton-Chadwick via Westpac 10 November 2014



You're smart. You're organised. You could manage your own renovation project – but is it really such a good idea? Being your own project manager could save you thousands and thousands of dollars. Get it wrong, though, and you could see both your budget and your deadline vanishing rapidly into the distance.

If you're planning a renovation, should you organise the work yourself or hand it over to a professional? Ask yourself these three questions:

How big is the renovation project?

Almost anyone can manage a simple renovation which requires coordinating just one or two different trades. Refurbishing all your bedrooms; building an elevated deck; new flooring; plastering and painting walls – all these jobs would be well within the management skills of any reasonably organised homeowner.

Managing a renovation becomes complicated when more than two trades are required. A kitchen renovation, for instance, could call for a builder, a plumber, an electrician, a tiler, a plasterer, a glazier and specialist installers for each of your new appliances.

As project manager, you need to choreograph the tradespeople to arrive on site in the right order, for the right amount of time, and work with each other.

Add to that the need to manage the design and consent processes, and organise the council inspections, and you can start to see the value of a good project manager.

Process?

Before you start planning your own project, you need to be familiar with both the Building Code and the Building Acts, says Hamish Wilson, senior policy analyst at Consumer, who has been a testing manager for the Consumer Build website.

“You have to know what you can do and what you can't do, what requires building consent, and when you need to call in someone with a license,” says Wilson, who self-managed a major renovation of his home.

It was a time-consuming endeavour, but worked well for Wilson, who not only understands the legislation but is also an accomplished DIY handyman.

“The best person to do their own project management is someone who is quite handy themselves and who understands the building process.”

You need to know the building process so you can line up your tradespeople in the right order – getting it wrong can prove disastrous for your timeline and your budget.

“If you miss someone out of the loop, that guy might be busy, and by the time you book him in it could be another week or two,” explains professional project manager Aaron Coveny, managing director at Coveny Group.

“During that time, nobody else can do any work. Then your tradies go off to other jobs, and suddenly a three- or four-week renovation has turned into a three- or four-month renovation.”

How much time do you have?

Project management is time-consuming and potentially stressful. For a job with a short time-frame, you need to be on site daily. For a longer-term project, you should be there at least twice a week, Coveny advises.

It’s easy to underestimate the amount of time your renovation will soak up, and when you’re not available, things can quickly start to go wrong.

Coveny was once called in to take over a major renovation in one of Auckland’s most expensive suburbs. The owners had gone on an overseas holiday during the build, only to get a call from their startled neighbours, who had noticed the builder and his mates enjoying daily swims and barbeques on site, despite the fact that no work was being done. The combination of an opportunistic builder and a clueless owner-manager meant that by the time Coveny stepped in, the project was a staggering \$400,000 over budget.

“You can’t go away, you can’t be unavailable and you can’t turn off your phone,” he says. “If you’ve got a full-time job, it can be very hard to be on the phone each day, asking the tradies how they got on, what stage they’re up to, and booking in the next guy.”

Successful project management requires knowledge, time, organisation and enthusiasm, but if you get it right, it’s hugely satisfying.

“It’s a great feeling, standing back at the end and saying ‘Look what we’ve all achieved,’” Coveny says. “It’s gone from looking like dirt to looking like gold – and you’ve organised everything.”

Seven tips for managing your renovation

Do your research

Read up on [the Consumer Build website](#) about the Building Code and the Building Acts. Remember that you will also have to manage the process of getting consent from your local council; this stage can be onerous, and expensive if you keep getting it wrong.

Get a crew together

Build up a network of reliable tradespeople who will arrive on time, accurately estimate how much time they need on site, and work well with other tradespeople.

Put together time and cost estimates

Ask each tradesperson to quote you a price, tell you how long the work will take, and at what point in the project they need to do their job. This allows you to create an accurate timeline which includes every tradesperson in the right order.

Compare the costs

Get quotes from building companies where the project management is included in the price. Compare these to your cost estimates and work out if the savings are worth the stress and extra work of DIY management.

Plan ahead for problems

You need to be able to make quick decisions when problems crop up, which they almost certainly will. When that happens, you'll need to leave work, get to the site and possibly be ready to alter your plans, your timeline, and your budget.

Communicate regularly with all your tradespeople

Project management hinges on good communication, which means not only regular phone calls and texts to coordinate all your tradespeople, but also making sure they are talking to each other so the project matches the plans every step of the way.

Cover yourself

Building insurance is often overlooked by DIY project managers, says Wilson, but it's essential in case something goes seriously wrong. Plus, don't forget that as project manager, you're in charge of the health and safety requirements on your site. If you don't want that kind of responsibility, use a professional project manager.