The Seven Steps For Picking A Contractor

At some point in time every industrial plant must bring in an outside contractor to do specialized work such as boiler blasting, concrete waterproofing and ceiling painting that in-house manpower cannot perform on a cost-effective basis. Such an option makes sense, in that many industrial operations do not enjoy the luxury of re-assigning staff to do labor-intensive work that requires additional training. Nor does facility management have at their ready disposal the unique equipment required to perform major maintenance or upgrade projects.

However, the greater challenge lies not in deciding whether or not to call in outside help, but rather, determining which contractor is best able to perform the job on time, within budget, with the best outcome and the least lapses in safety. With the right selection, an outside contractor can act as an ongoing partner to help plant managers and facility engineers lower costs and add value over the long run.

1. Precise Planning

The need to run at 100% production levels at all times heads the list of priorities at most every processing plant. Downtime for maintenance or upgrades equates with an interruption in revenue stream. In defense, the best way to avoid having any outside work halt the process is to insure that the contractor provides a precise, highly-detailed plan of the project work in advance.

“If a contractor can’t tell you how he’s going to do that job, and lay it out in an organized, detailed, step-by-step fashion, then you shouldn’t hire him because he isn’t sure of what he’s doing,” says Michael McMahon, president of Coating Systems, Inc. (CSI). Based in Savannah, GA, CSI is a SSPC QP1-certified specialty

maintenance contractor that provides a full range of industrial painting and protective coating services for power plants, transmission pipeline companies, petrochemical plants and chemical processing companies. Its clients include Shell, DuPont, Proctor & Gamble, Kimberly Clark, Olin Chemical, and Colonial Pipeline Company.

“Put another way, if you can’t build it on paper, you can’t build it in reality,” continues McMahon. “For example, we use ‘critical path method scheduling’ which incorporates close to thirty items. It covers the scope of work, the crew, the specifications, the safety checks, the tasks broken down by each different craft, and a complete timeline from start to finish. Such a project schedule should be provided to the plant manager in advance of any work.”

2. A Qualified Workforce

Given today’s scholastic environment where far more students study computer science as opposed to metalworking, the pool of skilled craftsman continues to dwindle. After soliciting RFQs, the down-selection process must include a careful evaluation of the contractor’s complement of tradesmen.

“The importance of having a job go smoothly rests, in great part, on the skill of the people actually twisting the wrenches,” says McMahon. “They must possess a basic aptitude for the job as well as a good work ethic.”

Advance determination of such qualities is not as difficult as it seems. Recognized training programs can vouch for satisfactory performance levels from a given craftsman.

Additionally, most every technical discipline has credentialing bodies which evaluate respective contractors and their employees for competency.

“The Society for Protective Coatings, for one, offers its SSPC QP1 certification to contractors that meet a set level of performance in key areas such as management procedures, technical ability and quality control,” explains McMahon. “Such certification provides facility owners and specifiers a means to determine whether the painting contractor has the capability to perform surface preparations and coating applications on the likes of storage tanks, pipelines, flooring, process equipment, and other plant infrastructure.”

Judging work ethic takes more effort. Look for a contractor who features a dedicated, long-term team of workers versus hiring a local crew “off the street.” Ask the contractor to provide a list of the potential workers and request their job history. If not available, think twice.

3. The Right Equipment for the Job

Often underestimated, the painful truth is that inappropriate or underperforming equipment can greatly increase the time it takes to complete a project. On the other hand, a contractor can actually bring about a cost savings for plant

management, and return the plant to full operation quicker, if he or she possesses equipment selected with forethought and applicability to the specific project.

“When we tackle a critical project like applying a coating of epoxy novolac to the inside of a 300-foot diameter storage tank, we go through the trouble of bringing in portable air conditions, or heaters depending on the time of year, to manage the environment within the tank,” McMahon explains. “This controls the humidity and prevents premature rusting of the exposed metal before the coating goes on. Without such precaution, unanticipated coating failure could develop. At the same time, the controlled environment allows workers to continue spraying twenty-four hours a day instead of just eight. The job gets finished in one-third the time, so the tank can get put back on-line that much sooner.”

Even something as simple as ready access to the equipment and tools can make a difference in the timeline.

“We heard of one informal time/motion study that revealed the average mechanic spends an hour and five minutes each day looking for tools,” recounts McMahon. “Ask to see photographs of the contractor’s equipment and tool trucks. If, for example, you see a gang box filled with a bunch of tools that guys have to dig through to find what they need, then that disorganization can lead to cost overruns.”

4. Safe Work Practices

Safety can never be compromised for the sake of speed. If anything, a serious accident can stop a project in its tracks and immediately place a project budget in peril. Checking a contractor’s commitment to safety begins at the top.

“The mechanics will do whatever the supervisor lets them do,” notes McMahon. “If the foreman allows the workers to stand on a ladder without a safety belt, they will do it. So supervisors should attend ‘process safety management training’ classes so they will set the right tone. Once a project begins, conditions should be constantly monitored and safety inspections are conducted weekly by the operations manager.”

A contractor’s membership in the American Society of Safety Engineers also indicates a commitment to reducing injuries. Additionally, the prospective contractor should be able to demonstrate site-specific training of its employees. Examples include training in fall protection, respiratory protection, hazardous waste handling, Mine Safety and Health Administration procedures, and a confined-space program.

5. Access to Spare Parts & Equipment for Unforeseen Circumstances

Every product manufacturer understands the need for a “second source” supplier. It should be no different for contractors who show up to do critical work at a plant. The contractor must outline a systematic process to acquire spare parts on an urgent basis when the “inevitable” emergency occurs.

“With the experience of coating over 400 tanks behind us, I can assure you that you have to have ‘Plan B’ as well as ‘Plan C,’” advises McMahon. “To be really on the safe side, the contractor should have duplicate pieces of machinery at the ready so if a part breaks it won’t halt the work. We recently were working around the clock to finish spraying the internal lining of a tank for a General Electric company. Since the timeline was so tight we shipped a second, fully-equipped spraying rig to the site. It just sat there as a back up and we never used it, but the expense was well worth the peace of mind.”

6. Constant Communication with Plant Management

Upon completion of a project, few plant managers like surprises such as unexpected, expensive change orders or up-scoping. A conscientious contractor must be willing to provide project reports up-front, on a daily basis.

“Clarity with the customer is crucial,” McMahon stresses. “I recommend that the customer receives three separate reports at the end of each day; each one covering construction overview; safety and quality. For instance, if we planned to blast and coat 5,000 square feet in a given day, and we got that area covered, then we let plant management know things are on schedule. If we didn’t, then we would prepare a list of options and recommendations so that plant management can make an informed decision on how next to proceed.”

7. A Willingness to Partner for the Long Run

An index of suspicion should rise when a contractor appears anxious to take the money and run. Some eventually declare bankruptcy, leaving plant management with no recourse if anything goes wrong.

Look for a contractor who is willing to maintain an on-site presence well after completion of the scheduled work. Even beyond that, added value stems from a contractor who is willing to act as a resource for long-term maintenance planning. Such partnerships actually free up the plant’s workforce to concentrate on more immediate needs.

“Plant foreman can benefit from permanently delegating some of their technical services to a contractor with expertise in their respective fields,” explains McMahon. “For example, a supplemental part of our business is to develop specifications and procedures to reduce rework and extend service life. Many of our foremen stay on at a given site to provide such services as corrosion surveys, failure analyses, computerized maintenance painting programs, industrial cleaning, fireproofing, and OSHA pipe labeling and safety-sign surveys.”

Ultimately, enlisting the help of a proven contractor on a year-round basis allows processors and manufacturers to keep their own staff focused on the core competency of the organization.

For more information, please visit Coating Systems Inc. via www.coatingsystems.net

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