

## How to Find Good Contractors and Maintenance Companies for Your Home or Business

Hello and welcome! My name is Kim Hopkins. For over forty years I've owned an electrical contracting company in Los Angeles called The Electric Connection. In this short manual, I want to show you a simple and reliable way to find and work with the best tradespeople.

Whether you intend to do a complete kitchen remodel or just need to fix a leaky faucet, or whether you need to hire a reliable pool maintenance person or a weekly house cleaning service, this simple method should work for you.

There are very good contractors and very bad contractors. Most contractors will fall somewhere in between these two extremes. After over forty years of working with contractors, I would guess that, on a scale of 1 to 10, most contractors average a rating of about 5 or 6. I'm going to show you a way to find contractors who rate higher, with more like an 8 to 9, sometimes even a 10 rating. And in the final section, I'll share tips for smoothing your relationships with contractors and getting high quality work for reasonable prices.

To keep things simple, I'll refer to anyone that you hire to do any kind of work or service as a *contractor*. No matter what trade or service they provide, all of them are still *contractors* because when you hire them, they are contracting with you to do the work or service.

### How to use this manual

If you're like most people who read this, you're probably already aware of many of the things I've written about here, which is great. The purpose of this manual is to help fill in any gaps.

For a complete overview, you can read this manual from beginning to end. But it's designed to make it easy to locate specific areas where you may want more information. Below you will find a list of the subjects covered. You can select specific subjects-and you will be taken to that exact spot in the manual.

### Five basic actions

There are five basic actions required when hiring and then working with a contractor:

1. Finding good potential contractors
2. Scheduling contractors to bid the job
3. Hiring the contractor
4. Getting the work done
5. Paying the contractor

By far the most important of these steps is finding good potential contractors. Selecting the right contractor for your project will automatically make the rest of your project run more smoothly. This manual discusses each of these steps in sequence. The final section of this manual includes tips for working successfully with contractors.



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## Table of Contents

### [How to use this manual](#)

#### [Five basic actions](#)

#### [Finding good contractors](#)

##### [What to look for in potential contractors](#)

##### [Sources of potential contractors](#)

###### [Contractors you have already worked with.](#)

###### [Contractors recommended to you.](#)

###### [Contractors that you don't know anything about yet.](#)

##### [Ignore ads, including "Sponsored" and "Google Guaranteed"](#)

#### [Using Google and Yahoo to find good potential contractors](#)

##### [The Google/Yelp Method](#)

###### [Google reviews — the limitations.](#)

##### [Example of the Google/Yelp Method of finding good potential contractors](#)

###### [First, go to Google](#)

###### [Now, go to Yelp to check the plumber's rating](#)

###### [Decoding the Yelp reviews](#)

###### [Contacting the contractor](#)

#### [Scheduling contractors to bid the job](#)

##### [If the contractor doesn't show up](#)

##### [Small jobs can be bid and completed at one go](#)

##### [Getting bids on larger projects](#)

##### [Part of the bid is the schedule](#)

##### [Check the contractor's license, bond, worker's compensation, and liability insurance](#)

#### [Hiring the contractor](#)

##### [Hiring a handyman](#)

#### [Getting the work done](#)

#### [Paying the contractor](#)

##### [Paying for smaller jobs](#)

##### [Paying for larger jobs](#)

##### [Paying for ongoing service work](#)

##### [Timely Payments](#)

#### [Construction tips](#)

##### [Permits](#)

##### [Permit or no permit?](#)

##### [Permits for smaller projects](#)

##### ["I haven't decided about the permit yet"](#)

##### [Should you pull your own permit?](#)

##### [Down payments](#)

##### [When to pay during a longer job](#)

##### [Simple payment rule](#)

##### [When NOT to pay](#)

##### [Dealing with Inspectors](#)

## General Contractors

### Keep a record of good contractors

### Why are contractor's prices so high?

### Price Vs. Value

### Fast, cheap, or good

### Conclusion

## FINDING GOOD CONTRACTORS

### What to look for in potential contractors

Look for contractors who are:

- Local
- Reliable
- Friendly
- Honest
- Competent
- Good communicators
- Do quality work
- Keep scheduling agreements
- Licensed and insured
- Their prices are reasonable, considering the quality of their work

It's a pretty safe bet that the more of these good qualities a contractor has, the better your experience will be.

### Sources of potential contractors

When searching for contractors to hire, there are three basic categories of contractors to choose from:

**Contractors you have already worked with.** If you have already worked with a contractor before, and you were happy with the job they did, the easiest and simplest course of action would be to hire them again.

**Contractors recommended to you.** These are contractors that a friend, relative, or neighbor may have recommended. They may or may not turn out to be the right contractor for you. But you can start by checking them out before looking for completely unknown contractors.

**Contractors that you don't know anything about yet.** This last category of contractors is an unknown quantity. But they may turn out to be a good match for your job.

## Ignore ads, including “Sponsored” and “Google Guaranteed”

Wouldn't it be great if all you needed to do when looking for a plumber, for example, were to go online and search for “*best plumber near me*,” and you would immediately get a list of the very best plumbers? Well, sorry to say, that's not going to happen. You see – and hopefully you won't be too shocked by this – every plumber you see will be advertised as the “best plumber near you.”

Whether a contractor is good or bad, honest or shady, overpriced or provides good value, all of them will promise to be the best contractor for you. So, let's see if can find the contractor who really is the best for you.

Let's assume, for example, that you want to hire a roofer. Your first step is to go to Google and search on *roofer near me* or *roofer near (your zip code)*. When the Google search page comes up, you are going to see many roofing companies. What you may not know is that most of the roofers have paid to be listed there. It's not obvious, but the top search results in Google are dominated by paid ads. While the roofing companies that pay Google may be the best roofers for *Google*, they may not be the best roofer for *you*.

One clue that a company has paid to show up as a top search result is that Google labels it as **Sponsored** or **GOOGLE GUARANTEED**. Another kind of paid ad is listed by companies which provide an entire catalog of contractors, like: *Angi, Home Guide, Home Advisor, Best Contractors, YellowPages.com*, etc. Even the *Better Business Bureau* —yes, the BBB is a privately owned advertising company.

If you click on the Google entry for any of these companies, their website will list innumerable contractors. And all the contractors featured most prominently will have paid for the privilege. So, if you can't rely on Google for unbiased contractor listings, how can you find the best contractors? *You look for reviews of contractors written by their previous customers.*

## USING GOOGLE AND YAHOO TO FIND GOOD POTENTIAL CONTRACTORS

There are two main sources for customer reviews, Google and Yelp. You can find good potential contractors by making use of Google and Yahoo together. You need to use both because:

- Google is better for *finding* contractors, while
- Yahoo is better for *providing reliable reviews* of the contractors you find on Google.

### The Google/Yelp Method of finding good potential contractors

If you search on *electrician near me*, for example, and you scroll down the Google page a bit, you will usually see a map with red teardrops on it. These teardrops indicate locations of electricians. If you enlarge the map, more electricians will appear.

Also, to the side of or below the map there will be a short list of electricians. And if you want to see a longer list, at the bottom of the short list you can click on **More businesses**.

The electricians on the map have not paid Google to be listed. This tells you that they don't have to jack up their prices to cover advertising on Google. Another benefit of the map is that the electricians listed are local.

Google will rate the electricians with 1 to 5 stars. Most contractors will have either a 4- or 5-star rating. Avoid contractors with less than a 4-star rating.

After the stars, you will see a number in parentheses. This is the number of customer reviews on Google. Generally, the higher the number, the more customers that electrician has worked for. And the more reviews, the better sense you can get of whether this will be a good electrician for you.

### Google reviews — the limitations

The problem with Google reviews is that they may paint an overly optimistic picture of the contractor. Unfortunately, some unethical contractors hire “black hat” companies to generate fake 5-star reviews.

Here's an example of the difference between the Google reviews and the Yelp reviews for the same contractor. This is an actual contractor, with the name of the company changed for legal reasons:



While the Google reviews indicate that this contractor has a 4.5 rating, the Yelp reviews paint a completely different picture. The Yelp reviews give this same contractor a 1.5 rating. In my experience, Yelp gives a more accurate assessment of contractors. Yelp seems to have found a way to minimize fake reviews. I should mention that many times Google reviews are totally legitimate and not influenced by black hat reviews. However, black hat reviews seem to be much more common on Google than on Yelp.

I recommend that you go to Google to:

- Find contractors near you, and then
- Eliminate contractors that have less than a 4-star rating.

### Example of the Google/Yelp Method of finding good potential contractors

Here's an example of the Google/Yelp Method. Let's say you're looking for a plumber.

#### First, go to Google...

1. Go to Google and search on *plumbers near me* or *plumbers near (your zip code)*.

2. Look on the Google map and note the location of the plumbers. Their names and locations are indicated by red teardrops.
3. Hover your mouse cursor over the teardrop to get the star rating and number of reviews.
4. Ignore all plumbers with less than a 4-star rating.
5. Find a plumber you're interested in and click on their teardrop. More information will appear on your screen about that plumber, including a link to their website, assuming they have one that's listed with Google.
6. Look over the list of services they provide. If you think that they may be a good plumber for you, copy their company name and phone number. Then...
7. Repeat steps 3 - 5 until you have collected several potential plumbers that you might want to hire. As a general rule, the more important or costly your project, the more contractors you should evaluate.

**Now, go to Yelp to check the plumber's rating...**

Let's say you want to check out a contractor called *Joe's Plumbing*.

1. Type in the Google search bar *Yelp Joe's Plumbing* and then press **Enter**.
2. When the page comes up, look for the Yelp.com link that includes the name of the plumber you copied, in this case *Joe's Plumbing*. The link should be at or very near the top of the listings.

NOTE: There might be more than one plumber with the same name *Joe's Plumbing*, so look at the contractor's address or phone number to make sure it's the one that you were looking for. If it isn't, keep looking through the Yelp listings.

**Decoding Yelp reviews...**

1. Read the reviews, both the good reviews and the bad (if any). If the contractor replies to the reviews, read those, too. Often you will learn as much from the bad reviews and the contractor's replies as the good reviews.
2. It's always a good sign when the contractor replies to reviews. It's especially revelatory to look at the 1-star reviews. You might be able to tell if it's a contractor problem or a customer problem.

NOTE: Sometimes contractors respond in writing to their customer's reviews, sometimes not. Responding to reviews is a sign that the contractor is aware that having a social media presence is important. However, an absence of replies is not necessarily a reason for disqualification. A contractor may do excellent work but may not be savvy about social media.

### **Contacting the contractor...**

3. After reading the reviews, if you think a contractor will do a good job for you, go to their website and get their contact information. Their website should be listed on their Yelp page.
4. Try calling them or emailing them to schedule a bid. If it's a small job, you may want to just schedule the work.

NOTE: Many times, contractors don't answer their phone, and you will need to leave a voicemail. This is OK, especially if they are a smaller company. They may be out working. However, an important test is, will they reply within a few hours or at least by the next business day? If not, they are probably not the contractor for you.

5. Repeat steps 1 to 4 until either you have scheduled a contractor for a small job or you have scheduled several contractors to bid on your larger job.

### **SCHEDULING CONTRACTORS AND GETTING BIDS**

If your job is small enough and you have contacted a contractor that you are happy with, you can simply schedule a service call. You can probably do this over the phone.

Try to find a day/time that is convenient for both you and the contractor. Then, you're all set! Well, assuming that the contractor actually shows up on that day/time, that is. If they don't and can't give you a convincing reason why, it's time to move on to another contractor.

If you're doing a larger project, it's best to schedule more than one bid. It's typical for larger projects to get about three bids. Schedule the bids using the list of contractors that you have selected from the Yelp reviews. You can schedule them all without waiting, but never arrange to meet more than one contractor for a bid on the same day and time. This is considered rude and won't sit well with the contractors.

### **If the contractor doesn't show up**

If the contractor hasn't shown up, **DON'T WAIT EVEN ONE MINUTE PAST THE AGREED TIME**—Contact them immediately to see if they are coming.

There's no reason to sit around waiting for someone who may not show up. And don't be shy or embarrassed to call. You have done nothing wrong and should expect them to keep their time agreements. If they don't answer or they say they forgot or that their truck broke down or... it's time to look for a new contractor.

One way to avoid this situation is to look for hints of this kind of behavior when reading the contractor's reviews.

### **Small jobs can be bid and completed at one go**

When the contractor arrives to do a small job or service call:

1. Greet them cordially and respectfully.
2. Show them what you need fixed or the small job you want done.
3. Ask them any questions you may have.
4. Agree on a price.
5. Make sure they have all the information they need to do the work.
6. Leave them alone to do the work.
7. When their work is complete, inspect their work to make sure you are satisfied that the work is complete and done to your satisfaction.
8. If there is any issue with the work, discuss it with the contractor and get them to fix that issue to your satisfaction.
9. When the work is completed to your satisfaction, if the job takes a day or less, they will usually ask you to pay them.
10. Pay them.

### **Getting bids on larger projects**

When the contractor arrives to bid a job:

1. Greet them cordially and respectfully.
2. Explain the job.
3. Ask any questions that you may have.
4. Make sure they have all the information they need to do the bid.
5. Leave them alone to determine what their bid will be.
6. Get their bid or arrange how and when they will get it to you.
7. If you are convinced that the bid reflects a great price for a quality job that will be done quickly, you may want to hire the contractor on the spot. However, unless you are absolutely certain of this, thank the contractor for their bid and let them know that you are going to get several bids. And then, you will get back to them.
8. Repeat steps 1 to 7 with other contractors until you are ready to make an informed decision as to which contractor to hire.

NOTE: Depending on the job, some contractors will be able to give you a bid right away while they are still on your property. On more complex projects, it is understandable that a contractor may need to evaluate different aspects of your job and get prices for materials. If so, ask them specifically when you will get the bid. If they don't give you their bid by that day/time, this signals trouble. Perhaps they are not the right contractor for you. This is one reason why you should schedule more than one bid.

### **Part of the bid is the schedule**

Whether large or small, part of any bid should be the schedule of when the job will start and when it will be completed. For larger projects, a more detailed time table will be necessary.

### **Check the contractor's license, bond, worker's compensation, and liability insurance**

If you are planning on doing a larger construction project, I would advise you to use a licensed contractor. And with licensed contractors, one final thing you can do to qualify that contractor is confirm that their contractor's license, bond, and worker's compensation and liability insurance are up-to-date.

You can generally do this by Googling *state contractors license board*. You can usually look them up by using either their company name or their contractor's license number. By the way, if they are a licensed contractor, their license number should be visible on written materials related to their company, including their website and business cards.

## **HIRING THE CONTRACTOR**

Once you've decided on which contractor to hire, let them know, and work out the schedule when they will start the work. Before starting the job, be sure to have them give you a written contract that has, at a minimum:

- A complete description of the work they intend to do,
- The exact price for this work,
- When they expect you to pay for the work. If it is a larger project, there may be more than one payment (called progress payments). If so, get in writing each point in the project at which payment will be made and how much that payment will be.

Note: Even if the job is a simple service call, it is advisable to get a written bid/contract describing the job and naming the price. Written agreements protect both parties and can clear up any misunderstandings that may come up later.

### **Hiring a handyman**

On very simple jobs, you may want to hire someone referred by a friend or neighbor. That person may be a handyman (handyperson?) who doesn't have a license or insurance. And they may not have the inclination or ability to give you a written bid or an invoice at the end of the job. I have sometimes hired

people like this when the job is simple and not likely to go wrong. It has generally worked out for me. I'm not necessarily recommending that you do this. You'll need to use your own judgment.

## **GETTING THE WORK DONE**

There's not a lot you need to do on this step. If you've hired a good contractor, they should be ready and able to do the work without a lot of input from you.

For a smoother job, be polite with the contractor and be pleasant and accommodating to their needs in regards to getting the work done. This may include bathroom arrangements or, perhaps, providing cold water on hot days.

## **PAYING THE CONTRACTOR**

### **Paying for smaller jobs**

On smaller projects, payment should be relatively simple. Make sure the work is completed to your satisfaction, and then pay the contractor in full.

### **Paying for larger jobs**

If a job takes longer than one day, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER pay the contractor 100% of the job! Often, if a job is going to take only a couple of days, the contractor will simply wait to complete it before billing. But if the contractor wants payment at the end of each day, then at most, pay the contractor ONLY FOR THE PERCENTAGE OF THE WORK THAT HAS BEEN COMPLETED. In fact, pay for a little less, like 10% less, than the percentage of work completed. ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS leave enough money available to reward the contractor for coming back to finish the job.

By the way, if the contractor is putting pressure on you to pay more than the percentage of work completed, this is a big warning sign: The contractor may have trouble finishing the job in a timely manner. Possibly, he is realizing that he may have underbid the job and is becoming reluctant to complete it for the agreed amount. Possibly, he's running low on funds and wants to leave your job to obtain a large initial payment on another job. Whatever the situation, paying for only the amount completed will increase your chances of a completed job.

### **Paying for ongoing service work**

Ongoing service work may be for weekly gardening, pool maintenance, house cleaning, etc. Before starting the service, reach agreement as to what's to be done, schedule, price, and when payments will be made. Payment may be at the end of each visit, once a month, or on another schedule. It's good to have a written contract describing these arrangements before starting the service. However, many service people are not into creating written contracts. In this case, use your judgment. Keep in mind that you can always end the service if it's not working out.

## Timely Payments

Always keep your pay agreements with your contractors. No matter what type of pay agreement you have set up with your contractor, pay reliably and timely. You will have a much better relationship and get better service from your contractors when you pay them promptly at the agreed-upon time.

## CONSTRUCTION TIPS

### Permits

If a permit is needed for your project, your contract should specify that the contractor is responsible for getting it. This will ensure that your contractor is properly licensed and experienced enough to know how to get the permit. Also, if the contractor obtains the permit, they are legally responsible for the work. And finally, when they get the permit, they will be the ones to arrange for the inspections related to the permit.

### Permit or no permit?

For larger projects, a permit is almost always a good idea. Here are some reasons why:

- It's always a good idea to have a record that your job was inspected and approved by the city or county. The bigger the job, the more important this is. For example, let's say you add a bedroom to your house. When it comes time to sell, without a permit, problems can arise regarding the official record of the square footage of the house.
- Work done without a required permit leaves you open to getting "busted." The city or county may insist on redoing work to meet building code requirements.
- With a permit, city or county inspections will be required. These inspections will most likely ensure that the work meets safety standards and will stand the test of time. Yes, it can happen that a building inspector may miss something. But getting a permit betters the odds that your job will be done properly.
- Getting a permit keeps the contractor honest. Knowing that their work will be inspected, a contractor will always do their best to do the job right the first time. And if an inspector does find something that needs to be corrected, the contractor will be legally obligated to make the correction.

Note: Getting a permit for many projects, such as replacing your main electrical panel, replacing your old water pipes or electrical wires, or adding a deck in your backyard will not typically increase your property taxes. However, if the square footage of your home increases as a result of the project, your taxes might eventually increase. On the flip side, when it comes time to sell, your property will likely have increased in value.

### Permits for smaller projects

One of the downsides of getting a permit is the time and expense involved in both paying for the permit and arranging visits from the inspector. With this in mind, even though many jurisdictions technically

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

require a permit for almost all construction, most homeowners are unlikely to want a permit for, say, replacing a light switch. But what about replacing all the light switches throughout the house? It's kind of a gray area.

### **“I haven't decided about the permit yet”**

To keep a contractor honest and doing the job properly, you can say that you are considering a permit and will let them know. The contractor will need to keep this in mind while doing the work. Then, if you decide in favor of a permit, it can be gotten just before or after the job is completed. (Though this wouldn't be possible for jobs where inspections are required at various intermediate stages of the work.)

### **Should you pull your own permit?**

Almost never. If the contractor obtains the permit, they may charge you a small fee for their time. But unless you judge the fee to be too large, let the contractor handle it. If they obtain the permit, it's listed under their contractor license number. This makes them legally responsible for their work. And they are legally obligated to complete the work in accordance with the building inspector's requirements before you pay them 100% of the contract price.

Of course, if they can't pull a permit because they are not a legally licensed contractor, or you feel that they are simply not organized enough to obtain the permit and deal with the inspector, is this really the contractor for you?

### **Down payments**

On jobs that cost more than a few hundred dollars, some contractors may ask you for a down payment. Assuming that you trust the contractor to do the work at the agreed upon time, this is OK. But never pay a contractor more than 10% or more than \$1,000 before the work begins. The exception to this is if the contractor needs to purchase expensive materials.

For example, let's say a plumber is to install a 50-gallon water heater costing \$1,500. It would be appropriate to pay the contractor in advance for the water heater.

### **When to pay during a longer job**

On larger projects that take more than one or two days, the contractor may want progress payments. This is acceptable *as long as you don't pay more than the amount of work that has been done*. Generally, it's a good idea to pay slightly less than the amount of work that has been done.

This is especially true if there is a permit on the job. In this case, progress payments should reflect the amount of work to date, minus 10%. Do this on every payment so that at the end of the job you have a 10% retention. Only pay this 10% retention after the inspector has signed off on the final inspection.

## Simple payment rule

A simple payment rule on larger projects is: 10% down and 10% retention until the job is 100% complete, including final inspections, if applicable. This is fair to both customer and contractor.

## When NOT to pay

When a contractor asks you to pay them for more than the amount of work that has been completed. *DON'T DO IT!* They will likely give you a very convincing reason why you should do this. But trust me, one way or another, this will not turn out well. Either they may delay finishing your job at the agreed upon time, or they may not come back at all.

As a contractor myself, I have been hired countless times to finish jobs the original contractor didn't complete. On almost every job like this, the first contractor had been overpaid.

## Dealing with Inspectors

While it's true that your contractor is primarily responsible for arranging for the permit, scheduling inspections, and getting the job approved, you may find yourself meeting the building inspector when they come to inspect your job.

The best way to keep things running smoothly with the inspector is to be friendly and make the jobsite easily accessible. It doesn't hurt to keep inspectors in a good frame of mind when they are inspecting your property.

## General Contractors

There are jobs where you might consider hiring a general contractor. The job may require multiple trades, and you may not be familiar with construction. Or you simply may not want to spend the time keeping track of all the construction details. In these situations, you can hire a general contractor to organize and manage the project. You will need to pay the general contractor a fee of 10% to 25% of the cost of the project.

On the other hand, if you have the necessary skills and the inclination to manage the project yourself, that may be your preferred option.

## Keep a record of good contractors

It can be helpful to keep the contact information of contractors that you have already had a good experience with. This will make it faster and easier to locate them again.

## WHY ARE CONTRACTOR'S PRICES SO HIGH?

My electrical contracting company has received hundreds of 5-star reviews. But occasionally, it receives a 4-star review from a customer who believes that, while they are happy with our work, they think our prices are a little too high.

I can understand their point of view. Our prices *are* high. But then, so is the cost of trucks, gasoline, insurance, employee salaries, and everything else that it takes to keep a service company running properly. The prices we charge allows us to provide our customers with the kind of quality service they deserve and expect and leaves our company with a 10% profit.

Below is a list of some of my own company's weekly expenses. There are more, but here are the main ones:

- Insurance coverage: workers compensation, liability, auto, comprehensive, etc.
- Vehicle maintenance and fuel
- Tools
- Office equipment
- Electrician salaries
- Office staff salaries
- Employee training
- Computers, including maintenance, training, and support
- Software: accounting, dispatching, and Customer Relationships Management software
- Contractor license fees
- City and State license fees
- City business taxes
- City and State sales taxes
- Credit card transaction fees
- Bookkeeping and CPAs
- Safety program and training

## **PRICE VS. VALUE**

When deciding which contractor to use, a main consideration is price. But there are other factors to consider as well. Here are some other things to look for in a contractor:

1. Honesty
2. Quality of work
3. Punctuality and completing work on schedule
4. Ease of communication
5. Competence

A contractor may give you the lowest price, but perhaps the quality of their materials or their workmanship may be low. Or a lower-priced contractor might promise when the job will start and how long it will take, and then disappoint you by not starting or completing the job on time. Maybe they will try to raise their price half-way through the job. The promised price may have been low, but the value isn't there.

## **Fast, cheap, or good**

There's an old rule in contracting: *Fast, cheap, or good – pick two*. The idea is that you can generally get any two but not all three. You can get fast and cheap, but the quality is likely to be poor. You can get

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

good and cheap, but the job is likely to take a longer. Or you can get good and fast, but you will likely need to pay a higher price.

While the *fast, cheap or good* rule often applies, it doesn't tell you which two to choose for your job. One customer may choose to pay more for faster service or more expensive materials. Another customer may choose to pay less for a job and be willing to wait longer for completion or go with less expensive materials. Keeping in mind the *fast, cheap, or good* rule can help you juggle these factors to suit your budget and time constraints.

## **CONCLUSION**

Whether you own a home or a business, I hope this information will enable you to find, hire, and manage contractors and maintenance people who will bring quality and comfort into your life.

Wishing you the best!

Kim Hopkins

Owner, [The Electric Connection](#)