

A photograph of two men shaking hands in front of a brick building with large windows. The man on the left is wearing a light blue striped shirt and dark pants. The man on the right is wearing a blue shirt and a tie. The background is a brick building with large windows. The foreground is a blurred desk with papers and a yellow folder.

# Design-Build: Why Not?

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# Design-Build: Why Not?

By [Scott Lowe, P.E.](#)

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In the last Ideas & Insights, we discussed the advantages of design-build. But there are things to consider when thinking about adopting design-build. We can call these disadvantages or challenges.

## Limited Competition

One of the challenges, particularly for public agencies, is there may be a limit on the competition that you can get from local firms on design-build projects. However, as design-build becomes more popular, there are going to be more teams capable of executing a project on a design-build basis.

## Your Risks and Role are Different

Another important consideration is that the risks can look very different. If you are used to your designer being the owner's advocate on a construction project, then what you are going to find, in the design-build scenario, is that's definitely not the case.

Here's a quick example. I have a good client and friend who was involved with the construction of a public hospital using design-build. His inspectors noted that a component of the project was not being constructed as required by the specifications. In other words, the standards were not as set forth in the specifications. Dutifully, the inspectors identified the deficiency and made the owner's representative aware of the problem.

The owner contacted the design-builder and said, "Look, we've got an issue out in the field. The contractor isn't executing the project according to the specifications. We are going to reject it and we thought you should know."

A quick response came back from the design-build entity. It basically said, "Yeah, we went out and took a look at the problem that you identified and as far as we are concerned it's satisfactory. We will modify the spec accordingly and we will submit it for your review and approval."

In other words, the design consultant went out, took a look at the problem, and concluded that it wasn't an important aspect of their design and waived it through. When you have a setup where the designer is now part of the design-build entity, that can happen. So, the specifications that we used to think of as "the law," are now a little more pliable in terms of their application.

Losing control can be a consideration or a concern to some owners. The owner will likely have less control of the ultimate design.

**Different Skill Set Needed**

There is a different skill set needed to successfully execute a design-build project. If you are used to relying upon a set of predetermined specifications in order to monitor or oversee the performance of the contractor and using the contract to enforce contractor's performance...

...that's going to be a little bit more challenging.

It won't be as easy to point to the contract. The contract won't necessarily be as friendly as it would have been in a design-bid-build scenario. You'll often find yourself having to do a little research to determine a valid basis for insisting upon the kind of performance you expect.

The "give and take" nature of design-build makes communication skills critical. The letter writing is important, the emails are important, and making sure everybody is clear as to what you are going to demand as an owner is perhaps even more important.

The bottom line is that design-build does have some disadvantages. Some owners might consider these significant disadvantages. For other owners, these might seem like reasonable compromises given the potential for improvements in price and schedule.

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