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# When It's Best to Go With a Pro

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By AMY HOAK

Homeowners are more willing to get their hands dirty with home-improvement projects these days in order to save money. But the DIY route may not always be the safest or cheapest.

"Especially with money being so tight, it's totally understandable that people want to take on projects themselves that in other periods they would have hired someone to do," says Meri-K Appy, president of the Home Safety Council, a Washington nonprofit dedicated to preventing home-related injuries.



Edison

But how do you determine if a project entails more than you can realistically handle?

Most people tend to gauge the complexity of a project by doing research online, says Chris Murray, front-end insights manager for tool maker Black & Decker. Some do-it-yourself Web sites grade a project's difficulty.

You also should look at the tools that are required for the job. "If it says 'You need these tools,' do you know how to use them? If you don't, you have a challenge coming," Mr. Murray says.

If you're unsure about your ability to finish a project correctly, get an expert opinion before proceeding. Sometimes, you may end up spending more money to repair a bungled DIY job than if you had hired someone to do it from the start.

Here are a few occasions when you may want to consider turning to a pro.

### 1 When safety is an issue.

Tinkering with a home's electric system can be risky business, says Matt Knox, CEO of DiggersList.com, a construction classifieds Web site. Not only could the do-it-yourselfer risk electrocution, but doing a job incorrectly could create a safety hazard within the home's structure.

A basic ceiling-fan installation is a popular do-it-yourself project. But even that, if done



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incorrectly, can have dangerous results. More than 19,700 people a year are injured by ceiling fans that are improperly mounted or incorrectly sized, according to Electrical Safety Foundation International, an organization that focuses on electrical safety in the home and the workplace.

**Some other jobs that involve safety risks:**

**Extending a gas line.** "Do not mess around with gas. ... If you're DIY, you probably don't know how to check for gas leaks," Mr. Knox says. A mistake there could lead to an explosion or carbon-monoxide poisoning.

**Projects that involve heights.** Carefully assess projects that require you to be high up, whether it's roofing or pruning trees, Ms. Appy says. "Do the cost/benefit analysis upfront and ask yourself, 'How well trained am I to do this, do I have the proper tools, what is my physical well being,'" she says.

**Projects that require power tools.** Obviously, big power tools, such as a circular saw, can lead to serious injury or even death if used improperly. But don't underestimate jobs that could cause an injury that might not be devastating, but would still slow you down, Ms. Appy says. "The nail gun that injures the hand you write with, it might not be something that seriously injures you," she says. "But it could be something that puts you out of commission for a couple of weeks."

*2 When water is involved.*

Leaks and water damage can lead to more costly and complicated repairs. If left unfixed, they can lead to mold -- which affects air quality and if found during an inspection can be a deal breaker on a home sale.

Water-related projects don't have to strictly involve your home's pipes. Putting in a skylight might seem like a do-it-yourself job you can handle. Do it incorrectly, however, and you could end up with a leaky roof, water damage and mold.

"If you're lucky and it leaks, you will see the leak," says Mr. Knox. If you're not lucky, leaking can start inside the ceiling and drip behind the walls, causing damage to drywall and wooden beams, he adds.

Mr. Knox says 90% of all construction-defect claims on jobs done by professionals are due to water intrusion, so "it escalates when you go to DIY."

*3 If the costs of materials or tools are high.*

Sometimes the costs of materials and the expense associated with making a mistake are enough to make hiring an expert a good idea.

"For something like crown molding...you need an expensive tool and the material itself is expensive," Black & Decker's Mr. Murray says.

A kitchen cabinet can cost a couple hundred dollars, and if you order incorrectly, there might be a restocking fee and special orders may be nonreturnable, says Mike Albrecht, division director for Home Depot's installation business. Being off on measurements for granite countertops also can be a costly flub.

*4 If the project is too big.*

If you're planning on replacing all the windows in your home or remodeling your kitchen, think twice about how much of the project you want to take on yourself, Mr. Albrecht says. Often, you can leave the heavy lifting to the experts, and work on the finishing touches, such as painting and tiling backsplashes, he adds.

In a bathroom, for example, you might be comfortable changing lighting fixtures and medicine cabinets, painting and retiling, Mr. Knox says.

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