

Preconstruction With Purpose: Practical Advice for Ensuring Project Success



Effective preconstruction requires more than bringing contractors to the table early. It demands a clear understanding of project goals, realistic assessments of cost and schedule, and a willingness to act on what the process reveals. By aligning priorities, resources and risks before key commitments are set in stone, owners and contractors can make better-informed decisions that will lay the foundation for project success.

Contractors have long contributed their expertise during design through estimating, constructability reviews, and value engineering. That input carries more weight today because market conditions can shift quickly and owners expect preconstruction decisions to hold up in the field. Material costs, lead times, and financing conditions may change before work begins, making early commitments harder to unwind. In this environment, the value of preconstruction cannot be measured simply by when the contractor becomes involved, but by whether the process begins with defined goals and produces a plan the owner can support and the project team can execute.

Expanded tariffs, tighter trade restrictions, and heightened geopolitical tensions have increased uncertainty around material pricing, sourcing, and energy costs in 2026. Persistent inflation and elevated interest rates continue to raise borrowing costs and pressure project financing. Despite these headwinds, U.S. construction is expected to expand through the end of the decade, although headline growth masks an increasingly uneven market. Data center development, infrastructure, energy and utilities, institutional facilities, and select areas of commercial construction are expected to provide much of the industry's forward momentum. This concentration of growth often intensifies competition for labor, materials, and trade capacity in stronger sectors, creating cost and schedule pressures even as activity slows elsewhere.

The practical consequence is that the assumptions underlying a project become outdated more quickly. As design approvals, long-lead purchases, and schedule commitments accumulate, the window for change narrows and the cost of changing course rises. Meaningful contractor input during preconstruction gives owners more opportunity to test those estimates and procurement assumptions and evaluate alternatives before key decisions become difficult to reverse.

Across both public and private markets, owners are increasingly adopting delivery strategies that bring contractors into the process earlier. New York City's Department of Design and Construction offers one public-sector example, with successful design-build projects and several construction manager-build procurements underway. The agency's expansion of its delivery toolkit reflects a broader move toward integrating construction expertise into decisions made during planning and design. Design-Build Institute of America's (DBIA) 2025 Design-Build Data Sourcebook provides another indicator of that shift, forecasting that design-build will account for nearly half of U.S. construction spending by 2028.

As owners seek to gain input sooner, leading contractors are demonstrating how preconstruction extends beyond estimating. Early engagement with suppliers and trade partners, integrated cost and schedule planning, and technology-supported design coordination help connect design development with current market information, purchasing decisions, and delivery requirements. When conditions change, these capabilities will enable teams to adjust the design, sourcing strategy or execution plan sooner in the process, minimizing negative impact.

Earlier involvement in the process is most effective when it begins by clarifying what the owner is actually trying to accomplish. Project goals are often not fully developed at the outset and priorities for functionality, scope, sustainability, community participation, and other outcomes may not yet be reconciled with the available budget and schedule. Contractors and designers can help translate those priorities into concrete requirements and determine whether they are achievable. Delivery structure matters because it influences when contractors become involved and how the project team responds to what preconstruction reveals. Design-bid-build remains suitable for many projects with clearly established scopes, while collaborative models may provide stronger incentives to resolve risks during design.

Regardless of delivery method, surfacing risk is only the first step. Teams must act on preconstruction findings by changing the design, schedule, or procurement strategy; incorporating known costs into the construction price; or allocating remaining risks in the contract and covering residual uncertainty through contingency. Otherwise, this early involvement may improve risk visibility without providing real resolution.

That discipline also protects contractors from commitments that could strain margins, cash flow, or financial capacity. The competitive advantage is not preconstruction itself, but the ability to use early input to align project goals with available resources. When owners and contractors clearly define the project's objectives and constraints, they can evaluate practical alternatives before making firm commitments and enter construction with a plan that advances the owner's priorities and reflects the contractor's ability to perform, giving the project its best chance to succeed.

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