

Between the architect and the installer

The work undertaken by home automation installers comes under scrutiny in a white paper informing architects about the industry. It stresses the responsibility of architects to understand the installer's job and ensure an installation doesn't look like an electronics showroom. **Rael Martell** reports.

The hazards of employing an inexperienced, under-qualified home automation installer are outlined in a new white paper aimed at architects.

Failure to understand the complexity of integrating the electronic systems needed for successful home automation can lead to the smart home looking like an electronics showroom, the report says.

Published by home automation providers AVD Australia and Project Connection Australia, the white paper instructs architects on what to look for in a home automation designer – and when hiring an electrical contractor for a project.

“Working with a home automation designer is no different to working with an interior

designer, landscape architect or other design professional,” says AVD Australia managing director Sandy Howard.

“Busy architects have their hands full providing core services and can't be an expert at everything. The white paper provides a seven-step solution for creating intelligent environments in new homes and is something that should be carefully read by anyone and everyone contemplating a smart home project.”

The seven steps cover developing the scope of works, such as energy efficiency, future technological needs, budget and aesthetic preferences.

“A detailed scope of works is the foundation of every successful home automation project,” the report says.

The seven step methodology for a successful home automation project

- 1** Develop the scope of works
- 2** Design and documentation
- 3** Selecting an electrical contractor
- 4** Cabling and infrastructure installation
- 5** Project management
- 6** Product selection and installation
- 7** Hand-over and tuition



What to look for in a home automation designer

- Experience in similar projects: seek a designer who has installed home automation systems for projects of similar scope and complexity.
- Rapport: a good home automation designer is never patronising. Architects need a designer who is eager to explain the multitude of possibilities.
- Product neutrality: designers should recommend a solution that suits client needs rather than their own business interests.
- Accreditation: there is no university degree in home automation design, but a designer should have accreditation for the intelligent lighting control system recommended (ie: Clipsal C-Bus or Dynalite), accreditation from manufacturers for all other products, a State security industry licence, general induction with occupational health and safety for construction, accreditation for electronic systems integration and CEDIA accreditations.
- Level of documentation: accurate documentation is essential for a successful project. If everyone is working off the same page with a clearly defined objective the project will run more smoothly.
- Project management: a home automation designer should work alongside other contractors to help them understand the requirements of the electrical infrastructure and electronic hardware.
- Adequate staff and resources: make sure the designer has adequate documentation, systems programming and installation staff to ensure the project is carried out on time and to budget.

“However, since home automation is a relatively new field, home-owners sometimes struggle to understand the benefits the latest technology can add to their lifestyle.

“They often need a little help to understand the wide range of possibilities.”

It also emphasises the amount of liaison needed with the client, architect, builder, interior designer and other contractors when discussing design and documentation.

“This stage of the project can be very complex and it’s when many projects come unstuck.

“The home automation designer goes through the plans room by room in fine detail with the client, architect and builder. Once the designer understands the function of each



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Hiring an electrical contractor for home automation

- Specialists: use an electrical contractor that specialises in home automation.
- Multi-skilled: the electrician should be skilled in all works associated with the project, such as telephony and data, the ability to work with and under the guidance of a home automation designer, computer literacy and good communication skills.
- Experience in similar projects: seek a contractor who has installed the electrical, lighting, audio-visual, communications and data cabling and infrastructure for projects of a similar scope and complexity.
- Accreditation: appropriate accreditation includes an electrical licence, Australian Cabling Authority accreditation, State security industry licence, manufacturers' accreditation for all lighting and other products installed.
- Adequate staff and resources: the electrical contractor must have sufficient trained staff and resources to keep up with the construction program. Farming out parts of a project to subcontractors can lead to inconsistent quality, and responsibility issues during maintenance.

room they can specify what services and electronic hardware are required."

Selecting an electrical contractor is cited as step three in the white paper, which points out that the home automation designer creates the tendering specification document for electrical contractors during the design and documentation phase.

"A detailed tender specification helps minimise erroneous interpretations by electrical contractors."

In a discussion of the cabling and infrastructure installation the document says that if design documents have been prepared properly and an experienced, accredited electrical contractor has been selected the process should go smoothly.

"The cabling and infrastructure installation should flow with the project and not impede any aspect of the construction."

Project management requires a single point of contact to save time and help reduce waste and duplication of effort.

And it is crucial for the home automation designer to support and liaise with other specialists ranging from architects to electricians, plumbers and security contractors.

Products are not selected until the home is nearly finished. Initially, equipment choice remains theoretical. It is only when clients walk into a room and think about where they will put the sofa that they can decide whether they

want a 42-inch or 60-inch plasma screen.

Hand-over and tuition comprise the last of the seven steps in the white paper.

"At this stage the home automation designer explains how to operate the finished system. Since the essence of a great home automation system is simplicity, lengthy manuals should not be required.

"The learning curve for a home automation system should be gentle. A well-designed system will be very intuitive to use.

"However, the home-owners usually experience a brief period of adjustment as they become accustomed to using centralised controls such as touch screens and multi-function switch plates."

The document concludes by explaining that, as there is a period of fine-tuning the system, the home automation designer needs to return to implement refinements to meet the exact needs of the client.

The architect's guide to home automation can be downloaded from www.avd.com.au and www.project-connection.com.au ■

Do you have a view on the white paper that you would like to share with Connected Home Australia? Do you have any examples of installations – successful or otherwise – where working alongside architects has been a useful lesson for your business?

If so contact raelmartell@build.com.au or call (03) 9542 9025.