

How to Go Solar:

Getting to Panel Installation in 8 Steps

You've finally got your organization considering solar power for your business, so now it's important to understand exactly how solar systems work in real life. Here's a rundown on the pre-construction phase, when your organization works out the details of installation.

1. Call the Solar Company

Find a solar company with a successful track record of solar panel installation. Ask other organizations that have gone solar recently, and don't hesitate to ask the solar companies themselves for references. On the other hand, don't expect to get an exact price quote or many specifics right way. Every installation is unique.



2. Initial Meeting

The solar panel company will first do a preliminary inspection. They'll discuss your current and future energy needs, gather your electric bills, and inspect your facilities. They should be able to tell you if there are any insurmountable obstacles, like a poor site location, and discuss possible objections by stakeholders. At the same time, they'll show what incentives are out there that can make the project less expensive. The main objective of this step is to hear your needs and assure that they are addressed.

3. The Audit Team Shows Up

The audit team does the nitty-gritty work of figuring out how to go solar—specifically, how to connect your solar system to the local utility grid. They'll want to know things like what equipment you have, if the proposed site for the array gets enough sun exposure, and if there's space in your current electrical equipment to tie in a solar system to your electrical system. They'll also take a close look at your site conditions. If your roof is poor condition, they'll recommend replacing it before any work is done. Or, they may suggest one of the other two main options—installing your solar system on the ground or building a solar carport.

4. Design Phase

The solar company will make a schematic to illustrate how your specific solar installation should be designed. It will show how many panels are needed for your power load, how they should be sited, and what equipment upgrades might be needed on your end to accommodate the system. Expect a lot of back and forth with the audit team on your design as the details are worked out.

5. The Project Manager Steps in

Early in the process, your solar provider will designate a point person who can answer questions and will keep the project rolling. This project manager will handle things like applications, permitting, and dealing with utilities. It will be their job to keep all the parties updated.

6. Apply to the Utility

Once the design gets settled, the project team will apply to all the necessary entities (local government, power company, etc.) for approval to build your solar system—obtaining any required permits. The solar provider will also present a schematic to the utility showing how your system will work.

7. Utility Review

In your application, the utility will be looking to make sure nothing in your plan endangers their infrastructure. Keep in mind that you're making an addition to the U.S. electrical grid, perhaps the most complicated mechanical system in the world. Most of their old equipment was designed to send electricity one way—to the consumer. Most utilities are ready to connect solar to the grid, but some drag their feet.

8. Approval

You either don't have any equipment upgrades from the utility or the ones you do have are acceptable. The utility likes your plan, you like your plan, and the solar company likes your plan. It's a go. The construction phase can begin.

The Bottom Line

It's going to take some time to get a solar system up and running. You'll need to make sure that everyone involved understands that going solar is a process, not an event—requiring eight relatively substantial steps before shovels ever hits the dirt. The good news is that once you're through all these steps, much of the hardest work is done.

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