

# *The Request for Proposal Process*

## **SUMMARY**

*The fundamental goal of the Request for Proposal (RFP) process is to solicit and evaluate architectural and engineering (A&E), construction management (CM), and project management (PM) firms that are the most qualified and best suited to an organization's project. A number of key components of the RFP should be considered as unique to the soliciting organization and the project under consideration. This document will discuss in detail the various approaches that can be used to individualize the RFP process and optimize the protocol to meet the specific needs of a project team. Specific examples of evaluation criteria will be offered for use in RFP development and assessment.*

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## Introduction

The fundamental goal of the Request for Proposal (RFP) process is to solicit and evaluate architectural and engineering (A&E), construction management (CM), and project management (PM) firms that are the most qualified and best suited to an organization's project. By design, there are a number of key components of the RFP that should be considered as unique to the soliciting organization and the project under consideration. Developing distinct criteria to assess these key components will better ensure not only the selection of a qualified firm, but also the acquisition of a project team member distinctively skilled for the challenges of the program. This document will discuss in detail the various approaches that can be used to individualize the RFP process and optimize the protocol to meet the specific needs of a project team. Specific examples of evaluation criteria will be offered for use in RFP development and assessment for the three main disciplines of A&E, CM, and PM.

## Defining the RFP Process

By definition, the RFP process "is a fair, objective, and legal process for selecting the services of project professionals who are most qualified for a particular project, based on competence and experience" (ref. 1). Beyond the definition, it is important to note that the professionals ultimately selected through this process will become an integral part of the project team.

Therefore, it is critical that one of the primary objectives of the RFP process should be the solicitation of information that can identify those professionals best suited for the particular project. These criteria should be based on the uniqueness

of the soliciting organization and the individual project requirements.

## RFP/RFQ Outcomes and Expectations

It should be noted for the purposes of this document that the RFP and the Request for Qualifications (RFQ) will be conceptually defined as the same. The RFP requires more detailed information involving price structure, professional fees, and project-distinct information; however, they both contain the same basic "soft" elements. It is this information that can be readily adapted for individualized application.

The end result of the RFP process should be established and understood from the onset. Aside from a list of qualified professionals, an organization must solicit project team members who will effectively compliment its own strengths and weaknesses, proficiencies and shortcomings. Throughout the process, these issues should be carefully examined as they relate to the common elements of the RFP.

## Common Elements of the RFP

Whether the RFP is involved in the recruitment of design or construction professionals, there are some basic common elements of all RFPs. These elements include a detailed description of the soliciting organization, a project narrative with budget and schedule projections, and proposal requirements and terms. In addition, information is requested from the responding firm relating to its company history, project experience, staff, and appropriate references. Within these general areas of information lies the opportunity to individualize the process.

## Organizational Background

Before responding to an RFP, it is important that the responding firm acquires a sense of the history behind the project. Sharing information as to why the project was developed, the needs driving the program, and the evolution of the present scheme will give the respondents an understanding of the dynamics of the soliciting organization. If the project is part of a facility master plan, the soliciting organization should provide an overview of the plan and describe the components this project represents. This will provide the responding firm with a necessary roadmap of the soliciting organization's past and future development and commitment to its market share. The following is a good example of the provision of this type of information:

“Changes to the facilities are driven by (1) the opportunity to create a first-class integrated patient care and health sciences campus, (2) outmoded support and ancillary facilities with poor operating efficiencies, and (3) insufficient educational and resource space, etc.” (ref. 2).

When possible, the soliciting organization should express the culture and values of the institution. A “commitment to high-quality patient care” or a mission of “people come first” are examples of the type of organizational philosophy that will help promote a more tailored proposal.

## Project Summary

Thoroughly defining the project, including its scope and phasing, is key to finding the right professionals for the project team. Not only does an accurate depiction of the program translate to appropriate

references from responding firms, it also promotes a realistic understanding of the soliciting organization from the start. A well-defined project summary will allow responding firms to tailor their qualifications to project requirements and will provide a uniform basis for evaluating responses.

Certain unique or special issues associated with the project should also be identified. “Such issues may involve physical or site constraints, regulatory restrictions, operational conflicts, community concerns, schedule constraints, or other difficulties” (ref. 3). When presented in the RFP, these issues will give firms an opportunity to describe their ability for innovation and problem solving. For example, providing a detailed description of a complex scenario, such as a multiphased renovation on the floor below an occupied surgical suite, will illustrate the challenges inherent in the project. This type of information gives the soliciting organization valuable insight into the perceived role and responsibility of the prospective project team members. In turn, the depth of understanding, creative ideas, and technical approach provided in a response to the RFP are among the most important factors in identifying firms committed to an organization's distinct project.

Providing a preliminary budget and project timeline will provide responding firms with an opportunity to honestly evaluate their ability to provide the requested services. The soliciting organization should ask for a firm's available resources as they relate to the project schedule. An example of this strategy is to require a current list of projects and their schedules. It is critical to evaluate not only a firm's overall potential, but also its ability to provide the necessary services when they are needed.

## **Development of a Project-Specific RFP**

“Product, place, people, price, and promotion aren’t simply categories of client-held values. They’re the dimensions of the playing field on which all professionals compete, even when things appear otherwise” (ref. 4). The effort to define these “dimensions” in individual terms is the real objective of the RFP process.

Within the standard RFP format, a number of questions can be formulated to further clarify a firm’s ability to successfully meet the goals of the project team. Again, the incentive is to individualize, to the extent possible, the responder’s capability to provide the services specific to an organization’s program.

## **Letter of Interest**

When a letter of interest is required as part of an RFP, the soliciting organization gives respondents an opportunity to provide a personal and comprehensive reaction to the project and its challenges. The letter allows the responding firms to indicate their understanding and their approach to the project-specific issues outlined in the RFP. In addition, the letter provides insight into the “chemistry” of the prospective team members as well as an opportunity to initiate useful dialogue. “The bond between firms and organizations is extremely important and is often a matter of chemistry and relationships” (ref. 5).

## **Key Personnel**

The standard RFP requires the identification and qualifications of personnel to be assigned to the project. It should be required that the responding firm commits in writing to retain stated personnel

on the project for its duration. In addition, the RFP should require that key personnel be present during the interview process. One of the most significant factors in developing a successful project team is the continuity of its members throughout the project term. To emphasize this issue, the soliciting organization should ask the responding firm for a written statement committing key individuals to the project, barring circumstances beyond their control.

The soliciting organization should also ask respondents to clarify the process a firm will use if a key project staff member needs to be replaced during the project. A soliciting organization should maintain an active role in approving a replacement for this (it is hoped) unlikely occurrence.

The availability of key staff must be established in the project summary section. The response should be a clear and defined allocation of the time needed to provide the required services in relation to other ongoing or anticipated commitments of key personnel.

## **The Owner’s Team**

Regardless of an organization’s form of project oversight, a responding firm should address the issues of working with the organization’s project team. “Whether it be a building committee, user group, or owner representative, a firm should be asked to describe its experience and philosophy and how it relates to team building and consensus” (ref. 6).

In many organizations, a major or even modest redevelopment or construction program is not an everyday event. It is essential (through the RFP’s organizational background section) that responding

firms are aware of the organization's project management experience and its ability to address leadership and facilitation strategies as part of its response. For example, the RFP should define the composition of the organization's team with titles, roles and experience listed.

Conflict resolution is a topic that should also be addressed as part of the RFP process. Firms will react differently to this question and individual responses should be evaluated in terms of their compatibility with the culture of the organization before an issue presents itself over the course of the project.

## **Qualifications**

Matching the qualifications of a particular firm with the needs of the project is of primary importance. A firm presenting many large programs as part of its RFP response may not be in tune with the subtle complexities of a more modest effort. The opposite situation is of equal concern.

Unique qualifications and experience working with, or in, a multifaceted environment can prove decisive to the ultimate success of a project.

Within the RFP, soliciting organizations should ask specifically for the scope and challenges of previous referenced projects. If applicable to the proposed project, the organization should ask that the responding firms outline their individual strategy for designing around, or constructing within, an occupied environment. "Request information on temporary relocations, multiphased occupancies, and knowledge of healthcare-related regulations regarding infection control and Interim Life Safety Measures" (ref. 7). The soliciting organization should present a scenario or ask for three situ-

ational challenges faced during a similar project and request that the firm describe how it overcame these unique challenges. The RFP is an opportunity for the firm to explain what it possesses that makes it a natural fit for this type of work, above and beyond its competition.

## **Firms Recommending Firms**

Another useful byproduct of the RFP effort is the identification of other firms that the respondents may have had successful working relations with in the past. If firms of different disciplines have worked well together in the past, they probably share many of the same ideals, providing the basis for sound teamwork. The soliciting organization should ask for the names of firms that the respondents have worked with and for a summary of those working relationships. Often a firm that understands and shares an organization's culture will know others that would potentially be a good fit.

## **Respondents' References**

By using an individualized RFP response strategy, responding firms will tend to "editorialize" their answers to the more objective questions. It is therefore a good practice for soliciting organizations to contact all listed references that relate to unique elements of the firm's reply. The organization should review the questions and responses with the reference and attempt to validate the response in the appropriate context. For example, if a design firm states "they design to budget," the soliciting organization should ask a reference concerning the firm's performance on minimizing scope creep. In addition, other pertinent insight may be gleaned through this process relating to the firm's performance over the course of the referenced project.

## Selection Criteria

This document has covered a number of RFP elements that can be enhanced to provide a focused response from a firm, as it relates to the individual requirements of an organization's project. Before sending an RFP to firms, the soliciting organization must agree on selection criteria. The responding firms need to be aware of the basis on which they will be considered for selection, and encouraged to respond to the unique challenges of the project. Developing these criteria is crucial, and once established, they must be prioritized and adhered to during the evaluation of the respondents.

Maintaining objectivity in the evaluation process is crucial to keeping the selection process consistent. An organization may elect to develop a ranking grid with weighted criteria based on the agreed-on relevance of individual factors. The following list is provided as an example of suggested selection criteria, assuming that a firm's general qualifications are appropriate for the project under consideration:

- The overall competence and expertise of the firm's principals and key personnel to react to the issues of the project.
- The anticipated involvement in the project by these individuals and their availability to the project.
- The firm's approach to planning and organizing the project effort including problem solving and innovative approaches.

- The firm's ability to adapt and conform to the soliciting organization's culture and mission.
- The firm's experience and willingness to work successfully with the management structure and the project team.
- The exposure of a firm to project-distinct challenges such as phasing and environmental factors.
- The firm's ability to respond to special or unique issues associated with the project.

Structured to focus on project and organization uniqueness, the above-noted selection criteria should be used as part of the overall RFP selection methodology.

## Summary

Typically, the RFP process will provide a soliciting organization with information from design, construction, and project management firms with which it will select a project team. Through an effort to develop specific questions that highlight a firm's ability to provide services, an enhanced selection process can be designed, tailoring RFP responses to an organization's unique issues and needs. Using the outlined process as a guideline, an organization can assemble a project team that is not only qualified to provide services for the project, but is also prepared to be a successful member of the project team.

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