



Procuring IT software

A complex procurement made more complex through lack of communication and the “do it my way” approach

by Michael Asner

In public sector organizations each department can often be likened to a kingdom in itself. And, rather than support functions like IT, HR, payroll and procurement being available as a service to all, they are often unique to the department as well. This diversity does not lend itself to a good understanding of the individual role each support function plays in support of the whole. For this reason among others, in many organizations, the information technology group (or some other important stakeholder) likes to do things its own way... One frequent strategy is to present the procurement group with a draft RFP and tell procurement that this project is strategic therefore they must issue the finalized RFP “by the end of this month.” When that is impossible, as it is most often is, then the IT group feels that “procurement is delaying our project.”

I've seen this happen numerous times. Likely if the information technology group were more informed about the issues, challenges and processes of 'fair, open and transparent' procurement, they might have prepared a draft RFP that just might be issued 'by the end of this month,' but, alas, most of the draft RFPs that I've seen have had significant errors that required much time and work to finalize.

In my opinion, the more complex and expensive the required solution is, the more likely that the stakeholder's draft RFP will contain significant deficiencies and errors.

Last year, I wrote a report on using an RFP to obtain complex software and services: “A Guide for Procuring Complex Commercial Off-the-Shelf Software (COTS) for Public Agencies: A Drama in Three Acts.” In it I identified 12 of the most common errors I've found in these draft RFPs. Here is my list:

1. The quality of the specifications is poor. This is the fundamental problem when users develop the RFP without any assistance from procurement. The specifications may be biased in favor of one vendor, incomplete, or contain inaccuracies.
2. The RFP or template was the wrong one and it was out of date.
3. Failure to identify all external contributors to the RFP.
4. Failure to include definitions of key terms such as “mandatory.”
5. Failure to identify the complete technical environment.
6. Failure to provide adequate time for the RFP/evaluation process.

7. No flexibility in the RFP process. No “best and final offers.”
8. Failure to provide a full record of interactions with vendors.
9. Lack of an adequate demonstration of proof of concept.
10. Failure to provide a draft contract in the RFP.
11. Failure to insist in the RFP that vendors guarantee the presence of all critical staff named in their proposals.
12. Failure to identify the need for a training strategy and plan.

will find solutions for the items listed above. There are few things that create as much drama in a public agency as the procurement of COTS software. It is serious business.

As you know, the procurement process can be long, difficult and expensive. And, if not done properly, it can result in a poor decision, no decision, litigation and/or the end of some otherwise solid careers. For the major players – the project manager, the procurement officer, the procurement manager – the build-up and wind-down of a complex software project can result in a script for a very stressful year. 

Fortunately, for the IT group and the organization as a whole, professional procurement staff

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