Procurement Mastery Series

RFP Development & Management

How to design, launch and run a competitive process that vendors trust and the organisation can defend

DISCLAIMER: All names, companies and scenarios in this document are fictional, and any resemblance to real persons or organisations is unintentional.

Choosing the right instrument

An RFP is right when three conditions hold at once: differentiation, clear requirements, a need for a defensible process.

Instrument	Use when	Typical output
RFI: request for information	Requirements are unclear; you are mapping the market	Landscape and shortlist
RFP: request for proposals	Requirements are defined; approach and price both matter	Evaluated proposals; a recommended vendor
RFQ: request for quotation	Fully specified standard product; price decides	Price comparison
Request for qualifications	Prequalify a pool; common in regulated work	Prequalified vendor list

Do not run an RFP when the decision is already made, the budget is too small, nobody can evaluate, or a sole-source case is sound.

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Eight phases and the gates between them

Skipping or compressing a phase is the most reliable predictor of failure. A well-run RFP takes 10–16 weeks.

Phase	What happens	Duration
1. Scope and alignment	Baseline, criteria weights, process sign-off	1–2 weeks
2. Document development	Draft, matrix, pricing template, demo scripts	2–3 weeks
3. Outreach	Final list, distribution, NDAs	3–5 days
4. Q&A and amendments	Questions, consolidated answers, addenda	1–2 weeks
5. Receipt and compliance	Log receipt, screen, reject non-compliant	3–5 days
6. Evaluation	Scoring, cost analysis, demos, references	2–3 weeks
7. Shortlist and diligence	2–3 finalists, extended demos, validation	1–2 weeks
8. Award and transition	Memo, notifications, debriefs, handover	1 week

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The alignment workshop: four decisions before drafting

A 3–4 hour session with the core evaluation team.

1

Weight the criteria

Each person allocates 100 points independently; average and discuss outliers.

2

Agree the must-haves

Any requirement that would disqualify a vendor is mandatory, tested against the market.

3

Declare conflicts

Every member declares vendor relationships in writing before distribution.

4

Set process rules

Who speaks to vendors, how questions run, what counts as a breach.

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Building the calendar, relative to distribution day

Build it from the vendor's side first: how long do they need for a quality proposal? Then add internal buffer.

Milestone	Timing	Rule
Document final	Day −7 to −5	No change after, except by amendment
Distribution	Day 0	To all vendors at once; log the time
Intent to respond	Day 7–10	Helps predict proposal volume
Q&A deadline	Day 14–18	Hard; late questions need an extension for all
Consolidated Q&A	Day 21–25	Published to everyone at once
Proposals due	Day 35–45	2–3 weeks after the Q&A
Evaluation	Days 48–65	Independent scoring, then calibration
Demos and references	Days 72–88	Scripted; score straight after
Award memo	Day 90–98	Formal memo to the sponsor

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Evaluating proposals: compliance first, then weighted scoring

Weights are typical for technology procurement; agree them before any proposal arrives.

Dimension	Weight	What to look for
Functional fit	25–35%	Requirement-by-requirement evidence; gaps on mandatory items
Technical architecture	15–20%	Integration with your systems, scale, security, cloud
Implementation approach	15–20%	Method, named team, risks, change plan
Commercial terms and cost	15–20%	3–5 year total cost, payment terms, risk allocation
Stability and references	10–15%	Years in market, finances, same-industry references

Compliance screen first: on time, complete, all mandatory answered, signed, pricing in Appendix B format, NDA on file.

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Total cost, not sticker price

Over three to five years the ranking often differs from year one. Build the cost model before proposals arrive.

Cost element	Why it matters
Licence or subscription, all years	Escalators and caps change the total
Implementation and services	Often quoted separately
Internal resource cost	Project team and IT integration time
Training and change	Adoption cost is real cost
Integrations not in the quote	The usual hidden gap
Renewal assumptions	Price caps and renegotiation rights

Example: Vendor A's year-one price was $100K lower, yet its 3-year total was $1.62M against $1.48M for Vendor B.

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Where RFPs go wrong

Ten recurring pitfalls, shown as five pairs of cause and prevention.

The failure	The prevention
Released before requirements are ready	Run the readiness check; fix gaps first
A timeline set by politics	Build from the vendor's side, add buffer
Requirements written round one vendor	Independent review; test against several products
Informal Q&A with one vendor	Absolute single contact; consolidated, simultaneous answers
Year-one price decides, and the demo wins	Cost model before proposals; scripted demos; calibrated scoring

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Putting the process in place

A checklist before the document is released.

- ✓ An RFP is the right instrument; requirements pass the readiness check; weights and must-haves agreed
- ✓ The document passes the 'no bridgeable gaps' test; every requirement is testable; pricing uses one template
- ✓ Committee of 4–7 with signed declarations, a charter and a calibration session booked
- ✓ One contact, written Q&A, numbered addenda, extensions for all, every contact logged
- ✓ Cost model built first; scripted demos; references beyond the list; award memo and debriefs planned

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