

BUYER'S GUIDE: QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CONSIDERING PROPOSAL MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

The search for proposal software can be a bit overwhelming, primarily because the purchase has potential to directly impact ROI. Additionally, it's a tool you'll spend a lot of time with if proposals are an important part of your role, so it needs to make RFP response processes as seamless as possible not just for you, but for your stakeholders and subject matter experts. Do your research first. Start by reviewing information from the leading organizations in your industry or vertical to compile a list of potential vendors. From there, it's worth your time to dig a bit deeper by reviewing

each organization's social media sites, like LinkedIn, to help narrow it down.

It's also important to get buy-in from a variety of potential users prior to making your software selection so that when it comes time to implement, everyone is on the same page. Not everyone will get what they want, but by working together from the get-go, you can help manage priorities and expectations with a keen eye for what will work best for your company. Be sure to separate and prioritize "must-have" from "wish list" requirements to

maintain focus during the evaluation process. To make the selection process as painless and productive as possible, here are some questions to consider as you evaluate your options. Asking the right questions will ensure the proposal software you choose meets your needs and is most closely aligned with the features, benefits, support and pricing your organization requires.

Features

Look for a tool that will meet your immediate needs while allowing for growth of your team and your content database over the next five to ten years. The whole point of having proposal software is to help your company grow, so make sure the product you chose can scale with you. And consider how much of the software is within your control. If you need your IT department or the vendor's involvement on a frequent basis, you may find yourself frustrated and unable to access valuable features or using customer support more than you'd like.

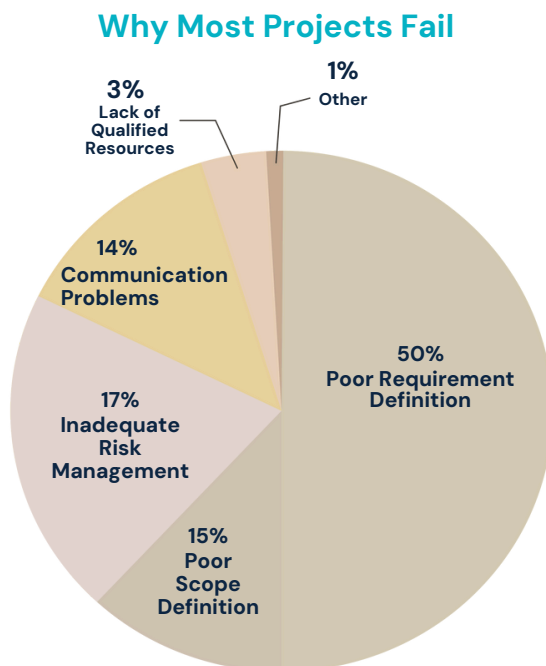
A major consideration when purchasing software is deployment method. Many companies, both large and small, are opting for web- or cloud-based software due to the lower price point, ability to scale and turnkey capabilities. These deployments don't require additional server installations or maintenance, saving money and avoiding complexity.

Another important thing to do is clearly establish your requirements for a system before interviewing vendors to find the right match. Half of projects fail because of poor requirements definition. Remember, asking vendors detailed questions may take more time up front, but getting the right proposal software solution for your business will save you time and money in the long run.

Here is our matrix for evaluating the software features:

Y N

- Does the software require significant customization for you to use it effectively?
- Is the software's interface intuitive and easy to learn, or complex with significant training requirements?
- Does the software facilitate a workflow that will improve your current process?
- Can you segment your proposal content to whatever level of granularity you need?
- Can you search a database record's full content and assigned segmentation tags/attributes?
- Can you relate database documents to each other?
- Does the software track all changes to proposals and content records?



¹ Semenova, Marianna. "10 Reasons Why Projects Fail or Common Mistakes to Avoid." SlideShare. 2014. Web.

Y N

- Can you create customized reports on all proposals, content records and their associated data?
- Is there a tool to help you quickly and easily assemble proposals, marketing documents and pitch books from content stored in the database?
- Can you create and maintain proposal templates without programming skills or support?
- Can you store and search the contents of Word, PowerPoint, Excel and PDF files?
- Can you search documents stored in your organization's internal networks, or are you restricted to the application's database?
- Can you insert the content directly into your proposal document with a single click, or are you forced to cut and paste from the tool to the clipboard to your local desktop?
- Are there tools for team coordination and assignments?
- Is there a calendar that can sync with yours?
- Do your subject matter experts require licenses to access or provide input on content?
- Are there tools for automated database content review/verification?
- Can you easily restrict or allow users' access to data and functionality?

Notes:

There will be additional criteria that are important to your business (e.g., specific reporting capabilities, integration with legacy systems or customizations), and now is the time to ask the vendor about them. Don't leave anything to chance. Setting clear expectations will help you secure the requirements you need as well as additional features you want, setting the stage for a successful implementation.

BEST PRACTICE: Understanding the basic differences between on-premises and web-based software solutions. On-premise: you host the software on your server(s). Web-based: is software you access over the internet with a web browser. You don't have to install CDs, download any software, or worry about upgrades. A cloud-based deployment is hosted on the vendor's servers.

- Software Advice.com

Benefits

Even if an application is packed with fancy features, it won't make a difference unless those features lead to concrete benefits for you, your team and your company. Stop to think critically about how the software's features will translate to tangible efficiencies and process improvements.

One of the best ways to find out how a product would specifically benefit your company is to ask colleagues, experts and consultants in your industry. What has worked for other companies with requirements similar to yours? What products are highly rated or regarded by industry leaders? Use your contacts, industry trade shows and conferences as well as social

media, software ratings guides and plain old word of mouth to help narrow down your selection.

Ask the vendor for at least three client references you can contact, as well as any case studies they have published.

Some questions you can ask other users of the system include:

- How long have you been using the product?
- How long did the implementation process take from contract signing to going live?
- Was the software implemented in phases?
- Were your employees satisfied with the training?
- Has the system been reliable?
- Are you satisfied with customer support?
- What improvements have you asked for and were they accommodated? If not, was a workaround provided?
- Has the vendor asked for your input on their product?
- Have you improved your process? How?
- Does the vendor provide regular updates to the software?
- Would you choose this vendor again?

Here is our matrix for evaluating the software benefits:

- Y N
- Will the software help you produce more proposals and RFP responses?
- Does the software eliminate unnecessary steps from your current processes?
- Will it make processes easier for your subject matter experts and other stakeholders, saving them time and effort?

- Y N
- Can the application help you organize your content so it's quick and easy to find and use?
- Would the software allow you to ensure your content is accurate and up to date so your proposals are fully compliant?
- Could the tool play a valuable role in your company's compliance audits?
- Does the software help you maintain consistency from a marketing and branding perspective?
- Can you use the reporting tools to: promote and demonstrate the value of your proposal team; analyze topic trends to understand client priorities; track win/loss/competitive information; and offer insight to product and service teams?
- Will the software save you time on proactive proposals and DDQs by automating some of the steps involved with creating and updating them?
- Could the Sales team use self-service features to create compliant, customized proposals ad hoc without having to engage the proposal team?
- Can the software bring organization and efficiency to document management processes beyond RFP responses and proposals, like marketing collateral and technical documentation?

Notes:

BEST PRACTICE: If possible, don't select a software system without talking to people who have used the system first. Asking for references or testimonials, is a way to discover benefits the vendor may have left out or you how good (or bad) their responsiveness is. And don't forget to review the vendor's website and review platforms such as G2.

Support

Support can make or break your experience with proposal software. A smooth, well-documented implementation process including database setup is ideal. And if something goes wrong down the road, you'll need the provider to be there for you immediately, with the right resources to solve the problem. Establish a relationship with the vendor up front so you can be confident that if you have a quick question or need some advice, they will be ready and happy to assist you.

You will also want to understand the vendor's support channels (email, live chat, phone, online help, etc.). Find out which of these are included in the contract and which may incur additional cost. Ask about average response time and escalation policies.

Another item to consider: the vendor's support tracking system. Many software companies have a support system to track client issues in-house, but those that outsource their support don't have as much detail in their system and issues can take longer to resolve.

When the help desk is outsourced, the service provider tries to capture the information into a knowledge database, but the information is not always kept up-to-date or easily understood.

Here is our checklist matrix for evaluating software support:

- | Y | N | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Will your company be assigned a designated point of contact for account management and support? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Does the provider have experienced proposal professionals on staff? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Can the provider offer best practice consultation and advice on process improvements? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Can you deploy and reach full production with the software in a reasonable amount of time? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Does the provider offer an easy way to submit a support request? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Is there 24/7/365 access to emergency support? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Is there a documented support and escalation policy? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Does the vendor offer customized training, or is it generic? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Is the customer service team in-house or outsourced? Onshore or offshore? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Does the provider host educational and networking events for the user community, like webinars and conferences? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Are there comprehensive online help resources that are easily accessible? |

Notes:

² Charlton, Graham. "83% of online shoppers need support to complete a purchase: stats." Econsultancy, 2013. Web. Swoyer, Stephen.
³ "Gartner Warns about Problems in Outsourcing Help Desk." Redmond Magazine, 2008. Web

BEST PRACTICE: Prioritize the elements of support that are important to you. Current customer insight can be helpful in this area if you can get it. You want to work with a partner who is committed to resolving issues and supporting its users long-term.

Pricing

Are all the costs of ownership, now and into the future, transparent to you? If you need expensive consulting services to set up the application or populate your database, or you are paying a fee each time you call support, the license fee will be the least of your worries. Look for a true turnkey quote to eliminate any guesswork.

It might be tempting to purchase the least expensive solution but, before you do, you will want to consider why the product's price point is lower than other offerings. Look for the value the product will have over time. Often the cheapest solution is also the one that is obsolete in a few years or requires heavy fees down the road for software upgrades. Make sure you understand the vendor's fees upfront. And get it in writing.

According to a McKinsey report, 66% of enterprise software projects have cost overruns. A third of them go beyond the estimated schedule, and almost 20% of them fall short of promised benefits.

How can you avoid scope creep and delays? One of the leading causes of a delay or cost overrun is not accurately identifying your requirements during the analysis phase. Once you are in implementation, adding new requirements will add to your cost and to your schedule. Be specific with a vendor.

Ask the right questions so you can make sure the project scope and budget are aligned with your overall business goals before you sign the contract.

Here is our checklist to evaluating the price of the software:

Y N

- Is it a comprehensive solution, or do you have to buy and coordinate separate modules?
- Can it scale with you as you grow as your company and capacity grows?
- Is everything you need to successfully deploy the software included in the price (e.g. data conversion, setup, installation and training)?
- What are the costs for customization of specific modules or reports?
- Do the support and maintenance options meet your budget and specific needs?
- Do you need to upgrade your current hardware or software?

Don't wait. Finding the right software for managing your proposal processes is critical to helping reduce the stress associated with the tedious and time-consuming tasks involved. With the right software, you can streamline your RFP process by organizing and categorizing your content, keeping it up to date and automating the process as much as possible. Today's software tools can not only help you improve turnaround times, but also free your team to focus on developing, sharing and maintaining winning RFP content together.

To find out if RocketDocs has the features, benefits, support and pricing your business needs for creating and maintaining winning RFP content, request a free, personal demonstration.

[Schedule a Demo Today!](#)