

Selecting the Right Consultant Team

THIS PAPER PROVIDES AN OUTLINE, TIPS AND INSIGHTS THAT WILL ASSIST A PUBLIC AGENCY IN CHOOSING THE BEST CONSULTANT TEAM FOR A LARGE, INVOLVED PROJECT.

PUBLIC AGENCIES FREQUENTLY need to hire consultants to prepare studies, engineering reports and preliminary or final design plans for various projects. The agency must realize that successfully hiring a consultant will require a lot of preparation and careful thought and is just the first step of many in creating a successful partnership. The ideal situation is a consultant who is prepared to work as an extension of the agency's staff (knowing or learning the culture, preferences, pressures, etc.) and to bring new ideas or innovations to the process.

The selection process can be costly and time consuming for both consultants and public agencies. Public agencies must select the best team to deliver the project on time and within budget to accomplish their goals. Agencies must realize that lowest cost should generally not be the determining criterion in selecting the "best" team since the most qualified team may not necessarily submit the lowest proposal. In fact, since engineering is generally a small portion of the total construction cost for a project, cost should have very little, if any, weight in the selection process. In addition, agencies need to be sensitive to costs involved for consultants to prepare materials needed for the selection process and especially for presentation at interviews. Ideally, the process should be appropriately tailored so that the level of effort required of the consultant matches the size and/or complexity of the project. Small projects costing less

than \$25,000 to design may be best handled on a sole-

source basis and medium-sized projects handled using a letter proposal with informal scope and proposed project schedule. This paper outlines a Qualifications Based Selection model process for larger, more involved projects that will accomplish the public agency's goal

of selecting the best team for the project while providing the consultant the latitude and ability to present their best image and minimize their cost. The paper also provides tips and insights from the perspective of both partners in the process.

PREPROPOSAL PREPARATION

Preproposal preparation is the most crucial stage of the process, both for public agencies and for consultants. The need for the project and the goals to be accomplished should be firmly established. This will help build support within the agency and establish the priority for the always limited funds available. During this time there will be a continuous process of refining the ultimate project, including the scope (project limits, basic requirements, etc.), budget (both implementation and consultant fees, phasing, etc.) and schedule (planning, design and construction). This process should not be done in isolation from the consultant community. An "open" dialogue with consultants who have expressed interest and those known to have the expertise that will be required can be used by a public agency to refine and improve its approach to the project. Consultants who have done similar projects may have ideas and suggestions about specific work tasks that should be included in the scope (but will probably save unique ideas for their proposal) and can often share some of the lessons they have learned. Consultants can also offer opinions about whether the budget is realistic. Consultants who are already known to an agency are undoubtedly evolving with new personnel, expertise, experience and new areas of emphasis.

Consultants are usually involved in a continuous process of researching upcoming projects to improve their competitive advantages. If a consultant

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has already established a mutually beneficial relationship with the public agency, there may be sufficient justification to jointly develop the scope of work and enter into a sole-source contract. If contracting rules or other circumstances dictate that a competitive process is necessary, consultants will still be interested in ongoing discussions. The more consultants know about the project, the more responsive they can be in structuring their approach and writing their proposal. This will also help in structuring the team, either within the consultant's own firm or with the appropriate sub-consultants. Consultants should talk to several key staff members within the agency who may have different ideas about the project and how it should be approached. If possible, these should include the key decision makers and/or the selection panel. This communication process allows consultants to better determine which projects they are really qualified for and/or have a reasonable expectation of winning.

SELECTION OF THE RIGHT TEAM BY THE PUBLIC AGENCY

To select the best consultants for their projects, public agencies need to follow a specific process which minimizes the efforts required of all involved but maximizes the likelihood of successfully selecting the "best" team. Many large agencies who hire consultants frequently have developed processes that try to be fair to all involved. Often, the agency is required to have an open solicitation with newspaper announcements. Alternatively, a list of consultants can be developed to whom Request For Qualifications or Request For Proposals (RFPs) are sent. Once the proposals are received, the public agency staff reviews the responses to the RFPs and Statement of Qualifications (SOQs), selects the consultants to be interviewed, conducts the interviews, selects the best team and executes consultant contracts. Finally, a Notice to Proceed is issued. Each step in the process is discussed in more detail below.

OPEN SOLICITATION PROCESS

In order to minimize the preparation

cost required by consultants and the amount of review needed by the agency staff, a three-stage sequential process is often utilized. The first stage is a request for a short Statement of Qualifications (SOQs) which is used to short-list the three to five firms who appear to be most qualified. The SOQs can be limited to 10 pages or less. This reduces the review time required of the agency staff and is a good test of the consultant's abilities to write concisely. If the number of firms anticipated to submit proposals for a project is small, public agencies may go directly to the second stage and request proposals from the short-listed firms. The proposals should include discussion of critical issues, an approach to the project and detailed scope of work. A separate paper¹ has been published that discusses the information RFPs should contain. Interviews are very frequently the third stage of the process and should be scheduled only after the proposals are submitted so the agency has time to review the proposals before the interview. This also provides time for consultants to prepare for interviews. A multi-stage process is particularly important if rules require public notification and a large number of responses are expected. It is unfair to require numerous consultants to develop complete proposals.

DEVELOPING A LIST OF QUALIFIED CONSULTANTS

Public agencies developing a list of qualified consultants (either by preselection or from the responses to an open solicitation) should consider the following parameters:

- Does the consultant have previous experience in this type of project?
- Is the firm reputable and do they have a previously established track record?
- Does the consultant have an office that is convenient to the agency's location to meet the agency's need for close coordination?
- Are there any reasons why this consultant should not be considered for this project, such as problems with previous projects, financial stability of the firm, etc.?

INITIAL SOLICITATION

Letters should be sent to all qualified firms or be available at the public agency's offices for firms responding to a general announcement of the SOQs. All of the letters should include the following:

- The submission/deadline date and address.
- Contact person for additional information.
- Description of the project with appropriate reduced size drawings (if available).
- Requirements of the SOQs. (A suggested outline for the response should be given in order to make it easier to review and compare the SOQs. A section for additional information should be allowed so the consultant can provide relevant information which may not have been specifically requested.)
 - Public agency's responsibilities and documents available for review.
 - Consultant's responsibilities. (For example, the agency may want consultants to make the commitment that the people identified on the project team will actually have a substantial role in the project.)
 - Details of the consultant selection process. (This should include a firm schedule that is obviously binding on the consultant but on the agency as well. It is important to select the date for the interview so that it can be set aside and fit the schedule of all involved in the process.)
 - Consultant List to which letters soliciting SOQs is being sent.
 - Public agency standard contract and liability insurance forms.
 - Public agencies must decide how additional information and answers to consultant questions will be addressed before the SOQs are due. In an attempt to be fair to all consultants, many agencies require that all questions be submitted in writing so answers can be sent to all. Other agencies schedule a "preproposal" meeting at which the agencies make presentations of their understanding of the project and consultants can ask questions. Both of these approaches can be stifling in that questions crucial to a consultant's proposed approach may

not be asked since this would also divulge information to competing firms. If a public agency's staff has the time, the agency should preferably allow interested consultants to schedule individual meetings with the agency during which information can be more freely exchanged. As stated earlier, the more information consultants have about the proposed project, the better able they will be to prepare comprehensive, responsive SOQs.

SELECTING CONSULTANTS TO BE INTERVIEWED

Once all SOQs and/or proposals have been received, public agencies can develop a short list of consultants who will be invited to an interview. Public agencies need to be careful in selecting firms for the final interview and limit the number of consultant firms to no more than five to be interviewed in a single day. The limit of five firms is suggested because it costs each firm

\$10,000 to \$20,000 to prepare proposals and be present at an interview. In reviewing RFPs/SOQs to select consultant firms to be interviewed, public agencies should consider the following (in addition to the parameters mentioned for short listing consultants):

- Experience of the project manager and critical members of the team on similar projects.
- Qualifications and experience of sub-consultants proposed as part of the project team.
- Acceptability of the proposed project schedule.
- Local presence of critical members of the consultant team.
- Current workload.
- References from other public agencies.
- Expressed knowledge and/or creative ideas about the particular projects.

References are an often overlooked resource. Consultants are obviously interested in providing contacts who will

speak well of the firm. One way to obtain a more balanced opinion is to require that the public agencies' or clients' project managers be identified for the projects listed as representative experience. Questions which might be asked of references include:

- Are the firm's personnel good communicators and good team players (and open to working closely with the client)?
- Was there continuity in the firm's personnel assignment? Are the most experienced personnel initially named in the SOQ and then substituted with less experienced personnel later?
- Is the firm known for being open and direct in its communications with clients?
- Does the firm proactively manage the schedule, budget and even the client?
- How willing is the firm to acknowledge and rectify flaws, errors, omissions, oversights, etc.?

Once the short list of consultants to be interviewed has been developed, care-

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ful consideration should be given to whether an interview is necessary. Is one consultant clearly considered the best by all the reviewers? If so, are the time and efforts of everyone involved in the process likely to change the outcome (selected consultant)? In order to select at this stage of the process, the RFP should clearly state that the agency has this option and interviews are optional. If the interviews are necessary, short-listed firms should be notified by phone and in writing.

At the same time, a letter should be sent to the consultants not selected for interviews stating that they were not selected and why. Public agencies need to be sensitive to the efforts of firms not selected for an interview. These consultants may have already spent consider-

able time and effort preparing proposals. Therefore, as much specific information as to why the consultant firm was not selected should be provided as well as an expression of appreciation for the initial interest in responding.

INVITATION TO CONSULTANT INTERVIEWS

Once up to five firms have been selected for interviews, a letter should be sent to each consultant providing the following information:

- Date, time and location of the interview (at least one month from the date of the letter).
- List of all consultants being interviewed.
- Total time allocated for the interview.

Table 1. Sample questions for consultant interviews.

1. What is the availability of the project manager and other key personnel?
2. Have you had a chance to review the schedule? Describe how the schedule can be advanced.
3. In what areas do you expect difficulties—either in the schedule or in the study/design?
4. What are the key areas that will require extensive study in this project?
5. How do you plan to manage the project and from where?
6. Who will be the main author for the study document?
7. Discuss briefly any relevant projects you have completed.
8. A considerable amount of data already exists for this study based on previous work. How do you plan to use that information and what additional information will you require?
9. Intelligent transportation systems are an important consideration on this project. Discuss some aspects you expect to encounter and should address.
10. Who should we contact on your team to resolve technical questions?
11. What are some key issues that could arise between you and other consultants working on different phases of this project?
12. Interagency involvement is critical. How will you integrate and coordinate activities among agencies?
13. We are interviewing three very fine firms. Why should we select your firm?
14. In your opinion, what is the most critical aspect of this project, and what will you do to meet that challenge?
15. On which other projects has the project manager worked with this team, including the sub-consultants?

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- Time allocated for presentation by the consultant and for questions.

- Critical members of the consultant team who need to be present at the interview.

- Name and title of each public agency official conducting the interview.

It is strongly recommended that all interviews be held on one day so that the selection of the best team can be made by the interview panel while the information is still fresh in the mind of each panelist. For most projects, one-hour interviews are appropriate. They should not be less than one-half hour or longer than one-and-a-half hours.

CRITERIA FOR RATING CONSULTANTS DURING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

As each consultant team makes its presentation and answers questions, the interview panel should consider the following in selecting the best consultant:

- Does the consultant team understand all aspects of the project?

- Has the consultant team identified elements of the project that will be critical

to successful completion or that could present problems in delivering the project as well as reducing the cost of the project?

- Are the visual materials of high quality?

- Does the consultant understand the limitations of the funding sources for the project?

- Has the consultant prepared a realistic schedule that meets the requirements of the project?

- Is the consultant's project manager the best and most experienced person for this project? Does this person communicate well, have good management and interpersonal/technical skills?

- How often and how well has the prime consultant worked with the sub-consultants on previous projects?

- Does the consultant exhibit an ability to solve problems and expedite projects?

- Has the consultant identified intermediate deliverables which will make project management and tracking the progress of the project easier?

- Does the consultant have a good track record in documentation as the project progresses?

Table 2. Consultant interviews rating form.

PROJECT: _____ **DATE:** _____

Evaluation Criteria*	CONSULTANT NAMES			
Interview Presentation				
Project Team Experience				
Project Manager Experience				
State Dept. of Transportation Experience				
Design Approach				
Value Engineering Capability				
Project Team Availability				
Previous Track Record				
Project Schedule				
Stability of Company				
Total (maximum points = 100)				

*Assign points from 0-10

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- Does the consultant demonstrate a knowledge of "cutting edge" technology?

- To what other competing projects has the consultant committed key members of the team?

- Are the number of hours estimated by the consultant to complete the project reasonable?

- If all firms are qualified to complete the project, what special qualities does the firm have that might make it the right choice?

Sample interview questions are provided in Table 1. To expedite the selection, a rating form, such as the one shown in Table 2, can be used to rank the consultants. Each consultant should be ranked from one to ten for each aspect of the consultant's ability. In the sample ranking form, each criteria is given equal weight. However, public agencies may want to rank consultants using a "weighted" ranking system. It is necessary to keep the importance of the interview in perspective. For projects with high visibility and extensive interaction with the public, the interview will also give an indication of how comfortable the consultant is likely to be in a public forum, how easy their visual material is to understand and how they will interact with the public in answering questions. For more technical projects or ones with limited public involvement, more weight should be given to references, approach and track record. The decision about which consultant team to select should generally be made on the same day as the interviews are conducted.

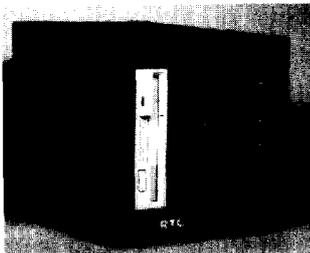
INFORMING CONSULTANTS OF THE PUBLIC AGENCY'S DECISION

Once references have been checked and the best consultant has been selected for the project, the public agency's project manager has the task of informing the best consultant that they have been selected, as well as informing those consultants not selected for the project. In doing so, especially for those firms not selected for a project, the agency's project manager should be aware of how this information is communicated to the consultant's contact person. The project manager should remember that the con-

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sultant has spent a great deal of time, money and effort in reaching this point in the selection process. The public agency's project manager should provide specific information as to why a specific team was selected and how the consultants not selected might improve their approach to future projects with the agency. Conversely, consultants should welcome honest feedback on their efforts; the temptation to express dissatisfaction with the decision is natural but should be resisted.

FINAL CONSULTANT CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

Once the best consultant has been selected, the public agency and the successful firm will finalize the scope of work. Good ideas or graphic aids suggested by other firms may have merit for consideration, or sub-consultants on another team may have unique capabilities. These changes can result in a better project but should be approached very carefully, even if they are relatively minor. Too many changes can be an indication that the selection process was flawed, and the best team was not selected. An editorial in *The Urban Transportation Monitor*² summarized this situation:

"...a surprisingly larger percentage of transportation professionals interviewed at public agencies (64%) do not feel that there is anything wrong in mentioning a good technique found in an unsuccessful proposal to the consultant who was selected. Many consultants are extremely uncomfortable about this situation. They feel that their well thought out, hard-earned, proprietary techniques are being made available free of charge to their competition....Recognizing the code of ethics for engineers and similar stipulations for other disciplines, it would seem entirely appropriate for clients to ask permission from a consultant to use a part of their proposal, and when permission is given, to give due credit. Consultants are at a distinct disadvantage in the consultant-selection

process. The system requires them to submit, in good faith, their very best ideas and techniques, with no control over what happens to their material. In this situation clients have the responsibility to handle with care the trust consultants invest in them."

The final steps will be to have the consultants complete the standard consultant contract agreements, complete insurance forms and issue a Notice to Proceed. Regularly scheduled meetings should be held throughout the life of the project to update the project schedule including the tasks remaining to be completed and coordinating the submittals by the consultant for review by the public agency.

QUALITY BASED SELECTION MANUAL

The Consulting Engineers and Land Surveyors of California (CELSOC) has prepared a comprehensive manual called, *Quality Based Selection; A Guide for the Selection of Professional Consultant Services for Public Owners*.³ The manual contains a detailed description of the QBS process and provides sample rating forms as well as letters and other forms that may be used when following the QBS process. Copies of the QBS manual can be obtained from CELSOC (916/441-7991; fax: 916/441-6312).

RECOMMENDATION

Many public agencies are now following the Qualifications Based Selection (QBS) process. It is recommended that public agencies who need to hire consultants for projects should follow the QBS manual or the above process because they meet the needs of consultants, as well as those of the public agency, and minimize misunderstandings. California public agencies should also be aware of the specific requirements of Senate Bill 419⁴ which also outlines the form of a QBS process that public agencies are required to follow in California. ■

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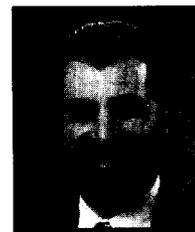
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