WRITING A

REQUEST FOR QUALIFICATIONS (RFQ)

Realizing the full value of consulting services requires a careful approach to selecting, contracting, and managing consultants. One of the most critical steps in the process is finding a good "fit" – an individual or firm that is not only capable of completing the work effectively, but also has a disposition and work style that will mesh well with your team.

In searching for the right consultant, it is often good practice to begin by issuing an RFQ (Request for Qualifications). Here's why:

- This practice promotes accountability and good governance. The RFQ process encourages fairness and transparency and mitigates potential conflicts of interest or favoritism.

- It will help you find the consultant best suited to your needs. Casting a wide net will introduce you to individuals/firms you may not have considered otherwise, and the competitive nature of the RFQ process will encourage all applicants – even those already familiar to you – to "bring their A game."

- The process of writing the RFQ and engaging with multiple applicants will help you build clarity about your needs and objectives, and your project will be much more likely to succeed as a result.

An RFQ is different from an RFP (Request for Proposals). An RFQ asks candidates to submit a brief summary of their qualifications (i.e., evidence of their ability to do the work), while an RFP requires them to submit a comprehensive project proposal (i.e., a detailed explanation of the approach, methodology, budget, etc.).

Responding to an RFP is time consuming and costly for prospective consultants. And, it can be difficult to do well because candidates typically do not yet have enough information about the project to craft the right approach.

Understandably, many capable consultants simply choose not to respond to RFPs unless they are personally invited to do so or have good reason to believe that they would be a top contender for the work.

As a result, in order to attract the most competitive pool of applicants possible, it is generally in your interest to begin the procurement process by issuing an RFQ. After reviewing the qualifications of those who respond, you can interview a few leading candidates in order to share more information about the project with them and gauge their level of "fit" with your team. Then you can request a full proposal from one or two finalists, including a customized and relevant work plan and budget.

RFP RESOURCES

While the RFQ process has many advantages, should you choose to issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) you can view these relevant resources:

Choosing a Consultant, a five-part guide available through the American Planning Association. Sections 2 and (especially) 3 pertain to RFPs.

Hiring a Planning Consultant: A Guide to Preparing a Request for Proposals, a tutorial written for government agencies but applicable to others, available through the University of Wisconsin.

Basic Components of an RFQ

PURPOSE

- Provide a clear, concise summary of the purpose of the project in a few sentences or bullet points.

BACKGROUND

- Provide a brief overview of the client and the context for the project. Specific content and level of detail will vary from one project to another but may include:
    - How or why the project came about/how the project aligns with the client's work
    - Potential challenges and/or opportunities the work may present
    - Early thinking about how to approach the project

SCOPE OF SERVICES

- Describe the work to be completed and the outcomes for which the consultant will be accountable. The objective is to help prospective applicants understand the nature of the project, not to dictate a precise methodology for the work. Focus on what you hope to achieve, leaving space for the consultant to exercise creative license in partnering with you to craft the best approach.
- Include any relevant parameters regarding the timeline for completing the work.

DELIVERABLES

- Describe the nature of expected deliverables (e.g., publication, presentation, staff engagement), as well as their intended audience and utility (i.e., who will use the deliverables and how).

QUALIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

- Provide a summary of the qualifications (expertise, experience) you are seeking in a consultant.

SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

- Provide instructions on how applicants should respond to the RFQ. Generally, you should request:
    - Bios or résumés for the staff who would be assigned to the project, along with background information on the consulting firm, if applicable
    - One to three relevant work samples
    - In some cases, you may ask for brief responses to a few questions (e.g., "How have you approached similar projects in the past?")
- Include instructions about where and when to send materials as well as format preferred (Word document, PDF, hard copy, etc.)
- Include instructions about to whom applicants may direct questions, should they have any.

REVIEW PROCESS AND TIMELINE

- Provide information about when applicants can expect to hear from you, as well as what the next step in the process will be (e.g., interviews, submission of a full proposal, etc.).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Include additional information (in the form of attachments, URLs, etc.), if it will help prospective applicants determine whether the project is a good fit.

Putting It All Together: A Sample RFQ[1]

MATH IN COMMON®

Request for Qualifications: Evaluation of a Five-year Initiative on the Implementation of the Common Core State Standards in Math in Ten California Districts

Purpose
The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation is seeking a team to manage a formative and summative assessment of its initiative on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in Math.

Project Background
The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation (the Foundation) supports the faithful implementation of the Common Core State Standards in Mathematics (CCSS-M) as a critical part of advancing high-quality teaching and learning in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education in California. After conducting research to understand the priorities and needs of California's educational practitioners and leaders, the Foundation determined that California's students would be well served through an initiative to support district models of CCSS-M implementation with the goal of identifying, developing, and sustaining promising practices in these districts and scaling these models across the state.

In December 2012, the Foundation invited 27 school districts to apply for support for CCSS-M implementation in grades K–8. Through a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) process, the Foundation awarded support to seven districts for up to a five-year period. These districts join the Foundation's three current district grantees working on CCSS-M implementation. As a condition of this support, grant recipients are expected to lead in the statewide implementation of CCSS-M by participating in a community of practice and sharing their plans, lessons learned, and tools with other districts statewide.

Scope of Services and Deliverables
The Foundation is seeking an evaluation team to capture learning and measure the impact of this effort. An evaluation of CCSS-M implementation inside and across participating districts should inform and strengthen practice throughout and beyond the five-year span of the Initiative. It also should inform other California districts and state policymakers about promising practices for CCSS-M implementation.

The Foundation has identified five key audiences for this evaluation:

(1)   Educators inside grantee districts;
(2)   Educators in other school districts implementing CCSS-M;
(3)   Education policymakers at the county and state levels;
(4)   Foundation board members and staff; and
(5)   Other funders supporting or considering supporting similar efforts.

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[1]This example was adapted from a real RFQ issued by the education team at the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation in 2013.

The key audiences are diverse, with varied needs and interests related to knowledge and lessons learned. To that end, we expect the evaluation design to include a blend of approaches including multiple methods for collecting data, formative and summative measures, and a range of reporting with an emphasis on useful data that can be fed back quickly to inform practice both within and across grantee districts. The evaluation learning also will inform districts statewide and the California Department of Education. We hope that the evaluation will offer:

(1)   Feedback to districts, teachers, and participants in the community of practice in digestible bites provided frequently enough to inform and strengthen CCSS-M implementation;
(2)   Regular reports to the Foundation that provide tools for learning and course corrections; and
(3)   Summative reports and case studies to capture and share lessons learned about CCSS-M implementation with practitioners, policy makers, and other philanthropists within California and nationally.

The evaluator will involve Foundation staff and grantee districts in the evaluation design process to increase its usefulness. Ideally, the evaluator and the community of practice design/facilitator will align design and subsequent work for better results. The information gathered though the evaluation should inform the community of practice and vice versa.

Qualification Requirements
We are seeking an evaluation team with:

•   Experience conducting similarly-sized evaluations within and across school districts, as well as experience with cross-district communities of practice;
•   Demonstrated capacity to use blended approaches to deliver high-quality products, with an emphasis on useful data that can inform practice; and
•   Credibility among educators, policymakers, and foundations.

Submission Instructions
If you are interested in leading this evaluation:

(1)   Tell us who you are and describe your approach to evaluating K-12 education initiatives.
(2)   Tell us what you have done in the past to evaluate similar initiatives.
(3)   Provide three work samples from relevant projects.

Please email your materials [NAME AND EMAIL ADDRESS] by April 26, 2013.

Review Process and Timeline
We will follow up within six weeks to invite two or three finalists to submit full proposals and participate in conversations with our team about the work.

Consultants support the effectiveness of nonprofit agencies and grantmakers in many ways and on many levels. Aligning the right consultant with an organization's need, budget, and work style can generate significant benefits for all involved. Based on lessons we've learned as well as the experiences of grantees we support, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation offers resources for working with consultants. This series features a guide for helping organizations take steps to find, hire, and manage a consultant. It includes essays on working with consultants who specialize in high-interest topics: strategic planning, communications, evaluation, and fundraising.

See the full series online at sdbjrfoundation.org/effectiveness/consultants
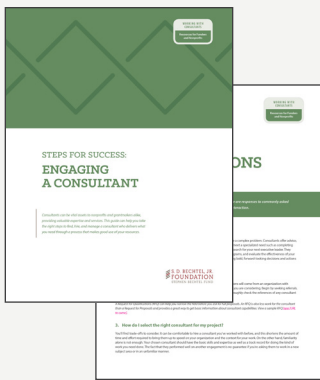
Start by reading this tutorial featuring nine steps to hiring any consultant. It's accompanied by a set of frequently asked questions.
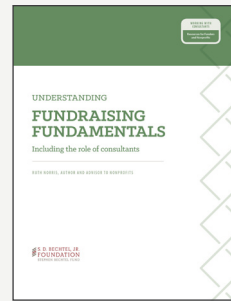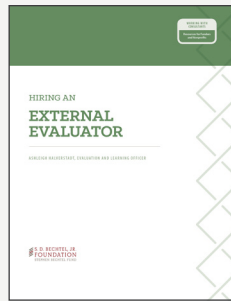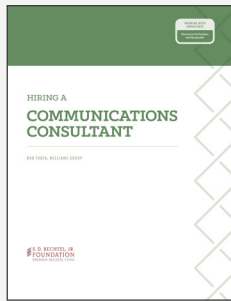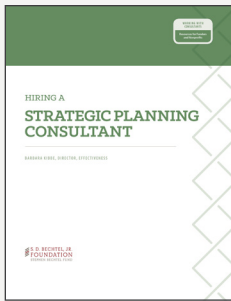
View these essays when engaging consultants to support specialized needs.

Use this guide to develop a Request for Qualifications from consultants.