

Are Consultants the Answer to Your Proposal Challenges?

By Chris Simmons, Founder and Principal Member of Rainmakerz Consulting, LLC

This is the first in a multi-part series of articles on proposal development consultants and how they can help solve your most common proposal challenges. This article explores the rationale for hiring outside consultants when internal proposal development resources are in short supply.

A simple, back-of-the-envelope analysis is all you need to determine whether your proposal team is short-handed.

One of the most common proposal challenges consistently identified by proposal professionals is the lack of available resources to do the job. In a recent survey published in the *Journal of the Association of Proposal Management Professionals* (“The Big Proposal Management Study,” Spring/Summer, 2009), 66 percent of those surveyed cited “lack of resources” as their biggest challenge, something that should come as no surprise to anyone reading this article. So, when is the right time to seek help and what is the best way to fill the proposal resource void?

When do you need help and how much help do you need?

A simple, back-of-the-envelope analysis is all you need to find out whether your proposal team is (or will be) short-handed. If a proposal response is imminent, start with an organization chart that includes the required roles, e.g., proposal manager, volume leaders, writers, subject matter experts (SMEs), capture managers, editors, etc. Place the names of qualified, available people in each of the boxes. (On smaller proposals, the same person’s name may appear in more than one box.) Look for major skill or people gaps and discuss trade-offs and constraints with your team.

If you have the luxury of planning ahead, the answers to a few simple questions can help determine whether you may require additional resources.

1. What is your new business revenue target for the next 12 months?
2. How much of this new business is likely to require a proposal?
3. What is the average contract size?
4. What is your estimated win rate?



Example: Let's say you have a \$10 million new business revenue target, your average contract size is \$1 million, and your estimated win rate is 20 percent. This simple formula shows that to meet next year's revenue target, you need to respond to at least 50 qualified proposals to reach your target.

$$\frac{\text{Annual Revenue Target (\$10M)}}{\text{Average Contract (\$1M)} \times \text{Win Rate (0.20)}} = 50 \text{ Proposals}$$

If proposal due dates were evenly spread out over the year, and response times were consistent, you would be finished with your analysis. But the harsh reality is that RFP release and due dates are highly unpredictable. Given this inherent lack of predictability, it is quite possible (in fact, almost certain) that three or four proposals may be due during the same time period while the proposal team remains idle during other times. Conclusion? You will need some amount of additional proposal development help this year.

How can you fill the resource void?

Here are three of the most common solutions to fill the proposal resource void:

1. Beg, borrow, or steal additional resources from other internal (business or operational) groups.
2. Recruit and hire new, full-time, proposal development employees.
3. Hire external proposal development consultants.

Beg, borrow, and steal from within. In times of need, many organizations secure proposal resources from other operational units within the company. These resources are very often billable SMEs who are either currently working for one of your customers or temporarily on the professional services bench. Unfortunately, most SMEs 1) don't have significant proposal writing experience; 2) don't know how to communicate basic business ideas; 3) don't know how to craft a compelling proposal story; or 4) have a full-time customer commitment and simply don't have the time. More often than not, using internal resources leads to frustrated SMEs who may have trouble meeting the required deadlines, deliver poor quality work, or otherwise drag the team down into a proposal vortex.

There are exceptions to every rule, but it's important to remember that the most accomplished SMEs who are pressed into proposal duty likely represent some of the best employees on the payroll. The real cost of making these superstar employees non-billable for any length of time, combined with the lost opportunity costs of taking them away from their happy customers, makes this a tough sell all around.



Recruit and hire new full-time employees. The most predictable aspect of the proposal world is just how unpredictable the workload peaks and valleys are. When was the last time a request for quotation, proposal, or other information actually arrived on the planned or promised date? Unless organizations are sufficiently large to absorb additional overhead costs, or they're smart about utilizing resources for other non-proposal work, recruiting and hiring full-time help can be a tricky and expensive undertaking.

Many full-time proposal employees have extensive experience, but often have long tours of duty with the same company. Unless they are active members of a proposal professional association, such as the Association of Proposal Management Professionals (APMP), their experience and capabilities may be one-dimensional or not up to date with current best practices.

In today's marketplace, the true superstar employees are in increasing demand and limited supply. A number of companies (especially the larger ones) have recognized this and have found ways to keep their best and brightest from looking elsewhere. Another challenge is finding a good cultural fit for a new hire in an industry that has a well-earned reputation for too much work and not enough pay. New employees with an entrepreneurial spirit, an interest in more diverse assignments, and the need for flexibility are likely to leave the ranks of full-time employment at some point to set up shop for themselves as consultants.

Hire proposal development consultants. The current recession has in many ways created the so-called perfect storm for hiring external proposal consultants. The stimulus package is generating an unprecedented increase in the number of federal procurements. Many companies have downsized to cut costs, while others are increasingly relying on temporary and contract consultants to gain a competitive edge. Here are three common reasons companies hire consultants to fill their proposal development needs:

- **Alleviate the crisis crunch.** Companies often wait until they have reached a crisis before they seek outside assistance. A typical call for emergency proposal support requires immediate attention (within 24 to 48 hours) or the proposal will be in serious jeopardy. This unplanned situation requires a damage control expert who can operate like the head surgeon of a MASH unit, putting in long-hour nights and weekends to rescue the proposal patient. Proposal consultants are uniquely qualified to assist in times of emergency. They are pre-programmed to step into the proposal crisis quickly, assess the damage, and deliver immediate results (without the time-consuming distractions and politics often faced by the rest of the team).
- **Increase proposal development efficiency (minimize the pain).** Most organizations have fluctuating proposal needs that require specialized skills, but these needs are often not sufficient in scope and duration to justify hiring a full-time employee. Even if full-time staffing levels are generally aligned with steady-state demand, proposal

assistance is often needed to supplement expected staffing fluctuations. These fluctuations can be the result of unanticipated workload peaks or to cover staff taking scheduled vacations or extended leave. Then there are the employees who simply have reached their limit and need a break from giving up their nights and weekends. External consultants can relieve the pain caused by proposal development resource gaps or other process inefficiencies. They bring specialized skills and experience for concentrated bursts of activity so that you can redistribute the workload for a discrete set of tasks over fixed periods of time. Once the task is completed, or your resource gap is otherwise filled, you can either say goodbye to the consultant or keep him or her around to focus on more strategic needs—until the next proposal wave hits.

- **Increase proposal development effectiveness (maximize the gain).** Sometimes companies have the foresight and discipline to take an objective look at their proposal development people, processes, and technology infrastructure. By looking at each element closely and objectively with an outside consultant, organizations can find ways to improve each component. The resulting operational efficiency gains lead to improvements in overall proposal quality, and ultimately result in higher win rates.

Proposal consultants can provide a number of benefits in this area—new ideas, processes and procedures, methods, templates, and other tools. Consultants are uniquely positioned to deliver fresh, unbiased opinions and practical recommendations that are largely unencumbered by either personal or political agendas. They can bring clarity and attention to an initiative that is oftentimes difficult to achieve with internal resources (who are either too close to the problem or lack significant experience outside their own organization) to bring an informed external perspective. With outside help, your on-staff proposal resources can spend more quality time on the proposal at hand, devote attention to other bids, catch up on other professional responsibilities, or even enjoy a weekend with family and friends.

Despite these compelling reasons to hire outside assistance, many companies seem to find more reasons not to hire consultants. The next part of this series explores some of the reasons why companies don't hire outside help—even when they desperately need it.

Chris Simmons is the founder and principal member of Rainmakerz Consulting—a business development solutions company specializing in proposal management, writing, and review.

Still confused or looking for more detailed suggestions? Take time now to send feedback, comments, or questions about this or other challenging proposal issues to Chris at chris@rainmakerz.biz or 202-255-2355. Visit www.rainmakerz.biz.

