

Public Sector IT Procurement

Time is money, or so they say. But time actually stops when it comes to public sector IT tender committees. Here is a typical everyday example:

The over zealous manager of a public sector department, capitalizing on the wide ranging support that IT enjoys at the highest level of the executive hierarchy, is always eager to dream up ways and means of polishing his/her image. This typical manager whose main job function is to manage time, people and resources efficiently (that is another story altogether) has absolutely no idea about the required IT products/services. Instructions are immediately sent to the resident IT staff to issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) or an Expression of Interest (EOI). A tender committee is setup and their first task is to start *begging* prospective bidders for background information on the required products/services. A superficial, generalized and often incomplete RFP (Request for Proposals) or EOI (Expression of Interest) is promptly floated without any obligation on the issuing party.

In many cases, the individual or even collective technical experience of the members of the committee is far inferior to those of the bidders themselves. There are even cases where public sector IT staff attended specialist certified technical training courses only to refuse sitting for the certification exam at the end of the course. Their logic; it is better not to attend the exam rather than sit for the test and fail it. Such practices convey a negative image on the qualifications and procedural transparency of public sector IT products/services tender evaluation committees. When it comes to gauging experience, there is a world of difference between a person with *fifteen years* of practical technical experience and another with a *one year* experience *repeated* fifteen times. Unfortunately, it seems that quite a large percentage of IT staff in our public sector is, to varying degrees, of the second type.

From a legal and regulatory point of view, the new Procurement Regulations that are currently being drafted cover IT products and services as well. The main issue here is that a large part of the clauses, articles and stipulations were actually extracted from the construction and contracting industry domains drawing on public works types of contracts with little or no relevance to the world of IT. This only complicates the specification and evaluation process further extending the allocated evaluation timescale.

In short, our public sector still has a long way to go even to begin understanding the notions of the value of time and the concepts of efficient resource management. After all, this is the most we can expect from civil servants whose monthly salary, benefits and annual raise is dependent simply on the number of hours spent at a desk without any due consideration to performance, efficiency or even simple productivity.

I once came across a promotional advertisement posted by an IT products and services company in the USA. The title actually said "Free Proposals Submitted". I was intrigued by the wording so I decided to contact them only to find out that they usually charge potential clients for preparing proposals in response to RFPs and this was just a special offer for a limited period of time.

Imagine being able to charge public sector departments for the actual time and material costs incurred for every single proposal submitted in response to an RFP or EOI. Judging by the number of RFPs issued (and re-issued) during a year, such an income could sustain the operations of any IT company regardless whether they actually win a bid or not.