

## Chapter highlights

**Purpose:** This chapter provides guidance for conducting requests for information, prequalification of suppliers and receipt of unsolicited proposals.

**Key points:**

- A request for information (RFI) is a standard business process to collect written information about the capabilities of various suppliers.
- Prequalification is a procedure to qualify products or suppliers and limit consideration of bids or proposals to only those products or suppliers which have been prequalified.
- An unsolicited proposal is a proposal received that is not in response to any agency or institution-initiated solicitation.

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### 18.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of requests for information, prequalification of suppliers or products and unsolicited proposals for the procurement of IT goods and services.

### 18.1 Requests for information

A request for information (RFI) is a standard business process to collect written information about the capabilities of various suppliers to provide identified IT solutions, services or products. The RFI acts as a formal inquiry to the marketplace to determine which suppliers and/or IT products, services or solutions are available in the market to solve an agency’s IT business problem. The information obtained through an RFI may be used in developing a subsequent purchase requisition, invitation for bid (IFB) or request for proposal (RFP) after determining that IT suppliers or solutions are available which can satisfy the IT business problem. An RFI is not a procurement method and the results of an RFI cannot be made into a contract. Responses to an RFI will assist the agency in determining an appropriate course of action that may or may not involve a new procurement to solve their IT need. An RFI can be best described as a formal effort to seek ideas, perspectives and information on the proposed IT procurement from potential suppliers so that a formal project scope and set of requirements may be developed.

### 18.1.1 When to use an RFI

Generally, an RFI is used when reliable knowledge is needed regarding the availability of unique IT suppliers, solutions, services or products and little is known about them in the general market or IT industry. There are certain specific instances where the use of an RFI can be helpful:

- When an agency lacks in-house expertise or resources qualified to determine what type of solution may achieve its IT project's business goals and/or what types of solutions are available in the marketplace.
- When supplier responses to an RFI will assist an agency in developing future IFB or RFP requirements. Suppliers may propose multiple solutions in response to an RFI inquiry and need not be limited to proposing one solution. Each solution proposed may be an option for consideration and may help an agency shape their requirements.
- When suppliers can educate an agency on available options that will help mitigate risks and/or reduce overall technical needs.

### 18.1.2 General guidelines for developing an RFI

While each project's business objectives are unique and the resulting RFI should be aligned with those unique needs, there are general recommended guidelines to follow in preparing a successful RFI:

- Be concise and include a clear statement of the problem for which a solution may be solicited in the future.
- Request that suppliers respond to questions concerning the particular IT topic, business need or solution being considered.
- Ask suppliers to provide information on their qualifications, experience and ability to solve the IT problem posed by the RFI.
- Ask suppliers to provide lessons learned, white papers or other credible data regarding the solution being considered to obtain sound information, facts and knowledge-share.
- Do not ask for any cost or pricing information as such information could create an unfair solicitation environment.
- Do not use the RFI to select an IT supplier or a solution.
- Any subsequent IFB or RFP may not be written to a particular supplier, product, service or solution discovered during the RFI process.

## 18.2 Prequalification of suppliers or products

Prequalification is a procedure to qualify products or suppliers and limit consideration of bids or proposals to only those products or suppliers which have been prequalified. Virginia Code § 2.2-4317(A) allows the prequalification of suppliers in certain instances.

Prequalification does not guarantee that a particular supplier will receive a contract or award, but rather qualifies a supplier to submit a bid or propose a solution for a specific solicitation under agreed-upon terms and conditions. Agencies may prequalify IT products or suppliers and then only solicit those who have been determined to have met the prequalification criteria. In such cases, a qualified contractors list (QCL) and/or a qualified products list (QPL) may be created. A QCL is a list of suppliers whose capability to provide an IT service has been evaluated and approved based on written prequalification procedures. A QPL is a list of IT products and/or services that have been tested and approved based on written prequalification criteria. The prequalification process allows for the listing of an unlimited number of potential IT suppliers that have agreed to meet the agency's specific technology requirements and have agreed to the terms and conditions as defined in the prequalification document. If the prequalification document includes terms and conditions which are not required by law, regulation or policy, those terms and conditions may be subject to negotiation before issuance of a solicitation.

### 18.2.1 Prequalification procedure

Agencies may contact VITA at [scminfo@vita.virginia.gov](mailto:scminfo@vita.virginia.gov) to inquire about current prequalified IT suppliers and products, or conduct a contract search of existing statewide contracts at

<https://vita.cobblestonesystems.com/public/> that may serve their IT need(s).

If an agency utilizes a custom prequalification procedure, the agency procedure must be posted publicly and in eVA, sufficiently in advance of its implementation, to allow potential suppliers a fair opportunity to understand and complete the prequalification process. The following prequalification procedure should be followed:

- Prior to the issuance of an IT solicitation, the agency will post a pre-qualification notice in eVA with the prequalification form attached. The form will set forth the criteria by which qualifications will be evaluated and when and to whom the form must be returned.
- Any prequalification notice will provide that all information voluntarily submitted that is labeled as trade secret or proprietary information by the supplier shall be considered a trade secret or proprietary information for the purposes of the prequalification.
- A prequalification notice may include a nondisclosure agreement, request for supplier's financial data and intent to bid/propose form which clarifies the supplier's point of contact information.
- At least thirty (30) days before the date established for submission of the bids or proposals under the prequalification solicitation, the agency shall advise those potential suppliers that submitted a prequalification application whether that supplier has been prequalified for that procurement. The agency will be the sole judge of when prequalification of IT suppliers, products or services is desired or required.

#### 18.2.2 Criteria for denying a supplier prequalification

An agency may deny prequalification to an IT supplier only if one of the causes listed in Virginia Code § 2.2-4317(C) applies. In the event a supplier is denied prequalification, the agency shall provide written notification to the supplier stating the reasons for the denial of prequalification and the factual basis of such reasons. The supplier may elect to appeal the agency's prequalification decision as provided in Virginia Code § 2.2-4357 and § 2.2-4364.

### 18.3 Unsolicited proposals

An unsolicited proposal is a proposal received that is not in response to any agency-initiated solicitation. This policy for unsolicited proposals applies only to IT goods and services. Agencies may encourage the supplier community to submit unsolicited proposals offering new and innovative technology goods, services and solutions including those which would provide significant cost savings to the Commonwealth. Unsolicited proposals allow suppliers to introduce unique and innovative ideas or approaches that have been developed outside of government to be made available to agencies.

#### 18.3.1 How unsolicited proposals are submitted and evaluated

Unsolicited proposals shall be submitted in writing directly to those agencies who establish a primary point of contact to coordinate the receipt and handling of unsolicited proposals. A favorable comprehensive evaluation of an unsolicited proposal by the agency does not alone justify awarding a contract. All contracts must be awarded through competition or other VPPA compliant mechanisms. No preference shall be given to the potential supplier that initially offered the unsolicited proposal should a subsequent solicitation be issued for the same product, service or solution; nor should the solicitation be written in favor of that supplier or its technical approach or specifications. All unsolicited proposals submitted to any agency should be subject to the following conditions:

- All unsolicited proposals are submitted at the risk of and expense of the potential supplier.
- An unsolicited proposal is submitted with no obligation on the part of the agency or the Commonwealth.
- Unsolicited proposals must contain no restrictions on the agency's use of any ideas or information contained in such proposals or the Commonwealth.
- The agency may charge a fee for review of an unsolicited proposal. Such fee should be posted by the agency in advance of receiving any unsolicited proposal to give the proposer adequate notice that payment of such fee is required. Proposals requiring technical review may be billed on an hourly basis as appropriate for time spent in review.

- All unsolicited proposals will be evaluated for their participation and inclusion of small businesses including small businesses owned by women, minorities and service-disabled veterans, as well as micro businesses.
- If the unsolicited proposal contains an offer to loan or provide goods or services to an agency at no cost or little cost, and this offer would tend to create a need for subsequent procurements, the requirement for such goods or services and any additional needs shall be offered for competition in accordance with the VPPA. Potential suppliers shall be afforded an opportunity to participate in the resulting procurement process.

**In order to constitute a true unsolicited IT proposal, the proposal must meet the following criteria to be accepted and reviewed by an agency:**

- The unsolicited proposal must be innovative and unique;
- The proposal must be independently originated and developed by the supplier presenting the proposal to the agency.
- The proposal must have been prepared without government supervision, endorsement, direction or involvement
- The proposal must include sufficient detail to permit a determination by the agency if consideration and review of the proposal would be worthwhile.
- The proposal must not be an advance proposal for a known agency IT requirement that can be acquired through competitive methods.
- The proposal must not address a previously published agency IT requirement.
- All proprietary information included in the proposal which the supplier wishes to remain confidential shall be marked as proprietary. If the entire unsolicited proposal is marked proprietary, it will not be considered for review by an agency.

#### 18.3.2 Requirements for awarding an unsolicited proposal

**Any resulting contract award and related award documents of unsolicited IT proposals by an agency must adhere to the VITA delegation and CIO review and approval requirements. Generally, competition should be used. However, if it is determined by an objective evaluation process that the IT goods or services required by an agency and offered in an unsolicited written proposal are practicably available from only the unsolicited source, the agency may negotiate and award a contract following the sole source procedures, including budget and VITA delegation requirements, conditions and approvals. Any notice of award shall be posted in eVA for ten (10) calendar days.**

