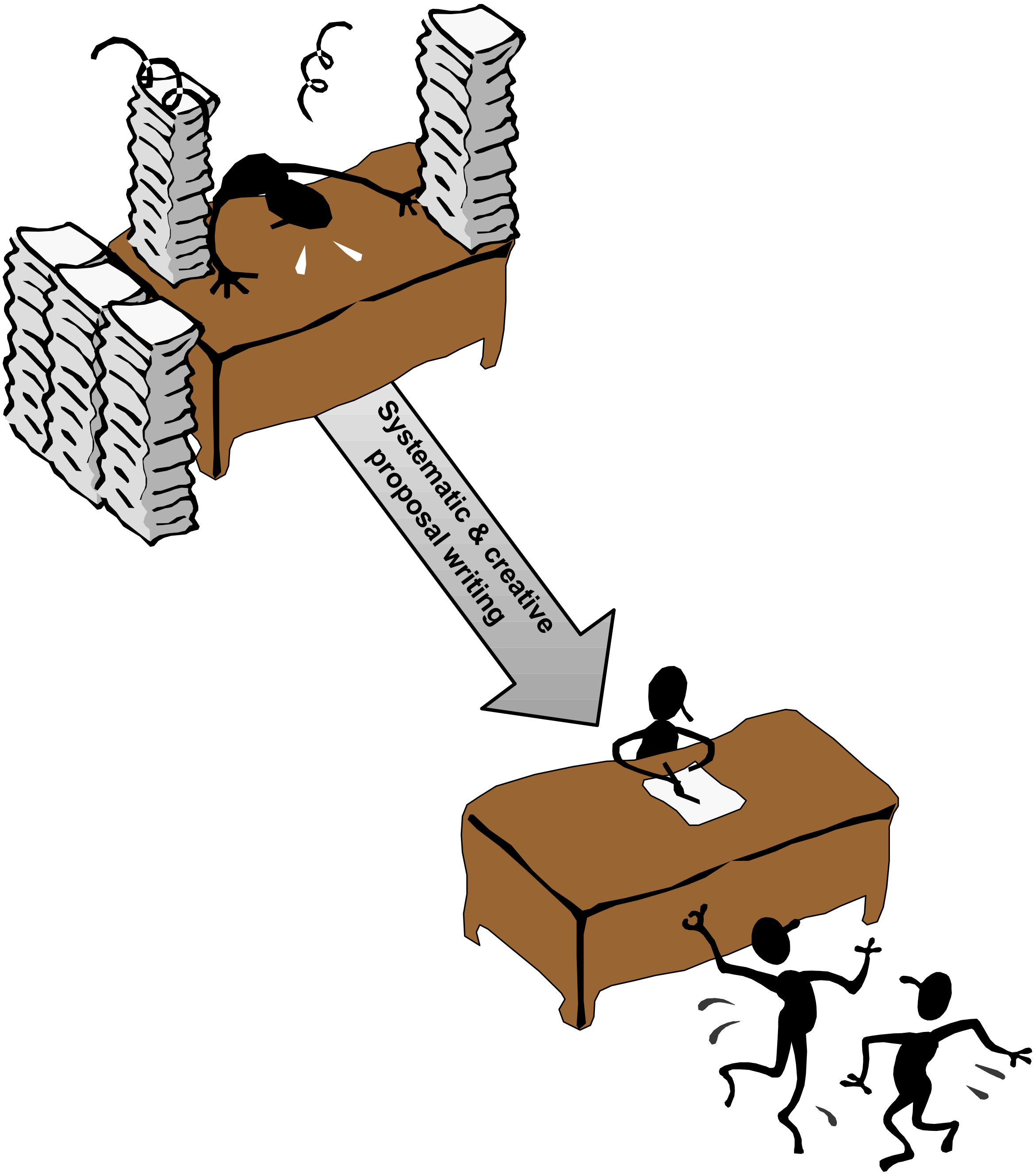
Proposal writing in the context of international development co-operation



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1. Introduction

One of the most characteristic developments in international development co-operation since 1995 is the trend towards an increased orientation on results, transparency and accountability. Under the assumption that the forces of the free-market and competition contribute to these goals, many international donor agencies and national governments shifted away from direct contracting based on good, often personal, experiences of the desk officer with the service provider, to open tendering. The underlying idea is that competition among interested bidders results in more realistic and target oriented proposals, with better guarantees for an effective and cost-efficient implementation of these proposals.

As a result, all multilateral and almost all important bilateral donor or funding agencies have drawn up their own tender procedures, guidelines for proposal writing, instructions for tenderers, proposal evaluation and contract award procedures. These procedures usually include a wide variety of pre-described declarations and statements through which bidders have to prove that they are reliable and trustworthy partners, financially sound and well behaving companies from an ethical point of view.

Consequently, many consultancy and engineering firms have become increasingly involved with tendering and preparing bids. In addition to an adequate selection of appropriate opportunities and the submission of convincing expressions of interest, proposal writing has become a highly important competency for senior staff from these firms. This is also indicated by the number of books and articles which deal with this competency. The bibliography attached to this syllabus provides a non-exhaustive list of books and articles on proposal writing.

This MDF syllabus deals especially with the *Art of Proposal Writing*. Another MDF syllabus, “Tendering in the context of International Development Co-operation”, deals with the various forms of tendering and the entire tender process, from scanning the opportunities to the notification of award.

In this syllabus the emphasis is on persuasive proposal writing, a craft that in our opinion can be learned, although, like with any craft or art, a certain natural disposition, talent and creativity are indispensable. With these ingredients, you can become a good craftperson in proposal writing, simply by learning what good proposals look like, by knowing the available tools for drafting proposals and by developing the necessary skills to use these tools. And like with any craft, by practising a lot of course. An adequate mix of dedication, inspiration, concentration and last but not least hard working is required. But like with mixing cocktails, the basic ingredients need to be available. Therefore, you should consider that a comprehensive preparation and a well structured approach is critical to the ultimate success of writing winning proposals.

In this syllabus due attention will be paid to these ingredients as well as to a more or less stepwise approach to proposal writing. Following these steps will facilitate taking all relevant and vital information into consideration. Moreover, following these steps will gradually prepare the mind to switch over to the required inspired writing mode. While taking these steps one by one, the concept of the proposal is growing up to the moment that it has to burst out of your mind into a Word document on your computer.

2. The approach

The Tao without doing anything leaves nothing undone – Lao Tsu.

The basic ingredients of the approach are fairly simple. Many proposal writers try to sell something, but good proposal writing has much more to do with what the client wants to buy. By systematically collecting, analysing and processing all available and relevant information, your mind is gradually shifting over to the clients position. This information does relate not only to the requested specific services but also to the background, mission and vision, policies and specific principles of that particular client. Reasoning from the position of the members of the evaluation committee is essential for writing winning proposals. Related to this is the rule that you should never try to fight the prescribed format. Following the format exactly is like following a ritual of precision.

Secondly, you have to know and be convinced of the core qualities and strengths of your company or consortium and be aware of the strong points and shortcomings of your main competitors. This will enable you to decide on the comparative advantages you want to highlight and stress in the proposal without mentioning weaker points of your main competitors of course.

Thirdly, you have to build a simple structure for your proposal. You have done most of the structuring already in the process of preparing yourself. Moreover, the structure can for a large part be derived form the ToR and the format for the proposal. But keep it simple and consider it as temporary only. You can and will change this structure when you start writing. Let it guide you but not restrict you. Without a structure you can set off in all directions and the writing will probably take you three times longer. You can get lost and discouraged. Setting a path for your proposal will free you from the distractions of worrying about where you are going. A structure does not prevent you from being creative. The key word here is temporary. If you create a temporary structure or framework, you can relax within that frame.

Now you are almost ready to start writing. You know what the client wants and why. You know what you have to offer and in what framework you intend to present the proposal. Next you have to turn your mind into the right inspiring writing mode. Relax within the framework because it will free you from the distraction of thinking about the whole proposal at once. It will help you to get into a "freewheeling right-brained mode". A Zen-like mindset being mindful of and focused on one piece of the proposal at the time.
If you organise first, the creativity and inspiration can and will come while you are drafting the proposal.

Turning yourself into that strange state of tranquillity mixed with a flavour of positive excitement is an art in itself. It is almost like preparing yourself for a Za-Zen meditation session. Sitting in front of your computer, gazing at the mandala of your screen saver. The correct initiation ritual does not exist. It differs from person to person, from proposal to proposal and from situation to situation. Some experienced writers do something else, anything else until they feel they are truly ready to start the work. Others start writing something else or start with writing the routine sections of the proposal. Some go out for a walk and after a mile or so of not thinking about the proposal a flash of clarity enters their heads and they become eager to get back to their computer. Evidently a uniform recipe does not exist. Experiment and learn to listen to your feelings because they will let you know when you are ready to start writing the most crucial parts of your proposal.

3. The Steps in a Standardised Approach

The approach is called standardised because it follows a number of steps that together form a logical sequence for proposal writing. Some of these steps allow for a standardisation, and thus labour-specialisation in the production process of proposals. The higher the degree of standardisation and specialisation, the more important the co-ordination function becomes.

For larger consultancy and engineering firms, writing expressions of interest and proposals is often one of their most important support processes. For them the production of proposals is to a high degree a routine and standardised process. For these firms it is the challenge to add to each proposal that indispensable touch of uniqueness that turns it into a winning proposal.

Smaller firms often see each proposal as a unique event for which they form a unique team that does not have much experience with the process and requirements of administrative compliance. For these firms proposals are often unique, but from the perspective of cost effectiveness it is essential to develop a modest routine procedure for meeting the administrative compliance requirements. These administrative compliance requirements are not dealt with in this syllabus but in the MDF syllabus on tendering procedures.

The following steps can be distinguished in this standardised approach:
- analysis of the information up to the moment of shortlisting;
- analysis of the tender dossier and terms of reference;
- collection and processing of the information;
- defining the building blocks of the proposal;
- composing and writing the proposal.

4. Analysis of information from pre-ceding steps

Start the process of writing a proposal by going back where it all started: the original (pre) forecast, announcement or tender notification. Also do not forget to consult the internal correspondence and, if applicable, the correspondence with potential partners or consortium members. Just to prevent you to replicate efforts which were already undertaken in the Expression of Interest (EoI) stage and to avoid making needless mistakes. Knowing why certain persons or firms were not interested to participate for example can reveal important information.

Re-read the EoI carefully since you might have to incorporate elements of it in the ultimate proposal and you anyway should avoid creating contradictions between the EoI and the text of the proposal. Pay special attention to the references in the track record(s) and, if applicable, the CVs of the experts used for substantiating the claim for being shortlisted. Apparently these references and CVs (or combinations of references in case of consortia) have been convincing enough to get shortlisted. Consequently it is worthwhile to take them into consideration as one of the building blocks of the proposal. This is in particularly true in the case of a consortium where partners are to be considered complementary regarding each other's strong and weak points.

Last but not least, inform the consortium partner(s) as soon as possible and try to agree on a writers team and a writing schedule at an early stage of the entire writing process. It will prevent needless stress, irritations and even frictions in a stage where this can cause serious damage to the writing process and thus to the quality of the ultimate proposal.

5. Analysis of the Tender Dossier

Content-wise the Terms of Reference (ToR) are the most important part of the tender dossier, because it specifies what the client wants, how he wants it and when he wants it. The other parts of the tender dossier however also deserve careful reading and re-reading. For example, in the special conditions or instructions to tenderers the client specifies the conditions under which he wants the services or products to be provided. In these sections the conditions for the administrative conformity or the administrative compliance grid is presented. Writing a good proposal. but not being awarded the contract due to administrative non-compliance is rather frustrating. Moreover here the information about the shortlisted competitors and the evaluation criteria can be found. Consequently, the analysis of the tender dossier can be split in several parts:

- analysis of the competition and available budget;
- analysis of special and administrative compliance conditions;
- analysis of the evaluation criteria;
- analysis of the ToR.

5.1 Analysis of Competitors and Budget

This part of the analysis is often done in close consultation with senior management staff, often even before the writing team is composed.

- Based on the maximum amount for the overall budget, corrected for the amounts needed for reimbursables and or incidental budget reservations, an estimate is made of the number of man days per category. By applying the prevailing fee levels of the firm, senior management can assess whether the company is really interested in the assignment from a commercial point of view.
- Based on the number of competitors as well as on their strengths and reputation senior management will try to assess the chances of winning the contract and can subsequently indicate how much time and energy can or will be devoted to the elaboration of the proposal.

For the subsequent paragraphs it is assumed that senior management rates these chances fairly high and is thus willing to invest sufficient time and energy for writing a potentially winning bid.

5.2 Analysis of special and administrative compliance conditions

Taking good notice of the special conditions is important in order to prevent that the company gets involved in situations or circumstances it prefers to avoid. Meeting the rules for administrative compliance is important to avoid a waste of time, energy and money on drafting technically sound proposals. Both issues are less relevant for proposal writing itself and are thus not further dealt with in this syllabus. Administrative compliance rules and regulations are an important part of the MDF syllabus on tendering procedures.

5.3 Analysis of the evaluation criteria

Nowadays almost all international donor agencies explicitly mention the evaluation criteria which will be used in assessing the various proposals received. Typical elements of this evaluation grid are:

- understanding of the ToR and rationale of the assignment;
- methodology or implementation strategy;
- backstopping capacity and arrangements;
- quality assurance;
- time table and plan of work/bar chart;
- qualifications and skills of the TA Team Leader/Project Director;
- qualifications and skills of the TA Team members;
- general professional experience of the TA team;
- specific professional experience of the TA team.

The elements of the evaluation grid and the distribution of the normally 100 points over these elements provide the writing team with important information for putting the emphasis of their efforts on the relevant parts. When for a training assignment 65 points are given for the composition of a 14 member trainers team and only 15 points are given for methodology, the emphasis should be on identification of qualified trainers. These trainers should meet all the criteria and all their CVs should be presented in the same format and style. It sounds perhaps simple but even experienced writers are always inclined to put their emphasis on the more challenging methodology, implementation and strategy elements whilst neglecting obvious issues like expert qualifications in line with the ToR or nicely looking CV formats.

It is important to mention here that for certain donor organisations, like EuropeAid the experiences or track record of a firm do not play an explicit role in this stage. This was important to get shortlisted but in the proposal writing stage this element has to be interwoven with methodologies, approaches, best practices, implementation strategies and work plans. For other multilateral donors like the World Bank the track record is important in this stage and in most Requests for Proposals there is a separate section where relevant previous experiences and assignments have to be mentioned. It is however not very frequently used as a separate evaluation criterion.

5.4 Analysis of the Terms of Reference

Obviously the ToR is considered to be the heart of the tender dossier since it is in this section that the client specifies what he wants to be achieved by the project or assignment, how he thinks this can be achieved and his perception of the required inputs and timeframe for it. As such the ToR requires a careful analysis, preferably by more than one person, in order to:

- get a good idea of objectives, goals, results, outputs and activities;
- get a good insight in the underlying problems to be addressed;
- get a good impression of the feasibility and consistency of the clients demand;
- get a good insight in the requirements for technical expertise, in terms of quality and quantity;
- distil questions for further clarification by the contracting authority;
- identify the points for the paragraph Understanding of/Comments on ToR;
- identify the most crucial strategy, approach and methodology elements;
- identify potential comparative advantages of the consortium;
- identify the required professional expertise and experience;
- elaborate a tentative workload distribution among the partners;

Perhaps the most important issue here is to find out what the client precisely wants and whether this is feasible, given the financial, institutional and technical constraints specified in the ToR. Writing clear and consistent ToR is an art in it self and sometimes ToR can be rather confusing and do not permit getting clear answers on obvious questions.

Many donor organisations nowadays provide in the ToR a Logical Framework of the project or assignment. In cases where this is not done it might be wise to derive or construct such a Logical Framework yourself. Just put your Logframe glasses on and transform the ToR into a Logframe, including assumptions and risks. This has a number of advantages:

- you are forced to read the ToR from a consistency perspective;
- you can detect the flaws in the consistency of the intervention logic;
- you can detect the assumptions and risks, especially at the institutional level;
- you can better assess whether the contractor’s obligations are realistic or not.

Building a good quality Logical Framework or deriving one from project documents and the ToR is however not the subject of this syllabus.

As you are reading and re-reading the ToR it is also advisable to make a tentative list of all the information which will be needed for writing a potentially winning proposal.

6. Selection and Processing of the Information

Careful reading of the ToR definitively should reveal the most important information needs, but in certain instances it may be worthwhile to collect other background information. If the tender dossier for example deals with the re-tendering of an ongoing assignment it will be useful to get access to certain documents like the Mid Term Review report or the regular progress reports. Especially in cases where implementation has been less successful, principals are not inclined to attach all relevant documentation to the tender dossier. Or when the principal informally has a preference to continue with the present contractor, not all officially public documentation is always attached. For example, it can be the case that the present contractor of a big training project can avail of the current course files which (perhaps) due to their volume are not included in the tender dossier.

A second reason for collecting additional information is adequate risk management. International development co-operation is a sector with a relatively high percentage of unsuccessful projects or even complete failures. Especially in institutional development programmes and projects the smooth co-operation of counterpart organisations is often too easily taken for granted. They may disagree with the contents of (parts of) the ToR, or have accepted these because they do not want to jeopardise other benefits they receive through that particular project . For this reason it is sometimes advisable to look for other sources of information to get a more complete picture of the assignment.

Formally it is often not the writing team but (more) senior management who has to decide to collect this additional information.

6.1 The various clusters of information

The following clusters of information needs can be distinguished:

Background;

- information concerning the operational and institutional environment;
- information concerning past developments in implementation;
- information concerning the role and position of counterpart organisations;
- information of other donor organisations experiences in the sector;
- …………

Technical;

- state of the art, cutting edge or Best Practices in certain (sub)sectors;
- relevant sectoral experiences from other regions or countries;
- relevant publications or study results worthwhile mentioning in the text;
- selected references from the track records of the own company;
- ……..

Professional;

- CVs of qualified persons for the position of TA team leader and/or project director;
- CVs of qualified persons for the various positions in the TA team;
- CVs of qualified staff for the short term experts;
- CVs for professional and managerial backstopping by the consortium/firm;
- Relevant references from the track record to substantiate previous experiences;
- ………..

Try to make an extensive listing of all the information needs before you start drafting the proposal because while writing you will definitively discover new needs. And remember: the better you are prepared, the better you can relax in the framework and concentrate on Zen-like writing.

6.2 Sources of Information

For most of the information needed it will be immediately clear where to find it or how to get it.

The first important source is of course the *tender dossier* itself. In case this dossier is not clear enough the principal can always be asked for clarifications and/or additional information. However, be aware that your questions and the subsequent answers will be made available to all bidders other bidders as well.

Next, you can refer to a wide variety of *public documents and reports* that under the European Law of Publicity of Governance should be available for any interested person in Europe. You will be surprised what essential information you can get if you really decide to go for it. On the other hand, dealing with bureaucracies takes time, so make up your mind in time, be and remain patient. Discovering your way in this labyrinth is a worthwhile tour in it itself.

For a lot of information you have to refer to your own *internal databases & systems* and/or those of your partners. Selection of sub-contractors, identification and selection of the best CVs, best practices, selected references from track records etc., all have to come from your own internal systems. So, know them and consult them well in advance. In this respect special attention should be given to the selection of the best qualified experts and the presentation of their CVs. In most cases the majority of the points can be gained by the quality of the TA team. Hence, invest sufficient time in selecting the best available candidates and do not be satisfied with one of the first CVs which more or less (but often much less than more) seems to meet the criteria. Present the data of all the team members in the same format and update the information regularly. See also to it that the degree of detailing is uniform. Identification and selection of CVs and candidates requires time and energy, so start with it even before you have started to collect other information and long before you start drafting the proposal. The ideal candidate definitively has something to contribute to your proposal, otherwise it would not be the correct candidate. Or, even worse, he/she might already have been head-hunted by one of your competitors.

The *World-wide Web* evidently offers tremendous possibilities to find information, but it can also trigger you to set off in all directions. While preparing for writing this syllabus I decided to consult the internet and Google provided me with 1,280,000 hits. As a result you can get lost and discouraged while you should remain in the freewheeling-zazenbrainmode. So also in this case: define your path and stay within your framework.

But no matter how vast and extended the World-wide Web might be, certain information can only be collected by going on a site or field visit.

6.3 The site visit

In many tender dossiers, especially for contracts under Euro 1,000,000 it is mentioned that a site visit is not applicable. Often because the contracting authorities and counterpart organisations consider it as not useful (for them), too cumbersome or even as a headache. A site visit however offers a good opportunity to leave potential competitors behind you. Firstly because you can collect information, you cannot get elsewhere and secondly you can deliberately, or not, influence the decision-makers by the impression you make. Once again, be prepared, have your framework ready or in other words know what you come looking for, and relax in the framework. Be open minded and let your adrenaline and creativity flow freely in order to discover the unexpected.

In preparing for the visit you have to define the information needs, identify the possible sources of information, identify the stakeholders to be visited, have the appointments made and prepare a good mix of open and closed questions for the interviews.

And be also prepared to answer questions from the other side of the table. Have a brief and clear presentation of your firm and the reasons for you being there in mind and mould this to the perceived needs of the various interviewees. Show clearly that you know what you are talking about, that you are keen to get the assignment, that your company is capable enough but do not be afraid to show that you are still missing certain pieces of information. And that this is precisely the reason why you are visiting this person in particular.

In case a site visit is not foreseen, carefully check whether such a visit is appreciated at all because it might happen that the officials concerned refuse to receive you if they were not properly consulted about your visit.

Last but not least, be and remain aware of the vast cultural differences in communication but always stay close to your true self and do not forget that sincere and respectful honesty is recognised and valued in all cultures. Consulting a handbook on cross-cultural communication and structured interview techniques whilst preparing for a site visit will not harm even a seasoned and grey-haired consultant.

7. Structure and Components of the proposal

The structure and the components of the proposal are often to a high degree determined by the proposal format of the principal concerned. Do not forget one of the first lessons of proposal writing: never fight the format. Most of these organisations have established strict rules for the format in which proposals have to be submitted. EuropeAid has its (Service) Tender Submission Form with its annexes and World Bank uses its Technical and Financial Proposal Submission Forms. Also UN agencies and bilateral donors like DFID and SIDA use prescribed formats. Even if you correctly feel that another way of presenting all the information would be better, do not do it since this challenges the set rules of a bureaucracy and your proposal might be rejected due to administrative non-compliance.

These rules are mainly meant to assure that (1) tenderers provide all required information; (2) tenderers provide proposals of a similar level of detail; (3) to facilitate smooth evaluation of the bids received; (4) provide essential information (like CV's and budgets e.g.) in a similar, compatible way.

Moreover, bear in mind the second lesson for successful proposal writing: relax in the framework and let it not hinder or irritate you. In the various sections of prescribed formats there are sufficient chances to make use of your beamed creativity. Especially in the core sections on strategy, approach or methodology your adrenaline-creativity driven state of mind will be useful.The other, more routine like sections however can also play a role in writing a good proposal. If you get frozen at the keyboard or are blocked by your internal censors, turn to another section, relax there and wait until you feel that strange meditative repose again.

A typical proposal structure has the following components:

- Introduction
- Comments on the Terms of Reference
- Approach and Strategy
- Methodology and Organisation
- Team Composition
- Time table, milestones and activity plan
- Budget and budget calculations/clarifications

7.1 Introduction

In some cases the format permits for writing a short introduction. Use it to present very briefly the essence of the services requested for in the ToR and to make clear why your company or consortium is pre-eminently suitable to be awarded this particular assignment. However, always remain modest in the language used and let the experiences, the track record of your company and the quality of the staff speak for themselves. Something exceptionally good is recognised by the client by its contents, not by the wording used.

7.2 Understanding of and Comments on the Terms of Reference

In this section you can show that you understand the core issues postulated in the ToR and ventilate your observations concerning the ToR. Especially those relating to the proposed intervention logic, the objectives, results and outputs to be achieved and the assumptions made. This is also the correct place to mention assumptions or risks which in your opinion relate to the intervention logic but are not mentioned in the ToR. Never criticise the ToR too hard, as that is more or less the same as questioning the capacities of the authors. Try to use formulations such as; “in case our interpretation *xxx* is correct, this would in our opinion imply *yyyy.*

Do not forget that you have had the opportunity to get clarifications by forwarding questions in writing to the principal. This is also the section to deal with the replies on these questions in case these meant significant modifications or additions to the original ToR.

Avoid a rather common pitfall by underlining too strongly or too frequently your interpretation of the ToR. This section is not meant to show how smart, clever or good you are, it is meant to show the client that you have clearly understood what he is looking for.

7.3 Approach and Strategy

This paragraph together with the next one on Methodology and Organisation forms the heart of your proposal. In this section you can present your vision on development processes, your principles concerning capacity building or institutional development, your didactical points of departure concerning training or your considerations regarding human resource development or leadership styles. In short, this is the section in which companies or consortia can distinguish themselves from the others. Here you can make the difference. not only by underlining certain more or less theoretical views, believes or principles but also by substantiating their value in practice. Describe previous experiences and best practices and demonstrate clearly their relevance for the present assignment.

A pitfall to be avoided here is that of the uniqueness of a certain approach. In order to make that difference you have to stress the distinctiveness of your approach. On the other hand this approach should not be too complex or complicated. On the contrary, it should be fairly simple for the sake of replicability. More often than not projects are only seen as “a drop in the ocean” and their value added often lies in their simplicity for replication. Hence, replicability definitively is an issue that should be dealt with here in this section.

In case the ToR mentions that variant solutions are welcomed, this is the place to unfold yours. Clearly demonstrate why and in what perspective it is different, what the additional benefits are, how this influences cost effectiveness and what could be the potential disadvantages. Remember that many principals are inclined to be a bit conservative and sceptical towards new, alternative solutions. Therefore you should consider to present not only your variant solution but also a more classical one. In most cases a variant solution can only be given next to the preferred one by the principal. Indicating clearly the similarities and differences, advantages and disadvantages and their implications for the itemised budgets.

One pitfall you always should try to avoid is to promise (much) more than you can deliver in reality. It is obviously rather tempting to describe in the proposal how you would like to act and what you would like to deliver in ideal circumstances. But circumstances are not ideal and even if false or unrealistic promises can result in winning proposals, these promises will backfire on you.

7.4 Methodology and Organisation

This section can be considered as the other, more practical side of the same coin as described in section 7.3. For certain sectors or sub-sectors, such as air pollution monitoring, public administration reform or bio-diversity management, it is quite common to use specific models, methods or techniques. Mention these here, give a brief description and mention previous experiences gained with them.

Many projects or programmes in the sector of international co-operation fail, partly or completely, because they are not well organised and managed. Very often principals or clients want to have as little involvement as possible with the implementation of certain projects. Take for example a project which has to deliver 460 training seminars in more than 100 countries over a period of 4 years or a project that has to mobilise 36 missions a year in order to monitor 680 different project and programmes in 72 different countries. It will be clear that in these cases organisation and management are of the utmost importance. Hence make it very clear how you intend to do this and what kind of experiences your firm has with logistically rather complex exercises. In many cases more points can be gained with a solid and robust organisation paragraph than with an innovative approach paragraph.

7.5 Team Composition

Almost all principals or clients use a certain format for the CVs of the required experts. It is often not easy to compress experiences gained in a lifetime into a 3-4-page format. So be very critical and stick as closely as possible to the requirements as defined in the ToR. Whenever possible try to avoid the use of people's standard CVs. In almost all cases it is better to tailor the CV to the needs of a particular assignment. The best person to do this, is obviously the expert concerned. Send him the ToR, job description or list with required competencies and ask her/him to adjust the CV. An outsider, like the proposal writer, can never see from a specific CV whether that person has obtained certain highly relevant experiences which might be hidden somewhere in a three lines description of a particular assignment.

See to it that all CVs have not only the same format but also the same internal structure, balance and style. For some proposals between 10 and 80 CVs have to be presented. From the way these are presented one can easily derive how thoroughly, or better how hasty, the proposal was produced, whereas in the majority of cases the CVs constitute more than 40 percent of the points to be gained.

Normally the CVs of the individual experts are attached in an annex. In the paragraph on the team composition the complementarity of the individual experts should be highlighted referring to the requirements as presented in the ToR. This is not only true for the professional qualities that can be rather easily substantiated in a CV, but also for the personal qualities and charisma. In case team-members collaborated previously with each other, do not forget to mention that here. Where possible and realistic do not hesitate to refer to the team cohesion and the synergy this will create.

This is an extremely important section since it can impress the readers to the extent that it makes the main difference in comparing the various proposals. Do not forget that this paragraph is read in the early stages of reading whereas the CVs are often read at the end when the readers attention is gradually slipping away.

7.6 Milestones and activity plan

Principals or clients may know what they want from you, they are however often less clear about the roads leading to that point. From any ToR it is possible to derive a number of important milestones to be achieved along the road. Mark them well, identify a series of activities needed to carry out before arriving at them and put milestones and activities in a nicely looking bar chart or another visual graph.

Seriously reflecting on milestones, plan of activities and their appropriate timing is also important for yourself. It happens rather frequently that clients under-estimate the time needed to thoroughly execute a set of activities. This is even more true in cases where you have to deal with a number of inter-connected sets of activities, which together should lead to certain milestones or outputs. In case you seriously doubt the feasibility of the time schedule indicated in the ToR, do not hesitate to ask for clarifications while substantiating the reasons for your hesitation. Normally this will result in a higher degree of freedom in specifying the feasible time-path for project implementation. Often clients have not made a realistic projection of the required time-periods but have only indicated their desired preference for the delivery date of the final outputs. Do not opt for confrontation by simply presenting a substantially deviating time-path in your proposal but use the possibility to ask for clarifications. In case the client sticks to the original time-schedule, you have two options. Either you stick to it as well but you indicate in the text the risks, or you present a different, more realistic schedule indicating your reasons for it.

7.7 Resource allocation and budgeting

Based on your activity plan, a resource allocation plan can be drawn up indicating the type of required resources in months. Next price tagging leads to a budget. This process is extensively described in another MDF syllabus and will not be discussed here.

Normally the ToR specifies a certain budget format that can be filled out after a set of budget calculations. It is not always clear to what extent the client should be made aware of the underlying budget calculations. In cases where the technical and financial offer are weighted in a 80% - 20% ratio, you can win the tender even when your proposal is relatively expensive. But also in other cases the rule is not to provide more information as the ToR is demanding for as long as the underlying calculations can be explained in a later stage.

8. Writing The Proposal

Try not. Do or do not. There is no Try. - Yoda

Up till now we mainly dealt with issues in the preparatory stage. Now we are getting started to actually write the proposal. There is a school of thought that claims that this is the terminus in the process of learning how to write proposals. From this moment onwards the writer should continue on his or her own. Or like some say, you can teach a horse how to find the water-place but you cannot force to drink it.

Nevertheless there are a number of practical recommendations that might help you to break through your internal barriers or censors whilst writing the proposal.

8.1 Starting the proposal writing process

Don't think. Just breathe. Get ready – Lao Tsu

We are all primed to write that proposal. We are going to just ready-aim-fire, but we get frozen at the keyboard due to a number of internal censors such as; "ready-aim-doubt", "aim-aim-aim" and "ready-fire-aim later". One way to break through these internal censors is by concentrating on being ready. Like *Zen in the Art of Archery*, one should not bother about firing, not even think about the target before one is completely and truly ready. Some of these Zen ideas can help us to get words down on paper, by direct writing as Hemingway called it. Take a concept or even better a set of concepts directly from the inspiration to action with no interference from the intellect. Continue writing in this way and you will have a first draft. "All first drafts are shit", as Hemingway said, "but it will smell better tomorrow" and just tell yourself that everything is gonna be alright after some revising and polishing.

The way to get in this correct writing mode is a highly personal matter but as soon as you have discovered your own way, you know it. Some people listen to music, some meditate, others write in a journal, build jigsaw puzzles, play chess with a computer or practise the art of sumi painting. All to get into an attitude of repose, the attitude of being ready.

8.2 Writing alone or on a team

He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened – Tao-te Ching.

Writing a proposal alone can be scary, but at least you can make your own rules. Team writing requires co-ordination with other people, compromises and relinquishing control. But it also offers support from others, immediate feedback and confirmation of your ideas. But even when you are the leader of the writing team, you will not have total control of when and how things come together at the end. You have to trust that everyone will get his or her piece done right and at the right time. Some will and some will not. So be prepared that Harry's section will be late and Amy's will be much too long. Schedule time for some rewriting and style harmonisation but do not rewrite their stuff completely and do not insist on your style. There is nothing wrong with the client learning that the proposal is the outcome of a joint team exercise.

Writing alone does not imply that you should not look for feedback or external advice. What is clear and obvious for you might not be for others. Do not be, or at least do not show hurt when your text is criticised. More often than not first drafts, no matter how you have fiddled with it, are normally bad, or anyway not as brilliant as you might think. Rewrite it and mirror yourself again on your co-reader until the two of you think it is good enough.

8.3 Consider your client's perspective

Your audience is one single reader. Pick out one person, a person you know or an imagined person and write to that one – John Steinbeck

Your proposal is not written for yourself but for a principal or client. Put yourself into that client's perspective. This does not only relate to the proposal itself, but also to the context in which this particular client or principal has launched the call for proposals. What are the relevant policies, the appropriate approaches, strategies and methodologies preferred by this principal? For instance, is this organisation mainly interested in getting the job done or is simultaneous capacity building appreciated? Putting yourself in that perspective cannot be done while writing the proposal. You should have learnt what precisely that perspective is when getting ready. Now you simply force yourself to look at the contents of the proposal from that perspective. Now you put yourself into the client's shoes. It will be evident that this is particularly important when your proposal is submitted to an international client with another culture. e.g. a Japanese, Chinese or Laotian. But do not forget that even within Europe cultural and language differences do exist. Direct, brisk Dutch prose may seem rude to a civil servant from Spain or Greece. These barriers can mean the difference between a proposal that wins and one that simply confuses your client. Put yourself keenly in the mental perspective of your client to, at least partly, overcome these barriers.

8.4 Keep reading interesting

Have something to say and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style – Matthew Arnold

Normally an evaluation committee has to read between three and eight proposals. The one that reads like a novel definitively has a comparative advantage over the others, no matter its contents. Therefore use short, to the point sentences instead of long and complicated ones. Avoid woolly language, do not always remain very serious and differentiated. At certain instances you have to become sharp, to the point and non compromising.

Impress your audience with the innovation of your approach, with the clarity of your logic, yes. But do not try to impress them with your big vocabulary. It will backfire. At the best, they will misunderstand you. At the worst, they will stop reading.

Variation is important. Do not hesitate to use tables, charts, graphics, symbols and illustrations instead of words, but be sure they serve a purpose. Tables, charts or graphs are better than words if you need to describe complex processes, if you have complex statistical data to convey or if you are describing something that requires the readers to form a mental image to understand. In general most people remember images better than they do words. However, illustrations should be essential and not used to conceal a lack of contents. They must support and clarify the text, not take its place.

The text should also permit the reader to relax once in a while. In reading there should be a proper balance between intense concentration and relaxation, allowing the reader to use his or her own imagination. Using cartoons can be rather helpful in this as long as you do not aim at making the reader laugh about the proposed assignment or at the ToR.

8.5 Making your case

“That was what I hoped would happen” – Bahadure Khaila

The one and only purpose of writing a proposal is to convince the readers that your approach, your methodology and organisation of the work together with the experiences of the proposed team and the backstopping services from your firm or consortium is the best guarantee for successful implementation of the assignment.

For that reason you have to make your case by presenting your proposal as a fascinating story or book that is interesting right from the start. And as a story or a book, your proposal should have a clear and intriguing narrative style that captures the reader in such a way that he does not want to stop reading before he has completed it.

Not an easy task, but remember that your readers most probably have a professional interest in the subjects, which makes it easier to grab and keep their attention. Try to take them along on a reading trip by using short, clear and sharply formulated sentences. Avoid long sentences with a lot of parentheses combining a number of abstract concepts, ideas or notions. The professional reader will immediately demystify the use of woolly language-usage and label it as an effort to hide a lack of concrete experiences with the subject.

From the introduction onwards it should be clear that the writer knows what he is writing about and that he is heading for something that will be revealed later in the proposal. The following sequence of presenting your case is a solid option for this writing approach:

- In the *introduction* you tell the readers what they are going to read and you briefly highlight previous experiences with the core, essential elements of the present assignment.

- In the *understanding and comments on the ToR* you pave the way and prepare the ground for what you are going to unfold in the subsequent paragraphs. In this section you give your interpretation of **what** it is that the client wants from the contractor.

- In the *strategy and approach* section you clearly explain **how** you are going to address the issues that need to be tackled. Substantiate it by referring to best practices in the particular (sub) sector or in the region, and by showing that your firm or consortium has quite a lot of positive experiences with similar assignments.

- In the section on *organisation and workplan* you indicate **who** is responsible for which activity and output. Using a visualisation is attractive since it captures the attention. Especially when a not so common picture like the Mintzberg mushroom is used. With another easy to read or understand bar chart or Gantt chart you indicate **when** these organisations or persons are going to carry out their tasks and activities. Use a kind of separate road-map indicating clearly by when the required outputs are achieved. Outputs are often the result of a few sets of different activities and in traditional bar charts it is not always easy to read the precise output-achievement dates.

- In the section on the *team composition* you have to underline two issues. Firstly, you describe the complementarity of the individual team members, based on an overview of the key expertise requirements as already presented in the approach or strategy paragraph. Secondly, the personalities and personal skills of the team members are detailed. They should be in harmony with the requirements as depicted in the approach paragraph. Finally you present your team as the A-team. The best possible team to do the job.

In order to build up your case in an interesting way you can consider using parts of fairy tales or introducing certain characters or animals from a relevant myth, children's tale or legend. Most countries in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe have a wide variety of such stories and characters. Introducing Ananzi the spider or Saraswati the goddess of learning and education shows that you are aware of the cultural background. Moreover you can consider to let these mythological persons or animals say things that you otherwise would have let unsaid. Many countries have relevant myths and characters on prosperity, wisdom, co-operation and development. And are they not the crucial elements of most assignments? Having a good collection of books of fairy-tales and myths is not a luxury for a creative proposal writer. Think for instance on the Baobab-Eucalyptus metaphor for sustainable organisational development. Use such stories, figures or metaphors. They give more fun in writing and reading a proposal.

8.6 Handling 'hostile' terms of reference

His words are full with ideas and visions. These alter reality without manipulating it – Paul Muad'Dib

It happens of course quite frequently that the ToR are not clear enough or that the requested methodology, strategy or approach is not coinciding with your own experiences and ideas. If the gap between what is desired and what you would propose is too vast, it is better not to write a proposal but a polite letter, honestly explaining why you will not submit a proposal.

There are however many cases in which you doubt whether the client precisely knows what he is asking for or what he should ask. Moreover it happens that you know the precise nature of the demand but that you would prefer a (slightly) different approach, strategy or methodology. The way to address such a 'hostile' ToR is the following.

In the section on *understanding of the terms of reference* you present your understanding of the demands of the client in such a way that the client says, yes indeed this is what I really wanted, but did not know how to express properly. The Logical Framework approach, used by many donor organisations nowadays, is an excellent tool to clarify the client's demands and the logic of reasoning behind it. It also provides you with an opportunity to slightly tilt the original demand of the client into a direction that better corresponds with the strategy, approach or methodology you prefer. In doing so you can also introduce an assumption or risk, which was not clearly mentioned in the ToR. This allows you to show the client that his approach or set of desired outputs is a bit risky and that it would be better to downscale the ambitions or adapt the approach. You use this section only to let the client become aware of that.

In the relevant paragraphs of the *approach, strategy or methodology* sections you continue to elaborate on it and you present your way of doing the job. Without giving the client the idea that this is something (entirely) different because that is often understood as pointing at the client's own incompetence. Present it in such a way that it appears to be derived directly from the client's own preferences and substantiate it by presenting successful examples. Last but not least, in the section on *team composition* you demonstrate that your A-team is perfectly capable to meet these adapted clients demands.

One could argue that this way of 'tilting' or adapting the original contents of the ToR is actually an act of manipulation. And that is true, because writing proposals is about playing with the future and the possible scenarios leading to that future. That requires speculation, manipulation and imagination, but also professionalism, determination, perseverance and a thorough preparation. And precisely that combination makes proposal writing such an attractive and professionally challenging job.

9. Epilogue

The pleasure of good proposal writing is in writing not in winning. Even if the proposal is rejected, you have for a brief time felt the glory.

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