Choosing a software – Getting to the Request for Proposal (RFP)

Brenda Prowse, CRM
Director of Professional Service & IM
Prima Information Solutions

Quick fix? Magic Bullet? These are terms often used when organizations talk about purchasing software. Many seem to think a piece of software will solve all of their information management problems. To be honest, it can solve most. But not without some hard work first. So no, you can't just say Abra Cadabra and all the problems will go away like magic!

How do I begin?

The very first thing you need to do is understand your requirements. You wouldn't buy a 2-seater sports car when you really need a mini van so why not put the same amount of research and effort into this purchase? After all, it's likely a huge investment that you will plan to maintain for many years.

Requirements Gathering & Analysis

You need to understand many facets of your business and technology in order to complete this piece. If you don't feel qualified in all areas seek help from within your organization or hire outside consultants to assist you. Key individuals within each business area will need to be interviewed. Your end goal is to gain a full understanding of how they work, what their information needs are and how they view software as an improvement tool. Developing some key questions to ask and distributing them prior to interview sessions will greatly assist you. Some questions include:

What information do you receive and/or create as part of your job?

How long do you need to keep your information? Do you have legislation which states this?

What are the key processes in your area? Do you have workflows mapped out?

How do you organize your information in the network drives?

Do you have requirements for version/revision control?

Communication skills are also very important during this phase. You must be able to ask the right questions but listen to and understand the responses. Listening skills are usually undervalued since many people start interpreting and trying to solve a problem before they listen to the entire issue that a person is trying to explain. Be sure to repeat an issue back to your staff member for clarification to ensure you have properly heard and interpreted the problem.

Interview sessions should take 1 to 2 hours to gather the information you need. It's always better to have 2 or 3 staff members who perform similar functions in the room together. They will usually manage to convey a more complete picture of their work or business unit with others prompting them.

Always leave some time after each interview to review your notes and fill in gaps while the information is still fresh in your mind. It is very difficult days later to go back and try to interpret if your notes weren't thorough and clear.

Be mindful of setting expectations during the interviews. While it's good to encourage people to express their wishes for software functionality, be realistic about what they can expect. Perhaps you want something to handle classification and retention but are not concerned about workflow. Be upfront when people ask about it. Note their concerns but manage the expectations so they are not surprised when a tool is finally chosen.

Document!

When documenting your interviews ensure you hone your notetaking skills. Try to create a shorthand method or ask if you can record the sessions so you can go back if you feel you missed something. Request a second meeting if you forgot what was said or perhaps missed a question. Even a follow-up email can help clarify areas of concern. If you can, have a co-worker attend these interviews with you. Two sets of ears and notes is always better than one.

Drafting the requirements

Once the notes have been reviewed you should be able to use them, and your own experiences and knowledge, to start drafting your requirements. You should have two lists: the "must haves" (mandatory items), and "nice to haves" (optional).

Some Must Haves:

- Supports a Taxonomy
- Supports Retention Schedules (event based)
- Has robust Security (meets DoD 5015.2 – the de facto standard for EDRMS functionality as published by the US Department of Defense)
- Works in your technical environment
- Audit capabilities

Some Nice to Haves:

- Simple Graphical User Interface (GUI)
- Workflow capabilities
- Hosted solution

To RFP or not to RFP?

You may want to consider using the RFI (Request for Information) route prior to the RFP. This is a way to understand the landscape of products and ballpark pricing prior to formalizing it. If you want to draw a larger pool of responses to an RFI you can state that only those who respond to the RFI will be invited to respond to the eventual RFP. The RFI should be brief and ask for some basic overall pricing. This will help you with budget and give you a better idea of the players in the market. Be aware that if responding to the RFI is not mandatory in order to be invited to respond to the eventual RFP, you will likely not get as many responses as you would like. This is due to a number of factors including a general lack of time to do a response and a feeling that any information provided would then be used to build the RFP which may be seen as “giving away” proprietary information. The lack of time is huge for companies and should not be underestimated. These responses can sometimes take weeks to generate and, for consultants, time is definitely money.

RFP elements

1. Always give your RFP a number, title, and contact person.
2. Be sure to include a solid description of your scope and overall understanding or what you would like to achieve.
3. Consider requesting a POC (Proof of Concept) as part of the project. You may be out some money, but it provides an “out” if the chosen product does not really work for you.
4. Outline how a vendor should respond. Provide a desired Table of Contents and list your requirements in a fillable form (e.g. excel spreadsheet).
5. You may want to consider having an Intent to Bid form which a vendor must return well before the submission deadline. You will get a good sense of who plans to submit responses.
6. Provide realistic timelines. Vendors put a great deal of time into their responses and two weeks is not enough. Allow for at least a month so respondents have an appropriate amount of time to ask questions of you and provide a comprehensive response.
7. Allow respondents to email their responses. Canada is a rather large country and shipping RFP documents from one side to the other, or even halfway, is both costly and time consuming. Some vendors may have to set aside a week of the response time just to allow for shipping.
8. Ensure that the named contact person in your RFP does not plan to be out of office during the response timeframe. It may sound funny as you read this but it does happen!
9. Include any legal clauses necessary including Conflict of Interest statements. This would also include any terms regarding “accepting proposals until date/time”, “proposals not accepted after….”, “updates to proposals only accepted under following conditions….”, “do not contact organization directly except for named contact person” etc. Always engage your legal team or company lawyer to assist with the RFP.
10. Provide a definitions section for any acronyms used and terms which you believe require explanation.
11. Ask for at least 3 references with the responses and request that at least one of those be similar in nature to your organization (both business wise and size).
12. Request a sample project plan and the vendor’s approach to rollouts. A qualified vendor should have a Project Delivery Methodology. Also request resumes of any proposed team members and ensure those provided will comprise your rollout team if selected. You don’t want to be presented with the “A” team only to find the “B” team arrives for the kick off meeting.
13. If you request demos as part of the response be prepared to allow for remote demos. Ensure you have a facility where all appropriate staff can sit and view the demos together. Also provide a script for the features you wish to see as part of the demonstration. This will ensure you view exactly the items you are looking for. Also, be sure to script requirements from both the Administrator and End - User perspective. If there is a requirement for more than one interface, ask they all be shown during the demo.

14. Be mindful of travel budgets if selecting an out of town vendor. This will often add greatly to your budget and you should be prepared for that or perhaps provide for remote work capabilities.
15. Never neglect Change Management when selecting a software. A vendor may be able to assist with this so ask if they have a Change Management approach. Users who are in the know and involved in the process are usually more accepting of the change.
16. If you already have a product in mind and can avoid the RFP process, then just move forward with it. Do not waste anyone's time. As mentioned, these responses take quite a lot of time and effort and money. Be mindful of this if you already have your mind made up.

Budget

If possible, expose your budget when publishing your RFP. Vendors will respond if they feel they can work within the proposed budget and you will get targeted responses. This is not a "cheap" venture and you need to be fully prepared for licensing, support and implementation costs. Implementation alone is often 2 to 3 times the cost of the software.

What to ask

Vendors wrap their pricing up quite nicely, but you need to be aware of the potential hidden costs. Some things to ask:

- Are manuals included with the training?
- Do I need to undergo training with each upgrade?
- What exactly is included with my support dollars?
- Is the software configurable or do I need a programmer (or your company) in order to make simple changes?

Other things to consider

Do you need to have a vendor host your solution? Is your infrastructure such that supporting a large, complex solution is truly out of the question?

Do you have at least two people who are truly capable of managing an electronic system? Records management is only one area of knowledge required. You must have some software skills in order to manage a software solution.

Do you need to integrate with other in-house systems? If so, who is going to do that? And what is the business need for the integration? Too often integration requirements are proposed without a full analysis of the actual need to do it. This can waste a great deal of time and money for no real purpose.

Are your users savvy enough to learn software? If not, you must be prepared to be the one who fully maintains it. Staff members likely bring paper to you now for filing. It would be no different with electronic records. They may place them in a network folder and you would need to process it. Do you have the bandwidth to do this? Will you require more staff?

Are there other projects currently underway which would compete with yours? Staff members have only so much time and ability to learn new processes and/or software. If you add this type of project on top of one or more others it may overwhelm your staff ant they will not be able to do justice to any project commitments.

Conclusion

Choosing software can be a daunting task but when you plan, properly analyze your needs, ask the right questions, solidify your budget, get a good team in place and select your vendor things will fall into place.

Addendum

Sample Requirements for Choosing an EDRMS Software

Supports Classification and Event based Retention

Complex Security elements

Detailed, searchable, Audit trail

Varying levels of user capabilities

Ability to add custom metadata

Configure not code

Provides SDK for ability to integrate with other systems

Provides import/export functionality

Provides ability for revisions/versions

Check-in/check-out capabilities

Allows a folder structure

Web client interface

Workflow capabilities

Training provided by vendor (train the trainer preferred)

Support includes access to patches/upgrades

Support can be negotiated for multi-year

n-tier system

Operates in your environment (provide those details in the RFP)

Consistent release patterns

Good market presence and longevity in the market