

BQ

BIDDING QUARTERLY

Industrial Evolution

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Connecting Winners

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Foreword

Being an expert in a particular industry or sector certainly has its appeal. As a master of your chosen discipline, you can become highly respected amongst peers and your confidence can soar. People also tend to trust experts more freely.

But what if that expertise is holding you back? Maybe you can't see the wood for the trees. Or maybe you are held in such high esteem you become an unopposed expert. What then? Where is the motivation to better yourself?

Turn the clock back 20 years and very few employers sought bid professionals with relevant industry experience. They were more focussed on your ability to put a winning bid together. You could quite literally jump from industry to industry and there were very few barriers to doing so.

Fast forward to today. We have never seen greater demand for specialist industry knowledge and skills in permanent recruitment. Many of our clients are very specific about the industrial background and experience they seek. Most say they are willing to be flexible but in reality, very few candidates make the cut if they don't meet the wish list.

The contract market is slightly less prescriptive and we work with both generalists and specialists in equal measure. Clients with short term resource emergencies tend to be more flexible and candidates are equally successful.

So what is behind this drive towards specialists and our self-termed 'Industrial Evolution'? Large swathes of the bid and proposal profession are maturing at a rate of knots. They are accelerating beyond the traditional 'sales support' or 'sales admin' function into the 'strategic enabler' and 'trusted advisor' space. It is in these more mature (and often more complex) businesses where we see the highest demand for specialist industry knowledge and skills.

The slight irony with this trend is that these types of businesses generally have the most capable subject matter experts (SMEs) so are potentially doubling up on the same skills. In our experience, clients with strong SMEs in situ typically need strong bid management or bid writing skills to enhance the process/proposals. The SME has the industry knowledge; it just needs to be meticulously extracted from them and professionally articulated.

Certain industries such as Defence, Construction, Science, IT and Professional Services are more likely to ask for specific experience but they also then tend to pay higher salaries to attract and retain the talent. The recruitment process can also be more protracted in these professions (three to six months is not uncommon) whilst the focus remains on securing their 'bidding unicorn'.

All too often we see months of intense effort to secure a perfect match candidate unravel because definitions of hybrid and homeworking are also rapidly evolving. The move back to an office environment is very real. Although there is strong resistance to returning to pre-Covid working conditions across our profession, hybrid work now typically means at least three or four office-based days.

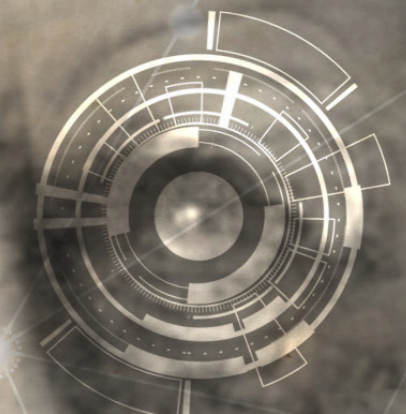
APMP's introduction of micro-certifications is also driving the profession towards more and more specialist roles. While these certificates provide kudos and respect amongst peers, we are yet to see an employer actively seek out such skills. Even those companies stipulating APMP Foundation or Practitioner rarely reject candidates without those qualifications. (APMP Professional has never been requested by our clients on a job specification.) We'd argue that how the prospective employer gels with the candidate has greater sway in the decision-making process.

Geography clearly also plays its part. Some countries are only in the earliest stages of bid and proposal evolution and others are sprinting ahead. There is currently a clear lack of specialist Bid Writers in the UK market but we haven't seen a move (yet) by clients to sponsor international candidates with the right skills and industry experience. It can only be a matter of time.

We firmly believe capture, bid and proposal skills are transferable across industries. There are absolutely some things you will need to learn about any industry to be successful but none are insurmountable for a skilled professional. And being a generalist is equally as credible as being a specialist. Our recommendation to candidates seeking out a new sector or industry is to focus on your most transferable skills. Examples include working on complex or multi-million £/€/\$ bids, leading or line managing teams, influencing stakeholders, developing value propositions, making bid/no bid decisions, and writing social value responses.

Our team of BQ Experts brings an unparalleled breadth of knowledge and experience to this topic and have generously shared their unique perspectives in BQ17. We hope you enjoy the 22 fantastic articles and can take advantage of the many opportunities arising from the *Industrial Evolution*.

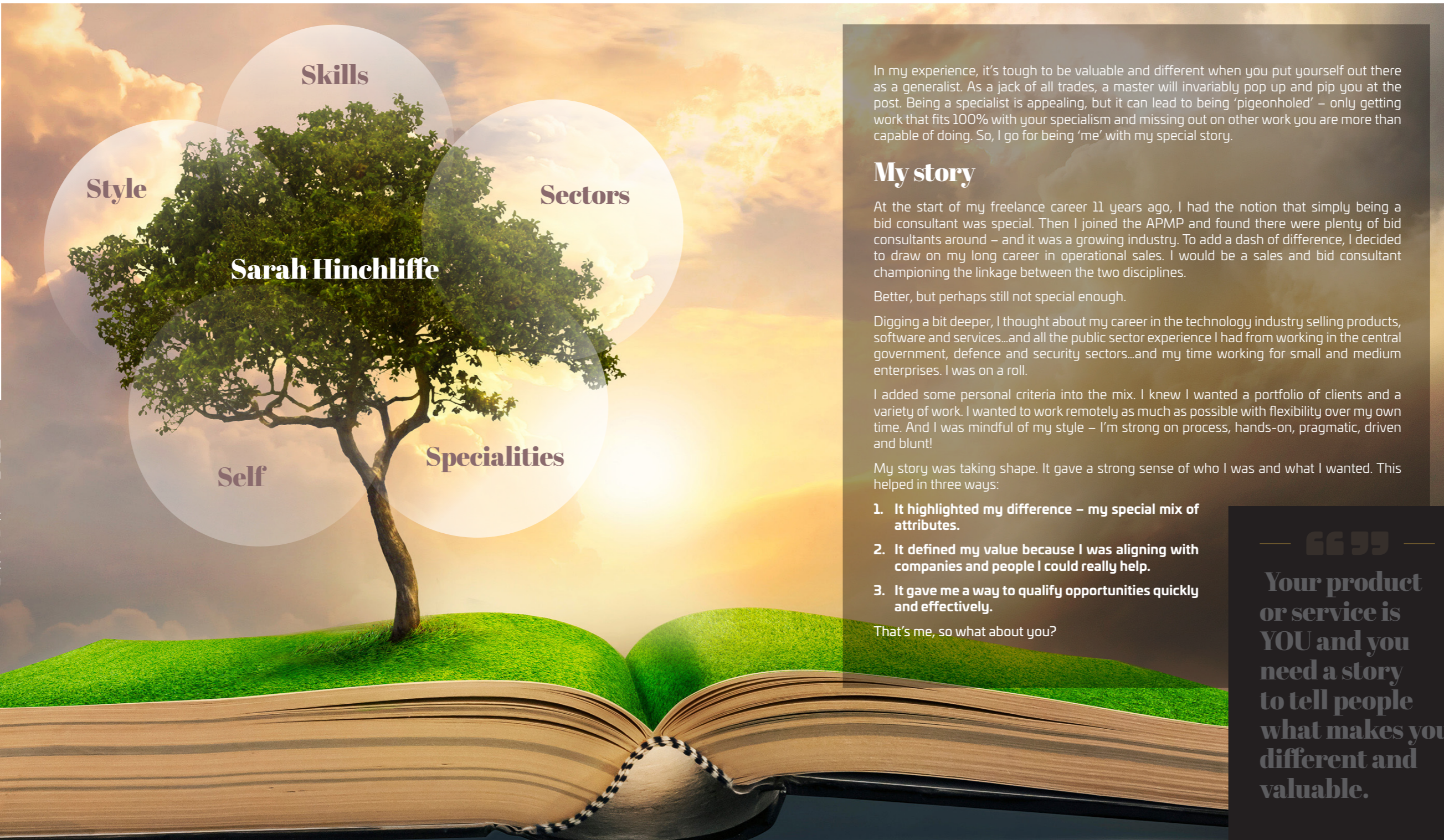
Martin Smith • Lisa Easthope • Ben Hannon • Tanya Smith



The Story of You

To be successful in business, you need a compelling story. The story of the value your product or service will bring to your client and why they should buy from you and no one else.

When carving out a freelance career in the bid world, it's just the same. Your product or service is YOU and you need a story to tell people what makes you different and valuable. Should you be a generalist with broad appeal or a specialist in your chosen field? Or perhaps you should just be you because every one of us is special in our own way.



In my experience, it's tough to be valuable and different when you put yourself out there as a generalist. As a jack of all trades, a master will invariably pop up and pip you at the post. Being a specialist is appealing, but it can lead to being 'pigeonholed' – only getting work that fits 100% with your specialism and missing out on other work you are more than capable of doing. So, I go for being 'me' with my special story.

My story

At the start of my freelance career 11 years ago, I had the notion that simply being a bid consultant was special. Then I joined the APMP and found there were plenty of bid consultants around – and it was a growing industry. To add a dash of difference, I decided to draw on my long career in operational sales. I would be a sales and bid consultant championing the linkage between the two disciplines.

Better, but perhaps still not special enough.

Digging a bit deeper, I thought about my career in the technology industry selling products, software and services...and all the public sector experience I had from working in the central government, defence and security sectors...and my time working for small and medium enterprises. I was on a roll.

I added some personal criteria into the mix. I knew I wanted a portfolio of clients and a variety of work. I wanted to work remotely as much as possible with flexibility over my own time. And I was mindful of my style – I'm strong on process, hands-on, pragmatic, driven and blunt!

My story was taking shape. It gave a strong sense of who I was and what I wanted. This helped in three ways:

- 1. It highlighted my difference – my special mix of attributes.**
- 2. It defined my value because I was aligning with companies and people I could really help.**
- 3. It gave me a way to qualify opportunities quickly and effectively.**

That's me, so what about you?

Your product or service is YOU and you need a story to tell people what makes you different and valuable.

What's your story?

Working out what you're good at and not so good at, what you want and don't want is a great exercise to help you get your story straight. A Venn diagram can help. Have a go at creating a series of bubbles:

Style: Are you a people person, a team player, a soloist, consensual, directive, diplomatic, candid, pragmatic; what are your values...

Skills: Are you a bid manager, writer, reviewer, editor, capture guru, win strategist, graphic designer, process designer...



Sectors: technology, telecoms, construction, facilities management, security, defence, finance, public sector SMEs...

Self: Do you want to contract for weeks/months or do short-term engagements; do you want to work remotely/in office/hybrid; do you want/need flexible hours; do you have accessibility needs...

Specialities: proposal automation, content management, frameworks, social value...

When you do this exercise, be selective and true to yourself. No pretending! If you're good at something but don't like doing it, leave it out. Don't worry too much about the intersecting portions – this is where your story can be tailored to suit different situations – but the more overlaps you can create, the better it will be for you and your client. And if you can hit the 'sweet spot' in the middle, then there's a good chance you'll both be in heaven.

Stories in action

A special story worked for me. In the early days, I went off-piste a few times but, on the whole, I stuck to it and I've had a continuous run of work that's suited me and benefitted my clients.

And my story has evolved over time. I've sharpened my storytelling skills. My public sector focus has developed and I often help SMEs breaking into the public sector to organise and professionalise their business development activities. I've also created a new speciality in Social Value, which is in high demand. I mix and match my attributes to be special in different ways and always genuinely suited to my work. If an opportunity doesn't fit with my story, I say no.

And for you? If you're thinking about moving into freelancing, develop your story to see how and where you would pitch yourself. It also works if you're looking for a new employed role – by clarifying your differences and your value, you will create a better CV and qualify job opportunities better. After all, having a win strategy and doing some content planning to get your compelling story straight before writing is bid best practice!

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

**CUSTOMER
FOCUS**

**CUSTODIAN OF
CUSTOMERS'
NEEDS**

**CONVEY
COMPLEX
INFORMATION
CLEARLY AND
PERSUASIVELY**

Tony Birch

Are Bid and Proposal Skills Transferable?



— “ ” —

As we begin to rely more and more on technology, we will have to overcome the challenge of losing customer focus. Not deliberately, but rather as a byproduct.

In my experience, most bid and proposal skills are transferable from industry to industry, and from business culture to business culture. The ability to convey complex information clearly and persuasively while remaining customer focused is particularly transferable, and will become even more important in the future.

Most of us are hoping (but don't know for sure) that technology will improve some elements of what people in bids and proposals roles do every day. Technology will make us more productive, meaning that some organisations will produce proposals faster. But is that same technology going to help us produce customer-focused proposals more efficiently?

I have been in the bids and proposals profession for more than 30 years now. A lot has changed, mostly for the better. At the same time, it has been interesting to observe how technology has, in many ways, slowed us down. For example, I remember when RFP software was first rolled out, giving organisations the ability to store and re-use material for bids and proposals. In many cases it meant proposals were developed more efficiently. However, this more efficient development process often led to less customer focus through the reuse of materials originally written for another customer's needs.

In today's competitive environment, how do you make your solution stand out? How do you make evaluators and decision makers select your solution? Of course you have to be offering the right solution for the right price to even be considered. Over and above that, you should be making it as clear as it can be in your proposal that your organisation understands the customer is buying a solution to a business issue, not just because they want to spend some money.

People who work in bids and proposals will have to become custodians of customers' needs. As custodians they will look at proposals from the customer's perspective and ensure the proposal is written for 'them' and not just about 'us'.

"Responsive" proposals clearly and persuasively communicate an understanding of what the customer is planning to buy and why. They demonstrate an understanding of the customer beyond the customer's written requirements. Responsive proposals address the customer's goals, underlying concerns, key issues and values that might not be spelled out in the request for proposal. Responsive proposals communicate how an organisation's solution will help a customer achieve their business goals (not just project or procurement goals).¹

Our industry's professionals (as custodians of customers' needs) will ensure developed content is about the things each particular customer values. They will get the information required to be responsive from the person who knows the customer the best; someone who has had those insightful discussions with the right people in the customer organisation.

Kick-off meetings on larger proposals should include a brief for all contributors, ensuring an understanding of the reasons why the customer is buying what they are buying and how to weave this into the appropriate parts of the response. Reviewers should be made aware of the customer's underlying needs so any improvement suggestions they make will keep the proposal as customer focused as possible.

I don't see how technology is going to learn to be responsive, but I am sure that it will one day. Until then, people working in bids and proposals will be the ones to ensure all proposals to all customers are as responsive as possible, from the Executive Summary through the body of each part of the proposal.

As we begin to rely more and more on technology, we will have to overcome the challenge of losing customer focus. Not deliberately, but rather as a byproduct. That is why I believe the ability to convey complex information clearly and persuasively whilst remaining customer focused is a very transferable skill.

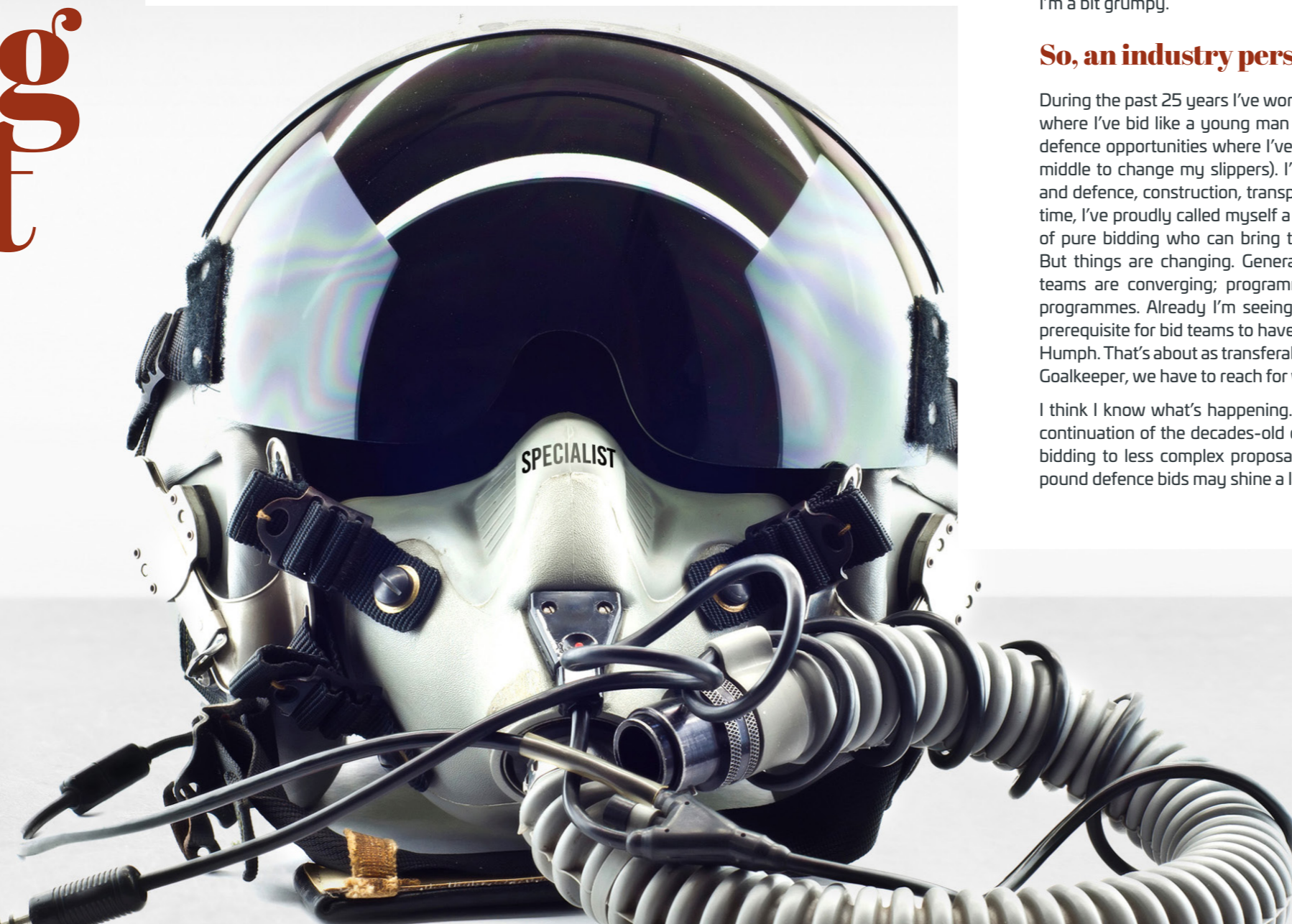
¹ For a good description of the difference between Responsiveness and Compliance, see the APMP's Body of Knowledge.

Where You Hang Your Hat

Nigel Hudson



Will you hang your hat on the nail as a free-to-roam generalist, or hammer the nail through your hat as a fixed-in-position specialist?



Somewhat unusually, I'm writing this while being 'between jobs'. Actually, that's not entirely accurate. I'm between contracts. But the effect is the same: I'm stuck at home with housework to do rather than a bid to submit. And it feels weird. We bidders enjoy a deadline, even if it's somewhat off. And I don't like hovering. So, I'm somewhat thrown about what to do. Write a BQ article, that's what. But be warned:

I'm a bit grumpy.

So, an industry perspective...

During the past 25 years I've worked on all types of bid from the quick turnaround proposal where I've bid like a young man (eager to start and quick to finish), through to long-term defence opportunities where I've bid like an old man (slow and steady, with a break in the middle to change my slippers). I've worked in commercial and public sectors, in telecoms and defence, construction, transport, legal; in fact, too many to remember. Throughout this time, I've proudly called myself a 'career bidder': someone dedicated to the art and science of pure bidding who can bring these skills to any company that wants to win business. But things are changing. Generalists are being replaced by specialists; solution and bid teams are converging; programme teams are leading bids; and bid teams are leading programmes. Already I'm seeing 'Head of Bids & Solutions' jobs being advertised and a prerequisite for bid teams to have 'detailed solution understanding and domain knowledge'. Humph. That's about as transferable as a one-legged footballer. But, like Reggie the Hopping Goalkeeper, we have to reach for what we can get.

I think I know what's happening. It's to do with risk, competition and cost. And, maybe, a continuation of the decades-old cascade of bid methodologies from complex public sector bidding to less complex proposals. If the latter's true, then my journey into multi-billion-pound defence bids may shine a laser-focused warhead on the subject.

Generalists are being replaced by specialists; solution and bid teams are converging; programme teams are leading bids; and bid teams are leading programmes.

When I moved into defence bidding in 2017, I'd come from a commodity-style proposal background where bid collateral was very 'knowledge-centre centric', bid turnaround times were three to four weeks and we worked on multiple concurrent bids. My first defence bid, on the other gobsmacking hand, would be my sole focus and had a turnaround time of four years. Four years? What the hell does a bid team do in this time? Cue my learning about what it takes to do complex bidding, and how this is cascading to less complex bids.

So, complex bids: The larger and more complex the customer requirement, the greater the need for a bespoke solution. Often the scope is beyond the capabilities of a single organisation, so partners are brought in to help.

The proposition, technical solution, contract, pricing, delivery model and choice of late-night pizza becomes brand new or, if you've partnered well, it evolves from an amalgamation of consortia capabilities. All of this requires time, expertise, and a lot of money to build. It also requires a very credible team to sell it – both to the customer who will want to know every last detail and to internal stakeholders who will want to mitigate risk. Add to this the whole win strategy piece, about calculating how the new proposition will compete against other bidders that will also be creating new solutions, and things get protracted and specialised.

The danger is that the solution gets most of the attention, not the customer. Bid Directors can spend nearly all of their time weeding through the minutiae of the solution and commercial detail, to be able to answer a million and one questions in internal governance, or to stand tall in front of a customer team intent on knowing what you're offering rather than why it will benefit them. And the core team of bid managers, writers and co-ordinators (yes, there can be more than one of each on complex deals) needs to build bid submissions so pedantically detailed as to double as the contract when the winner is announced. All of this conditions internal stakeholders and customers to expect the same on less complex deals. The devil in the detail on the big bids becomes the infernal nuisance of smaller ones. Wheels get reinvented, even when they don't need to be; governance approval – like a randy goat – gets locked behind multiple gates; and everything gets a nice gleamy scrub so it looks perfect to all involved. It's what I call 'The Shiny Nail Syndrome': pretty to admire but still a shaft of metal that's built to take a clout.

Not all bids require a hammer to drive them home, some are like a needle sewing fine lace, but all solutions need a skilled team to articulate them. So, I'm for remaining as a pure bidder, the one with the polish, while others can forge the nail. The question is, what are you? Will you hang your hat on the nail as a free-to-roam generalist, or hammer the nail through your hat as a fixed-in-position specialist? Answers on a postcard to: Nigel Hudson, c/o The One-Trick Pony, Submission Lane, Bidville, Winshire.



Beth Wallace

A Day in the Life of...

I remember starting my procurement career in British Aerospace. To be honest, I probably hadn't really thought much about the sector where my first proper job was based; it was more about location, getting into my chosen profession and learning. Four years later, I moved from manufacturing into financial services, thinking one procurement job is just like the next. Boy, I was wrong.

I went from talking about products on aircrafts (such as starter buttons, windscreen wipers and pilot's handwheels) and walking through hangars full of partially built planes and (im)patient engineers each day (waiting for supplier deliveries to allow work to continue) to predominantly office-based meetings discussing software on something called a mainframe (stored elsewhere in a big warehouse that had something to do with running a bank). The sectors were so different and, in many respects, confusing but it was a great opportunity to learn, get to know the right jargon, and (more importantly) gain experience in what I was procuring. (This included visits to that warehouse which I subsequently learned was called a data centre).

Now I can hear all of you saying, "This is a great example of a procurement person not getting it." The feedback from your profession is the tenders we (procurement) issue often don't make sense and that we obviously have no idea what we are buying ("It's a service we are supplying, not widgets!", you cry!).

Without getting into the politics of that consistent feedback (aside from saying each profession has various levels of skills and competencies, including yours!), one of the best bits of advice I've received was to know your customer. That sounds obvious, but it doesn't just mean having a great relationship with them. It means really understanding how what I buy impacts them. This is why I am incredibly passionate about "A day in the life of..." experience, either for my consulting clients or their own end clients.

I've visited customer offices, listened in on call centre calls and visited car garages (to name but a few). I have gained direct insight through these sessions into how the market is changing and what the future might hold. Asking the right people the right questions – even the dumb questions – builds an invaluable knowledge to help shape procurement strategies for the future. For example:

- I discovered a great piece of software that would revolutionise claims handling for both the end customer and the claims handler but it had two fundamental issues that hadn't been considered by those building the software.
- I understood the frustrations of those who are being supported and/or governed by a corporate centre who they felt didn't represent local interests.
- I learned car garages have moved on from those oily back street workshops (like the one portrayed in a popular UK soap opera) to being a workspace where health, safety and cleanliness are paramount (i.e., clean enough you could almost eat your dinner off the floor).

I have also done "A day in the life" with suppliers, sometimes in the form of regular dialogues (not driven by tenders or renewal cycles) to help build up a detailed picture of the art of the possible. Current hybrid working approaches can hinder this a little (Teams calls don't quite

give you the same useful reference points) but that doesn't stop me from having water cooler moments or coffee catch ups. I am just more innovative in how I run these remotely.

"A day in the life" even applies to my own profession. Even though a lot of my current business doesn't come from my procurement network, that doesn't stop me looking at what others do. A great example is how others deal with sustainability in today's world – how they gather and measure information and how they communicate success. The greater the gap in our sectors, the bigger the share so we can both potentially learn from it.

As far as sector expertise goes (having worked across public and private sectors), I have only been challenged once by a potential client about my lack of sectoral knowledge. This particular sector (to rename nameless) was a bit of a 'closed shop', which in my opinion limited its ability to think differently. (I'd even suggest it had a level of staleness from only using suppliers selected based on prior experience in the sector.) However, they decided to take a risk on me as I had previously bought their services in a buyer's role. I was able to show them that different approaches and bringing best practices and learnings from other sectors could only enhance, not limit, their own offerings.

So does a lack of detailed sector and product knowledge mean you can't move around? No. Learning and correctly using industry jargon will build credibility; embracing new tools, technology and artificial intelligence will ensure you're forward-thinking.

Taking the "A day in the life" approach will guarantee you're not standing still.



Learning and correctly using industry jargon will build credibility; embracing new tools, technology and artificial intelligence will ensure you're forward-thinking.



The Write Lane

Pippa Birch

Why Sector Knowledge is an Absolute Must in Highways

I love my industry. Many people know I fell into highways after training to be a drama teacher. I fell into it and never left because I love the subject, the people, and making a difference to the companies I work with. We recently received a testimonial from a client that said: *“Experienced team with a good understanding of highways surfacing, which doesn’t happen too often with bid writers”*. Another one said *“...industry knowledge on highways/civils is particularly useful for us”*. They reminded me why sector expertise is crucial in my line of work. Adding value through highways sector knowledge ensures my clients are winning, their companies growing, and their staff remaining employed.

Transferable skills?

I’ve always said my skills are transferable – I’ve worked across many industries, proving just that – but highways is difficult if you don’t understand the terminology and technicalities. Yes, bidding skills are transferable, but nothing beats sitting in a contracting office, chewing the fat with the operational team, and really helping them to shape their ideas in response to a tough bid question.

Most bid professionals will say that is easy if you know your craft and know how to answer questions. But highways is more than that. Highways people are a different breed. And highways people don’t want bid writers to look blankly at them when they are discussing a methodology using simple highways terminology. My clients need help with solutions as much as they need help with the bid, and to do that, you need to understand how to build a road, how to maintain that road, and how to address what their client is looking for. And it’s not just the technicalities of roads, there are other things too – NEC contracts for example. Understanding these contracts is critical when disseminating bid requirements in highways, understanding the nuances of how the contract works and where there might be pitfalls.

Strategic Proposals’ recent research backs me up in their September 2023 ‘Buyers Guide to Bidding’. When they asked about things to avoid, one of the highlighted responses from buyers was *“Using bid writers who don’t know the needs of our organisation but are good at writing”*. Enough said!

Adding Value

Smaller Pipster clients can be like a rabbit in headlights when it comes to bidding. They know their craft but bid documents scare them silly and they don’t know where to start. Ah yes, say all trained bid people, we can help as we know bidding! And yes, to a certain degree that is true, but can you coach them to have a richer story through your understanding of highways, what their clients are looking for, where the best innovations come from, or the key issues in highways today? I know you can’t, because I can, and this is because I understand my subject. I’ve lived and breathed it for over twenty years.

We will never be ‘parachute’ bid writers, dropping in and bugging off at the end of the bid to never be seen again. We know our craft, we know our subject, and we build relationships to become vital parts of our clients’ teams. We are in it for the long haul.

Where are the highways writers?

We have so much work at the moment, and it just keeps coming. Unfortunately I am struggling to find the bid writers I need.

I am lucky to have some wonderful freelancers who I can call on, but the associate model does not fit with the Pipster vision – we pride ourselves on getting involved with our clients as a team, building relationships, and becoming integral to our client’s growth. My freelancers are wonderful writers, very knowledgeable about highways, and I trust them with my clients implicitly, but they have their own way of doing things. I want to build a team of Pipster employees who live and breathe highways bids for our clients.

When highways companies employ bid staff, they have the luxury of teaching their new bid staff the technical side over a period of time. When they come to me as a consultant, they need us to have this highways knowledge already, so we don’t waste time. As a very small company, I can only afford to have one apprentice every two years to teach and train the technical aspects of highways from the beginning, even though I would love to do more.

I am now starting to think about reverse recruitment – hiring people from highways that I can teach how to write – because they will be able to converse with our clients in a language that is understood. Is that possible? I’m not sure, but it’s worth a go.

“ ”

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Mike Reader

Breaking Down

Barriers



As a bid manager, it's no longer good enough to just be a great project manager and creative mind.

I know friends within the industry will disagree with me, particularly those in the contracting market where a portfolio of clients from across sectors is more common. But when we're talking about in-house talent, sector experience matters.

The maturing of both bidding functions and the role of the bid manager has meant businesses are looking more and more to bid managers to bring sector knowledge and experience to the role they play in winning work. This is especially true in companies providing services; for me that's the construction consultancy sector. An understanding of the subject matter and the bidding models used in the sector are critically important.

...industry knowledge is critical to hitting the ground running and building trust with subject matter experts and leaders across our business.

What does that support look like? I'm still working that out, but site visits, time with project teams, formal training, work shadowing and helping subject matter experts recognise that new colleagues may need a little more time to unravel all the technical lingo and three letter acronyms in our industry will go a long way to bridging the knowledge gap.

Perhaps we have brought this upon ourselves. I started as a bid manager 15 years ago when clients' RFP requirements were relatively simple and using quality, repeatable content was common. Subject matter experts had more time to scrutinise, improve and enhance proposals, leaving me (as a bid manager) to fulfil the role of the project manager within the bid. But over time, tenders have become more complex and the demands on bid managers have increased.

Procurement professionals have also matured in their approach, finding new ways to test, challenge and attempt to separate bidders. This leads to much less standardisation in the way bids are run, and an increased difference in approach between sectors.

Organisations now look to the bid manager to be the project manager and also the coach and guide for subject matter experts, a challenger and reviewer on quality, and a skilled professional who can navigate much more bespoke, sector-specific RFP requirements.

So, does that mean the ability to move from sector to sector is gone? Have we pigeon-holed ourselves as professionals? As employers, have we reduced the talent pool available to us?

I'd argue no. But being cognisant of the differences between sector requirements becomes a lot more important whether you're a job seeker or employer.

As a leader with a brilliant cohort of over fifty professionals in my team around the globe, I've woken up to the need to provide more onboarding support for those joining our team, to help them understand the nuances of what a great proposal looks like in our industry. A foundation of experience via previous employment and APMP certification is important but holding, or being able to quickly build, industry knowledge is critical to hitting the ground running and building trust with subject matter experts and leaders across our business.

What does that support look like? I'm still working that out, but site visits, time with project teams, formal training, work shadowing and helping subject matter experts recognise that new colleagues may need a little more time to unravel all the technical lingo and three letter acronyms in our industry will go a long way to bridging the knowledge gap.

I recommend you think about the same. Investing in early support for a new employee, beyond corporate inductions and onboarding will open up the resource pool you can draw from. It opens up new avenues for new talent to join the amazing world of bids and proposals, and helps us to learn as an industry from those who join us from outside of it.

We've got to keep evolving. Breaking down barriers to work in our industry has to be one of the next ways we do that.



Holger Garden

I found it a wonderful challenge to pivot into bid consultancy after 20 years in civil engineering and business development. It's been a privilege to support clients' bids for the 11 years since.

The theme for BQ17 had me pondering: How much do people with a civils background use their training in bidding?

The way I look at it, a lot. There are the technical subjects, of course, as well as knowing what matters most, to whom, and why.

A friend told a story from his undergraduate course where a student asked, "Will you be handing out notes at the end?" The reply from behind the lectern was, "Absolutely, I'll give you all the notes you'll ever need; they're called the library." I'm glad teaching methods have evolved (as has the predilection for collaboration and media to support it). But the subtext of the reply remains applicable through a bidding lens:

We must know how and where to find information to fuel proposals based on what really matters to the client and stakeholders, not merely nice-to-have material that demonstrates knowledge but adds no value.

So, is it necessary to have a civil engineering background to support bids in that discipline? You might think a civil engineer would say, "Of course," but I'm actually more inclined to think it depends on the role(s) we undertake and when in the bid lifecycle we do so.



From Water Tables to Win Themes

Bid strategy meetings I've led/contributed to focused on matters to shape the overall proposals and brought win themes to life. Open questions included:

- How the client and stakeholders would benefit
- How proposal strengths could be threaded through the bid
- How the strategy themes contribute to reducing risk for the client and other stakeholders

Strategy sessions hover at the level of enablers. Examples in civil infrastructure bids are logistics planning, digital engineering, and design for manufacture and assembly. A working understanding of those topics (e.g. carbon reduction and the PAS 2080 standard, or data management over the whole asset lifecycle covered by ISO 19650) enables us to call on industry trends and challenge ourselves for better performance. Industry knowledge helps to guide these challenges if we leave plenty of latitude for every contributor to inform thinking to avoid being blinkered.

I recall meetings in which we discussed, for example, EPB TBMs, FATs, ITPs, the DMRB, D3M roads, and UTXs*. I'm not a fan of initialisms, acronyms and abbreviations, but they have their place when page or character limits are imposed and to prevent cumbersome long-string repetition. Subject matter experts often live by such terms because they're so familiar with them. If we've previously used terms in their various contexts, we're more likely to find meetings make sense and to contribute confidently. Of course, these things can be learned – and let's remember it'll be a sad day when we stop learning – but tight bid timescales mean prior working knowledge is useful.

I've worked on bids with colleagues whose core experience lays outside engineering but who learned throughout past bids from subject matter experts and technical reading, or from those whose roles didn't require technical knowledge. Those colleagues' time on the bids was successful because they capitalised on their transferable strengths: leading, co-ordinating, writing, reviewing, and other tasks. In those situations, it's really great to learn from people's experience in other sectors.

When reviewing responses, particularly in early reviews, I've found it helpful to add people with less industry and technical knowledge into the experienced reviewer mix for feedback. Theirs is as valid as experienced participants' feedback because

it's usually provided without presumption of assessors' detailed knowledge. Feedback is likely to come with important questions teasing out items worth considering further. "How is this point important to the client?" or "Why does this matter?"

If a response makes sense to someone not deeply familiar with the subject or a technical aspect, it's because:

- Technical detail is presented in language accessible to non-technical readers. This is important when responses might be read by secondary assessors not as familiar with the particular discipline. It's always safer not to assume someone experienced in one specialism understands others in as much detail.
- The response provides the level of technical detail required to answer the question, not excessive material demonstrating knowledge but adding little value or, worse, burying what matters most
- Graphics are presented as great information designed to clarify how processes work and how activities interact to achieve benefits for the procuring client and stakeholders

The definition of civil engineering making the rounds in my student days was:

"...the art of directing the great sources of power in nature for the use and convenience of man..."

Thankfully, the world has progressed to more inclusive messaging, but I love the part about 'directing the great sources of power'. In bidding, we direct the great sources of team power to navigate the bid process and craft proposals that make an impact.

Whether or not we join a bid with immediately relevant experience, we must keep learning from each other, asking questions to make sure we haven't missed a trick, and, crucially, enjoy and embrace what we do.

* EPB TBMs - Earth pressure balance tunnel boring machines; FATs - Factory acceptance tests; ITPs - Inspection and test plans; DMRB - Design Manual for Roads and Bridges; D3M - A dual carriageway with three lanes each way and hard shoulders, built as a motorway formation (but a non-motorway road could also be built this way, just to keep things interesting); UTX: Under-track crossing in railways

So What?



Karen Croshaw

For me, bid success isn't knowing the answers – it's being able to ask the right people the right questions.

I didn't set out to be a bid professional. At school, I wanted to be a writer – preferably the next Douglas Adams.

What I actually did was to train, qualify and graduate as a research chemist with my horizons set firmly on working on a cure for cancer (as you do when you're in your early 20s). Progressing ever upward in academia, I came to an abrupt halt in my 30s when – freshly printed PhD certificate in hand – I realised there was actually nowhere for me to go. I was over-qualified, too specialised and had two small children to cluck over.

The university I worked for at the time nudged me away from research and into setting up a bidding and tendering function for them as part of their business outreach mission. I was unwilling, possibly resentful, at first but the Research Director sweet-talked me into it. I had been specially selected, he claimed, because a) I learned quickly, b) could spell and c) had nice handwriting. The latter was important at the time because bid submissions were all handwritten.

So, I came into the profession 25 years ago knowing absolutely nothing about bidding and with little subject matter knowledge outside of sciences.

Fast forward a quarter of a century (eeeeek!) and here I am running my own successful consultancy practice focusing on bids and tenders. There was a convoluted route to get here that involved working as a bid specialist in private and public sector organisations, winning business, and hoovering up knowledge and information along the way. (I won't bore you with my CV here. Connect with me on LinkedIn maybe?)

The point is that being successful in the world of bids and tenders isn't all about subject matter knowledge – that's what businesses have subject matter experts (SMEs) for. I write and manage bids in rail, construction, architecture, IT, nuclear decommissioning, design....and I'm no expert in any of them. I never claim to be, but I'm never afraid to ask questions.

While having **working knowledge** of an industry can be helpful, **subject matter knowledge** can work against you if it's not absolutely up to date. I've found it's safest to let the SMEs tell me the answers and I'll fill the gaps by asking them questions.

In the rapidly changing bid landscape, I have to learn new information every single day and, yes, it can be exhausting. To write a successful answer, for example, I must deconstruct complex technical information and simplify it so that other people can understand it and grasp the value. I ask questions until I understand; I research and read relevant subject matter. I make friends with Google and ChatGPT when I don't understand a technical phrase. My favourite question is "So what?" and I ask it dozens of times a week when I'm interviewing SMEs and trying to get them to articulate the value of their solution. Sure, they understand the value that [insert "industry-specific technical jargon" here] brings, but will the person scoring the bid understand it?

If you're thinking about coming into the world of bidding and tendering, I don't think you necessarily need industry-specific knowledge, but there are some things that will certainly assist you:

- The ability to understand and answer the bid questions is fundamental
- Information from Shipley, PRINCE2 and APMP is helpful
- Document and version management skills are valuable
- The ability to talk to people, understand concepts and simplify complexity is priceless

For me, bid success isn't knowing the answers – it's being able to ask the right people the right questions.

That's it really. Other than saying although Terry Pratchett beat me to being the next Tolkien, I do get the opportunity to author works of creative fiction on a daily basis...



While having working knowledge of an industry can be helpful, subject matter knowledge can work against you if it's not absolutely up to date.



Towering Achievements

Lisa Readman

I work as a freelancer so don't actually have an 'industry' – but I have developed some specialist knowledge working in other people's industries for over 20 years.

In the early 2000s, the bulk of my bid work involved vegetation management on linear assets. This encompassed highways, rail, waterways and utilities – any assets you can measure in a straight line. I subsequently narrowed my focus solely to utilities vegetation management and pylon tower painting.

“Electricity is really just organised lightning.”
If you're technically minded, you may be able to organise this type of bidding lightning into an electric, specialist bidding career.

These are disparate service activities with the same goal. Technically, they protect network resilience and the supply of electricity to homes and businesses across the UK. Practically, they keep kettles on (to keep bid teams saturated with coffee and tea!), TVs tuned in and WiFi working. Both service streams also require work in safety-critical environments.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead once said “Always remember you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else.”

The same is true for utilities bids and this sector's bid professionals. Each tender is unique depending on where the affected routes are located (urban or rural, near roads or residences, etc) but all are just like each other (same service requirements, same processes and procedures). Successful utilities proposal professionals are unique in their ability to distil technical, safety-focused information but are just like bidding professionals in other industries, working through the bid lifecycle, etc. A thorough understanding of both aspects is essential to creating high scoring (winning!) proposals.

What else makes these service streams unique? They are:

- **Highly specialised** – So much so that fewer than five large companies (supported by subcontractors) deliver vegetation management and only three deliver tower painting across the UK.
- **Highly...high** – Climbers carry out work at height. Tree canopies can exceed 30 metres and pylons range between 36 and 190 metres.
- **Highly dangerous** – Works are delivered under outage and non-outage conditions, i.e. the power is off (outage) or on (non-outage, and very much “touch me and you're dead”).
- **Weather dependent** – Arboricultural and hedge maintenance can be affected by adverse weather (lightning, rain, etc) and painting works depend on constantly monitored conditions (dew point, wind speed, wind direction, temperature, etc).

- **Heavily monitored** – Legal standards apply and clients carry out quality checks at every stage of service delivery.

- **Prescriptive** – Only certain types of machinery, PPE, paint, brushes, hand tools, etc are allowed. Environmental restrictions which are unique to each route (e.g. bird nesting season, wildlife habitats, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, etc) are assessed and mitigated to avoid programme delays and potential financial penalties (for both client and contractor).

- **Both client- and stakeholder-facing** – Client liaison is fundamental to develop achievable work programmes, particularly under outage conditions. Stakeholder engagement is required for land access, identifying potential for damage or disruption (livestock in fields, loss of amenity), etc.

However, this is not a mature market in bidding terms. This multi-million pound industry is cyclical (every five to eight years) which makes business development and capture a very long game indeed. These services are not sales-led so understanding who the buyer is for each project (procurement or operations) is vital – as is an unwavering focus on protecting the client's reputation. On a positive note, this type of work also encompasses cell and radio towers (which have similar requirements but different stakeholders) so growth opportunities do exist and may develop further as the renewables market expands towards the government's Net Zero 2050 targets.

A specialist utilities bid professional must have an excellent bidding skillset and thorough knowledge of the utilities sector. There are a few ways to enhance your skills if this niche market interests you:

1. **Educate yourself.** Research the work and the clients. Read and understand the industry standards against which you'll have to demonstrate capability. Ask the operations team to take you out on a site visit. Watch how the work is done. Take notes on what you see. Take

photos. Talk to staff. Find out what they know so you'll know it too – and will be able to write about it.

2. **Be ready to be immersed.** Positive and proactive interactions between bidding and operations are more critical in this environment than in many others because of their technical and specialised nature. These are not 'everyday' services and necessitate a symbiotic relationship to ensure the solution ticks every client box.

3. **Boost your SME engagement skills.** Those who deliver technical services tend to have a technical mindset. In my experience, SMEs have a wealth of knowledge but don't always realise there is more to bidding than just saying how things are done. Extracting features, benefits and evidence from the SME requires perseverance and great interrogation skills.

4. **Adapt your usual bid writing approach.** You know the one – where you use well-chosen words to tell a fabulous story about developing synergies to deliver outstanding features and excellent benefits. In this industry, the client is only interested in two things: how the work will be delivered on time and on budget, and how you'll do those things without killing anyone. Sounds dramatic, doesn't it? But safety is paramount in this type of work and an accident (or worse, a fatality) can damage the client's reputation beyond repair. So no fluff, no sales speak, no 'touchy feely' stuff.

APMP certifications, degrees or other formal qualifications will add value but are not specifically required in this market. What is most important is the ability to clearly and concisely condense the complex service solution into responses answering the client's very technical questions (with some evidence-based support included if page/word limits allow).

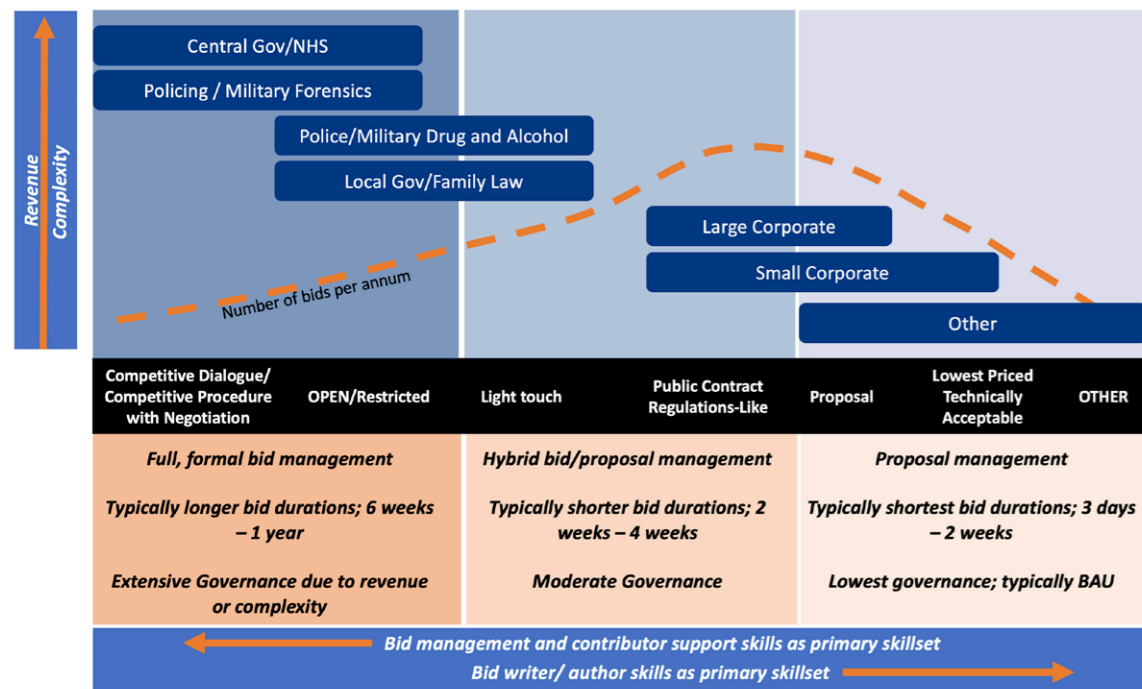
Comedian and social commentator George Carlin once remarked, “Electricity is really just organised lightning.”

If you're technically minded, you may be able to organise this type of bidding lightning into an electric, specialist bidding career.

Maximising the Talent Pool Using Compromise and Cultural Fit



Figure 1 – Even niche business have a mix of customers, with a variety of buying methods. Bids vary in duration, complexity, revenue and method of response.



Recruiting bid managers in niche sectors can be a formidable challenge. The scarcity of qualified candidates and technical proficiency and industry knowledge requirements all contribute to the difficulty of finding the perfect fit. However, there's an improved chance of finding the ideal candidate with consideration of cultural fit and some adaptability of the organisation's recruitment and decision-making processes.

It is becoming common to tightly define bid roles, especially in larger bid teams. Some organisations can differentiate between ostensibly similar roles to create teams of astonishing breadth and depth, and many now specify prior industry experience in recruitment adverts alongside bid competencies. Less mature industries, smaller organisations or (as in my case) a niche industry with a broad span of bidding types within the single organisation face a different challenge; one that requires looking past technical skills to resolve.

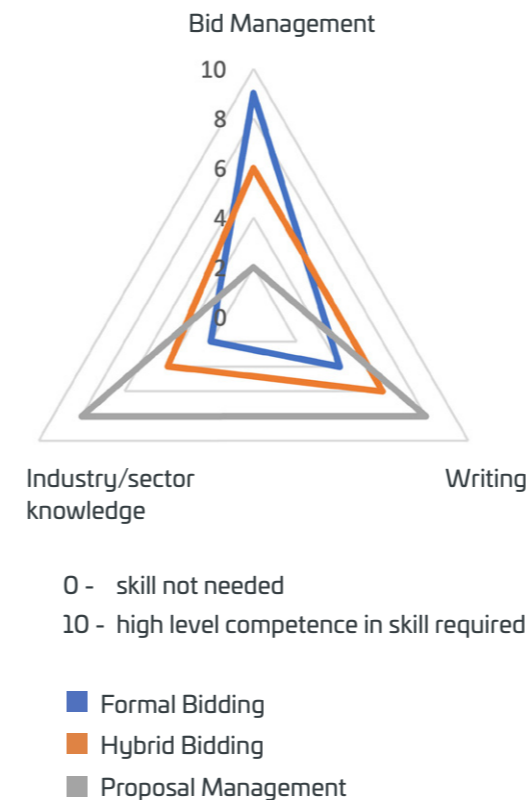
Forensic Science is the niche sector I work in. However, as in many industries, the real breadth of the organisation is only revealed when you look behind that descriptor. Forensic Science is any science relating to courts of law. Within my organisation we do all the classic forensic science work (with specialists in disciplines as varied as DNA, toxicology, and document reconstruction) and also undertake work for civil law purposes (including paternity and drug/alcohol testing for workplaces).

Forensic markets are not homogeneous and buyers of each of those services buy differently. For example, police and military customers follow a full, lengthy, formal procurement (workplace testing, often very short turnaround, proposal based) with a tranche of customers in the middle. Volumes of bids for the large procurements are low; churn of the small proposals is high. Figure 1 shows an overview of the environment in which we operate.

To define the problem:

1. There is a limited pool of qualified candidates with both forensic knowledge and bid management skills.
2. The art and science of proposal writing has different emphases to that of large-scale public-sector procurement. Figure 2 shows the ideal mix by bid type.
3. Budgetary (or organisational) constraints make hiring multiple staff a non-starter.

Figure 2 - Ideal skill mix is different by bid type



For proposals, we would want technical expertise relevant to the sector and good writing skills in order to convey solutions to customers' hot buttons whereas in formal procurement the writing is for SMEs and we would want bid management skills to control the bid, herd the cats and control the content and the governance of the response.

So, with the problem expressed, what can we do? Compromise is required if the organisation isn't large enough or sophisticated enough to segregate duties by bid type. With assessment on purely technical grounds, the sensible choice would be to simply pick someone capable of the hybrid model who can do a bit of everything. That's an easy decision and represents a 'good enough' option, but not the best.

Looking long term, beyond 'good enough' to cultural fit, development and support.

Looking beyond immediate demonstration of technical skills presents options for niche businesses. This approach also requires compromise (and management willing to consider support and development) but there are some simple, perhaps even obvious, ways to improve the odds from 'good enough' to 'best'. I've applied all the points below and have developed some of my best bid managers from 'non-standard' applicants.

Assess behaviours and cultural fit at interview, not just background and technical skill.

Although challenging, this can help ensure a good match and prevent an early exit when you and the candidate find out you're not good matches for each other. For example:

- Irrespective of technical competence, if you need cross-function flexibility and your candidate is happiest in a very formally constrained role, it may not be a perfect match...and vice versa. This was a very hard lesson for me to learn.
- Check their approach to people management matches yours (and the company's). If you and your new bid person both approach your SMEs and stakeholders the same way and with the same voice, it limits options for disconnect and ensures a smoother ride.

Work out whether a technical gap can be filled by training.

- If you need a particular bid skillset and an otherwise excellent candidate doesn't have it, can it be trained in? How long would it take? Would it need to be internal or external?
- Lack of sector knowledge is not necessarily a deal breaker. Consider a 100-day plan to expand sector and company internal knowledge rather than discarding a potentially 'best' candidate for lack of these. If this candidate stays for years, technical knowledge is something that will be acquired.

Work out whether a technical gap can be resolved by software, a system or a process.

- This might be the perfect time to consider making your proposals more 'self-serve' so that subject matter experts with customer and technical knowledge can produce better content without leaning so heavily on a bid team.
- Conversely, this might be the time to redraft and reissue your bid management Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) so your new person can learn whilst doing and can understand the nuances between the approaches for different bid types.

Companies looking for a very specific fit for a well-defined role, with a wide pool of potential applicants can (and probably should) include sector knowledge as part of their hiring criteria. The shallower the learning curve, the quicker the bid team can deliver at its optimum...but even those teams should look wider and consider cultural fit and compromise to ensure they get the best long-term prospect, not just one that's good enough for today.

Those of us in niche sectors should use cultural fit and compromise as a standard part of our hiring practices, looking beyond immediately evaluable technical skills to the developed future contribution of the bid people we hire. Evaluate how you hire and the criteria you hire on or you may be missing star potential.

Breaking the False Dichotomy

Ceri Mescall

Master of one versus jack of all trades. Depth versus breadth. Specialist versus generalist. Which is more advantageous in proposals? My immediate answer (as it often is when faced with a tough question) was “It depends...”. Now I’ve given it more consideration, I don’t think it’s an either/or situation. This article examines reasons for industry specialisation and generalisation and explores ways to get the best of both worlds.

Reasons for industry specialisation

- **Enjoyment:** You may relish niching down and being seen as a subject matter expert (SME) in your industry as well as in proposals. Perhaps you have a strong preference for either project management or writing, so you gravitate to industries with a clear delineation between proposal roles (e.g. defence). You may enjoy the crossover between proposals and marketing, so you choose to work in an industry that values multi-skilling (e.g. architecture, engineering and construction). The balance between proposal volume and timelines can differ according to industry. You may prefer lower volume and longer timelines (e.g. government contracting) or enjoy juggling multiple quick burn deals (e.g. tech).
- **Pay:** You may opt to work in an industry that pays a premium for proposal professionals (e.g. legal). Customer industries can also affect remuneration. For example, the Association of Proposal Management Professionals (APMP) Compensation Report shows that proposal professionals specialising in US Federal Government proposals make more money than those who work on bids for state and local government, commercial, and non-profit customers.

- **Opportunities:** Having a professional network within one industry may mean you’re notified of “hidden” job roles (those not officially advertised) in that space. You may be more likely to be considered for lateral moves into adjacent roles in sales and marketing.
- **Speed to value:** Your onboarding is accelerated and there’s less need for your manager to credentialise you to others. You’re seen as credible due to your combination of proposal and industry experience. When joining a new company, you know what you’re signing up for in terms of cultural alignment (e.g. if you work in a professional services industry partnership model, you may expect stakeholder sign-off complexity and a focus on risk mitigation).
- **Less reliance on technical SMEs:** You’re able to write more proposal content yourself. You use SMEs to validate and edit your work. You understand industry nuances, trends, and the competitive landscape and incorporate this into your work.



Reasons for industry generalisation

- **Enjoyment (again):** You appreciate variety. You may be naturally curious and love to learn a little about a lot of topics. You welcome opportunities to speak with technical SMEs who are passionate about their chosen field. You like unlocking answers by asking the right questions in the right manner at the right time.
- **Necessity:** You may need to shift industries during times of economic uncertainty. For example, layoffs in tech in 2022-2023 have driven proposal professionals to consider other industries that are perceived as being more stable. If you’re a contractor/consultant, being industry agnostic can mean a bigger pool of prospective clients.
- **Fresh perspectives:** You can provide new insights, challenge assumptions and overcome complacency. Just as proposal skills are highly transferable, lessons learned from one industry can be applied to others.
- **Role requirements:** Industry experience may be less relevant for a Proposal Manager than a Proposal Writer as subject matter knowledge may have more of an impact on content than on process.
- **Ability to simplify the complex:** Great proposal professionals put themselves in the shoes of the client evaluation panel (which often includes non-technical stakeholders). When you don’t have industry experience, you’re given more leeway to eliminate jargon and other barriers to comprehension.

How to get the best of both worlds

- **Recruitment:** If you’re a hiring manager, assess the composition of your team rather than one vacancy in isolation – does everyone need to have industry knowledge, or will you benefit from a mix of specialists and generalists? What other experience is valuable to you? For example, geography (regional/national/international experience), company structure (corporate, partnership, start-ups), and bidding structure (Joint Ventures, consortia). Do you require particular experience for a limited period? Consider hiring a contractor/consultant. If you’re a jobseeker, determine how best to present your experience – this may be a skills-based CV/resume as opposed to role-based. Discover what your value proposition is and have your elevator pitch ready for interviews.
- **Onboarding:** Audit your current onboarding process – is it fit for purpose for both specialists and generalists? Ask team members who have recently joined to provide feedback. Create a “cheat sheet” of key industry terms and acronyms as well as a company-specific induction. Consider the industries of the customers you submit proposals to as well as the industry your employer operates in.
- **Ongoing knowledge management:** Overcome information gatekeeping. Involve all team members in updating your content library. Develop a Frequently Asked/Unasked Questions wiki to minimise the risk of “I wish I had known that before...”. Use generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) for rapid research - prompt it in the same way you would interview a technical SME. Pair specialists and generalists to collaborate on proposals and conduct lessons learned sessions afterwards.
- **Networking:** Attend both industry and proposal events. You’ll meet people who help you to apply a different lens to your day-to-day, and who may open doors in the longer term.

NB: Ceri used generative AI as part of article planning. However, the only AI-generated content in this article is the title.

Freelancing as a Way to Explore Industries

Javier Escartin



Most fields are becoming so niche that proposal manager positions are out of reach for newcomers, yet freelancing in the small and medium business space offers transferability – and maybe an opportunity for you to discover the industry you love!

If you follow my content, you know I don't talk about things I haven't tried or done. My points here are straight from my personal experience.



...bid management is one of the most transferable professions out there.



From the ultra-niche...

The first time I touched a proposal was working full-time for the aerospace division of a European high-tech company, around four years after getting my MSc in Aerospace Engineering. How an aerospace engineer ended up in proposals is relevant to today's topic, so let me tell you that story.

I was fresh back in Spain after my last university year in London and joined a high-tech systems company, specifically a group working in Aerospace and Defence. Even more specifically, the Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) division (GPS, Galileo, and the like).

I started as a project engineer and worked in the deep, too geeky to detail technical stuff for a few years. I did some project management, some consulting, and finally managed to get into business development. Business development in this industry is a fancy word for a job that's 90% about winning public tenders with proposals considered a sales function (no debate) and bidding as old as the industry because of its B2G nature.

As you can imagine, winning GNSS tenders is as niche as it gets. I haven't met anyone working on these proposals who doesn't come from technical positions in the industry. We used to joke that we knew everyone bidding for our RFPs in Europe, and it was very common for people to jump between a few companies doing similar roles. It is so niche, in fact, that it's very common for agencies to end up hiring the same professionals to manage RFPs and programs from the buying side.

There are no 'pure' proposal managers in GNSS (similar in aerospace overall), just engineers, physicists, and mathematicians who decided to pursue a commercially-focused career. Upper management sees these positions as strategic, something you cannot fill with industry-agnostic profiles.

People hiring in this industry think it's easier to teach an engineer who already knows the agencies (and is motivated to move to sales) how to bid than to train a top proposal manager who knows nobody in the industry and will need a dictionary for years to navigate the soup of acronyms and tech jargon. Without an industry background, these positions are out of reach.

...to the transferable world

I took a gap period after more than seven years and some big badges. To be honest, at that time I wasn't even aware "Proposal Manager" was a job. I thought of myself as a business developer; a sales professional who knows how to bid.

Casually, just to extend the gap a little bit, I entered the freelance world and realised small and medium businesses are much more open to working with bidding professionals with no background in their industry.

While they may have a preference, I've found it easy to win work in many different industries based on pure proposals experience (including both B2G and B2B markets). This may be due to a lack of candidates or just the flexibility that characterises small business – but it's curious how, in this space, it's indeed the consultants who benefit more from niching down their clients rather than the other way around.

From my personal experience as a freelancing bid manager serving SMEs, you can win work to manage proposals for RFPs in industries as diverse as biotechnology, software and IT, logistics, entertainment, shipbroking, environmental disaster recovery, janitorial services, and lifeguarding services. These are all real examples and confirm my belief that bid management is one of the most transferable professions out there. You can change industries and do very well as a bid professional, and it's going to be way easier if it's for a medium-sized business instead of a big enterprise.

By the way, that 'gap' gig became my full time thing for the next five years. I still run it as a services business but now focus on being a testing ground for AI in bidding (sort of the lab for my proposal AI tech endeavour).



... procurement teams change the requirements... so you refocus your business strategy to keep up and face another challenging hurdle

Andy Haigh

The Joys of Public Sector Bidding!

Public sector contracts are a lucrative business. You may not win many at first but this will change with experience in leveraging the systems and processes to gain competitive advantage. More doors will open as you become known.

For over 20 years we have helped people bid into the public sector but it is the most frustrating (and often non-intuitive) area of bidding to work in with strict and well-defined rules. Both procurement and bidders work hard to get around these rules and if they do, their competitors try to find out how and take them to court for doing so. If the court finds no wrongdoing, everyone builds their own workaround to circumvent the rules in future bids.

Then procurement teams change the requirements. Bids should NOT be all about providing quality goods and services the public sector needs; they must support the latest ecology, quality and social engineering agendas which make the buying department (or local politician) look good (e.g. eye-catching support for disadvantaged communities, numbers of wildlife rehoused, etc).

So you refocus your business strategy to keep up and face another challenging hurdle – word limited responses to heavily worded questions. The responses in a recent multi-million pound public sector bid were limited to 600 words (difficult but manageable) – but several questions were 300 words and one was 400! At least all bidders had to contend with the same restrictions.

From my experience, the biggest and most successful public sector bidders have dedicated public sector sales teams, with bidding support focused on these types of bids. They understand the many nuances of competing in this field; many have their own well developed bidding tools and processes. They choose from a selection of strategies developed to best meet the latest requirement. Interestingly, the majority seem to value APMP accreditation, even if they do not specify it when they are recruiting or use the APMP methodology internally.

But some provide bid support as a central resource (not sales-integrated). This can be a problem if bean-counters in some multinational HQ decide costs are too high and cuts are needed. They see bids as just another project, and assume the Project Managers already in place will be able to run their bids with support from SMEs in the business. No need for overpriced bid managers/teams!

In our business, we love it when this happens. The client's bid performance crashes and we are asked to help put it right. We establish a public sector bid team inside the sales function, fully integrating its activities into the communication plan for each qualified opportunity.

So what's my advice to a company wanting to get into winning public sector contracts? Entry barriers are significant and going after public sector contracts is not a business decision to be taken lightly.

For small contracts

You may get the impression the 'playing field' is not level and buyers' personal agendas are followed at the expense of fair competition. Legal redress for any procurement or bidding shenanigans is unlikely; it's just too expensive (though the threat of going to court can sometimes sort an issue). Your best protection is to strictly follow the precise rules, requirements and constraints of the ITT. Do not embellish the responses or add in text which is not absolutely relevant to the exam questions set. Only address what the procurement team ask and show you are meeting their needs, not selling what you have. They will be unable to drop you from the competition as a result of a minor non-compliance.

For big contracts

Following the rules is not enough. You have to 'game' the entire system or you will be wiped out by a competitor. Of course, you need a sound, credible, adequately described solution to remain in the competition – though this is probably not where the final decision will be based.

Someone in your team will need to review the reporting requirements to uncover biases or weaknesses. Start with the price reporting template and create a pricing and solution design strategy that will exploit any weaknesses (e.g. when you know the activities or services to be priced against will be different from what is actually required). Find the people in your organisation who are good at this type of analysis, put them to work and give them a pay rise – it will be worth it!

Next, work out how every section of your response addresses each point in the scoring system, dealing directly with the points which will generate maximum marks. The scoring system may contain vague and unquantifiable tests, e.g. "excellent levels of proof" or "delivers the highest confidence", so play these words back to the evaluators in the leading and final words of your response.

Finally, let it be known that you will not accept any impropriety in the competition. Make it clear that you will robustly challenge any selection decision which is not entirely justified.

My two top recommendations for all contracts are:

- 1. Critically review and score the written response from the evaluator's perspective prior to submission. Try to understand their approach to scoring your work and the rules they must follow. This will provide a benchmark for investigation if your internal score is very different from the evaluator's.**
- 2. Do NOT use AI to generate text. AI is limited, it cannot innovate and is fairly easy to spot. The client wants innovation and your brain is the best tool for the job.**

Go on, have a go! You may be one contract away from a brand new sports car and a holiday home in Tenerife.

Specialist Industry Knowledge and Skills:

Michael Brown

I found this edition's subject particularly difficult to write about. My 15+ years of bidding experience are all within the construction industry but I came from an educational background (International Relations and Political Economy) without any industry knowledge at all. I have been able to work in many construction sectors (schools, hospitals, public and private partnerships, government, hotels, residential, and high tech industries). But delving deeper into the thought process on this edition's subject, I realised maybe so-called 'industry experience' isn't crucial after all.

This article explores the bid management skills fundamental to bidding success and rates the need for industry experience for each. I conclude with a recommendation regarding the transferability of bidding skills across industries.

Essential for Bidding Success?

What skills does a bid manager need?

Project Management

One of the key facets of bidding is the basic requirement to project manage the bid from the time it arrives to the time it is closed. I say 'closed' because the bid process includes post-tender clarifications, interview presentations, negotiations, handover (if it has been won), lessons learnt and harvesting good collateral for the bid library. Do any of these skills require industry knowledge? Admittedly no. What it requires is a basic knowledge of Project Management theory (my grounding was in Prince 2) and decent, natural organisational skills.

Need for Industry experience? 0 out of 3



Relationship-building and communication skills

My natural proclivity to forming bonds with people from different backgrounds, industries and levels of seniority gave me the ability to get the job done. A lack of empathy or the inability to form strong relationships with colleagues, stakeholders and clients would have adversely impacted my success. An industry background isn't crucial to forming relationships but being able to 'speak their language' enhances communication and makes it easier for people to open up and give you their time. The door opens far wider if you can talk to an engineer about MEP complexity, or to an architect about the importance of involvement at concept design stage, or to a cost manager about Long Lead Equipment.

Need for Industry experience? 2 out of 3



Technology skills

One of my favourite management philosophies is trying not to task my team with things I am unable to do. This is particularly true with technology. I am able to drive a successful bidding function by being adept at InDesign and PowerPoint, coaching technical teams for tender interviews, using data analysis of CRM systems to understand win/loss ratios and understanding the design of Power BI dashboards. These skills will add value to any sector; none requires industry knowledge.

Need for Industry experience? 0 out of 3



Bid Writing

The ability to write succinct and powerful executive summaries and methodologies is sacrosanct. Converting a collection of bullet points, scribbles or even a quick chat into content that communicates your value and approach is fundamental to being a strong bid manager. This ability combines good communication skills, an inclination to write, a love of words and (to some extent) an understanding of the technical context of the project or service. You will be at a massive disadvantage (from both a writing and gravitas point of view) if your SME conversations begin with simple questions like "What is a data centre?" Their limited availability is unlikely to include time to educate you on the basics of the service or solution.

Need for Industry experience? 2 out of 3

To summarise, a range of important and transferable capabilities (such as project management, technology and people skills) will enable you to drive proposal success in any sector or industry. But understanding the context of the proposal subject and speaking the language of your stakeholders and clients will make your job easier and can give you instant gravitas and respect.

So do you need specialist industry knowledge and skills for bidding success? The answer is a mixed bag - about 50/50 based on my highly scientific scoring matrix.

“Having industry experience makes your life a lot easier but you will be at a severe disadvantage without basic, transferable bidding skills.”



Look Before You Leap

Jeremy Brim



To specialise in an industry or not to specialise?

I may well get typecast as a construction work winning professional, considering my background in leading functions for construction market leaders such as Arcadis and Mace. But these days I'm lucky enough to flit between different markets and sectors, working across professional services, outsourcing and infrastructure (to name but a few). We are blessed to be in a small group of consultants and trainers who really get under the skin of different organisations' maturity levels and work winning functions across the spectrum. The following points are true of construction and in many other markets too.

We have diagnosed a key dynamic in our maturity benchmarking work across markets. In general, the greater the complexity and the number of moving parts in a product or service, the greater the opportunity to differentiate becomes – and (naturally) the less mature in winning work the organisations in each market tend to be (as perhaps they don't have to work so hard for the win).

For instance, I spent a period leading the growth function of an enforcement services business, eventually leading to a successful sale of the firm. Their actual service is incredibly simple – largely, make some phone calls and send some letters. Pricing is set by legislation and clients don't like to interview, so tendering all comes down to your quality submission score. It was bidding nirvana, incredibly competitive with absolute writing precision required to win. You had to be really well positioned, prepared and organised.

But I have also worked with massive, well-known, incredibly complex engineering businesses that get hit in the face cold with recompetes for deals where they are incumbent. And I work with building contractors all the time that fail (or bring in consultants to support them) on really basic aspects of bidding, e.g. breaking questions down, storyboarding responses, etc.

There are obviously exceptions. We do find the bigger firms with higher win rates tend to be relatively more mature than their smaller competitors in most markets, with maturity levels tailing off fast the further down the list you go. But you do get the odd, interesting challenger firm that is growing fast, usually with entrepreneurial leaders with experience working at bigger, more mature firms or with a natural talent for bidding deals.

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Moving industries and sectors can be the making of your career as well as a useful tactic when dodging the impact of recessions and other change. Just do your homework and figure out the value you will bring to the firm. Make sure you look properly before you leap.

A crossing point happens when it comes to framework bidding. In construction for instance, bidding for a big government framework is much higher stakes but also much more competitive than bidding for a project. How you will run your framework team and look after end clients is a much easier task than figuring out how to construct a complex building. The oxygen for differentiation is in much shorter supply.

So what does that mean for us bidding professionals and whether we should specialise?

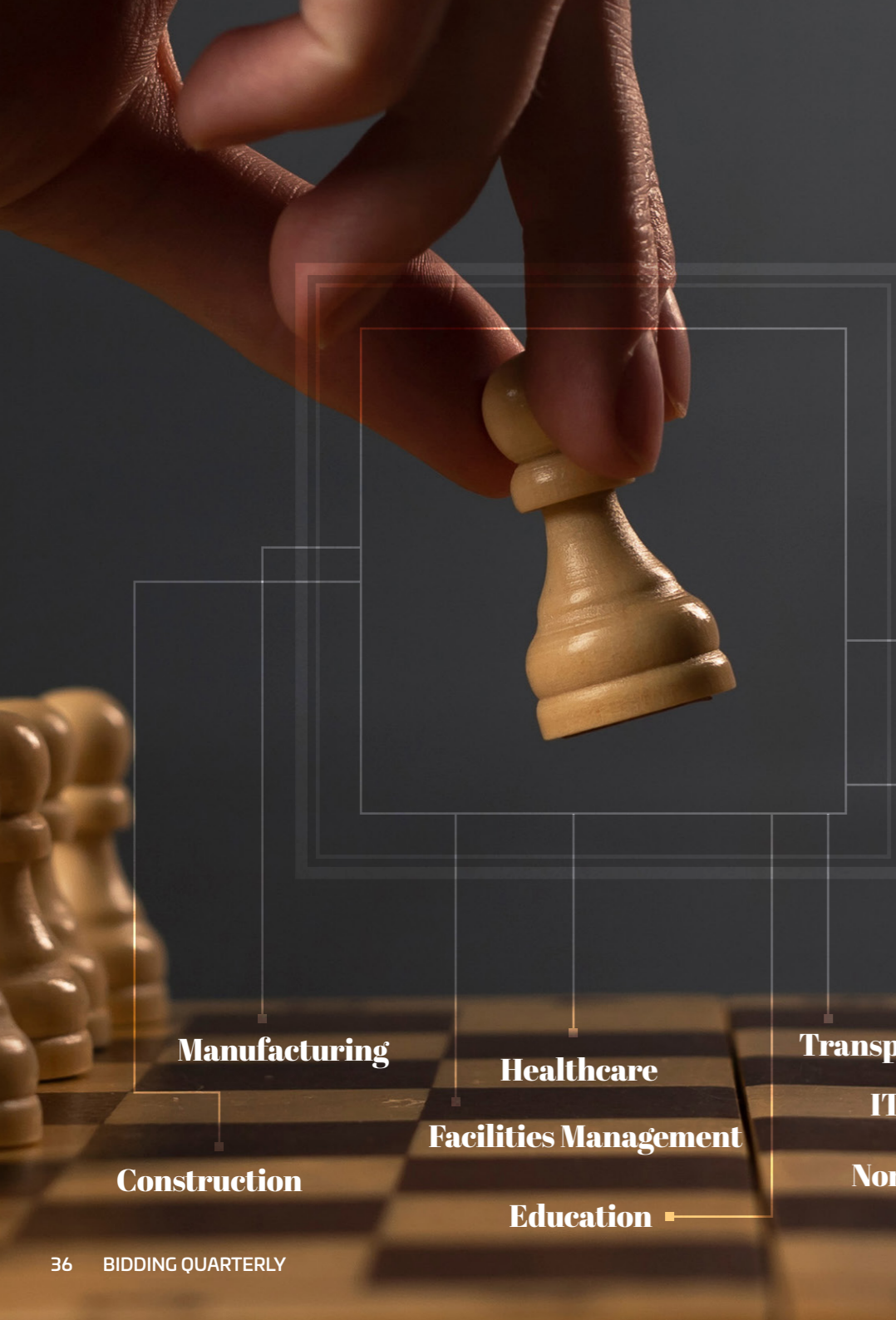
In our bid writing training sessions I always say half of a Bid Manager's role is to project manage the successful submission of a compliant compelling response to the client on time. Much like the work of your IT function, no one should even really notice that part of our work taking place. Crucially though, the other half of the job is facilitating a winning proposition out of the business and landing it in your proposals. This is harder to do as an outsider in a mature and competitive market, so this is where sector experience really comes into its own. Industry knowledge becomes more powerful.

It logically follows, as a rule, that you can move more easily in markets/sectors selling complex deep solutions with an immature work winning approach rather than within highly mature markets where the service and proposition is quite straightforward (and where you need to work really hard in the detail to derive a winning proposition).

There is a route to bridging the gap though. Deals are largely won and lost before the RFP is ever written. In the enforcement company example, I didn't really know the industry at all. I brought value to the firm (beyond providing a focus on bidding excellence) by being the 'work winning professional' – moving the eyeline of the business up to focus on capturing key deals in the pipeline far before tender and robustly managing current client accounts. I see a movement upstream into capture (and away from the clutches of AI) as a fertile ground for bidding professionals with skills that are far more transferable between markets (particularly as capture is so immature in itself outside the US).

Of course there are some 'watch outs' when moving industry. Most people in bid teams work for immature organisations that are bidding everything, with low win rates, unpleasant environments, etc. Do your research. Probe them on their approach and levels of maturity during the recruitment process or target bid teams you know are successful and would like to work in.

Moving industries and sectors can be the making of your career as well as a useful tactic when dodging the impact of recessions and other change. Just do your homework and figure out the value you will bring to the firm. Make sure you look properly before you leap.



Rita Mascia

Sector Experience: A Blessing or a Curse?

When planning this article my first thought was, "Did I have experience of the sector in which I started working in bids and proposals?" and the answer is a resounding 'NO'!

My first sector was higher education and I worked on bids providing business services for small and medium enterprises. I worked successfully in this field for 12 years. For the past seven years, I have managed bids in Manufacturing with a particular focus on rail. I had absolutely no experience in either sector yet was still successful in my role.

I primarily worked on public sector tenders (both EU and UK funding) at the start of my career and have worked on commercial tenders for the past seven years (with only a tiny fraction in the government sector).

In between these periods, I worked as an independent consultant in other fields including construction, healthcare, facilities management, transport, IT, non-profit, education, and many more. The only 'relevant' experience I had in any of those sectors was my spell in Higher Education. So based on my experience and my career of 24 years as a bid professional, I can confidently say that knowledge of a sector is not as relevant to getting hired as being able to do a good job.

That doesn't mean employers didn't ask me about sector experience. They always did. Does this mean that my CV would not be selected because I did not have the required industry knowledge? No. I was still invited to interviews without having their specific market experience and would still be offered the role.

Do I think that knowing a sector will put you in a stronger position? Yes, and no. Knowing a sector will help you navigate the jargon and politics associated with that particular field which could be an advantage. However, being a novice to the sector brings fresh and diverse perspectives to existing processes and methods – allowing you to see areas of improvement that those with prior sector knowledge may not notice.

I do not wish to diminish the importance an employee with a wealth of knowledge in a particular sector brings to a company but there is something else to consider.

In practice, specialist sector knowledge is often inaccessible. Covenants included in employment contracts nowadays practically gag you for a year or more – preventing you from working with the same clients or partners and muffling your experience of that sector for a long time. For example, there are very few train builders in rail. If you can't work with your previous customers because of the covenant you signed, you are unlikely to use that sector knowledge!

It's therefore inevitable that people will move into adjacent or sub-sectors to overcome such barriers or end up changing sector entirely.

I will also argue that being sector agnostic is actually an advantage for a bid professional. During my consulting years, moving quickly between industries enriched my skills because each sector approached tendering slightly differently. The learning curve when sector hopping is amazing. For example, working in construction will enhance your visual presentation skills as tenders are normally luxuriously produced, while working in the non-profit sector will teach you to craft superb social value statements.



During my consulting years, moving quickly between industries enriched my skills because each sector approached tendering slightly differently. The learning curve when sector hopping is amazing.

The reason why some employers insist on applicants having experience in a particular field is because many do not understand the difference between a bid writer and a bid manager. Or they are trying to get a 'two for one', a bid manager who will also write all the bids. A bid manager doesn't need experience in the sector to manage a project as they are experts in managing a process. A bid writer...well, it helps if you know the market unless you're working in a highly technical sector. In this case the bid writer will be reliant on subject matter experts for bid content, making prior sector experience irrelevant.

This is my main issue: whenever I have recruited staff, I have recruited for talent and attitude. Sector knowledge can be gained without affecting the quality of your work. I have never regretted changing sectors and I certainly would not want to work for any employer who discounts my 25 years of experience as a bid professional simply because I have not yet worked in their sector.

Who would you rather employ? A brilliant bid professional with the right qualifications, success rate, trusted references but no experience in your field or an average employee who knows your sector?

I know which one I would hire.



The reason why some employers insist on applicants having experience in a particular field is because many do not understand the difference between a bid writer and a bid manager. Or they are trying to get a 'two for one', a bid manager who will also write all the bids.

Charlotte Rees

Variety is the Spice of (Bid) Life...



We've been discussing the importance and benefits of building diverse teams for years - both in the bidding profession and in the proposed teams within our bids. But when it comes to experience, it's regularly seen as the exception, i.e. 'The more years of experience the candidate has in our industry, the better they will be.'

Firstly, this definitely isn't guaranteed. But more importantly, what might you be sacrificing by building a bid team who all have the majority of their experience in your industry? One of my favourite quotes is by Henry Ford...

“If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got.”

Henry Ford

I have moved into different sectors throughout my bid and proposal career and hired people from alternative industries into my teams. And I'm here to say there are some fantastic benefits in having a bid team that has experience from a variety of industries.

When leveraged effectively, you can take the very best ideas from multiple industries to place you at the forefront of bidding in your market.

The Challenges

Now I'll admit there are two key potential challenges for bid professionals who move to a new industry, and for the bid team they move into.

Subject knowledge

Going into a new industry requires effort in learning more about the subject matter and in how the industry may bid differently.

For example, Construction proposals can easily be 250 pages but Professional Services proposals may only be 20 pages. It's important to allocate time to gain understanding and make adjustments to ways of working, and to ensure the most effective information and win strategies are conveyed in the most succinct way.

- As a manager/team leader, consider ways to breakdown the most important information such as creating Bidding 101 guides and having a library of best practice bid examples available.
- As an individual, consider researching the topic area and asking for visibility of bids that have been and are being submitted. The more bids you get oversight of, the more comfortable you'll feel in knowing what the business expects.

Time to get up to speed

It's less easy to hit the ground running when someone doesn't have the new role's industry experience. This might mean you'll need to allow for some extra time to settle in, both as an individual and within the team. Jumping onto a bid in the first week might not be the best option.

- As a manager/team leader, consider using shadowing and team buddies to enable on the job learning and a safe space to ask questions. This also allows you to have a helping hand on live opportunities without putting pressure on a new starter and reduces the risk of inaccuracies and errors.
- As an individual, ask any questions you have and let your manager know if you're not quite ready to tackle a bid. Also, try to accept that you won't feel as confident in the subject knowledge as quickly as you'd like to be. It's the same for us all - don't put pressure on having to know everything straight away!

The Benefits

There are many benefits for individuals and the team when creating a bid team with diverse experience. Here are just a few:

- Improved ways of working through different bid processes and approaches
- Leveraging lessons from other bid teams who are more established and may target more elements of the bid lifecycle
- Becoming more adaptable and flexible, helping to navigate change and respond to challenges
- Sharing innovative solution ideas that are being created by other industries
- Suggestions on alternative ideas for presentation such as layout, formatting and templates (such as microsites and interactive documents)
- Deeper insight into topics of interest in other industries that you might be bidding to
- Bringing new perspectives to the table, challenging the norm and offering new suggestions
- Pushing outside of your comfort zone (as a team and an individual) through trying new things
- Better understanding of bidding trends, seeing how proposals are changing, and understanding new areas of focus

Top Tips

Finally, some top tips for getting the most out of diversity of industry within bid teams:

For Teams

1. Be open to creating a team with a variety of backgrounds, and consider this when developing job descriptions and choosing candidates to interview.
2. When inducting new staff from alternative industries, plan in time for them to learn and understand their new market, and ensure they have the right resources to hand.
3. Create a safe space to receive suggested new ideas - this will enable you to truly reap the benefits of a team with a diverse bidding background.

For Individuals

1. Don't be afraid of applying for roles in a new industry. Think about all of your transferable skills and remember you're there to be the 'bidding expert' not the technical expert.
2. When joining a new industry, be patient with yourself - you won't be able to know everything straight away! Take time to read examples and pay attention to how other members of your team work.
3. Ask questions! Ask your team, your manager, and the teams you work with - continuously make the effort to learn about the subject matter.

Spot the Difference: Can You Win Across Different Industries?

Graham Ablett

I told Martin, "I can't really write for this edition of BQ. Sorry."

Why? Because I work across many sectors (not one industry) in my role at Strategic Proposals. The biggest contrast has been from nuclear power stations to stationery providers. And yes, the end customers did ask some of the same questions! That makes me smile.

Anyway, he said, "Didn't you spend ages up to your neck in PCs bidding in IT?" Well, yeah, about ten years and I still do tech bids today. Then he said, "Didn't you spend three years working at least 60% of your time in a professional services company?" Good point! So here we are, my article on some of the industry differences I've seen and some of the things to look out for.

Firstly, a note on transferable skills. As a senior buyer once told me, "Working with one of our competitors is a conflict of interest. Working with multiple organisations in the sector makes you a sector specialist."

Experience counts. When we meet our new clients for the first time, they often ask what we've done in their sector. People think it's important. Why?

Moving from one sector to another can be a steep learning curve, but it is also very rewarding to individuals and can be seen as bringing in fresh ideas to employers.

Familiarity. Terminology. You get it. You can start quickly.

If this is really what your employer wants, it's probably because they want you to write on behalf of their subject matter experts (SMEs). In that case you really do need to know the market you're working in. On the other hand, perhaps you're editing or managing and reviewing, so bring the advantages of not being in the SME echo chamber. Horses for courses. Whether you're a contractor going into a new role or applying for a new job, it's important to know what your future employer is looking for.

That aside, here's what I've seen in terms of differences across the sectors I've worked in and what perhaps makes a difference.



Buyers

- Move from just procurement, finance and IT department decisions
- Stakeholders from the business now make much more complex contact plans
- Move to seeking solutions more than just product purchase
- Pricing of solutions is key
- Typically focused on the return on investment (ROI) and cost-effectiveness

Internal teams

- Lots of marketing effort to position brands
- Strong sales and BD influence, with often very experienced, expert sellers who work on bigger deals
- Lots of inexperienced sales people building their skills and experience on the job working on smaller deals
- Technical specialists are critical to developing those solutions
- Finance input is critical on pricing

Key characteristics

- Competition fierce
- Typically formal processes, but often lots of proactive proposals and pitches
- Many high value deals, but many more lower value
- Often quick turnarounds, high pace
- Lots of sub-sectors with distinct differences
- RFPs/ITTs with sometimes large numbers of technical questions – sometimes solution overviews required to paint the 'big picture'

Public vs private end customers

- Lots of frameworks in public sector
- Both tend to use formal processes, as deals tend to be large (when compared to sectors like professional services)

Top tips

- Pre-engagement is key - if you haven't been engaging with them, someone else will have
- You need experienced sales and technical folks in your team to win
- Key to understand customer's unique needs, provide tailored solutions, and effectively communicate value
- Lots of similarities across ITTs, so good quality and broad knowledge bases can help with efficiency

Technology

Professional services

- Often interested in forming long-term partnerships
- Trust, credibility and working collaboratively seen as crucial
- May rely on referrals and word-of-mouth recommendations
- Strong emphasis on compliance
- Intermediaries can be used to play the procurement role – strong gatekeepers who can issue vanilla, sometimes anonymous tenders

- Contributors are usually fee earners who are focused on delivery (so time poor), though they are critical to success
- Often super-intelligent, highly educated team members who may struggle to use non-technical language in the proposal
- Senior management input (e.g. partner level) prevalent, but can be last-minute

- Mostly very competitive
- Several big global dominant forces and then large numbers of relatively smaller organisations often battling it out between scale and depth, versus specialism and lower rates
- Concern over a race-to-the-bottom on price on day rate-based standard services
- Capture prevalent for large 'big four' type deals, but then much more reactive in other contexts
- Shorter ITTs/RFPs with typically a small number of questions (outside of compliance sections)

- Much more formalised processes in public sector
- Lower value deals more likely to be decided by a pitch in private sector
- Lower value public sector tenders tend to be very cookie cutter in style

- Key is building trust with customer pre-tender
- Responses need to showcase credentials, especially niche differentiators amongst proposed staff
- Proposals need to show deep domain knowledge
- Time poor contributors may need hands-on interview/writing type of support
- Gain partner trust early to demonstrate you can/will bring value

The key to working in bids and proposals across different sectors is understanding what's expected from you. Sometimes deep subject matter expertise may be expected, sometimes not. Moving from one sector to another can be a steep learning curve, but it is also very rewarding to individuals and can be seen as bringing in fresh ideas to employers. Working in different areas is certainly one of the reasons why I still love doing what I do.

A Force of Nature – The Power of Osmosis and a Deep-rooted Tree

Isabella Stevenson



“**Learning by osmosis + Steadfast bid practices + Key attributes and skills + Curiosity = Success in any sector**”

Learning by osmosis

Steadfast bid practices

Key attributes and skills

Curiosity

The bid profession is one full of contradictions to be carefully navigated (usually with a looming deadline!). For me, one of the most notable contradictions is the expectation of having extensive technical expertise (in whichever sector you operate) and the creative, lateral and flexible thinking needed to pull together a winning submission.

While these skillsets are not mutually exclusive, the concept of industry knowledge versus bid knowledge has made me reflect on my own career and the variety of industries I have worked in. I started my bidding career in recruitment and the idea of moving out of that sector was initially terrifying. Transitioning into the built environment was a challenge at first, where everything was different to my first bidding post.

On reflection, this may be because the first industry you work in as a bid professional is where you learn your ‘base’ bidding skills and terminology. A leap into a new sector and move away from that can feel incredibly unnerving, trying to learn new technical language, processes and even bid structure. Another layer of anxiety may also be added – one of being acutely aware of the direct correlation between the bidding function and the overall success of the organisation.

However, exercising patience, open mindedness and a willingness to learn really does help to smooth the transition into a new sector. Once you are able to overcome the initial fear, it becomes easier to move into different industries and start applying bidding best practice to that sector.

I believe this is underpinned by a unique formula bidding professionals develop when working in differing sectors:

Learning by osmosis + Steadfast bid practices + Key attributes and skills + Curiosity = Success in any sector

A little breakdown of the formula:

Learning by osmosis

When entering a new sector, particularly a highly technical one, it can be very daunting getting to grips with the language and terminology used. Continual exposure to, and conversations with, technical specialists (over time) allows you to naturally absorb important sector knowledge to help craft successful bids.

Steadfast bid practices

A development of strong bid practices early in your career can be compared to a deep-rooted tree – strong and grounding but with the ability to evolve and rejuvenate when needed. There will always be core practices to be drawn upon when moving into differing industries (such as tools, templates and process structures) which can be a very stabilising force in bidding.

Key attributes and skills

There are a number of innate personal attributes and skills needed in the world of bidding – tenacity, relationship building, collaboration and strategic thinking are just a few. Carefully honed over time, these are highly transferable skills. The majority of organisations will value these types of attributes and skills to guide them through bids (especially complex ones).

Curiosity

A sense of curiosity about your chosen industry is a great foundation for bidding success. Curiosity about the technical aspects to be included in your bid (e.g. via conversations with your team of subject matter experts) is important for translating that information into a winning submission. Additionally, curiosity about the procurement process driving the whole tender and understanding the outcomes clients are trying to achieve all contribute to successful bidding in any sector.

Personally, the aforementioned elements have been particularly vital in the last few years working in the emerging market of EV infrastructure. The sector itself is fast paced with technology, and the legislation to accompany it, continually developing. With this in mind, it has been helpful to reflect and remind myself that those unique transferable skills and the right attitude of a bid professional are more important than depth of technical expertise.

There is a balance between remaining steadfast in your approach, practices and behaviours towards bidding as you advance at pace in a new sector and applying adaptability, curiosity and mindfulness. Perhaps, like nature itself, balance is paramount for successful bidding.

“**A leap into a new sector and move away from that can feel incredibly unnerving, trying to learn new technical language, processes and even bid structure.**”

A New Era of Bidding

Samantha Burns

“““

Remember, process is a tool, not a rule.

Working as a consultant, I tend to see a strong cross-section across industries and have a good overarching view of the variances. This said, what I have learnt is that proposal teams are often most largely influenced by their leaders – there seems to be a strong disconnect in most cases between process and people.

Let's start by looking at the bird's-eye view on industry bidding maturity

In my experience, we are seeing a shift towards more carbon focussed weighting led by the energy sector. Carbon and social value are continuing to grow as government clamps down on expectations. An interesting development is that we seem to be moving towards more specific targets within these areas, and the bidding world is becoming far more literate in being able to respond, carving out new roles and specialisms. Transport and infrastructure have become more price focussed than previous years, largely down to HS2. And the private sector seems to be catching on to some of the softer elements around social responsibility and behavioural testing. Finally, I'm largely seeing that FM and utilities remain more structured and systematic.

A bit about AI

I can't write an article about trends without talking about AI and tech. My view on this stays relatively firm; AI will change the way we operate without question. There are already large government departments looking at AI tools to support them in procurement. It's only a matter of time before we see AI being used in both the technical and commercial space for writing, scoring, and providing feedback. What does this mean for us as bidders? Win strategy and behavioural coaching will become more important, 'boilerplate' will eventually become redundant.

What are they saying on the other side of the fence?

Sukhraj Gill, a Procurement and Supply Chain industry leader has offered us the following insights:

"I often get asked and advise about the shifting dynamics of the bidding landscape by cross-sector clients. With the current climate, it is clear that the emphasis on optimising 'value for money' has shifted back to being a mandatory sourcing requirement. However it is important to consider that it is not just about cost, but broader value encompassing criteria such as quality and innovation. Additionally, sustainability measures such as ESG and 'making good' on commitments, are now becoming decisive factors in awarding contracts. Given the turbulence in global supply chains and volatile interest rates, procurement professionals are valuing bidders who demonstrate solid risk management strategies more than ever before. There is also a notable trend shifting from competition to collaboration in procurement. Instead of traditional adversarial buyer-supplier relationships, procurement teams are moving towards partnerships that prioritise collaboration."

*Great levels of transparency in bid evaluations and a focus on longer term, adaptable relationships, rather than transactional ones are other emerging priorities. As the bidding environment continues to evolve, bidders who understand and align with these changes will become the leaders for innovation and supply chain transformation."*¹

So, what are the non-negotiables in terms of skillset?

Regardless of what you are bidding for, you have to have attention to detail if you want to do well. Details are queen in bidding, as far as I'm concerned; you can have no further skills and still be an asset to the team if you pick up something I miss (which I have done,

from time to time). Wider than this, communication skills are necessary – and I don't mean being able to send an email or have a conversation. Strong communication means you can articulate exactly what you need, clearly and concisely, in a manner which preserves relationships.

People vs. process

It's true, we are process people in bidding. We need structure, organisation and lists to truly enjoy life. Process has its place, and it's the first thing I ask for when I go into any organisation. This isn't because I think we should regimentally stick to process, it's because a process can indicate the level of bidding maturity. Sometimes things get lost in process and this is where I've seen the biggest breakdown in internal relationships. For example, a bid manager indicates we must hit a red review by a certain date but the drafts aren't at the required level of development yet. If we focus solely on process, this review will go ahead, and risks alienating reviewers and negatively impacting the writers. There must be room to negotiate around process because quality is the true measure of progress. Remember, process is a tool, not a rule.

Creativity = volatility

A final thought from me sits around creativity and volatility. Every team needs to have the right balance between the right- and left-hand side of the brain. The wider industry is evolving, and so are we. Having creative energy is so important to push the boundaries of 'what good looks like', and with that, we need to accept the volatility and differences in style and approach. There is no one size fits all, and that is only going to become truer as we enter the next era of bidding. Work to create an environment that celebrates both – I promise, your quality will improve.

¹ Sukhraj Gill is a Procurement and Supply Chain industry leader, who supports Private, Public sector and Non-profit organisations with interim procurement support, procurement transformation and strategic sourcing.

Evolution of the Bid-Slinger: A Maverick's Guide to Mastering the Proposal Game

Izane Cloete-Hamilton

During my wild ride in the world of bids and proposals, I've worked with all sorts - bid managers, bid coordinators, designers, and writers. I've gained insight into what really makes someone click in this profession. It's not just about juggling tasks effectively or generating snazzy templates; it's also about thriving under pressure and maintaining an eagle eye for each minute detail.

Sometimes, the bidding world throws Shakespeare's famous line, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," out the window. A rose might be a rose for you, but for someone else, it might be an entirely different bloom. Bids are a complex beast; my take on what's competent might be completely different from the next person's.

Where am I going with this?

Not all bid and proposal approaches are created equal, which is a significant part of what makes this industry so captivating. They present a challenge but also a splendid invitation to innovate, adapt, and evolve as a bid professional, regardless of your industry.



Bid and proposal work offers a doubled-edged sword for those bewildered but intrigued souls daring to dive in. Tricky to navigate challenges offer uncharted and rewarding opportunities.



1. Bidding maturity: a kaleidoscope of viewpoints

Our proposal consultancy doesn't discriminate between industries. Our clients' views are colourful and full spectrum - bid and proposal development may be a high-stakes game-changer to one or a sales prop and administrative chore to another. And there's a whole gamut in between.

This ever-shifting sea of opinions isn't only about how far bidding sectors have come; it's about how bidding, as a strategic value must-have, has evolved within the bigger picture. South Africa is our case in point.

What's the takeaway here? Bid and proposal work offers a doubled-edged sword for those bewildered but intrigued souls daring to dive in. Tricky to navigate challenges offer uncharted and rewarding opportunities.

With an open mind and a go-getter attitude, these adventurous spirits may ignite fresh perspectives that'll reshape (perhaps revolutionise?) the bidding landscape.

2. Making it big as a bid pro: the indispensable ingredients

Being a bid professional is for fearless souls who want to survive and soar.

How?

By arming themselves with an arsenal of skills, traits, and experiences that make them stand out. My top four indispensable ingredients are:

Stay insatiably curious

Fuel your curiosity and never stop exploring! Can't help but question why things are done a certain way and how they could be improved? Fantastic!

You're toying with what I call 'figuring it out', better known as 'design thinking'. This mindset lets you break away from traditional problems to create outside-the-box solutions.

Design thinking pushes you to put yourself in the client's shoes,

map out clear goals, brainstorm inventive solutions, create prototypes of the most promising picks, and put them through a rigorous reality check.

The more curious your mind, the more you break away from the ordinary - redrafting the script for addressing client needs, deciphering the latest procurement trends, nailing down industry nuances or mastering must-have skills.

Never underestimate the power of certifications

Dreaming of making a name for yourself in bid and proposal management, especially in a boutique-style consulting firm? Be ready to show your pedigree with the right credentials.

The APMP certifications reign supreme. The Practitioner level certification is now considered an entry-level criterion (at least by Moi).

An APMP certification skyrockets your credibility and cements your dedication to mastering the craft.

Continuously cultivate your experience

Accumulate the right kind of experience. It's not just a numbers game - quality matters as much as quantity.

Becoming a seasoned professional takes more than one successful bid or one year of experience. On the flip side, even a decade in the business doesn't translate to expertise if you haven't continually evolved and grown. Remember, meaningful practice - not just clocking in the hours - makes perfect. Misdirected or stagnating efforts lead to deep-rooted, ineffective methodologies, stifling growth and limiting your potential.

Strive to become an agile learner and communicator

A bid professional who can adapt to different industries and situations while communicating effectively is truly indispensable. Expand your knowledge base, delve into different sectors and keep refining your communication skills. Efficient and effective communication can make or break your proposal's impact.

Collaborate with team members and listen closely to clients. This continuous learning and communication loop allows you to better understand needs, address challenges, and ultimately offer a winning proposal.

3. Concluding impressions: evolution, exploration, and exuberant bids in the making

The bidding industry is a compelling realm, characterised by unique dynamics and trends poised at the intersection of strategic business functions and sales support. Emerging practices driven by procurement teams' behaviours are colouring the industry canvas, with new opportunities blooming on the horizon.

While bidding maturity levels may vary, the basic principle of crafting personalised, impactful proposals remains a non-negotiable constant across industry segments. The do's and don'ts of bidding and APMP qualifications play pivotal roles in shaping successful bid careers, fortifying a bid professional's arsenal in making a mark in the industry.

Beyond these academic accomplishments, the industry fervently calls for innovative thinkers and creative problem solvers. Those who truly excel are curious and can learn, adapt, and transfer their skills across different sectors and geographies and work outside their comfort zone. Bid and proposal skills are entirely transferable, making the walls of industry knowledge mere stepping stones rather than insurmountable obstacles.

Just as rare and exotic flowers grow from seeds nurtured with thoughtful tending and diligent care, winning proposals are the fruits of tireless dedication, creativity, and the innovative spirit of the professionals steering the ship.

If you are a newcomer navigating this exhilarating industry, or at a crossroads determined to conquer a new sector, or revisiting your bidding strategies with a keen eye, embrace the call for relentless evolution, unwavering curiosity, and an insatiable desire for mastering your craft.

About our Experts



Sarah Hinchliffe

Sarah labels herself a 'Storyteller, Organiser, Timekeeper' – three things that come naturally to her. After a 30-year sales career in the IT industry, where she learnt every popular sales methodology and sold millions of pounds of software and services, Sarah decided to share what she'd learnt about winning business using great stories, a systematic approach and consistently delivering on time. She continues learning and sharing through her freelance consulting work and volunteering as a writer, speaker and mentor.



Tony Birch

Tony Birch is the founder and current Chairman of Shipley Limited in the UK. Tony served on the main board of the APMP for four years and was elected a Fellow of the organisation in 2006, for his work in developing and launching the APMP's Certification Programme. Since founding Shipley, Tony has trained thousands of sales and bid professionals around the world.



Nigel Hudson

Nigel is passionate about professional development. He designed and delivered the APMP award-winning Bid Academy for Vodafone and co-authored Europe's leading proposal syllabus with Strategic Proposals. He's trained more than 4,000 people worldwide.



Beth Wallace

Beth has worked in a number of sectors, starting out in aerospace manufacturing but also working in financial services, media, hospitality and legal to name a few.

Her career has spanned both negotiating deals as well as managing supplier relationships, from simple projects to complex outsourcing.



Pippa Birch

Pippa owns Pipster Solutions Ltd – an award-winning bid consultancy. Pippa has been a bid writer for over 20 years, mainly in highways and civil engineering. She is well known in the sector and is an active member of the Institute of Asphalt and has won several industry awards. Pippa went freelance in 2012 and started growing the Pipster team during the Covid pandemic. She is APMP Professional certified and mentors other bid professionals, winning Contribution to the Profession in 2022. She also developed #ThursdayThrong and #BidBites – free online meetings for the bidding community to reduce isolation.



Jon Williams

Jon and his team work with clients worldwide to help them establish winning proposal capabilities and to capture major deals. He has built and led numerous bid and proposal centres; managed, reviewed and benchmarked countless proposals; worked in over 35 countries; and trained many thousands of course participants.



Mike Reader

Mike Reader is one of the UK's leading work winning professionals, helping senior leaders navigate the bidding and sales world. He leads a specialist team at Mace who work across all continents pursuing mega built environment and infrastructure projects. He also loves cold water swimming, politics and good food.



Holger Garden

Holger is a bid manager and writer, and a personal/team performance coach. He spends most of his time supporting construction clients bidding for civil infrastructure and building projects, but his transferable skills have led to his work in the medical, charity and security arenas also.

He works with businesses of all sizes to help them win more work.



Karen Croshaw

Karen has been involved in bidding and tendering for nearly 25 years, firstly with universities and training providers, then in large private sector organisations. She now runs her own successful freelance bid consultancy. Her consulting career spans public and private sector bids including government frameworks, nuclear, rail, road, construction, digital, defence, healthcare and skills. She has strong Middle East bid/project delivery experience gained by living and working in the UEA, Saudi Arabia and Oman, where she also trained and qualified as a scuba instructor.



Lisa Readman

Lisa is an expert Content Evaluator and APMP Certified Practitioner as well as a highly skilled proofreader and copy editor of bidding, sales and marketing documents. Her bid and proposals career began in 2003 and she established her own business (Readman Writes) after 15 years as a Bid Writer, Bid Coordinator and Knowledge Manager. Lisa combines her unique skillset and passion for words with a sensible, commercial approach to clear and concise written communication.



Paul Harding

Paul has over 25 years' experience in work-winning roles, almost 20 of which are in bidding. He is currently Head of Group Tendering with Eurofins Forensic Services, part of the world's largest Testing, Inspection and Certification Group. He combines his expertise in bidding into corporate customers and the public sector with his scientific, commercial and legal qualifications to deliver high success-rate bids, with a particular focus on Policing and Defence customers. Paul has been an APMP member for over 10 years, achieving Professional certification and is a judge for APMP's Annual awards. He is active in the APMP UK's Rapport mentor programme, supporting bid professionals in their career progression and personal development journeys.

About our Experts



Ceri Mescall

Ceri is a Work Winning Consultant based in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. She's trusted to sustain, elevate, and transform bid and proposal functions. Over her 17-year career, Ceri has enabled clients to secure almost \$1 billion in sustainable, profitable work. She's one of only 22 people globally (out of 13,000+ members) who holds all four main APMP certifications. Ceri is also an APMP 40 Under 40 Award winner (2019) and an APMP Fellow (2020).



Javier Escartin

Javier is an aerospace engineer who has climbed the corporate ladder from engineering to business development. He is a full-time freelance Proposal Manager and has recently launched a business to make our work easier with artificial intelligence.

He is the founder of DeepRFP.com, runs the proposals newsletter jescartin.com, and manages proposals for worldwide technology companies as a consultant.



Andy Haigh

Andy is an expert in bidding and tendering, specialising in competitive formal bids into EU Public Sector organisations. He is an authority on EU procurement legislation and can bring all these capabilities together to initiate and drive major complex bids through to a successful completion.



Michael Brown

Michael Brown is a seasoned bid professional having won multiple projects across the built environment throughout Europe, the Middle East, APAC and North America. He is passionate about leading global teams to deliver top quality proposals and pitches to multinational clients.



Jeremy Brim

Jeremy works with leadership teams and business owners as a consultant and advisor to plan and deliver sustainable growth through analysis and interventions across the sales cycle. Jeremy has also taken on leadership of the Bid Toolkit, bringing with him a wealth of bidding knowledge and desire to help businesses of all sizes improve their win rates.



Rita Mascia

Rita's journey into the world of bids and proposal started while working for an award-winning language and culture business organisation. Rita is a bid professional with 21 years of experience in the public, private and not for profit sectors. Her expertise in the bid cycle includes business development, capture, bid management, bid writing, and contract negotiations. Her passion lies in leading teams to win business by producing persuasive proposals that deliver what they promise.

About our Experts



Charlotte Rees

Charlotte has worked in the bidding profession for nearly a decade, starting her journey as a bid and proposals apprentice for an engineering company. She has worked across several industries including IT services, facilities management and construction, and is currently Head of Bids, working within professional services. In 2018, Charlotte founded the Wellbeing and Inclusion in Bids and Proposals (WIBAP) community to target gender inequality within the profession and provide a space to share experiences and overcome the challenges we all face on a regular basis.



Graham Ablett

Graham Ablett is a Consulting Director at Strategic Proposals, where he helps clients to win specific opportunities as well as implementing effective and efficient proposal processes. He is a former board member of APMP in the UK, holding APMP Professional status, and is an APMP Approved Trainer.



Isabella Stevenson

Bella started her career in bids over 14 years ago working for a recruitment consultancy co-ordinating their EMEA-wide bid submissions. For the last 10 years, she has worked as a Bid Manager, mainly within the built environment, but also in sectors as diverse as facilities management, security and dentistry.

She enjoys collaborating with technical teams via workshops and review sessions to build win themes, install best practice and develop creative thinking to win more contracts and help organisations meet their business development objectives.



Samantha Burns

Sam Burns CP APMP is a Senior Bid Manager at EiB. Sam has over 11 years' experience and has worked in both the private and public sector, helping clients win transformational projects across the UK and globally. She has a passion for technology and pioneering solutions in the full business development lifecycle.



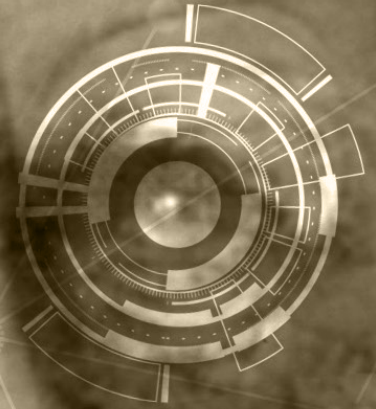
Izane Cloete-Hamilton

Izane is the Master of Inspiration at nFold, a strategic proposal consultancy in South Africa. She is a compassionate leader with a rare and innate ability to develop people. She has held various senior management positions in business development, marketing, and bid management for over 20 years. Izane joined nFold as a partner in 2021, where she continues to inspire success in others through thought leadership, training and strategy development.

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