PREPARING AN EFFECTIVE TECHNICAL PROPOSAL

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aim

The primary aim is to lift the quality of proposals by creating a recognisable style. The secondary aim is to reduce the time and energy needed to produce proposals.

1.2 Approach

The approach is to use a three-level format as follows:

- An executive summary.
- A comprehensive outline of the need, the goal, the solution, and an outline of the project method.
- Include any fine detail and appendices at the end of the proposal.

It is also important to include other important information in a proposal:

- Recognition of the client's previous efforts to resolve the issue.
- An outline of plans to work with the client's team.
- The approach to fulfilling project recommendations.

1.3 Proposal length

Short proposals (about three pages) may not need an executive summary. For major proposals, the second section of the document may extend to ten pages, followed by a detailed third section.

1.4 General

Be concise and use plain language and explore one idea per paragraph. Start with a summary of the most important ideas or recommendations. Use headings that help the reader follow the argument. Review with an expert and a non-expert. Use a systematic approach to improve readability. Use consistent structures for headings and dot points. Ensure content, organisation, and language are targeted to the reader.

2. START WITH AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (SECTION 1)

The Executive Summary is for longer proposals. A true summary is never more than 1/7th the material summarised. Capture the essence of the proposal in a single page. The executive summary assembles your thoughts and is an excellent reference for discussing the proposal with your client. It covers everything a reader looks for in a proposal.

2.1 The Current Situation

Briefly describe the client's most important issues, followed by the focusing question. This gives you the opportunity to show that you understand the business environment, the specific issues, and the most important question your client would like answered. You will need to be brief and to the point. Pictures usually express a point more clearly than words so use diagrams whenever possible to avoid lengthy text. If your client has made an effort to resolve the issues, and your project builds on the work of the client, then recognised this.

2.2 The Ideal Situation

Describe the most important targets the client would like to achieve. Record your client's goals so you can ensure that your proposed solution is consistent with them.

2.3 The Proposed Solution

Outline your proposal and the benefits it will deliver. Here you must show that you have a workable solution that delivers value, and that you have the technical ability to deliver the solution to your client.

2.4 Project Management and Costs

Briefly outline the proposed size and skills of the team, plus the timing, costs, and co-commitments. Finally you need to provide your client with a concise appraisal of the resources, the timing and any co-commitments needed for successful implementation of the project.

3. DESCRIBE THE SCOPE OF WORK (SECTION 2)

This section provides detail for each of the executive summary headings. As a guide your expanded proposal should be no longer than about eight pages. This size limit guides you to provide important information in support of the points you made in the executive summary, without getting into too much fine detail.

This section is the heart of your proposal and should be accessible to non-technical readers. To this end you should avoid technical terminology and use diagrams, charts and tables to express complex points clearly.

To be comprehensive at this level you will need to expand on the points made in the executive summary.

A - The Current Situation

The four part of "A" will show you clearly understand the client's issues. "The Current Situation" should cover no more than two pages. You may need another page or two of evidence if you believe the client has understated the size of the problem.

Context - Describe the environment that has led to the current issue. This may include the way the world has changed since creating the client's systems and processes. Describe what has changed to cause the current need or create the opportunity

The overall impact - Look beyond the immediate issues and make sure you take account of the entire affected system. Your proposal may affect other parts of the business and you will need to note where this potential exists. Describe the total system and its wider impact

The problem or opportunity - Note the most important issues and ways your client has tried to resolve them. Outline the most important issues, and recognise any previous efforts by the client to resolve them

Focusing Question – Check and agree on the overall question your client wants answered. Take great care to get this right as it sets the direction for your whole investigation.

A focusing question has 7 parts, an opening, a purpose (why), an act (what), an agent (who), an agency (how), a scene (where) and a qualification (standard).

B - The Ideal Situation

The three parts of "B" describe what your client would like to achieve. It is important to show that you understand the relevant business goals and how your work will help the client to achieve them. Use numbers wherever possible in this section so goals are measurable. Record your client's goals in enough detail, in less than a single page.

Business goals - Record the more abstract goals of the business. They must provide a sense of **"why"** the investigation is important. Your client, or your client's boss, must identify with these goals. Describe the major business goals, with numerical targets, that your project will help the organisation to achieve.

Project goals - Outline the goals of your proposed investigation. They must clearly show **"what"** the investigation will achieve. Agree on the goals with your client.

Operating values - Describe the way you will go about achieving the project goals, that is **"how"**. Express them as values if you can, for example, using the best technologies or sharing key information. Here you are taking account of the culture of the organisation. Describe the most important values your client seeks to achieve.

C - The Proposed Solution

The parts of "C" describe your process for achieving the client's goals. This section allows you to present your approach in detail. It should remain free of technical terminology, especially if people who are not specialists in your field are to read it.

Include the diagram showing your major process steps in your executive summary. There should be no "copy and pasting" of text from one section of the document to another. Keep the "Overall approach" to four pages and use diagrams, tables, and charts wherever possible.

Approach summary - Outline your approach in one or two short paragraphs. This is where you introduce your solution and describe why your approach is the best available. To avoid misunderstandings later, note anything not included.

The proposed process map - Present your process as a diagram to make the major steps clearer. After showing the process diagram, expand on the process steps, but don't write more than a page in total. If a standard process is proposed, or your process is long and involved, attach the detail as an appendix or provide a short summary.

Project analysis - Effective analysis of costs, benefits and risks are an essential part of any proposal. The depth of your analysis will depend on the size of the project - or possibly on your project's likely effect on the business. The aim is to describe the value you will deliver using your approach.

Implementation of recommendations - Make sure you are clear about the extent to which your client would like to involve you in fulfilling the final project recommendations. And briefly describe how you will keep your client up-to-date as the work progresses so there are no surprises within the final recommendations.

D - Managing the Project

The parts of "D" describe the program management, including the monitoring and review systems. In essence, "Managing the Project" shows that you understand the importance of successful implementation, both for your own investigation and, later, for the recommendations that will come out of it. Two pages should be enough but make sure there are clear references to any detail placed in section 3.

The project team - Use a diagram to describe the team and show included site people, highlighting the importance of their contributions. Include the CVs in the appendices.

The project schedule - Prepare a schedule showing the proposed timing for major project steps. Show resources and budget needed and include milestones and accountabilities. Show the proposed timing for each project and show the review points.

Managing the change - The client usually plans this, but you need to include it in the program.

Co-commitments - Co-commitments are necessary activities that fall outside your client's area of responsibility and could stall implementation. Taking care of co-commitments is also a client responsibility, but you need to make note of them here, and remind the client about them during the program.

4. PROVIDE THE BACKGROUND (SECTION 3)

This is where any details should remain. It may contain your detailed analysis of the issues, details of the method you plan to use, or detailed CVs of project team members. We can often add information as appendices, but some large proposals may need a more formal Section 3.

The structure is less prescriptive than the other two sections so there is no need to force Section 3 into the precise structure of Sections 1 & 2. It is rarely necessary, for example, to include an expansion of "The Ideal Situation" in Section 3.

Present material in Section 3 as tables, charts, pictures and diagrams, with small amounts of text used to describe the information contained within them. This makes the document easier to write, and much easier to read.

Clear referencing from Section 2 is important. It helps your reader easily move from the more abstract information in Section 2 to the fine detail in Section 3. For example, when presenting the team structure in Section 2, make reference to team members' detailed CVs in Section 3

It is usually counterproductive to copy and paste from Section 3 into Section 2. The repetition can confuse or annoy your reader. Confine all fine detail (especially technical detail) to Section 3 and summarise the important information you wish to say before transferring them into Section 2.

5. OTHER (SECTION 4)

This section provides some tips based on personal experience.

5.1 Price

It is a good idea to provide the detail for how you arrived at the value of the work. It may assist in later discussions for potential project overruns. A table may be useful including resource, hours, rate etc.

5.2 Deliverables

Be specific, this assists in closing the project or work and whether the client has any recourse to demand more of your time. Manage client expectations further by providing delivery dates for the work.

5.3 Dependencies

Timely delivery of the work depends a lot on others. Make sure the client is aware of this.

5.4 Payment Terms

Many independent consultants are at the mercy of client policy. Make sure you have investigated the client's terms and understand them.

5.5 Proposal Acceptance

Provide an area for client acceptance for the project to start; hold on to a copy (signature and date and agreement you can start). Start delays are never factored in but due dates never change.