

Advancing the arts, sciences, and technology of new business acquisition and promoting the professionalism of those engaged in those pursuits.



Proposal writing as a career comes of age

Good proposal writing has always been a requisite for successful tenders but the job has fast become an art-form and the people with the skills are finding themselves in a very wanted position.

Proposals are mostly written at high-speed, under intense time pressure, while ensuring all aspects of the response are in agreement with the mandatory RFP guidelines. "Unfortunately in South Africa, most proposals are still written at the last minute with some vague idea that copy and paste by the company PA will be enough," said Accenture Bid Centre Manager, Debbie Colhoun.

"The tender environment has become a lot more competitive and there is a real art to proposal writing – a company's proposal is a key marketing document that sells your company whether you win the bid or not."

Writing a proposal is always lengthy and costs time and money every time you're not awarded the contract. It is clear that just being able to do a job well is not good enough, you have to let the client know it and experienced writers shift away from writing product-orientated proposals and deliver a proposal that puts the customer right at the heart of the response.

The necessity of defining an effective approach to the response clearly illustrates why proposal writing has carved out a niche for itself as a profession unto itself. "We are definitely seeing more requests from the market for technical proposal specialists and proposal managers who are skilled in the art of writing a persuasive proposal," added Colhoun.

Bill Graham is a bid proposal management expert and trainer. "In our current economic climate, a lot of companies are needing to recruit bid managers or are needing to put together a large bid for the first time and don't have the necessary skills. We are definitely seeing more of a demand for business writing skills," he said.

Proposal writing is receiving more attention simply because it relates to the changing way we are doing business. With many companies downsizing there are more people who have moved into consulting or small business fields, all offering similar products or services. Tendering is an excellent way to compare companies and ensure you get the best pricing and support.

Additionally, government mandates now require staff not only to put potential vendors through an exhaustive tendering process but also to be able to prove their own delivery of programs is cost-effective. What this means is that proposal writing is a requisite for successful business people.

MD of nFold, Sandy Pullinger, is an experienced entrepreneur, proposal writer and trainer. "The exact words you use in your proposals and tenders can make the difference between success and failure. Choose the right words and your prospects will find you and your company irresistible. When it comes to writing proposals and tenders, your word choices do matter. Use them wisely and watch your win rates soar," she said.

Colhoun continued, "We are starting to usher in a level of higher quality bids in South Africa and there is a definite trend in the market for more professional proposals. Proposals are not going to disappear, the figures we are dealing with are just too big nowadays and with the competition getting greater, necessarily the skills needed are going to become more honed. A good proposal sells a company from beginning to end."

Both Colhoun and Graham are Association for Proposal Management Professionals (APMP) members. "There is great training available through the APMP and there needs to be more awareness of it, of the fact that managing proposals

and proposal writing can be a career choice," said Colhoun. "I wish I had known about the courses available when I started with proposals ten years ago."

nFold will be hosting the first South African APMP Conference on 3 and 4 June 2009 with the aim of providing a platform for anyone involved in proposal quality initiatives to learn about the different aspects of proposal management and to facilitate networking with their peers.

"Specifically in South Africa," said Pullinger, "we feel that there is need for Proposal/Bid Managers to stand together as the APMP, so we can influence and assist government/tender board bodies in setting guidelines and standards around the tender process."

nFold and the APMP are committed to the pursuit of proposal excellence and are building a local community to grow the profession. nFold is a specialist software company that has pioneered the sales effectiveness market in South Africa, helping companies of all sizes win more business with less effort.

By attending the June APMP Conference, delegates will get a jump start on their competition by learning the latest trends and issues in the world of proposal development and building skills that can lead your organisation to conquer new frontiers in proposal development. The conference is a learning environment for both novice and seasoned proposal professionals.

Email events@nfold.com for more information.

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