



Global Link

[Home](#) > [Resources](#) > [Section E-Newsletters](#)

[Current Issue](#) | [Previous Issues](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Author Guidelines](#) | [Editorial Staff](#)

How to Select a Language Service Provider

Global Link, July 2011

By: Silvia Avary, Eva Klaudinyova, and Anna Schlegel

Selecting a language partner is an important decision and at times an overwhelming one. You want to establish a long-lasting partnership that you can trust, but with so many language service providers (LSPs) offering comparable services and prices, the selection can be tricky. To help reduce the risk of making a choice that you will later regret, it is crucial to take the supplier-selection process seriously and employ the best tools to find the one that will meet your needs. In this article, we will share some of the tricks we have learned in supplier selection that have proven successful.

Identify your needs. The first thing you need to do when you are ready to start request for proposal (RFP) is to decide what you are missing from your current supplier pool. Maybe you need to improve quality, or perhaps add more languages or technology. Many times you need better prices or a faster turnaround. It's key to know what your priorities are before starting so that you can craft your RFP questions based on your needs.

Since you probably don't want to go through the same exercise a year or two from now, think strategically: What are you missing now and what will you need long term? Think about the strategic growth of your team and the company, about additional markets and languages that might grow or be added to your usual set of languages, about geographical expansion, emerging countries, new technologies, value-add services, and so forth. The ideal supplier should not only be able to cover your current needs but also the needs you might have a few years down the road and be able to provide additional services other than the one you are evaluating them for.

Do your research. Do proper research and talk to industry colleagues or consulting groups to gather possible candidates. Ideally, you should start with a large pool of suppliers (10 to 25) that have been recommended by people you trust.

Get buy-in. Doing an RFP the right way is a time-consuming process, so it is crucial that you get your management's buy-in. It is also important to involve other stakeholders; it is a mistake to try to do it alone when other people in the company can also benefit from the new supplier. They will be more inclined to support your decision if they take part in the process.

It is very important to involve the purchasing department in your company before you begin the RFP process. Not only do they ensure that your supplier-selection process follows all required steps by your company but they also can support you during the RFP and perform many time-consuming steps that you normally would have to do yourself. Make sure to measure responses objectively and back up your final choice with numbers, not just your intuition.

Contact all companies, send out and collect RFPs, manage the translation sample process, collect all data in a quantifiable format, and make recommendations from a purchasing standpoint. Remember, your purchasing team consists of experts in finding the right suppliers for your company, and you should most definitely use and rely on their expertise and experience.

Do a request for information (RFI) first. We recommend doing an RFI before you do an RFP. The reason is that an RFI is much shorter and it can focus on the specific areas that are important to you. This way you can work with a large pool of suppliers from which you can select the finalists that will participate in your RFP. An ideal RFI is a semiformal questionnaire with up to 25 questions. At the beginning of the process, you have defined all your major requirements that every supplier must be able to comply with. The RFI should contain questions asking the suppliers whether they can comply with all these specific requirements, and how. If you do it correctly, at the end of your RFI you should have selected three to four strong candidates to participate in your RFP, all of them fulfilling your main requirements.

While creating an RFI, make sure you:

- ◆ Keep it simple.
- ◆ Ask general as well as specific questions, but make sure you cover all your needs.
- ◆ Always ask about the structure of the company, main teams, and number of employees. You don't want to find out down the road that your supplier is too small, or outsources all their services.
- ◆ Don't assume that the supplier can provide all services you need just because most of them do. There are still some (although few) highly specialized suppliers out there that don't do desktop publishing, can't process certain file formats, or prefer not to use computer-assisted translation tools.
- ◆ Include a price template if price is important at this point.
- ◆ Don't ask for samples yet. Do you have the bandwidth and the resources to review and evaluate all of them?

Creating the RFP

A good RFP should contain a package with well-crafted questions and instructions on how to fill them out. It will also have nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) and other important documents from your purchasing and legal departments. You might want to include translation samples at this stage, but make sure to keep them small as it will be a lot of work to review them later. Since you won't be paying for them, it is also not fair to the candidates to ask them to translate large samples for free. Sending your style guides and glossaries along with the samples is optional. It might be important for you to send them along with the samples to see which candidates actually follow your instructions. If you decide to do so, review both materials and delete any confidential information you might not want to share with potential suppliers: product names, company-specific terminology, internal confidential information, and so forth.

In addition, you might want to ask candidates to do a showcase presentation, live or over a web-based conferencing tool. In this case, provide a set agenda with instructions or you won't be able to compare apples to apples later. If it is at all possible, visit their headquarters and meet their staff, especially the team that will be assigned to your account. You can learn a lot from a company by visiting their site and talking to their employees. At the end of the day, you want to hire a supplier that treats their personnel well or you might end up selecting a supplier with a high turnover of employees, which could be very disruptive for your business.

Ask for client references and try to talk to them on the phone as opposed to email, as you can learn a lot more by actually talking to people. You should also do a "blind reference," not only talk to people designated officially by your vendor as their reference contact, but also people in the industry that you know personally who have experience working with your chosen supplier. They can give you some unbiased feedback or point out things you might want to check on in more detail. If you are a supplier, please make sure to ask your

client if it is acceptable to use them as references. Some companies do not allow employees to give testimonials on suppliers and clients can get a little wary if you try to use their names.

Also try to meet or talk to the supplier's senior management staff—rather than just the salesperson trying to get your business—to find out about their strategic-growth plans and any new initiatives they are working on (including technology and internal process improvements), and try to gauge the importance of your business to them. The best supplier for you would be the one that is big enough to handle all your current and future needs but small enough to treat you as one of their best customers. And one that can grow with you, rather than be left behind.

Measure responses and back up your decision with metrics, not just your intuition. Remember the first question you had to answer: What am I missing in my current supplier pool? If you did your homework and know your priorities, you already assigned higher weights to the criteria that matter the most. When you do an RFP, you should work with criteria such as overall capabilities, customer service, pricing, quality of the translation samples, and quality assurance processes as the foundations for your evaluation.

The criteria are always the same; what changes is the weight assigned to each criterion and the questions asked. Prepare questions that will answer what is important to you under each criterion and evaluate the responses based on a scale from one to 10, with 10 being a strong answer. Alternatively, you can grade the answers based on a simpler scale of complies, complies partially, or doesn't comply with the requirement, with a certain weight assigned to each. Of course there is still some subjectivity, but it is an important tool to bring a certain level of objectivity into the selection process. Combine your scores with the other stakeholders (if they are involved in the grading process), average them out, and then multiply them by the weight you assigned to each item. This method should allow you to get a fair and objective result that will guide you to make your final decision. Besides, showing metrics and backing up your decision with numbers will give you the confidence you will need to present your choice to your management.

Congratulations, you have selected a new partner. Responding to an RFP is quite expensive and time-consuming for suppliers, so keep that in mind and respect all your candidates by doing your homework and treating them fairly and professionally. They are your potential business partners so be honest, clear, and as open as possible. To ensure fairness and objectivity, make sure the information you share with one candidate is available to all. Because localization is a small industry, people know people so instruct all your colleagues not to have side conversations with or provide any information to the suppliers they might know from their previous careers. This would give them an unfair advantage, and according to certain purchasing departments with stricter rules, might even be a reason for disqualification. Each supplier should only have contact with one designated person at your company, and any information shared with one candidate has to be provided to all. Likewise, if you are a participant supplier, answer the questions truthfully, as getting caught at "massaging the truth" can close doors for you forever. Remember, at the end of the day, this is about finding a great fit for both parties. The ultimate goal for both sides should be building a long-lasting partnership that is based on trust and mutual compatibility.

Finally, a good resource for more information on the supplier market is the nonprofit and nonbiased [Globalization and Localization Association](#).

Silvia Avary is a cofounder of Women in Localization and senior localization manager at Symantec. Eva Kludinyova is a board member and cofounder of Women in Localization and senior manager of global operations for VMware. Anna Schlegel is chairwoman and cofounder of Women in Localization and director of globalization programs for NetApp. Emails: silvia_avary@symantec.com; eklaudinyova@vmware.com; anna.schlegel@netapp.com

Rate this item:



Simply click on a star to rate this item.

Comments:

[Write A Comment](#)