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Request for Proposal (RFP) Quality Measurement: in Engineering, Management Consulting Projects

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ABSTRACT

Engineering and management consulting services have a high share of total consulting services. Occasionally, there are difficulty for the client to define the problem, which needed to be solved by a consulting project, the project has some ambiguity that reflected in its request for proposals document (RFP). Engineering and management consulting projects have different types of RFP depending on the degree of defining project problem and defining scope of work. Poor quality of the written RFP may lead to project scope creep and other problems that affecting the success of the project. It is important for the consulting companies to have a system for evaluating the quality of the written RFP to classify the project according to its degree of uncertainty and establish the system for managing the project. This research proposes a model for RFP evaluation. To develop the model, the measurement scale (MS) was established. The MS is based on factors of measurement. Those factors and their relative importance on the evaluation were determined using Fuzzy-AHP method. Then a scale for measuring each factor was established by using RFP evaluation cards (RFPEC). The model was applied for three projects. The proposed model was a helpful tool in the preliminary stage for categorizing the project and then taking the decision whether to develop a proposal and bid for the project or not.

1. Introduction

Contribution of the consulting projects in the worldwide economy is high. In 2011, Haverila et al. announced that the consulting services are estimated to be a $330 billion industry worldwide. Consultancy organization (consultancy.org) in 2023 suggests that consulting industry generates between $100 billion to $300 billion in revenue depending on definition of consulting work.

At the heart of the industry stand six main domains which are, strategy consulting, management consulting, operations consulting, financial advisory, HR consulting and technology consulting that combined span services in over 200 industry and functional areas (consultancy.org). The number of consulting projects is expected to increase year after year (Eriksson, 2022). The objectives of engineering and management consulting projects are to solve problems happening during work or improve existing working systems for clients. Adamopoulos in 2021 emphasized that consultants should propose long-term solutions for their clients not only short-term

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solutions.

Few research focus on the RFP and analyze it. Tkáč et al. (2016) analyzed the RFP for a construction company to know the causes that lead the company to reject submitting proposals for many projects. They did not discuss the quality of the RFP.

This research focuses on engineering and management consulting projects that use competitive bidding method. The RFP term in this research refers to any documents that contain information about the project issued by the project client up to the deadline of submitting project proposals, such as letter for invitation to bid, project definition, and project specification. Information about the consulting project during the stage of proposal preparation is mainly collected from the RFP documents. The increase of the ambiguity about the project may lead to an unsuccessful project. Decreasing the ambiguity of the project can be achieved by good writing for the RFP documents. The good quality of the written RFP helps in giving the Contractors/Consultants (CC) important and comprehensive information about the project and enables them to prepare a reliable cost estimate and analyse the project risks.

Larson, R. & Larson, E. (2009) defined that "the lack of clarity" of the project is the first cause for project scope creep. Ajmal, et al. (2020) and Tsiga et al. (2017) stated that managing project scope requires the ability to capture and control the exact project requirements. Clarity of the project and exact project requirements are reflected in the quality of the RFP of the project.

This research proposes a model that is helpful tool for estimators in consulting companies for assessing project risk in the preliminary stage of preparing the project proposal. The proposed model can be used as an indicator for the degree of uncertainty in the project. Increasing the uncertainty of the project may generate many problems for the consulting company starting from the inability of evaluating an accurate estimate for the project tasks to the total project failure. This research introduces a Quality Indicator (*QI*) for the RFP that enables the CCs to evaluate the degree of project scope of work ambiguousness. The *QI* is connected to the expected risks of the project.

2. Background

Consulting is defined by Greiner and Metzger (1983) and Naarmala and Tuomi (2006) as "an advisory service provided by qualified persons who act objectively to help identify/analyze problems and assist in the implementation of solutions". Consulting services are diverse. Some of consulting services are feasibility, environmental studies; project planning; cost management; quality, forensic services; research and development; or tender preparation (United Nations, 2002; ACENZ 2004).

In 2007, Martino differentiated between engineering consulting from product-based and manufacturing-based work as in the manufacturing-based works there is physical and time separation between product development and its delivery. Products can be tested to assure their quality before delivering to the client or customer. But in consulting there is immediacy of production and a level of personalization very different from selling a standard product through a retail channel. Engineering consultancy was also defined as the application of physical laws and principles of engineering to a broad range of activities in the areas of construction, manufacturing, mining, transportation, and environment (Consultancy Development Centre, 2006; Owusu-Manu et al., 2015).

Definitions of consultants are as varied as the professions to which they consult (Banai and Tulimieri, 2013). Within the literature, two typologies of consultancy are identified: management consulting and engineering/technical consulting (Pittinsky and Poon, 2005). Greiner and Metzger (1983) as well as Kubr (2002) have defined management consulting, whilst Weiss (2009); Chelliah and Davis (2011); Poór and Milovecz (2011); and Walesh (2012) have defined consulting in general regardless the type of the profession of the consulting work.

The type of consulting project is determined according to the project scope of work and the role of the consultant as an external consultant. Greiner and Metzger (1983), in their definition of management consulting, have determined the role of the consultant as assisting the client organization to identify management problems, analyze such problems, and help, when requested, in the implementation of solutions. The responsibilities of consultants, in construction project delivery, as described by Idoro (2011) are: developing the requirements of project clients, setting targets, deadlines and establishing standards for meeting these requirements, preparing project documents that describe the targets, deadlines and standards set and sometimes monitoring the activities of contractors that execute a project to ensure that the targets, deadlines and standards are achieved. The role of management and engineering consultant has discussed in number of research e.g., Kakabadse et al., (2006); Appelbaum and Steed,

(2005); Chang and Chiu, (2005); Pellegrinelli, (2002); United Nation, (2002). There are consensuses in the literature on the role of consultant to problem solving.

3. Assessment Factors for the RFP Document and Data Collection

The first step to develop the model is determining the assessment factors used for assessing the RFP document. Figure (1) shows research steps. The research of Kululanga and Price (2005) for measuring quality of specifications has some factors focusing on measuring quality of writing for specifications. Toma and Alharthi (2009) have also introduced a model measuring quality of consulting projects' specifications. These studies do not evaluate the whole RFP document, where specifications are just a part of it.

The main question at this research stage is: "What are the factors that can be used for evaluating the RFP ambiguity clearance and give complete information about the project?". After consulting the opinion of 12 experts working in engineering and management consultation, they concluded that 11 sections of the RFP should be written in good quality to give clear information about the project in addition to another factor, which is the consistency of the RFP sections. The quality of 12 factors has an impact on the quality of the RFP. Those factors are "Definition of project work problem"; "project objectives"; "project scope of work"; "statement of the work method"; "project deliverables"; "project duration"; "client information"; "procedures for bidding"; "bid items list"; "dates of bidding process"; "bid evaluation process" and "consistence of RFP documents".

A questionnaire was developed containing those factors. The questionnaire was sent to 127 experts working in engineering and management consultations. The objective of the questionnaire is to collect experts' opinions about the importance of each factor in giving clear information about the project and evaluating the RFP. The scale proposed by Saaty (2008) was used to express the degree of importance of each factor. The meaning of the scale as shown in table (1).

Consultants were asked to evaluate the importance of each factor according to the scale of table (1). They were not asked for a pairwise comparison of factors. 105 of the experts filled in the questionnaire and returned it back. The minimum experience of experts who filled in the questionnaire was seven years of working in consultation. No more factors were suggested by experts.

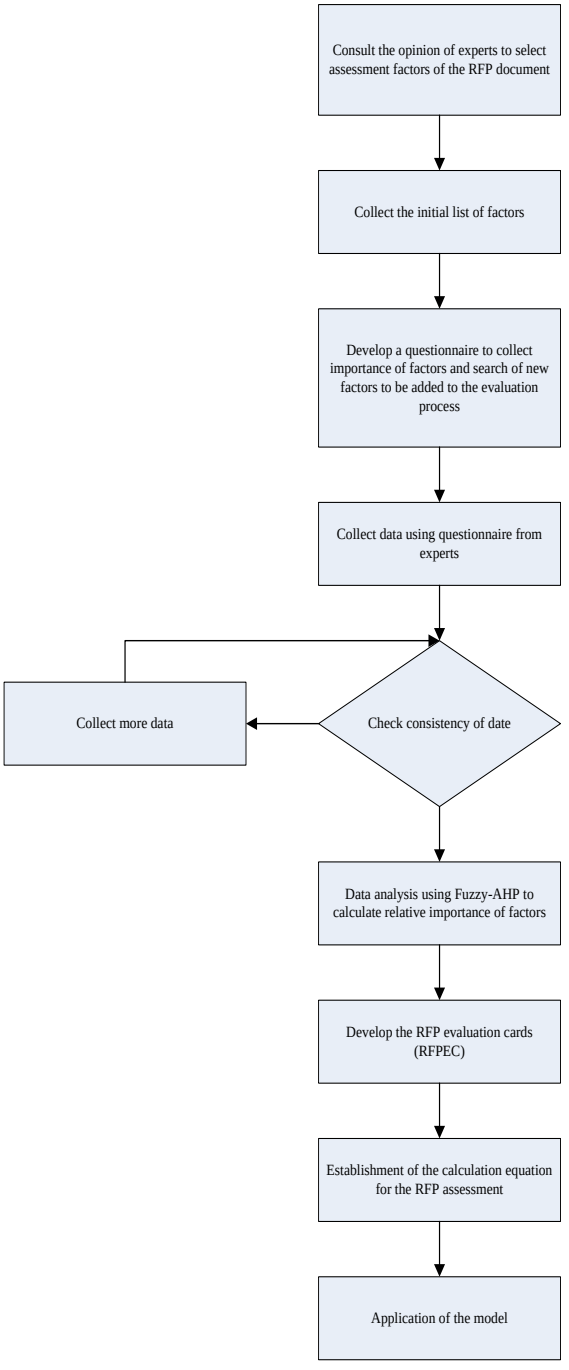


Fig. 1: Research Steps

Table 1. Scale for weighing importance of factors.

Low importance	Important	Medium importance	High importance	Very high importance
1	3	5	7	9

4. Data testing

Test-retest is used for checking data reliability. After a month of receiving the filled questionnaires, 22 experts who filled the questionnaire were selected to refill the questionnaire for the second time. Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated for the 22-testing data between the opinions of experts of the first filling of the questionnaire and the second filling, to check the consistency of the collected data. The lowest correlation coefficient among the 22 experts was (0.88), that demonstrates the reliability of the data. The old and new data of experts were plotted as scatter diagrams to check the correlation between them. Figure (2) shows an example of the scatter diagram for one of the experts' old and new evaluations.

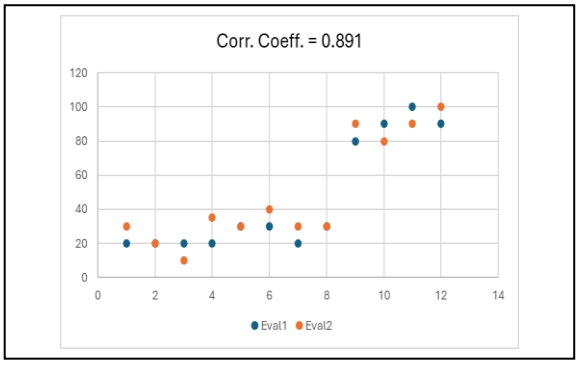


Fig. 2: Checking data reliability.

5. Data Analysis

Data collected using the questionnaire were converted into pairwise comparison between factors for each expert evaluation. The method used for the pairwise comparison, of each expert opinion, is estimating the difference between expert's evaluations for factors. As an example: when a factor (X1) assigned an importance of 9 degrees and another factor (X2) assigned an importance of 5 degrees by the expert. Then as pairwise comparison between the two factors will be (X1) 5 degrees when (X2) is 1 degree. In the pairwise comparison it is important to keep the differences between factors. The difference between factors (X1) and (X2) were 4 degrees, as assigned by the expert. In pairwise comparison the difference is the same (4 degrees).

After preparation of the pairwise comparison for the factors with respect to each expert, the Analytical Hierarchy Process with Fuzzy method (Fuzzy-AHP) suggested by Buckley (1985) and Ayhan (2013) were used to evaluate relative importance of assessment factors. The following steps were applied.

The pairwise matrix shown in equation (1) was developed, where d_{ij}^{k} indicates the k^{th} expert's opinion preference of i^{th} factor over j^{th} factor, via fuzzy triangular numbers. The "tilde" represents the triangular number demonstration, for the example, $\widetilde{d_{12}^{1}}$ represents the first expert's preference of first factor over second factor, and equals to, $\widetilde{d_{12}^{1}} = (2,3,4)$, where the values (2,3,4) were given based on pairwise comparison of table (2).

Table 2. Saaty pairwise scale and corresponding triangle fuzzy numbers.

Saaty Scale	Fuzzy Triangle Scale
1	(1, 1, 1)
2	(1, 2, 3)
3	(2, 3, 4)
4	(3, 4, 5)
5	(4, 5, 6)
6	(5, 6, 7)
7	(6, 7, 8)
8	(7, 8, 9)
9	(9, 9, 9)

$$\widetilde{A^{k}} = \begin{bmatrix} \widetilde{d_{11}^{k}} & \widetilde{d_{12}^{k}} & \dots & \widetilde{d_{1n}^{k}} \\ \widetilde{d_{21}^{k}} & \dots & \dots & \widetilde{d_{2n}^{k}} \\ \dots & \dots & \dots & \dots \\ \widetilde{d_{n1}^{k}} & \widetilde{d_{n2}^{k}} & \dots & \widetilde{d_{nn}^{k}} \end{bmatrix} \quad (1)$$

The preferences of each expert $\widetilde{d_{ij}^{k}}$ were averaged and $\widetilde{d_{ij}}$ was calculated as in the equation (2)

$$\widetilde{d_{ij}} = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^{k} \widetilde{d_{ij}^{k}}}{k} \quad (2)$$

According to average preferences, the matrix of equation (1) was updated as shown in equation (3).

$$\tilde{A} = \begin{bmatrix} \tilde{d_{11}} & \cdots & \tilde{d_{1n}} \\ \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ d_{n1} & \cdots & d_{nn} \end{bmatrix} \quad (3)$$

Buckley (1985) suggests calculating the geometric mean of fuzzy comparison values of each factor. The geometric mean was calculated using equation (4). $\tilde{r_i}$ represents triangular values.

$$\tilde{r_i} = \left(\prod_{j=1}^{n} \tilde{d_{ij}}\right)^{1/n} \quad i = 1,2,\dots,n \quad (4)$$

The fuzzy weights of each factor were calculated using equation (5), by finding the vector summation of each $\tilde{r_i}$. Then, the (-1) power of summation vector was calculated. Replace the fuzzy triangular number, to make it in an increasing order. Finaly, to find the fuzzy weight of factor "*i*" $(\widetilde{w_i})$, each $\tilde{r_i}$ were multiplied by the reverse vector.

$$\widetilde{w_i} = \tilde{r_i} \otimes (\tilde{r_1} \oplus \tilde{r_2} \oplus \dots \oplus \tilde{r_n})^{-1}$$

$$\widetilde{w_i} = (lw_i, mw_i, uw_i) \quad (5)$$

For de-fuzzifying $\widetilde{w_i}$ values the center of area method proposed by Chou & Chang (2008) was applied using equation (6).

$$M_i = \frac{lw_i + mw_i + uw_i}{3} \quad (6)$$

M_i is a non-fuzzy number, but it needed to be normalized by equation (7).

$$N_i = \frac{M_i}{\sum_i^n Mi} \quad (7)$$

Table (3) and Figure (3) show the results of fuzzy-AHP analysis. "Defining project deliverables" was the most important factor, its relative importance of 13.34%, whereas the lowest important factor is "Project bid items list", its relative importance of 3.89%.

Table 3. Relative importance of factors

Project Deliverables	13.34%
Project Scope of Work	12.45%
Project Objectives	11.78%
Defining Project Work Problem	10.94%
Consistence of RFP Documents	9.30%
Statement of the Work Method	8.93%
Client Information	8.13%
Evaluation Process	6.87%
Procedures for Bidding	5.59%
Project Duration	4.60%
Dates of Bidding Process	4.18%
Project Bid Items List	3.89%

Data analyses are showing logical results, where the most two important factors for measuring the RFP clarity are "determining project deliverables" and "defining project scope of work". When these two factors are evaluated highly, it is expected that the RFP will be clear and give good information about the project that may lead to avoid scope creeping.

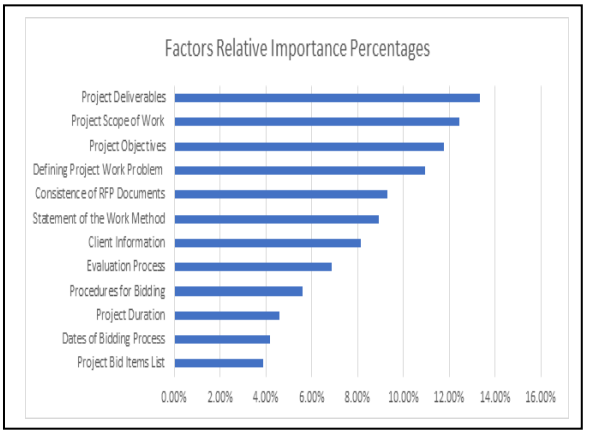


Fig. 3: Assessment Factors' Relative Importance

6. Evaluation Model for the RFP

The evaluation model of the RFP depends on measuring the clarity and professionalism of written sections of the RFP. "Request for Proposal Evaluation Cards" (RFPEC) where developed. Figure (4) shows one of the RFPEC. The user of the model, firstly, will determine for each factor whether it is defined in the RFP or not. If the factor is defined and exists in the RFP, then secondly, the user of the model will evaluate the clarity and professionalism of the written section using a scale from one to ten. One means the written section is not clear and has much ambiguity whereas, ten means the written section is good and gives clear information about the project and its works.

Table 4. Example Data for using the model

	Factor defined or not in the RFP (1)	Evaluation Degree (2)	Importance of factor (3)	Evaluation points for each factor (4)
1. Defining Project Work Problem	Yes	6	0.1094	0.6564
2. Project Objectives	Yes	7	0.1178	0.8246
3. Project Scope of Work	Yes	5	0.1245	0.6225
4. Statement of the Work Method	Yes	6	0.0893	0.5358
5. Project Deliverables	Yes	8	0.1334	1.0672
6. Project Duration	Yes	5	0.046	0.23
7. Client Information	Yes	9	0.0813	0.7317
8. Procedures for Bidding	Yes	8	0.0559	0.4472
9. Project Bid Items List	Yes	7	0.0389	0.2723
10. Dates of Bidding Process	Yes	9	0.0418	0.3762
11. Evaluation Process	Yes	3	0.0687	0.2061
12. Consistence of RFP Documents	Yes	8	0.093	0.744

The model uses the following equation (8) to calculate points for evaluation of the RFP.

$$QI = \sum_{j=1}^{n} (p_j * i_j) \quad (8)$$

Where: *QI* (Quality Indicator) is the evaluation of total points; p_j is the evaluation of factor (*j*); i_j is the importance of the factor (*j*); (n) total number of factors.

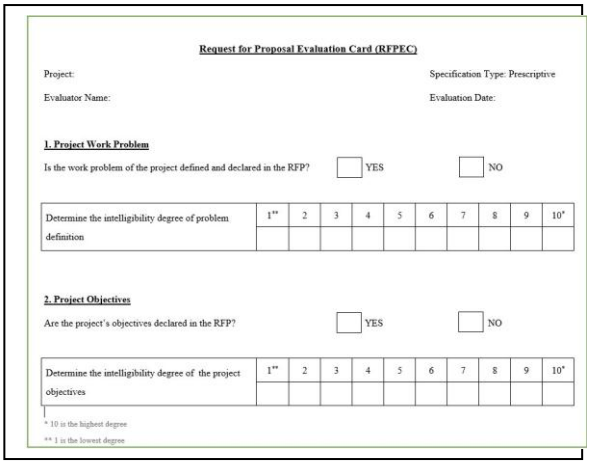
Table (4) shows data for a hypothetical project to illustrate how the model works and method of calculating the (*QI*). By applying the model: columns (1) and (2) are assigned by the user of the model. Values of column (3) are the relative importance of factors shown in table (3). Values of column (4) are the multiply of column (2) by column (3). The total evaluation points (*QI*) for the RFP of this project are 6.714.

A brainstorm session was organized for the 12 consulting experts who participated at the beginning of the research to consult them about the scale that relates the (*QI*) to the degree of risk expected from the project. The scale of table (5) resulted from the brainstorm session. The 12 experts agreed that low (*QI*) value for the RFP that is in range (1 – 3) indicates that the project has high risk because many things unclear from the beginning and this risk may be covered by bidding with high price for the project. When (*QI*) in range (4 – 7) this represents medium ambiguity about the project, which means project risks can be expected and registered in the risk list from the beginning of the project and residual risks will be minimum this case can be expressed as (manageable risk project). The low-risk projects are that projects with (*QI*) value for the RFP in range (8 – 10). The maximum value of the (*QI*) is ten.

For the hypothetical project, the (*QI*), resulted from the calculations, will be compared to the scale in table (5) to classify the project as medium ambiguity (manageable risk project). The final decision for bidding or not is the top management decision of the consulting company.

Table 5. Degree of clarity of the RFP

QI	1 – 3	4 – 7	8 - 10
Clarity of RFP	High ambiguity (high risk project)	Medium ambiguity (manageable risk project)	Low ambiguity (low risk project)



Request for Proposal Evaluation Card (RFPEC)

Project: Specification Type: Prescriptive

Evaluator Name: Evaluation Date:

1. Project Work Problem

Is the work problem of the project defined and declared in the RFP? ☐ YES ☐ NO

Determine the intelligibility degree of problem definition	1**	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10*

2. Project Objectives

Are the project's objectives declared in the RFP? ☐ YES ☐ NO

Determine the intelligibility degree of the project objectives	1**	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10*

* 10 is the highest degree

** 1 is the lowest degree

Fig. 4: Request for Proposal Evaluation Card (RFPEC)

7. Model Application

The proposed model can be applied in the preliminary stage of RFP study and preparation of proposal to project. The model was applied using two different approaches. The first approach was applied in a Saudi Arabian consulting company to have preliminary assessment of project risks. This approach was applied into two projects, one is a re-engineering project, and the other project is a study to decrease construction wastages. In the first project, evaluating the RFP was done individually by three estimators working in the proposal development department of the consulting company then taking the average of all the (*QI*) of the evaluations. However, in the second project a workshop was organized for four estimators from the proposal development department of the consulting company to reach a consensus for evaluating the RFP then (*QI*) was calculated.

The model was applied in a third project using the second approach. The consulting company wanted to take a decision to select only one project from three available projects to prepare a proposal for it. The company wanted to select the project which is likely to be lower in risk. The model is used to evaluate the three different RFPs of the three projects and then the RFP with higher (*QI*) was selected to prepare a proposal for it.

8. Conclusion

The RFP is an important document that gives information about the project as well as the client. The reasons for the poor quality of the RFP may be due to the inability to define the project objectives and the wanted project deliverable or due to a weak management system at the client organization. Whatever the reason is for poor RFP quality, these projects have many risks.

Due to the vagueness of some consulting projects, a tool is required to assess the degree of vagueness of RFP document that reflects the degree of uncertainty of project works. The suggested model is a good decision support tool in the preliminary stage of preparing the proposals for consulting projects to figure the ambiguity of the RFP that may affect the risks of the project. The model measures the degree of vagueness of the RFP using a scale from one to ten, then another scale was suggested to categorize the project as high risk, manageable risk, or low risk project. The model is a good indicator of risk in projects, where increasing the ambiguity and less professionalism in preparing the RFP is an indicator for high risk of the project. The model was applied for three consulting projects and could be used as selection tool between different project based on the degree of RFP clearness.

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