

# THE GREAT PROCUREMENT ILLUSION

## WHY AN RFS WON'T SAVE YOU

### Addressing the challenges of RFPs, RFTs, and RFSs

The procurement industry is facing a growing identity crisis. Frustrated by slow, rigid processes, many organisations are looking to an RFS as the solution — believing that a more open-ended, solution-focused approach will magically drive better outcomes.

But is the problem really the process, or how we're using it? Procurement methodologies — whether RFPs, RFTs, or RFS — are only as effective as the strategy behind them.

## Introduction

Procurement is no stranger to reinvention. Every few years, a new request type promises to fix inefficiencies, streamline processes, and unlock better outcomes. The latest contender? The Request for Solution (RFS) — positioned as the answer to rigid RFPs and restrictive RFTs.

On the surface, an RFS sounds like the natural evolution of the RFX process. Instead of prescribing rigid requirements, it invites vendors to propose solutions tailored to business needs. Flexibility, innovation, and collaboration — it checks all the right boxes.

But here's the uncomfortable truth: a new RFX won't solve procurement's real problems. The issues go deeper than the framework itself. Whether it's an RFP, an RFT, or an RFS, the success of any procurement process still hinges on clarity, strategy, and execution. Without those, an RFS is just another acronym — a bandage, not a cure.



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# 01 Defining RFPs and the challenges

## Understanding the Landscape

A Request for Proposal (RFP) is a cornerstone of procurement, providing a structured framework for soliciting detailed bids from vendors. Its purpose is to bridge the gap between an organisation's needs and the market's ability to deliver innovative, cost-effective solutions. However, while the RFP is a foundational tool, its application often exposes significant shortcomings in procurement practices.

One of the most persistent issues is the lack of clarity in RFP documentation. Frequently, procurement professionals approach the RFP process with vague or incomplete business objectives, expecting vendors to identify the root problem, propose a solution, and outline its implementation. This approach creates uncertainty for vendors and limits the potential for innovative responses.

For instance, there is a critical distinction between asking for a "solution to traffic congestion" versus specifying the construction of a bridge. The former invites a broader range of creative solutions, allowing vendors to propose ideas such as enhanced public transport systems, smart traffic management technologies, or even behavioural change campaigns. The latter, by contrast, prescribes a singular path forward, often missing opportunities for more sustainable or cost-effective alternatives.



## 01 Defining RFPs and the challenges

### The Challenge of Misalignment

This example highlights a fundamental challenge in procurement: unclear objectives lead to misaligned solutions.

When organisations fail to define their needs in measurable terms, they unintentionally create roadblocks that compromise the effectiveness of the procurement process. Vendors may overdeliver or underdeliver, misinterpreting expectations due to insufficient guidance.

# +266.134%

## In Servicable Market Value by 2037

These inefficiencies are particularly concerning given the growth trajectory of the procurement industry. In 2024, the global procurement as a service market was valued at \$6.88 billion and is projected to grow to over \$25.19 billion by 2037, reflecting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of approximately 12.9% ([Research Nester, 2024](#)).

As the market evolves, organisations will increasingly rely on streamlined procurement processes to maintain a competitive edge. Without addressing foundational challenges like unclear RFP objectives, they risk falling behind in a rapidly advancing sector.

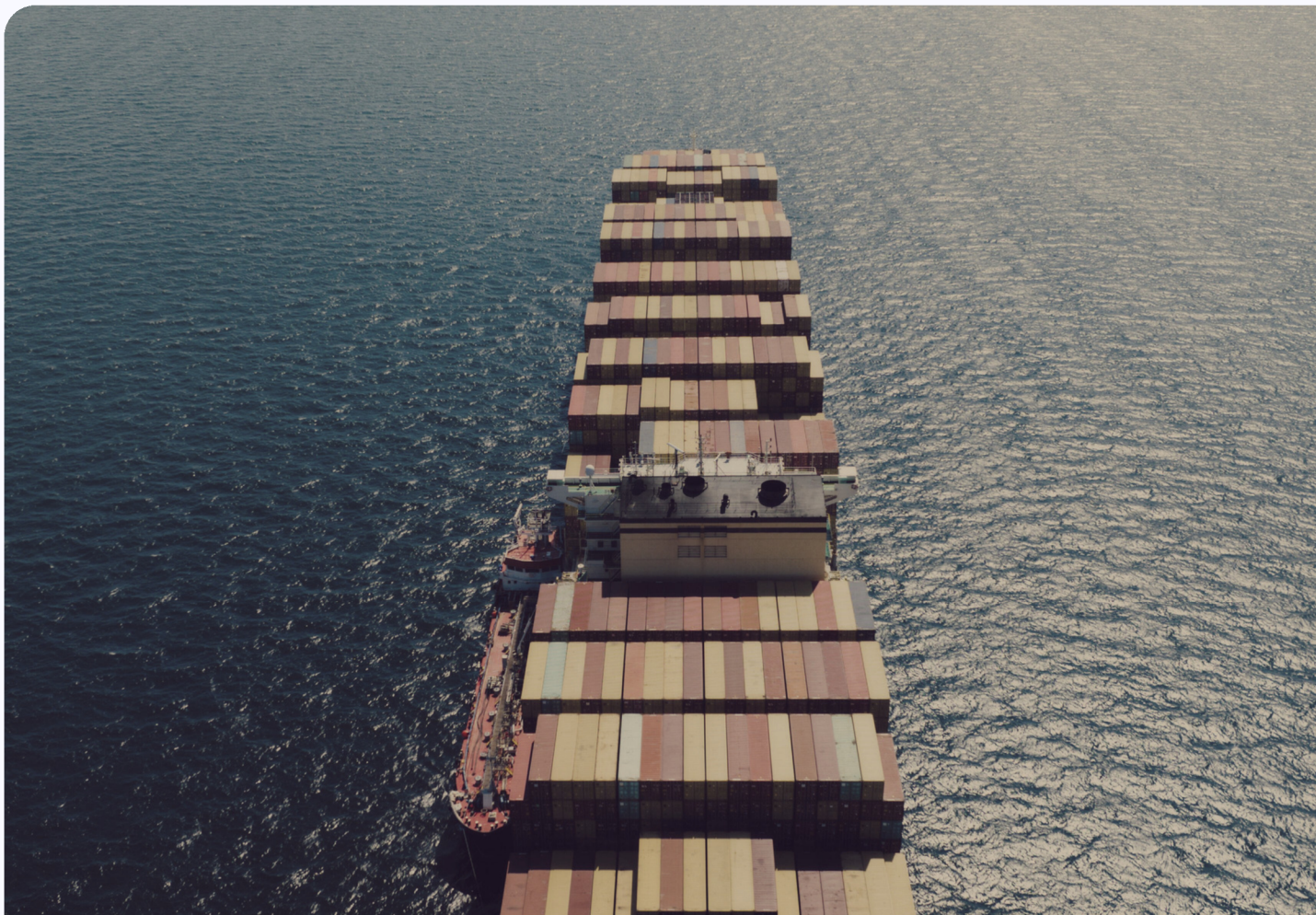
# 01 Defining RFPs and the challenges

## Why It Matters

Procurement teams often face a dilemma: encouraging innovation while maintaining control.

When the RFP process starts without a clear alignment between stakeholders and organisational goals, the outcomes are at risk of being suboptimal. Vendors may interpret broad objectives differently, leading to solutions that either fail to address the core issue or overcomplicate the implementation process.

Additionally, this misalignment often forces procurement teams to go back and forth with vendors during the evaluation phase, delaying the decision-making process and increasing administrative overhead. The inefficiency not only impacts procurement timelines but also erodes trust between vendors and buyers.



## 02 The introduction of RFS and its limitations

### Enter the Request for Solution (RFS): A Band-Aid, Not a Cure

The Request for Solution (RFS) is the latest trend in procurement, hailed by some as the next evolution of RFX processes. Positioned as an alternative to the traditional Request for Proposal (RFP), the RFS claims to solve the shortcomings of poorly written RFPs by encouraging vendors to focus on delivering innovative solutions. On the surface, this seems like a step in the right direction, but in reality, the RFS often serves as a band-aid rather than a cure for procurement's systemic challenges.

The core issue remains unchanged: procurement professionals frequently jump to solutions without fully articulating the problems they aim to solve. By bypassing the critical step of defining clear problem statements, organisations unintentionally create ambiguity that hampers vendor performance. Even the most innovative vendors cannot address a problem they do not fully understand, leaving them guessing and ultimately stifling the innovation procurement teams are meant to champion.

While the RFS invites vendors to propose their best ideas, it often shifts the burden of problem definition from procurement teams to vendors. This reactive approach doesn't eliminate the problem—it compounds it, adding another layer of complexity to an already strained process.

## 02 The introduction of RFS and its limitations

### Rethinking the Focus

The emergence of RFS highlights a broader challenge within procurement: the gap between technology adoption and meaningful digital transformation. Despite advancements in procurement technology, a significant barrier persists.



71%

of procurement professionals believe that procurement technology investments are a low priority when setting the company's IT budget.  
- Gartner 2024

This perception underscores a missed opportunity to implement tools that could streamline problem definition and foster better collaboration between buyers and vendors.

Instead of adopting new methodologies like the RFS, procurement teams must focus on equipping themselves with the right tools and processes to articulate their needs clearly and efficiently. This strategic shift will not only address current inefficiencies but also lay the groundwork for fostering long-term innovation and value creation.



## 03 Poorly written RFPs and vendor responses

### The Impact of Ambiguity

Unclear and poorly written RFPs are significant obstacles to effective procurement. When procurement teams fail to articulate their needs with precision, vendors are left to interpret vague objectives, often resulting in verbose or generic responses. This lack of clarity not only slows down the procurement process but also undermines the quality of vendor proposals and, ultimately, the solutions selected.

Consider the following user story:

**"As a procurement manager, I want to sign contracts."**

At first glance, this statement appears straightforward, but it lacks critical context. Without additional information, vendors are left wondering: What type of contracts? What are the compliance requirements? What level of automation is needed? By rephrasing and adding specificity — **"As a procurement manager, I want to sign contracts digitally with automated approval workflows, so that I can reduce manual processing time by 50% and ensure compliance with company policies"** — the objective becomes clear, actionable, and measurable. This level of clarity enables vendors to tailor their proposals effectively, reducing unnecessary back-and-forth communication.

### Where Clarity Meets Collaboration

For procurement teams to realize the full potential of vendor partnerships, clarity must be a core principle in the RFP process. This means:

- **Defining Clear Problem Statements** – Before drafting an RFP, procurement teams should ensure they fully understand the issue they are addressing, rather than defaulting to pre-determined solutions.
- **Structuring RFPs for Usability** – RFPs should include specific objectives, evaluation criteria, and flexibility for vendors to propose alternative approaches.
- **Encouraging Open Dialogue** – Creating opportunities for vendors to ask clarifying questions or suggest innovative solutions ensures that procurement decisions are based on the best available insights

## 03 Poorly written RFPs and vendor responses

### The Cost of Unclear RFPs

When RFPs lack structure and specificity, vendors often respond with overly broad or boilerplate proposals in an attempt to cover all potential interpretations of the requirement. This results in:

- Time-Consuming Evaluations – Procurement teams must sift through lengthy, generic responses to extract meaningful insights, delaying decision-making.
- Reduced Competition & Innovation – Vendors who could provide innovative solutions may opt out of the process if they find the RFP too vague or restrictive.
- Missed Opportunities for Value-Driven Procurement – When vendors cannot differentiate their proposals due to unclear requirements, procurement teams are left choosing based on price rather than total value, reinforcing a race-to-the-bottom mentality.

This is a critical issue, especially considering that **80% of frequent B2B buyers have switched suppliers at least once within a 24-month period**, often due to suppliers not meeting their needs. [newsroom.accenture.com](https://www.accenture.com/newsroom)

Procurement teams that fail to write clear RFPs risk reinforcing this perception and missing out on suppliers who offer more strategic, long-term value.

### Missed Opportunities in the Vendor Relationship

Beyond the internal inefficiencies, unclear RFPs also damage buyer-vendor relationships. Vendors want to collaborate and add value, yet procurement processes often limit their ability to do so. Research indicates that **closer relationships between buyers and suppliers could create significant value and help supply chains become more resilient**. [mckinsey.com](https://www.mckinsey.com)

However, when procurement teams fail to structure RFPs effectively, they inadvertently discourage vendor engagement. Instead of fostering collaboration, procurement becomes a transactional process, limiting opportunities for strategic partnerships that could drive better outcomes.

## 04 Challenges in Scoring and Evaluation

Procurement isn't a silo — it's the connective tissue between finance, operations, and strategy. By improving how RFPs are written, procurement teams can unlock better vendor relationships, more innovative solutions, and procurement processes that align with broader organizational goals.

### Evaluating Beyond Compliance

One of the fundamental issues in procurement evaluation is the tendency to prioritise compliance over capability or innovation. Many RFPs use rigid, closed-ended questions such as, "Does your solution support feature X?" which reduces the opportunity for vendors to showcase their full range of capabilities. While these types of questions are useful for ensuring baseline compliance, they often fail to capture qualitative differences between solutions.

### The Innovation Dilemma

By focusing too heavily on compliance checkboxes, procurement teams risk excluding solutions that, while not meeting a specific predefined requirement, could offer superior outcomes through alternative approaches. The most successful procurement strategies allow vendors to demonstrate their expertise and propose innovative solutions rather than simply confirming adherence to rigid specifications.

### Striking the Right Balance

Evaluation frameworks must account for both technical compliance and the broader value a solution can provide. One approach is to use **tiered evaluation criteria**, where mandatory compliance factors are assessed first, but higher weightings are given to qualitative factors such as scalability, usability, and long-term strategic alignment. Procurement teams that integrate structured scoring methodologies with expert evaluation panels see better outcomes, particularly in high-stakes, strategic procurement initiatives.



## 05 Multi-Stage Procurement Processes

### Streamlining Vendor Selection

Multi-stage procurement processes, such as Expressions of Interest (EOI) and Requests for Information (RFI), play a crucial role in refining vendor selection before diving into a full-scale RFP. These preliminary steps **reduce administrative burden**, ensuring that only qualified vendors proceed to later stages of the process.

One effective approach is the **two-stage RFP process**:

- Initial Evaluation – Focus on non-priced criteria such as technical capability, past performance, and alignment with organisational goals.
- Final Selection – Shortlisted vendors submit a full proposal, including pricing, ensuring the procurement decision is based on both qualitative and financial considerations.

### Why This Matters

Despite the clear benefits of multi-stage procurement, best practices are **often overlooked due to time constraints, stakeholder pressures, or internal resistance to process complexity**. In some organisations, decision-makers push for speed, resulting in rushed RFPs that fail to filter out unqualified vendors early on.

### The Risk of Skipping Steps

Without a structured multi-stage approach, procurement teams can face:

- Increased vendor churn – Suppliers who do not meet the requirements waste valuable time and resources, leading to **process inefficiencies**.
- Late-stage disqualifications – Vendors reach the pricing stage only to be rejected for non-compliance, requiring an RFP restart or renegotiation.
- Mismatched expectations – Vendors who misunderstand requirements may submit proposals that fail to meet strategic needs, **prolonging decision-making**.

Building **efficient yet robust** processes is key—ones that don't compromise quality for the sake of speed but also avoid unnecessary bureaucracy that slows down vendor engagement.

## 06 Best Practices for Effective RFPs

### Principles for Success

To improve RFP outcomes and maximise vendor engagement, procurement teams should adopt the following best practices:

- **Clearly define problems without prescribing solutions** – Instead of dictating a specific approach, describe the challenge and allow vendors to propose innovative ways to solve it.
- **Share evaluation criteria transparently** – Vendors perform better when they understand how their responses will be assessed, leading to stronger proposals and a fairer selection process.
- **Provide sufficient background information** – Context matters. Procurement teams should include key business objectives, technical constraints, and operational challenges to help vendors craft targeted responses.
- **Use open-ended questions to encourage innovation** – Instead of binary yes/no questions, structured questions such as "How does your solution address scalability challenges?" allow vendors to showcase their capabilities.
- **Separate pricing evaluations from capability assessments** – Evaluating technical merit **before** reviewing pricing prevents cost from overshadowing quality and ensures the best solution—not just the cheapest one—is selected.

**By following these principles, procurement teams can create a framework that empowers vendors to deliver their best work while ensuring transparency and alignment with organisational goals.**

## 07 Training and Tools for Better Procurement

### Building Capacity and Capability

Improving procurement processes requires more than good intentions—it demands **investment in people, processes, and technology**.

### Lessons from Other Disciplines

Borrowing from the principles of agile project management and software development, procurement teams can improve outcomes by:

- **Using iterative requirement gathering** – Engaging stakeholders in defining needs before formalising an RFP.
- **Developing clear user stories** – Ensuring specifications are actionable and relevant to end-users.
- **Incorporating feedback loops** – Allowing vendors to ask clarifying questions early in the process.

### The Role of Technology

Procurement tools that **automate evaluation processes**, facilitate vendor collaboration, and provide real-time insights **can drastically improve efficiency**. Yet, **71% of procurement professionals say procurement technology investments are a low priority** in IT budgets ([Gartner, 2024](#)). This highlights a **critical gap in digital transformation efforts**.

Organisations that invest in procurement-specific solutions gain a competitive advantage by reducing manual effort, improving evaluation accuracy, and fostering better vendor relationships.



## 08 Closing Thoughts

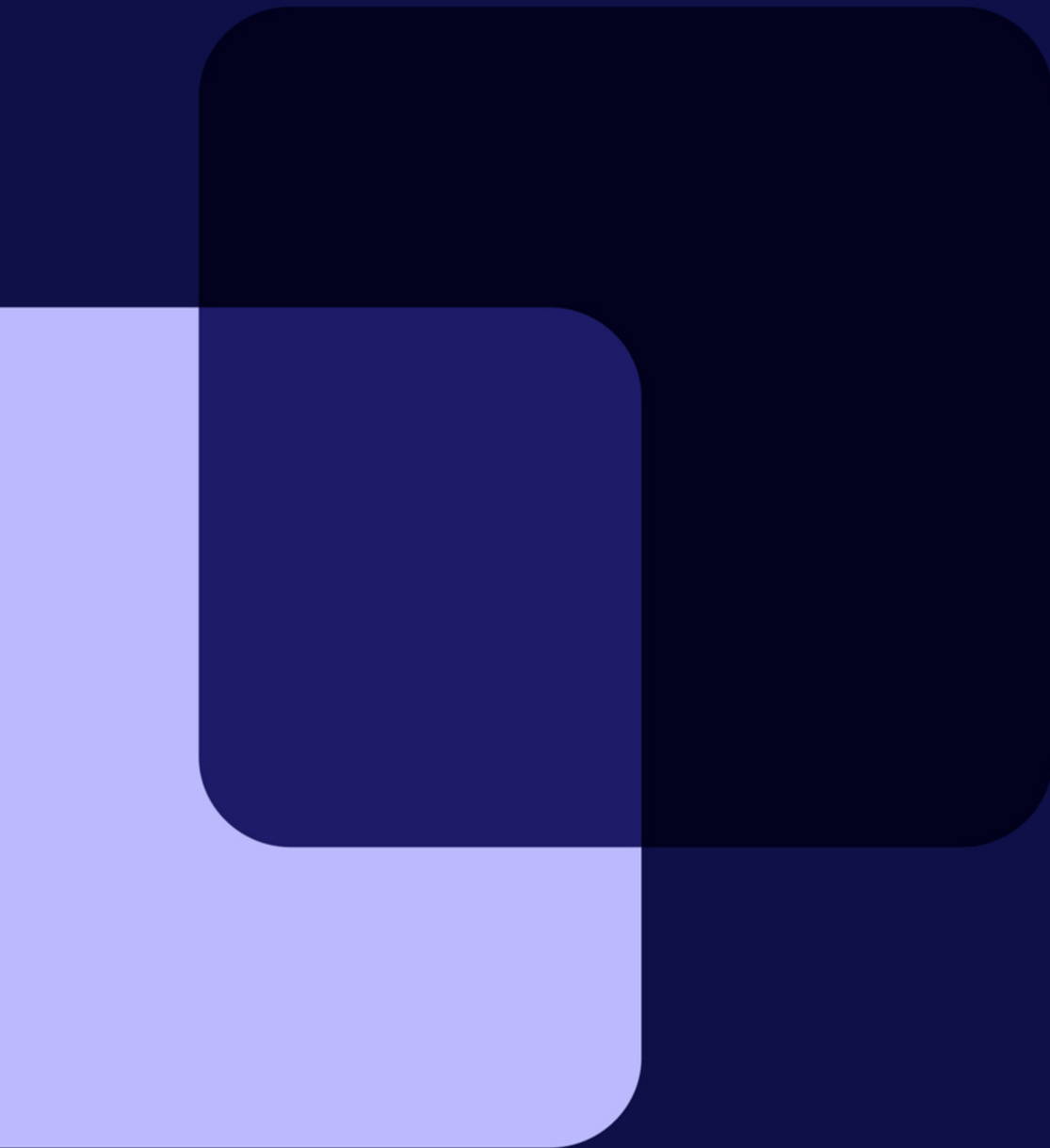
### Transforming Procurement Practices

Poorly written RFPs don't just waste time — they cost money, frustrate vendors, and limit innovation. Addressing the root causes of these inefficiencies requires **clarity, alignment, and a commitment to continuous improvement**.

At **Cotiss**, we believe in empowering procurement teams with the **tools, insights, and strategies** they need to succeed. Whether through **best-in-class software, tailored training, or thoughtful innovation**, we're here to help redefine what great procurement looks like.

Procurement is evolving — let's move beyond the status quo and build a future where procurement drives **meaningful results**.





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