

Overcoming a Culture of Cautiousness

The Critical Role of RFPs in Innovation

By Rich Bowlen



The Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) is changing the way human services and child welfare leaders think about technology and innovation, which is causing a ripple effect across all programs and future initiatives. We're shifting the focus from monolithic to modular systems, prioritizing flexibility and human-centered design, and bringing emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and machine learning to the forefront of our conversations. There's even a certain shift in how we think about managing and supporting a workforce that becomes more mobile and remote, but wants to remain connected, every day. Yet, we're still living in a culture of cautiousness.

Despite decades of conversations and planning around the demand for access to modern tools and ideas, as an industry we are still restrained by obsolete processes and policies, and in some instances, outdated mindsets. Despite constantly asking for bold, new, innovative ways to protect and strengthen vulnerable children and families, we still tend to fall back on the “same old things” we’ve done for the past 25 years. Stuck in a comfort zone, we’re fully aware we must move forward, yet we’re afraid to take the first step.

In many ways, we’re simply paving the proverbial cow path—updating our existing systems and processes to meet new rules and requirements without considering: What do we really need? How do we place true best-of-breed technology in front of the workers who deserve it and the children and families whose lives depend on it? What’s the hold up?

We’re afraid to fail. To get blamed if something goes wrong. To move in an unprecedented direction when we might as easily play it safe and simply do what procedures dictate.

RFPs: Laying the Foundation for Innovation

Technology has evolved considerably in the last 20 years. Most of us are likely to be more comfortable using advanced technologies in our personal lives, yet the consideration for such tools in human services, especially child welfare, is slowly catching up.



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between the Northwoods team and child welfare partners, including agencies, advocacy groups, policymakers, court systems, state and local legislators, and national industry leaders.

The perspective shift driven by CCWIS offers an open door to fresh, new ideas and opportunities to act on them. We’re not confined to technology innovation, rather innovation in every sense of our practice. In fact, technology and practice should be joined at the hip as a dynamic duo of sorts as we navigate the possibilities in child welfare.

Discovering what’s out there and what can be leveraged in child welfare need not be uncharted waters. Since it kicks off the process of exploring options and researching available technologies, requests for proposal (RFPs) are at the forefront of creating meaningful change. Knowing what to ask for is a critical part of constructing the RFP. After all, the best way to gather such information is to pose the question.

An RFP—or a request for information (RFI) for agencies that have the time and resources—is an ideal way to get in front of the latest technology to determine what fits your business needs. When effectively executed, the RFP serves as a tool to solicit the right solutions to maximize investment when dollars and resources are tight. It’s a blueprint for out-of-the-box practice and a map for identifying the tools to make it happen.

Employing the same approaches to develop RFPs that were used more than two decades ago doesn’t fit today’s technology and business process needs. Planning from obsolete templates and guidelines won’t suit current and future needs. RFPs should be as bold and brave as workers in the field. The realities of their challenging work should serve as the foundation for innovation.

Think about it this way: the RFP begins the formal relationship between agency and vendor. It’s the first step in building a trusted and lasting partnership. Asking the right questions and evaluating the right criteria will differentiate a true partner in your innovation efforts from vendors offering “cookie cutter,” one-size-fits-all solutions.

Developing an RFP that accomplishes this considers common themes and practices. These will guide your entire process—from planning and writing the RFP to evaluating responses and ultimately awarding a contract:

■ **Clearly define your purpose:**

It’s common knowledge many

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technology projects fail. We know from experience failed projects begin with a failed RFP. A failed RFP may be too generic or too specific. A failed RFP may be written as a wish list, rather than something to benefit a specific set of users. A failed RFP may focus too much on policy, and not enough on problems to solve. Or, a failed RFP may not accurately represent the voice of the worker, and by extension, the children and families they serve. Be clear on exactly what you intend to accomplish and use the RFP to drive it. Without a clearly defined purpose you risk over-abundant responses that aren’t tailored to your needs and require more work to sort through and determine viability.

■ **Start with why:** If you want technology that truly supports your mission-driven work, you need to seek out a mission-driven partner. The RFP process is a great way to find out what motivates a potential vendor beyond meeting requirements and fulfilling contracts, which is the key to a lasting partnership. Incorporate questions to identify and evaluate the values that drive a company’s approach to building, implementing, and supporting products. What do they believe in? Does their mission align with yours?

■ **Put people and problems in the center:** The most innovative, impactful solutions are rooted in solving real problems social workers and caseworkers experience every day when interacting with children and families—not simply checking boxes on a list of requirements. With this in mind, at least one worker and supervisor should be part of the RFP team,

in addition to administrative, IT, and legal representatives. The front line should influence your decisions, as they will be most affected. Seek solutions that are designed and built by and for the people who will ultimately use them. Stay laser-focused on specific problems to solve and don't shy away from providing details about how or why those problems are impacting your agency's ability to meet its mission. Without a people-centric focus a vendor won't be able to accurately explain how they can help.

■ **See the whole picture, not just the software:** Figuring out technology solutions you need is just one piece of the puzzle. What's more challenging is figuring out the best way to provide the solution to your workers once it is purchased. The best RFPs go beyond the technical solution and evaluate the full scope of a project: How is it implemented? How will workers receive training? How will it be supported? How is the project managed? Most important, how does all of this sync up to your agency's goals and objectives?

■ **Think beyond buzzwords:** Most vendors will say they focus on human-centered design but dig deep enough to ensure this is the case. Don't get drawn in by attention-grabbing keywords and trends. Exercise due diligence to make sure vendors truly practice what they preach. Think back to your problems and ask how the vendor leverages these trending concepts to solve them. Similarly, use the RFP to gauge how they'll anticipate future needs that haven't been defined or identified. This is critical in identifying who has the right expertise to meet your state's or agency's unique needs.

■ **Emphasize integrations:** No vendor can realistically solve all your problems on its own. The right partner will help you understand what other systems they can integrate with to provide you a truly best-of-breed solution. Be integration-minded throughout the RFP process and ask vendors to demonstrate how they can exchange critical data and information to help

you make more informed, evidence-based decisions. Require them to show how they minimize duplication requiring users to navigate between multiple systems. Flexibility is also critical. Ask about methods for integration in addition to systems a vendor can integrate with.

■ **Focus on program outcomes:** Human services agencies need vendors and solutions that help achieve program goals for ensuring safety, improving well-being, and achieving permanency, not simply IT goals like reducing infrastructure or guaranteeing uptime. Use the RFP process to gauge how well a vendor understands and can meet business needs. Use practice examples like family finding or kin connections to demonstrate how the vendor will identify and understand the nature of all the connections in a case—how often and to what extent has each person been involved in the child's life? Have interactions been positive or

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negative? Ask a vendor to provide specific use cases or examples that demonstrate how their solution can help answer these questions.

■ **Never settle for “technically acceptable”:** Many agencies get stuck on the price tag when evaluating their technology options. But, using cost as the only criterion is often costlier in the long run. Simply put, the “lowest price, technically acceptable” approach should never apply when lives and well-being are at stake. Agencies should never

settle on solutions that don’t accomplish their goals. The community, your caseworkers, and most important, the children and families being served deserve more than just acceptable. They deserve the best of breed.

The longer we wait to truly embrace risk in innovation, the longer vulnerable children and families are missing out on the safety, stability, and well-being agencies aim to provide. They deserve more, as do workers and

supervisors serving on the front line, striving to positively impact lives.

It’s time for agencies, advocates, partners, and leaders to step outside the comfort zone. It’s time to be open to possibilities—the “why not?” and “what ifs?”—to take advantage of innovative, outcomes-driven solutions we’ve craved for so long. RFPs and RFIs are the key to unlocking critical insights and identifying and evaluating the right partners to fuel your innovation efforts, meet your mission, and position you for both immediate and future success. 