

Answering a Request for Proposal – Challenges and Proposed Solutions

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Abstract. [Context and motivation] The tender process is a special requirements engineering process. The customer provides a request for proposal (RFP) with requirements of varying detail. Several software companies answer with a solution proposal. The customer chooses the supplier according to the price and the quality of the proposed solution. So far very little has been published on how the requirements engineering process of the suppliers in producing the solution proposal should be performed. [Question/problem] The main challenges of the tender process for the supplier are that the RFP is very big and the solution proposal has to be produced in a very tight time frame. Furthermore, there is typically very little direct communication between customer and supplier, which is needed to clarify the requirements in the RFP. So, the supplier needs to guess the meaning of the requirements. [Principal ideas/results] The main idea to overcome these challenges is to produce a structured documentation of available solutions and typical risks experienced in former tender processes. This documentation can be used to identify the most important risks of the current tender process and to efficiently produce a viable solution proposal. [Contribution] In this paper we report on the experiences of a supplier company with tender processes. We summarize the challenges of the requirements engineering for tender processes from the viewpoint of the supplier and we describe the solutions envisaged by this company for these challenges.

Keywords: Tender process, requirements engineering, request for proposal, risk assessment, knowledge management.

1 Introduction

In the area of requirements engineering (RE) very often continuous communication between customer and supplier is assumed. In practice this is often not the case. In market-driven development the supplier produces software for a vast number of unknown customers [8]. Another situation where such communication is not possible is a tender process. The customer provides a request for proposal (RFP) with a big

number of requirements of varying detail. Several software companies answer with a solution proposal. The customer chooses the supplier according to price and quality of the proposed solution. The main problem of such a tender process for the supplier is that the RFP is very big and the solution proposal has to be produced in a very tight time frame. Furthermore, there is typically no direct communication between customer and supplier, which is needed to clarify the requirements in the RFP. So the supplier needs to guess the meaning of the requirements. Very few papers have been published dealing with RE for tender processes. Lauesen [2] is one of the few exceptions. He provides guidelines for the creation of the RFP by the customer. These guidelines could also support the suppliers. However, experience of the authors of this paper shows that they are not applied by the customers. We did not find specific guidelines for the suppliers in the literature.

In this paper we report on the experiences of a supplier company with tender processes. This company has 15 years of experience. Most of the supplier's projects are acquired by proposal submission. The supplier has been continuously improving their software engineering processes and the RFP phase.

In the following we summarize the challenges of RE during the tender process from the viewpoint of the supplier and we describe the solutions envisaged by this company for these challenges. We only refer to the RE process after the tender has been won, if it is important to understand the RE during the tender process. In Section 2 we discuss related work and introduce Lauesen's guidelines. Section 3 describes the situation of the supplier and the resulting challenges. Company-specific details are left out on purpose. The solutions for these challenges have been developed in several internal workshops at the supplier company and in one workshop moderated by the first author of this paper. The last workshop is sketched out in Section 4. The outcome of the last workshop – guidelines on how to improve the RE process of the supplier – is summarized in Section 5. Section 6 concludes the paper and proposes future research work on this topic.

2 Related Work

A literature search concerning RFP (or call for tender) surfaced a paper about an agile RFP process [1]. It advocates a careful RE process from the customer based on user stories of different detail. RE for tender processes is also discussed in the area of COTS selection e.g. [5], but again there the focus is on the customer view. Similarly, in [9] the customer RE process is targeted by re-using former requirements through patterns. In [6] requirements interchange in complex customer supplier relationships, such as in the car industry, is discussed. This also includes a tender process, but because of long-term relationships, a collaborative communication is advocated. This is not the case in most other domains. The consultant Tom Searcy published a book on RFP from the supplier viewpoint [10]. This book provides guidance on the decision whether to get involved in a tender process or not, and how to organize a response to the RFP. It does not comprise guidelines on the elicitation and management of the system features to be included in the response.

Most detailed are the mentioned guidelines by Lauesen. He discusses the tender process for public organizations in the EU from the viewpoint of the customer [2].

The processes have to follow strict rules to protect against corruption. Private RFPs do not have to follow these rules, but often adapt them.

Lauesen's guidelines are based on his Task and Support approach [4]. In his *Guide to Requirements SL-07* he provides a template for a better handling of requirements by the customer within a tender process [3]. It is aimed at coping with the major challenges such as risk balance between customer and supplier, solution-focused customer requirements or requirements which do not cover important customer demands. The approach provides two main artifacts which are explained in the following:

- *Task descriptions* to illustrate customer demands and to differentiate them from solution specifications.
- A *template* for associating customer requirements with proposed solutions that also provides information about gaps by using codes to categorize solution specifications.

Tasks

In Lauesen's approach user tasks capture customer requirements as shown in Table 1.

"A user task is something user and computer do together from start to end without essential interruptions. A good start point is something that happens in the user's world, for instance that a client calls. A good end point is that nothing more can be done about the case right now - the user deserves a "coffee break" (task closure)." [3]

Table 1. Requirement Template SL-07 Used for RFP (taken from [3])

| Task: Handle request | |
|--|--|
| Subtasks and variants: | Example solutions: |
| 1. Receive the request through phone or email. Or look at the pending requests. | |
| 2. Record the request, particularly the user's phone, email and the cause of the request. | In case of an email request, the system automatically transfers data from the email. |
| 2p. Problem: Cumbersome to record, particularly when it is an on-the-spot solution. | |
| 2a. It may be an update of an existing request. Find it. | The system shows possible matches with the caller's name or parts of it. |

Table 1 is taken from an example Hotline development project. It describes the first part of the main hotline task of handling requests. The first column of the table lists the subtasks. Subtasks can also capture variants. The user decides which subtasks

are done in which sequence. The advantage of using task descriptions is to be able to state problems (see Table 1, row 2p.) without specifying how to cope with the problem. Additionally, further context information related to a task can be captured, such as the actors (users) or the environment where the task is performed. Tasks which are related to the same environment can be bundled into work areas. A work area provides information about the user profiles (roles) and the environment.

Requirement Template

The template, as illustrated in Table 1, provides two columns. In column 1 the customer's demands are shown and column 2 presents solution possibilities regarding specific needs. This could be used to capture specific requirements in the RFP by the customer. In the example there are two subtasks (receiving the request and recording the request). R 2a indicates a variant for the subtask 2. Row 2p captures a specific problem when performing subtask 2. Column 2 indicates two example solutions proposed by the customer. The supplier, however, is free to provide a different solution for the subtask or problem.

Table 2. Requirement SL-07 Template Used as RFP Response (taken from [3], example codes are from an earlier version)

| Task: Handle request | | |
|--|--|-------------|
| Subtasks and variants: | Example solutions: | Code |
| 1. Receive the request through phone or email. Or look at the pending requests. | | 5 |
| 2. Record the request, particularly the user's phone, email and the cause of the request. | In case of an email request, the system automatically transfers data from the email. (The system has a semi-automatic capture of email. The user must initiate the recording.) | 1 |
| 2p. Problem: Cumbersome to record, particularly when it is an on-the-spot solution. | A. The present version records the caller based on the email. B. Release 18 will provide buttons for easy recording of the most frequent causes | 4.18 |
| 2a. It may be an update of an existing request. Find it. | The system shows possible matches with the caller's name or parts of it. The system also provides phonetic search. See screen 12 in App. x. | 1 |

The supplier could use the provided template for the response to detail the solution by filling column 2 in accordance with the supplier's system. The supplier may

indicate alternative solutions or deviations from solutions proposed by the customer as shown in Table 2 (row 2). For subtask 2, the solution proposed by the customer is cancelled and another solution mentioned. For the problem 2p, two new solutions are proposed.

In addition, a further column can be added to capture further information depending on the nature of the project. The customer may specify priorities of the requirements, or give a score for the supplier's solution. Another possibility is that the supplier fills in column 3 with a code that specifies the delivery (see Table 3) to support effort and time estimations. Example applications are shown in Table 2.

Table 3. Codes for Solution Specifications (taken from [3])

| Code | Description |
|-------|--|
| 1 | Part of the supplier's system |
| 2.x | An extension of the supplier's system, but the extension is covered by the ordinary maintenance agreement. Will be available from delivery stage x. |
| 3.x | Custom-made software or an extension of the supplier's system that is <i>not</i> covered by the ordinary maintenance agreement. Will be available from delivery stage x. |
| 4.y | Part of a future release that will be supplied under the ordinary maintenance agreement. Will be available from release y. |
| 5 | No solution is offered for this requirement. |
| alt.z | Alternative solutions are offered. This solution is part of alternative z. |

3 Being a Supplier in a Tender Process

The situation of the supplier is as follows: a customer has provided a list of requirements – often phrased as questions – and the supplier is requested to detail which requirements can be met and how the solution could look like. Often the RFP is made available via a web portal for online editing or with sophisticated Excel-sheets where each requirement has a specific identification key. This key is used for tracing by the customer, but also by the supplier. The answers to the questions have to be provided in the same manner as the questions. The supplier derives the answers to the questions from *existing systems* which have been developed earlier for other customers. During this phase (which we call *RFP phase* in the following) the supplier has to make difficult decisions as to which kinds of *gaps* exist between the request and the existing systems and how much effort it is to develop a system filling these gaps. In particular, it is important that the sketched solution system and the estimated cost are competitive compared to other suppliers.

In the following, we sketch the roles involved on the supplier's side in producing the response to the RFP and their information responsibilities. Based on this, we explain the challenges of this process.

3.1 Roles

Several roles need to be involved to create a response to an RFP. This includes RE experts, who have worked in former tender processes and who also have been involved in the projects following a successful tender process, as well as development experts, who have been involved in the creation of previous systems.

In detail, the following roles are important:

Consultants are responsible for the elicitation and specification of the requirements during the RE phase after the proposal has been won. As experts for the customer view, they are involved during the RFP phase. They do not have detailed technical knowledge and contact the module specialists when needed during RE. Their work during the RE phase is based on the outcome of the RFP phase. Thus, they are very interested in producing a good response during the RFP phase.

Management makes the main decisions regarding the price offered to the customer and the internal resources.

Module specialists are responsible for one or more modules which are used in the different existing systems. They know the technical details of the modules and how the modules interact with one another. They know when to consult the software architects. During the response creation they are important to decide on the detailed technical risks of the envisioned system.

Sales specialists are the persons mainly responsible during the RFP phase. They talk to the customer and answer the RFP. Therefore, they have to decide about the features to be offered to the customers. This decision is based on existing systems from the supplier. They delegate some of the work to answer the questions to consultants.

Software architects are responsible for the architecture of the system delivered to the customer. They know how the different modules work together. During the RFP phase they are involved as experts for the architecture-related technical risks of the envisioned system.

3.2 Information Responsibilities

The purpose of this subsection is to characterize the RE process of the supplier for the response to the RFP. As described in [7] we prefer to characterize a process by an **information model** instead of a process model. It would involve too much detail to describe all the activities of the roles. Furthermore, one would need to describe a control flow between the activities, which cannot be given in general. An information model answers the following questions:

- Which *viewpoints* (the level of technical detail and intended audience) are captured, and in which documents?
- Who creates which information, and for which audience?
- Who approves the documents?
- Who reviews the documents?
- Who checks consistency?
- Who approves and propagates change?

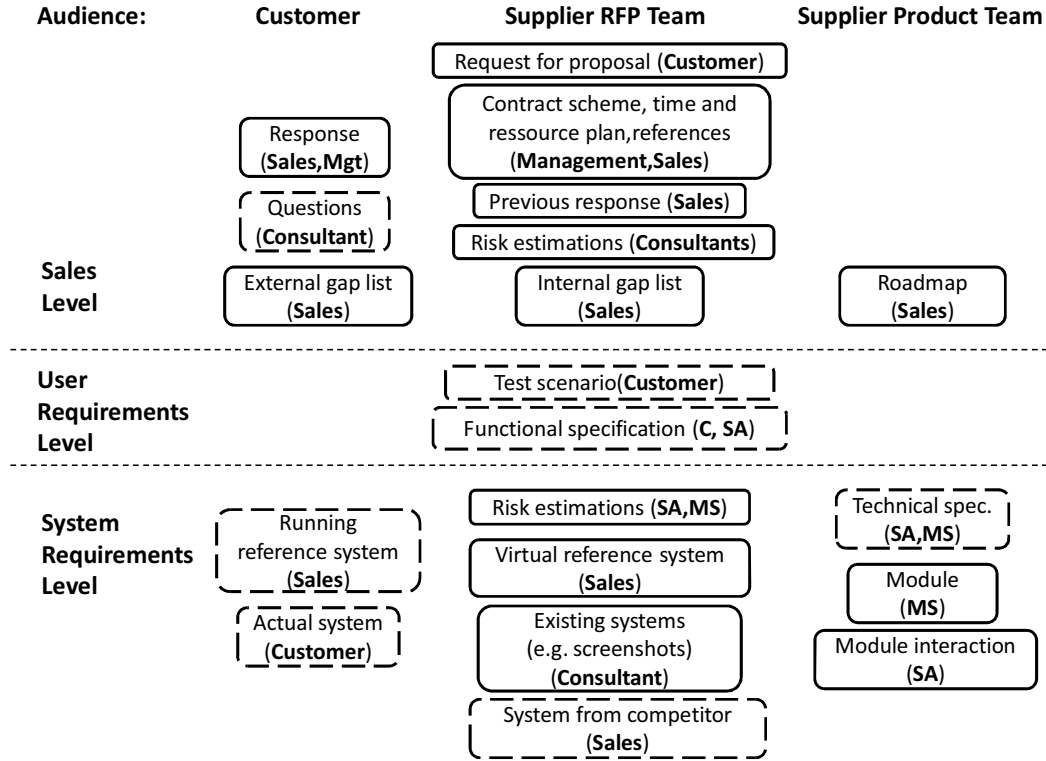


Fig. 1. Information Model

For the purpose of this paper we focus on the first two questions. In Figure 1 the information model is depicted. It shows the information (which is documented or just in the head of some person) currently used for RFP phase decisions. Each information item is represented by a box. Information which is only sometimes available is indicated with a dotted line. The information is categorized with respect to the creator (who creates the document or who is responsible for the information). The creator is shown in brackets in the box. The information is also categorized with respect to the audience (who is the intended reader of the document or the intended receiver of the information – shown in the upmost row) and the level of technical detail (shown in the left column). Three levels are distinguished:

Sales Level: This is the level used by the customer in the RFP and by the supplier in the response. It describes the system in terms of features (represented in the response to the RFP questions). On this level sometimes technical details are involved, but they are not backed up by a detailed understanding of the user requirements.

User Requirements Level: This level captures the business processes and use cases from the viewpoint of the user. It details the features and thus makes clear how the features support the user.

System Requirements Level: This level captures the functionality and quality characteristics of the system. It details the user requirements and thus makes clear which system functions and data and qualities are needed to realize the user requirements.

The audience can be the customer or the supplier team involved in the RFP phase. Furthermore, for the supplier, the product development team providing the products (in part by adapting existing systems) is involved as well.

The following can be seen from Figure 1:

Sales Level

- The customer provides the *RFP*
- The customer answers *questions* by the consultants (sometimes).
- Sales provide the *response* to the customer. This includes cost and project resources.
- Sales create a *roadmap*. This is a list of features which are to be developed in following releases, but which are included in the cost to the customer.
- Sales use *previous responses* to identify features which can be offered.
- Management provides constraints for the *contract, time and resource planning* as well as *references* to be included in the response.
- Consultants provide *estimations of risks* for selected features (as requested by sales).
- Sales create a list describing the *gaps* between the requested requirements and existing systems (for internal purposes and with adaptations also for the customer).

User Requirements Level

- The customer provides *test scenarios* describing business processes and use cases (sometimes). The supplier has to demonstrate that they can satisfy these scenarios.
- Sales use *functional specification* documents describing use cases for parts of existing systems (sometimes).

System Level

- The customer requests a *running reference system* (sometimes).
- The customer provides information on their *actual system* (sometimes).
- Software architects and module specialists provide *estimations of technical risks* for selected features (as requested by sales or consultants).
- Sales base their response on a *reference system*. This system is mostly *virtual*, that means it combines features of different existing systems, but this combination is not yet implemented at the time the response is created.
- Sales (with the help of consultants) use *knowledge about the supplier's existing systems*.
- Sales use knowledge about the *systems of the competitors* (sometimes).
- Module specialists and software architects use *technical specifications* of existing modules (sometimes).
- Module specialists provide knowledge about *the modules and their dependencies and conflicts* with one another.
- Software architects provide knowledge about *the interaction* of the modules.

3.3 Challenges

This section describes the main challenges for the supplier. They are clustered into two categories: the first category comprises challenges incurred by the behavior of the customer. Typically, it is not possible to alter this behavior. So the supplier has to develop countermeasures to deal with this behavior. In the second category are problems relating to RFP phase communication and decision making within the supplier.

Customer-Incurred Challenges

- The RFP is of low quality so that many questions are difficult to understand.
- The customer requests specific solutions. It would be helpful to understand the business processes and user requirements behind these solutions, because sometimes the supplier could offer a (better) realization of the user requirements, but not of the specific RFP requirements.
- Very rarely a direct communication with the customer is possible to clarify the requirements. Sometimes questions from the supplier to the customer are possible, but mostly the answers do not give much further insight. Furthermore, often answers to these questions are made available also to the competitors so that through questions supplier-specific features can become public. Therefore, the supplier has to decide very carefully which question to pose how.
- The supplier RFP team must estimate cost and effort without a detailed understanding of the requirements.
- The customer not always answers questions timely. This slows down the creation of the response.
- The time for response creation is very short.

Internal Challenges with RFP Handling

- The following challenges are typical for any offer. They are particularly difficult in the RFP process, because of the customer-incurred challenges mentioned above:
 - The decisions about what to offer to what price are high risk decisions. Wrong decisions induce high cost.
 - Effort estimation is difficult.
 - The balance between customer satisfaction and cost is difficult.
- It is dangerous to include screenshots in the response as the customer might get too focused on this exact solution.
- Communication between sales and consultants on the one side and module specialists and software architects on the other side must be very efficient.
- Gaps and risks are not always identified correctly: Often they can only be recognized by looking at the whole reference system. Individual systems or modules may offer solutions which are incompatible.
- A reliable basis for the creation of the response is not always given, as some knowledge regarding the existing systems is implicit. This knowledge is often captured in responses to previous RFPs, but not consolidated to be reusable in other responses or projects.

- The identification of experts and generalists who can provide important information is not easy.
- The response creation process is slowed down because experts are busy with other projects.

4 The Workshop

The supplier had discussed the challenges in internal workshops, but then decided to have one more workshop with an external moderator. In preparation of the workshop a one-day meeting was held with the first author and two representatives of the supplier. During this meeting the roles involved in the RFP phase, documents created and activities performed during these phases were discussed. In addition, also a preliminary list of challenges was identified and the goals for the workshop were determined. The latter were:

- To make clear the complexity of the RFP RE process and of the involved decisions, as well as the challenges faced during and after the decisions.
- To motivate the whole team for the importance of these decisions.
- To learn about existing techniques to support these decisions.
- To create a common view of the current processes and their challenges.
- To create a common view of possible solutions and a vision of applying the solutions.

Thus, the agenda of the workshop comprised the following topics:

- General introduction of participants, terminology and RE basics (including the template by Lauesen)
- Brainstorming of typical challenges of the RFP phase
- Creation of an information model for the current RFP process
- Discussion of solutions for particular challenges in two groups and presentation of group work results
- Discussion of workshop results, identification of next steps and feedback on the workshop

In addition to three members of the Heidelberg Software Engineering group, there were 10 participants from the supplier side comprising representatives of the different roles. The outcome of the workshop is presented in the next section.

5 Proposed Solutions for the Challenges

The following three main solutions for the challenges emerged during the workshop:

1. Development of a risk classification checklist for customer-incurred risks
2. Improved documentation of knowledge about existing systems
3. Improved documentation of knowledge from the RFP process.

These solutions are detailed in the following three sub-sections.

5.1 Risk Assessment Checklist

The first group identified types and indicators for customer incurred risks. These types and indicators deal with the specification and communication problems (the first three customer incurred challenges described in subsection 3.3), as the time constraints cannot be influenced. They should provide a checklist to review the RFP with respect to important risks. Examples are the following:

Type 1: Incomplete Customer Requirements

Many times the customers are influenced by the functionality of the actual system or an ideal system they have in mind. Therefore, the set of requirements contains often requirements to extend the functionality of the actual system. A lot of information or knowledge about customer needs or processes is available only implicitly. Additionally, interface requirements are often neglected, but they potentially involve risks and problems.

Indicators:

- Customer references a running or hypothetical system.
- Customer business processes or system interfaces are not transparent.

Type 2: Customer Requirements Are Specified on the Solution Level

If the customers specify requirements on a solution level, the solution alternatives are unnecessarily constrained.

Indicators:

- Customer references a running or hypothetical system.
- Customer requirements do not describe *What* is required of the new system, but *How* this should be implemented instead.
- Attachments such as screenshots, reference to interfaces, provided technical data suggest requirements on solution level.

Type 3: Customer Requirements Are Too Generic (e.g. Non-functional Requirements)

Every requirement that is specified in a vague manner poses potential risks. For example, “The system must provide filter functionality as in Excel”.

Indicator:

- Requirements are specified in a way, that they are not testable.

Type 4: Customer Requirements Specification Is Very Domain-specific

Depending on the customer context specific domain knowledge is necessary to understand customer needs. Missing joint understanding of terminology involves potential risks.

Indicator:

- A comprehensive glossary is absent.

Type 5: Customer Requirements Contain Conflicts

To identify conflicts within customer requirements, a link to business processes or workflows, which provide additional context information, would be helpful.

Conflicts will only become apparent if viewed in the context, but there are difficulties of an end-to-end view for requirements that span multiple systems or processes.

Indicators:

- Requirements could not be assigned to already known workflows or use cases.
- Customer business processes are not transparent.

Type 6: Customer Requirements Are Not Realizable

Every “must have”-statement in the RFP involves potential risks, because this specification represents non-negotiable requirements which must be provided by the solution. Additionally, technology-specific requirements also involve potential risks related to the technical realization possibilities.

Indicator:

- Requirements specification contains “must have”-statements.
- Data migration needs
- New technologies involved
- Interfaces to other systems are needed.

This preliminary list developed in the workshop should be consolidated by looking at previous tender processes. Furthermore, it should be continuously updated. Related to the approach of Lauesen (see Section 2) a tagging approach for requirements in the RFP could be developed. Codes corresponding to the risk types could be used to tag every requirement. This provides a better overview of the risk level of the whole RFP.

5.2. Documentation of the Existing System

As can be seen from the previously presented list of internal challenges (see subsection 3.3.), knowledge capture and communication are very critical. To be prepared for a quick assessment of the RFP the following knowledge should be readily available:

- Which existing system uses which module?
- Which module supports which features?
- Which feature is in conflict with which other feature? A conflict occurs when two features cannot be realized in the same system.

This knowledge should thus be documented compactly. The conflicts could be documented between modules or features. A conflict matrix between modules would describe which modules exclude one another. Similarly conflicts between features could be captured (which are typically induced by conflicts between the modules implementing the features). In both cases only the indication of the conflicts would not be enough, because it is not clear why this conflict exists. Thus, descriptions of the conflicts need to be captured as well.

Based on this documented knowledge it can easily be documented

- which feature (and thus which module) is used in the reference system and
- which known conflicts are contained in the proposed reference system?

The main effort for such documentation is to come up with a good set of features (not too detailed) and to find good representations for conflict relationships. In the long run visualizations of the conflict relationships will be helpful to get a quick overview. However, this requires high maintenance effort. Depending on the numbers of features, modules and systems, a database or an Excel sheet is sufficient. In both cases it is necessary to analyze which information is used when (e.g. when and how often does someone want to know which features a module has and when and how often does someone want to know which modules or systems are used for a feature). Then a format should be chosen according to these usages. This also applies to the definition of the conflict representation.

This documentation should be updated during development. New conflicts detected during the RFP phase or implementation of an offered system should be captured.

5.2 Documentation of the RFP Knowledge

As many people are involved in response creation at different times, as much knowledge as possible on assumptions and decisions made should be documented.

Such knowledge includes

- the features and modules of existing systems used for the reference system together with cost estimations and development risk estimations.
- the external and internal gaps. It should be clearly documented when a gap is identified. This applies when the gap is communicated to the customer (external), but also when the gap is closed in the response by a hypothetical feature in the reference system (internal). As described in Lauesen's approach (see Table 2) a gap should be treated as a feature (whose realization has to be paid by the customer or by the supplier in a future release).
- the lessons learned from the RFP negotiations.

The first two bullets correspond to a draft response consisting of a list of features which are tagged as external gap or as internal gap or as existing features. Each feature is also tagged with cost and development risk estimates. Clearly, only part of this information is passed on to the customer.

6 Conclusion

In this paper we have presented challenges and proposed solutions for the RE of the supplier in a tender process. To our knowledge this is the first description of the supplier view. The solutions have not yet been fully applied in practice. The company reviewed the workshop results one month after the workshop and decided to start implementing the proposed solutions. They will be applied in the next RFP phase.

Currently the company is consolidating the description of the conflicts and of the gaps identified in previous responses. Furthermore, they are refining the risk list and improving means to cope with these risks.

From the research view it seems interesting to study the following questions:

- What is a good way to document existing systems so that they can easily be compared with a RFP? For the documentation of features and their relationships product line approaches could be relevant. However, there is not that much overlap between the systems offered to different customers. Thus, product line approaches need to be adapted for efficient use in the tender process.
- What is a good way to document gaps between requirements and system descriptions on different levels? So far the literature mainly concentrates on the refinement of high-level descriptions to low-level descriptions and on the capturing of traces of these refinements. However, in the RFP context a pure top-down process is not possible. High-level requirements of the RFP have to be mapped to low-level descriptions of features of the existing systems. A list of features necessary for the RFP but not yet provided is a first idea of such a gap description. However, it bears the risk that the features are very specific to the given RFP. Thus, from several RFPs a huge list of small gaps would be collected. Also, the organization of the list for efficient search is a problem.

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