
"We can't bid on this thing!"

I pop up to look up over the divider that separates my desk from the not-very-wide hallway. This desk-sized cubicle isn't temporary Proposal Land digs: It's my everyday digs after a corporate cost-cutting initiative that has hit floor space hard. As a contract employee I rank below the most-junior permanent employee, or that's the stated rationale.

As I edge into my space each morning, I wonder uneasily whether there's an unstated desire for me to go away, but I don't wonder whether my current life circumstances enable me to indulge a thin skin. Recently separated, I need the work because I need the money. And I need to maintain my weight if I'm going to keep using this cubicle.

Anyway, I don't have time for professional or personal angst right now: We're into another proposal. Or are we? Apparently our new contracts guy doesn't think so. Well, he's new to our office, not new to the company. He worked for several years on our first and still biggest project in Ottawa, so he's an accomplished guy with experience in the very function he's come here to perform: contracts management. Seen it all when it comes to government contracting, I'd have thought. Not super excitable in any case, I'd have said. But right now he's waving something over his head in what looks like a pretty excited state.

Ah. It's his copy of the RFP, festooned with perhaps an equal weight in yellow stickies.

Since I'm the only one to have popped up in response to his announcement, he says it again.

"We can't bid on this thing!"

The sales lead emerges slowly from his office, as befits his geezer status. He's retired from three careers by my count, one of which includes a few decades in the client's operation, yet here he is in Proposal Land, still working.

"What's wrong?"

Well! Contracts Buddy is only too ready to show Sales Buddy what's wrong. It seems the client's draft contract retains Completely Unacceptable management prerogatives with respect to day-to-day project management.

"Look! Here!"

They can refuse to approve our proposed Project Manager, requiring us to assign someone else.

"And here!"

They can require us to dismiss any other employee at any time for any reason.

"And here!"

They can take special project work out of our hands at any time, hire another contractor to finish it, and send us the bill.

"And here!"

They can decide to take all the work back in-house and send us home with minimal compensation.

And so on.

It takes a while, but Sales finally convinces Contracts that the words on the page are completely standard, utterly non-negotiable, and yet absolutely not the client's plan for the day-to-day working relationship. So what are they, then? Contracting prerogatives to be exercised only as a last resort in extraordinary circumstances. A risk-reduction measure, from the client's point of view.

Contracts Buddy learns that even government clients aren't all the same. And he and I both learn that what it says is not necessarily how it works.

As a literal reader myself—a strength in the proposal function I perform—this learning matters, not least because it highlights the different strengths that we need to be a complete team.