Best Practices: Writing Minimum Qualifications

What are they?

Minimum Qualifications describe the baseline set of knowledge, skills, experience and abilities that must be possessed by the Offeror (company) and/or the Offeror's resources (personnel) to provide reasonable assurance that the required work will be performed successfully. Minimum Qualification criteria must be able to be scored as either "pass" or "fail."

Minimum Qualifications are a powerful tool to ensure that only "qualified Offerors" (i.e., only those responsible Offerors that submitted proposals initially classified by the procurement officer as reasonably susceptible of being selected for award) compete for a particular agency need. However, determining how "high to set the bar" can be challenging. Minimum Qualifications set too high may result in insufficient competition; if set too low, then too many Offerors propose, lengthening the evaluation process and exposing the State to Offerors that may not be qualified to do the work.

A Minimum Qualification is NOT a job description of all the desired features for a company or its personnel.

When are they needed?

Minimum Qualifications are needed when it is likely that companies proposing may not be appropriate or capable of performing the work. Minimum Qualifications are not mandatory for solicitations, and are actively discouraged when not rationally tied to the ability to perform.

Why are they needed?

A well-written Minimum Qualifications section is essential to the success of a solicitation because it:

- Clearly identifies the bare minimum skill sets, credentials and experience *necessary* to successfully complete the work as described in the Scope of Work (SOW);
- Filters out Offerors not even minimally qualified to perform the work, reducing evaluation workload; and

Rules

A) Minimum Qualifications may be written for just the Offeror's company, just the Offeror's personnel, or *in limited cases* for both the Offeror company and a limited number of Offeror personnel.

B) DoIT strongly favors using only company Minimum Qualifications when the solicitation is for corporate services. In general, use of personnel Minimum Qualifications is limited to staffing contracts. Only include personnel Minimum Qualifications for proposed personnel.

C) Minimum Qualifications are primarily a procurement function, intended to ensure potential offerors know what is considered critically important for performing the work.

D) Minimum Qualifications establish the lowest threshold, or least qualified, company and/or individual who can reasonably perform the necessary work. **For example, a "C student" who possesses the minimum knowledge or prerequisite required to join a class.**

E) Offerors MUST be able to prove the Minimum Qualifications through references or documentation such as a resume.

   1) Criteria must be very precise, and must result in a pass/fail determination.

   2) A single Minimum Qualification containing a list of items will always require "all of" the listed items to be individually demonstrated. For example: five (5) years of experience with Windows 2005 and Windows XP means 5 years each.

F) Personnel Minimum Qualifications containing more than 1-4 criteria may not meet the intent of a Minimum Qualification. Tip: Look for key criteria that are indicative of a set of skills.

   1) Unless granted a specific exception, Personnel Minimum Qualifications for CATS+ TORFPs may not include

qualifications in addition to those identified in the standard labor category description. Place additional desired qualifications in the Personnel Experience section of the TORFP template.

2) If, in the rare instance additional personnel minimum qualifications are allowed for a CATS+ TORFP, you may add additional criteria but may not amend any existing labor category criteria. It is expected that under a master contract that you will not substantially alter the intent of the labor category. Remember, master contractors bid a ceiling rate for the skillset defined in the labor categories, so substantially adding to the requirements may result in master contractors who cannot find resources at the rates they proposed.

G) ITPO strongly favors solicitations that make an award decision using four or fewer proposed personnel (often called "key personnel"). Substitutions of personnel prior to award are limited to certain rules, so limiting the number of proposed personnel reduces the risk of an individual leaving prior to award. Additional resources may be described generally in a staffing plan instead of a proposed resource.

1) An Offeror may not provide a resume for any resource not explicitly proposed, and

2) A personnel Minimum Qualification criteria may not be met by a resource that does not have a resume to demonstrate meeting the Minimum Qualifications.

H) Remember, Minimum Qualifications are intended to form the foundation of requirements, but requirements identified in the Offeror Experience and Personnel Experience sections establish the additional broad criteria upon which Offerors and proposed personnel are evaluated. Requirements in the Offeror Experience and Personnel Experience can be used to rank a Technical Proposal higher whereas a Minimum Qualification is used to prevent the Technical Proposal from starting the evaluation.

How to proceed?

Step 1: **Analyze what the agency wants to accomplish with this solicitation.**

    A. Identify the core services needed to satisfy solicitation requirements.

    B. Identify Minimum Requirements that truly represent the core services needed for this solicitation. Keep in mind that raising the bar too high may reduce competition to unacceptable levels or unnecessarily increase the cost of the services furnished.

Step 2: **Begin defining Minimum Qualifications following best practices described in this document.**

    A. Use only objective, concrete criteria that can be scored as either "pass" or fail."

    B. Place any requirements that are not concrete, cannot be independently verified, or are preferred but not mandatory into the "Offeror Experience" or "Personnel Experience" section to allow technical evaluation.

    C. Define and quantify variables if any. Examples of variables might be: duration of experience or size of prior projects. Avoid use of the phrase "projects similar in size and scope to this RFP."

    D. Describe how Minimum Qualifications will be demonstrated or verified (e.g. resumes or references contacted)

Step 3: **Company Minimum Qualifications:**

Identify qualifications that illustrate the company's track record of successfully completing similar engagements. A contractor's past successes are both an indication of ability to perform the work, and an ability to find employees who can successfully perform the work over the contract term. Be sure to describe what "similar engagements" means in concrete terms. If key skills are critical to the Contractor's success, the company Minimum Qualifications may include that the Contractor must include as part of its proposed team certain skills, without identifying the specific role that holds those skills.

Consider which company Minimum Qualifications are critical to be met by the contractor (i.e., when subcontractor meeting the Minimum Qualifications might present issues with the resulting contract).

When there is both a product and an implementer, determine whether minimum qualifications should be identified for one or both.

Step 4: **Personnel Minimum Qualifications:**

Clearly define the skill sets, credentials and experience necessary for proposed personnel to perform the

work being contracted.

    A. Limit the number of positions required as part of the proposal to between one and four. Select only those positions that significantly impact the evaluation and award, usually positions matching critical needs or those resources hardest to acquire.

    B. Start by describing all the skills, experience, or certifications in the "Personnel Experience" section to fully list the desired position's skillsets.

    C. Write Minimum Qualifications appropriate to the nature of the solicitation.

        1. If you are requesting the Offeror propose a solution, describe the skills and experience required rather than identifying specific labor categories. In this case, the Offeror must identify an established labor category for each proposed resource, who in turn must meet the labor category's requirements per the master contract/RFP plus any Minimum Qualifications in the RFP/TORFP.

        2. If you are requesting personnel to fill specific roles, state specific labor categories to be fulfilled in the solicitation.

Step 5:   **Prior to Release**

    A. Engage the Procurement Officer to discuss the minimum qualifications and confirm how evaluation criteria will be evaluated. Evaluation may be via references, resumes, or other mechanisms such as phone interviews.

DOs and DON'Ts for Minimum Qualifications	

Example 1
 	
DO: Use language to indicate that a Minimum Qualification is mandatory (i.e., shall, will, must).
 	
    Example: "The Contractor <u>shall</u> provide…"
 	
DON'T use language that might indicate that a qualification is optional.
 	
    Example: "The Contactor <u>should</u> provide…"
	WHY: Avoids ambiguity

Example 2
 	
DO: Use proper descriptive **action** language for the specific qualification
 	
    Example: Five (5) years of experience <u>developing software</u> using Object Oriented Programming
 	
DON'T: Leave out the action required for the qualification
 	
    Example: Five (5) years of experience in Object Oriented Programming
	WHY: Avoids ambiguity

Example 3
 	
DO: Be precise when describing required experience.
 	
    Example: "…<u>at least three (3) years of experience in the design, delivery and evaluation</u> of student systems."
 	
DON'T use vague terminology to describe required experience.
 	
    Example: "…<u>demonstrated knowledge and </u>experience working with student systems."
	WHY: Avoids ambiguity

Example 4
 	
DO: Describe required general industry experience to indicate that the candidate must have experience with projects of similar size and scope and technology.
 	
    Example: "… experience performing operations and maintenance on <u>enterprise-wide web based applications having a minimum of 1000 users.</u>"
 	
DON'T be too specific regarding experience with particular applications or products.
 	
    Example: "…experience operating and maintaining the <u>State's XYZ Fleet System.</u>"
	WHY: Naming specific application experience impedes competition in favor of incumbents and unnecessarily limits the pool of potential candidates.

Example 5
 	
DO: Specify the minimum acceptable experience or credentials required to be considered as a candidate.
 	
    Example: "…shall have a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science…"
 	
DON'T further qualify minimum acceptable criteria with any indication of "preference" for higher qualifications.
 	
    Example: "…shall have a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science (Master's degree <u>Preferred).</u>"
	WHY: Minimum qualifications must be able to be scored as either "pass" or "fail". A "preference" does not meet these criteria. You can insert the Master's Degree preferred experience in a different section of the TORFP.

Example 6 **DO:** Define and quantify variables such as duration of experience or size of prior projects. *Example:* "… provide references that demonstrate that Offeror has successfully conducted within the past <u>three (3) years</u> at least <u>two (2)</u> information security risk or information security program assessments in mid-to-large sized organizations <u>(i.e., 100 to 2000 employees</u>)." **DON'T** fail to quantify variables	**WHY**: Creates measurable criteria against which a Contractor or Resource can be measured.

Example: "… provide references that demonstrate that the Contractor has successfully conducted information security risk or information security program assessments in mid-to-large sized organizations."	
Example 7 **DON'T** use vague terminology that does not provide a means to test or measure the qualifications. *Example: "*The Offeror shall propose at least one (1) team member with excellent written and oral communication skills."	**WHY**: This skill cannot be measured objectively in a way that is unambiguous. DoIT recommends that written and oral communication skills not be used as a minimum personnel qualification.
Example 8 (CATS+ only, and only if pre-approved by DoIT) **DO:** Ensure that any inserted Minimum Qualifications are distinct from the Minimum Qualifications for the CATS+ labor category (See Section 2.10 in the CATS Plus RFP). *Example:* **(CATS Project Manager) "**The Project Manager shall have a minimum of five (5) years of experience as a Project Manager for an IT Project <u>involving Web Application Development</u>." (Qualification of the type of project management experience needed.) **DON'T:** Specify qualifications that are less than the Minimum Requirement of the labor category. *Example:* **(CATS Project Manager) "**The Project Manager shall have a minimum of four (4) years of project management experience." **DON'T:** Specify qualifications that are increases to the CATS+ Minimum Requirement of the labor category. *Example:* **(CATS Project Manager) "**The Project Manager shall have a minimum of seven (7) years of project management experience."	**WHY**: The CATS+ master contractors made labor rate commitments based on the Minimum Requirements specified in the CATS+ master contract. Requiring additional Minimum Qualifications for those skills deemed appropriate for a CATS+ labor category might make the skillset too hard to fill at the labor rates proposed.
Example 9 **DO:** When specifying experience with hardware and software products, ensure that the products have been available for the number of years specified. *Example*: "Five years of experience using Microsoft Office 2007 or later version" **Don't:** Specify *more years of experience than the product has been on the market.* *Example* (if written in 2011): "Five (5) years of experience using Microsoft Office 2010"	**WHY:** The effect of this minimum requirement will cause a failed procurement, as the product has not been on the marketplace for 5 years (at least until 2015,) hence no one can qualify.
Example 10 **DON'T:** Specify qualifications that may be **too** restrictive in terms the number of years of experience required *Example*: "Eight (8) years of experience developing software in Object Oriented Programming"	**WHY**: Consider reducing the number of years where appropriate to avoid unnecessarily limiting the pool of potential qualified candidates.
Example 11 **DO:** Ensure that qualifications are appropriate for the labor category. *Example:* Minimum of three (3) years' experience in managing a team of subject matter experts and technical experts of the project to ensure project completion. *This qualification would be appropriate for a Project Manager, but not necessarily for a business analyst*	**WHY**: Asking for Minimum Qualifications that do not match the typical role could unreasonably reduce competition.