Request for Information (RFI): The first step towards structured supplier selection

The Request for Information (RFI) is a non-binding information-gathering enquiry with which buyers first explore the market and potential suppliers. It typically forms the first stage of the tendering process and creates the basis for decision-making for subsequent RFQ or RFP procedures. Used correctly, the RFI reduces wrong decisions, shortens processing time later and improves the quality of the supplier longlist.

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Key facts at a glance

01 An RFI serves market research and is expressly non-binding; contract negotiations or purchase commitments do not belong in this phase.

02 Typical content comprises supplier self-disclosures on products, capacities, certifications, sustainability and logistics concepts.

03 The RFI narrows down the circle of suppliers and structures the preparation of subsequent procedures such as RFP or RFQ.

04 In practice, a response deadline of two to six weeks is frequently granted for an RFI, depending on the complexity of the requirements.

05 Criteria and evaluation logic should be defined before the RFI is dispatched in order to preserve procurement law compliance and traceability.

06 Digital procurement platforms standardise RFIs through forms and templates and accelerate supplier onboarding.

Definition: Request for Information (RFI)

The Request for Information (RFI) is an informal to semi-formalised enquiry by a company to the market, used to gather information about providers, products, services and technical possibilities. It is non-binding, does not conclude a contract and does not establish an intention to purchase. In the

procurement process, the RFI stands at the beginning of the enquiry cascade, followed by Request for Proposal (RFP) and Request for Quotation (RFQ).

Distinction from RFP and RFQ

The RFI requests information, the RFP calls for solution proposals and concepts, and the RFQ requests concrete prices and terms. The RFI is therefore the broadest and least binding instrument: it helps to identify which suppliers could be considered at all and which requirements are realistic. Clear labelling as a non-binding enquiry protects against misunderstandings on both sides.

Use cases in industrial procurement

RFIs are typically used when tapping into new product categories, expanding the supplier pool, launching new technologies or in strategic preliminary considerations on make-or-buy. For complex manufacturing orders – for example multi-stage supplied parts – the RFI also serves the early clarification of manufacturing competencies and qualification status before a demand specification is finalised.

Structure and typical content of an RFI

A practice-oriented RFI is structured in such a way that responses remain comparable. Alongside a short covering letter with the project objective and timetable, it contains defined information blocks that the supplier can complete uniformly.

Supplier self-disclosure and services

The core of the RFI is a self-declaration form covering the company, services and references. Frequently requested are the product portfolio, manufacturing processes, machinery, volume ranges, development competencies and reference projects from comparable industries. In addition, critical business factors such as delivery reliability, capacity reserves and export capability are of interest.

Quality, compliance and sustainability

Information on certifications, quality assurance agreements, auditability and complaint processes also belongs on the review agenda in this phase. Increasingly, procurement also requests sustainability data such as CO accounting, targets under Science Based Targets or the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) of relevant products. Compliance questions, for example on sanctions list screening and supply chain due diligence, round off the block.

Logistics and commercial aspects at a glance

Even though the RFI is non-binding, a rough block on logistics, Incoterms preferences, locations and typical delivery times is worthwhile. Initial extrapolations of product costing or price structures are possible, provided they are clearly marked as non-binding; binding prices follow only in the RFQ.

Methods and approach in the RFI process

The process can be divided into four phases: preparation, dispatch, evaluation and transition into the follow-up procedure. Each phase has its own quality requirements, which will largely determine the later success of the entire tendering process.

Preparation: defining demand and structuring the market

Before dispatch, the demand should be described with sufficient precision – a robust demand specification is a prerequisite for meaningful responses. Procurement defines search criteria, draws up a list of potential suppliers from market data, trade fairs and existing networks, and establishes the evaluation criteria including weighting. A high degree of tender readiness of the enquiry significantly improves response quality.

Dispatch and communication

The RFI is sent in writing or via a procurement platform to the pre-selected circle of suppliers. Uniform response formats, a fixed deadline and a central contact person for queries are important. In practice, publishing clear rules has proven its worth: no individual advantages, no advance commitment, transparent contact channels for all participants.

Evaluation and transition to RFP or RFQ

The responses are evaluated according to the predefined criteria, frequently on a points scale of typically 1 to 5 per criterion. The result is a narrowed-down list of qualified suppliers who are invited to the next step – for example to an RFP with solution concepts or directly to an RFQ with concrete prices. Where demand is narrowly defined, the route to a contract for work and services can also follow directly.

Key KPIs and success factors for the RFI

Even the non-binding market research procedure can be measured. The following key figures provide insight into process quality and market coverage; their benchmarks depend on the product category and complexity.

Response rate and response quality

A response rate of typically over 60 per cent is regarded as solid for well-targeted RFIs; for specialised niche services it may be lower. More decisive than the pure rate is the quality: how complete are the responses, and how high is the proportion of relevant suppliers after evaluation? A target-versus-actual comparison of the information requested against the data actually provided reveals weaknesses in the questionnaire.

Turnaround time and efficiency

The turnaround time from dispatch to evaluation in practice frequently lies between two and six weeks.

Digitalised forms with structured fields instead of free text noticeably reduce the evaluation effort. Anyone linking the RFI to their supplier onboarding can use qualified responses directly as a master data basis and avoid duplicate enquiries.

Contribution to savings targets and the supplier pool

The RFI contributes indirectly to ROI in procurement: it increases competitive pressure in later RFQs, uncovers unknown suppliers and prevents incorrect awards. Expanding the pool of qualified suppliers per product category is therefore one of the most important output measures of the procedure.

Risks, sources of error and controls

Despite its non-binding nature, the RFI carries legal and practical risks. Errors arise chiefly from unclear communication, incomplete requirements and insufficient distancing from tendering procedures.

Legal classification and caution regarding binding effect

As long as the RFI is clearly labelled as non-binding market research, no purchase obligation generally arises. Nevertheless, if carelessly worded, it may in fact be assessed as part of a tendering procedure – particularly relevant in the public sector, while under private law transparency and equal treatment matter. The specific legal assessment should be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, especially for cross-border procedures. Standardised compliance checks such as sanctions list screening should also be included early in the process.

Information asymmetry and over-questioning

Questionnaires that are too long deter qualified suppliers or lead to superficial responses. In practice, an upper limit of typically around two to three hours of processing effort for the supplier has proven its worth. Open questions without structure produce responses that cannot be compared – structured fields with definitions prevent this.

Discretion and protection of competition

The RFI reveals market interest and project ideas. Sensitive information such as volumes, target costs or roadmap topics should therefore only be disclosed cautiously and protected by a confidentiality agreement. This applies in particular if pilot projects with suppliers or tooling release for proprietary components are planned at a later stage.

Current developments: digitalisation, sustainability and integrated processes

The RFI is changing with the digitalisation of procurement. Instead of static PDF questionnaires, standardised digital forms that can be reused and evaluated automatically are increasingly dominating.

Platform-based enquiries and data reuse

Procurement platforms offer templates for RFIs, link them to supplier master data and enable self-service-style market research. Responses feed directly into supplier onboarding, thereby reducing laborious duplicate surveys. Where a company later narrows down its demand via a category strategy, the RFI results can be reused as a reference data basis.

Sustainability and supply chain transparency

Sustainability criteria are becoming a standard component of the RFI. Increasingly requested are decarbonisation targets under Science Based Targets, information on the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) and evidence of supply chain due diligence. Anyone collecting these data early can later reuse them in an audit checklist procedure or when drawing up a quality assurance agreement without having to collect them again.

RFI as a building block of integrated supplier strategy

The RFI is increasingly understood as the entry point into the entire lifecycle: from market research via the pilot project with suppliers to ramp-down management at the end of the lifecycle. The capacity and alternative data collected in the RFI also provide an early overview of supply chain failure risks for emergency management and obsolescence management.

Typical metrics

Metric	Typical value
Response rate	> 60% *typical benchmark for well-targeted RFIs; lower for niche services*
RFI turnaround time	2–6 weeks *from dispatch to completed evaluation, depending on complexity*
Proportion of complete responses	> 80% *indicates the quality and clarity of the questionnaire*
Qualified suppliers after evaluation	3–6 *usual size of the longlist for the follow-up procedure*

Practical example

A mid-sized mechanical engineering company plans to increase its vertical integration in the area of complex welded assemblies and requires new suppliers. Instead of requesting quotations directly, procurement first sends a structured RFI to around 25 potentially suitable providers. After four weeks, 16 complete responses have been received; after evaluation, six suppliers remain, who are invited to detailed discussions and a subsequent RFQ.

- The RFI contained blocks on manufacturing competencies, certifications, logistics concepts and sustainability data – all responses in a standardised form.
- Criteria and weighting were defined before dispatch and documented in an evaluation matrix.
- Qualified responses were transferred to the supplier master data and accelerated supplier onboarding.
- A later pilot project with suppliers confirmed the procedural quality of the RFI evaluation results.

Conclusion

The Request for Information is more than a preliminary stage of the request for quotation: it structures market research, reduces the effort in later procedures and creates a comparable data basis for supplier selection. What matters are a precise definition of demand, structured question formats and an evaluation logic defined in advance. Those who set up the RFI digitally and link it to master data, compliance checks and sustainability capture gain a reusable building block for their supplier strategy. In interaction with RFP and RFQ, it contributes significantly to avoiding incorrect awards and strengthening competition in procurement. The moderate effort therefore stands in favourable proportion to the long-term benefit.

Frequently asked questions

? What is an RFI in procurement?

An RFI (Request for Information) is a non-binding enquiry sent to potential suppliers to gather information about services, capacities and qualifications. It serves market research at the start of the procurement process. An RFI does not result in contracts or price commitments.

? What is the difference between RFI, RFP and RFQ?

An RFI requests general information, an RFP calls for developed solution proposals and concepts, and an RFQ requests concrete prices and terms. The three instruments often build on one another and progressively narrow down the circle of suppliers. The later in the process, the more binding the enquiries become.

? Is an RFI legally binding?

A properly worded RFI is non-binding because no intention to purchase and no quotation submission are required. Nevertheless, if poorly worded, it may be assessed as part of a tendering procedure, particularly in public procurement. The specific legal assessment should be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

? When is an RFI used?

An RFI is suitable for new product categories, an unknown supplier market, complex requirements or strategic preliminary considerations such as make-or-buy. It helps to test realistic requirements and narrow down the circle of suppliers before prices are requested. Where demand is clearly

defined and the market is known, the RFI can be dispensed with.

? How long does an RFI process take?

In practice, an RFI project typically takes two to six weeks from dispatch to completed evaluation. The deadline for supplier responses is frequently two to three weeks, depending on complexity and the number of questions. Digital forms significantly shorten the evaluation time.

? Which questions belong in an RFI?

Typical questions relate to the company, the product and service portfolio, references, certifications and quality processes. In addition, capacities, locations, logistics concepts and increasingly sustainability and compliance data are requested. Binding prices do not belong in the RFI but in the later RFQ.

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