

# A Young Person's Game?

Jon Williams

**The coffee break at the last APMP UK conference gave me a jolt. I happened to look up across the room of chattering bidders and it suddenly struck me: "I'm one of the old folks."**

I built my first proposal centre – aged 31 – back in 1999. At that point, it was the largest team of its type in the UK outside the defence sector. I became the first CEO of APMP UK in 2001. Proposals were a young person's game.

Sure, bid teams existed back then. Their goal: to make life easy for their sales colleagues. Plug the documents together, organise the meetings, get things signed off. And then the salesperson would bring it all to life with their natural charisma (?) when they got into the room to present. But it was all very grey, very dull.

It was easy to shine as a consultant in those days. Huge insurance company with no structured approach to proposal development? We can fix that. Major telecoms company setting up its global sales team? Sure, we can create the proposal processes to help you win your biggest deals. IT company struggling to win work? Just look at those proposals you're sending out: is it any wonder? Hey, let us loose...

Technology? Is that an iPhone in your pocket? No, because they hadn't been invented yet. Virtual teams? If we were lucky, we could set up a conference call. And

there were two bitter rivals in the pre-written content world. They hated one another. Spent every opportunity at loggerheads. And then they merged...

Design? Are you still using a typewriter? Because it looks as if you are.

The proposal world wasn't exactly a greenfield site. There were good people trying their best, against the odds, to do the right thing and to raise the profile of the profession. ("'Profession'? Ha, it's not a 'profession': it's just glorified admin.")

And then we fast forward two decades, to the present day. What's changed?

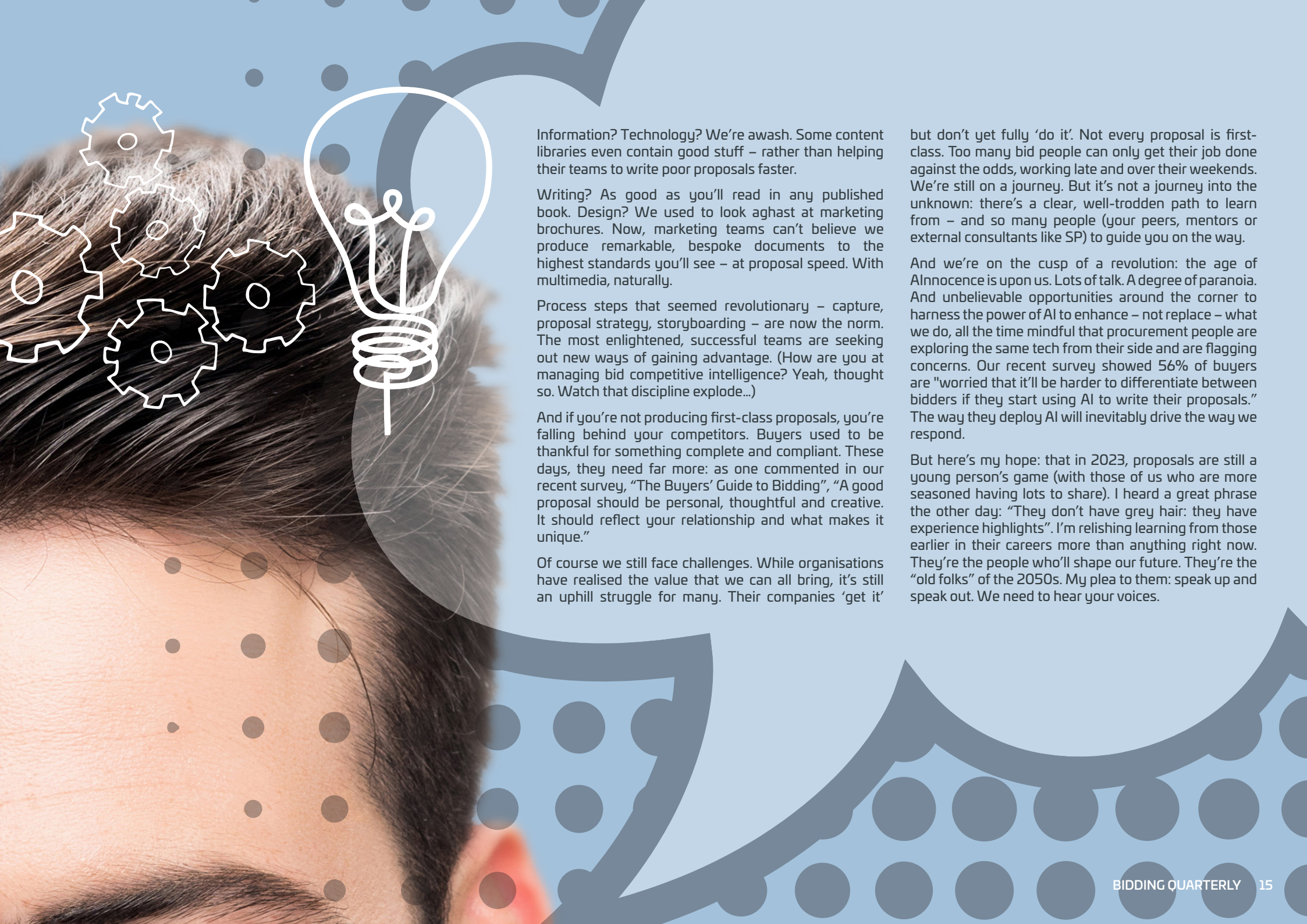
These days, you're the exception if you don't have a team of proposal professionals in your organisation. The C-suite have heard of us; in some cases, they're passionate sponsors for what we do.

You can have a career as a bid/proposal professional, with training, career paths and qualifications. The apprenticeship scheme (one of the things I'm most proud of establishing for our profession) is bringing brilliant younger people into our world. APMP certification is a pre-requisite, not an optional extra, for those wanting to mark themselves out as serious about a career doing what we do.



“ ”

**I heard a great phrase the other day: "They don't have grey hair: they have experience highlights". I'm relishing learning from those earlier in their careers more than anything right now. They're the people who'll shape our future.**



Information? Technology? We're awash. Some content libraries even contain good stuff – rather than helping their teams to write poor proposals faster.

Writing? As good as you'll read in any published book. Design? We used to look aghast at marketing brochures. Now, marketing teams can't believe we produce remarkable, bespoke documents to the highest standards you'll see – at proposal speed. With multimedia, naturally.

Process steps that seemed revolutionary – capture, proposal strategy, storyboarding – are now the norm. The most enlightened, successful teams are seeking out new ways of gaining advantage. (How are you at managing bid competitive intelligence? Yeah, thought so. Watch that discipline explode...)

And if you're not producing first-class proposals, you're falling behind your competitors. Buyers used to be thankful for something complete and compliant. These days, they need far more: as one commented in our recent survey, "The Buyers' Guide to Bidding", "A good proposal should be personal, thoughtful and creative. It should reflect your relationship and what makes it unique."

Of course we still face challenges. While organisations have realised the value that we can all bring, it's still an uphill struggle for many. Their companies 'get it'

but don't yet fully 'do it'. Not every proposal is first-class. Too many bid people can only get their job done against the odds, working late and over their weekends. We're still on a journey. But it's not a journey into the unknown: there's a clear, well-trodden path to learn from – and so many people (your peers, mentors or external consultants like SP) to guide you on the way.

And we're on the cusp of a revolution: the age of AlInnocence is upon us. Lots of talk. A degree of paranoia. And unbelievable opportunities around the corner to harness the power of AI to enhance – not replace – what we do, all the time mindful that procurement people are exploring the same tech from their side and are flagging concerns. Our recent survey showed 56% of buyers are "worried that it'll be harder to differentiate between bidders if they start using AI to write their proposals." The way they deploy AI will inevitably drive the way we respond.

But here's my hope: that in 2023, proposals are still a young person's game (with those of us who are more seasoned having lots to share). I heard a great phrase the other day: "They don't have grey hair: they have experience highlights". I'm relishing learning from those earlier in their careers more than anything right now. They're the people who'll shape our future. They're the "old folks" of the 2050s. My plea to them: speak up and speak out. We need to hear your voices.

# Spot the Difference: Can You Win Across Different Industries?

Graham Ablett

I told Martin, "I can't really write for this edition of BQ. Sorry."

Why? Because I work across many sectors (not one industry) in my role at Strategic Proposals. The biggest contrast has been from nuclear power stations to stationery providers. And yes, the end customers did ask some of the same questions! That makes me smile.

Anyway, he said, "Didn't you spend ages up to your neck in PCs bidding in IT?" Well, yeah, about ten years and I still do tech bids today. Then he said, "Didn't you spend three years working at least 60% of your time in a professional services company?" Good point! So here we are, my article on some of the industry differences I've seen and some of the things to look out for.

Firstly, a note on transferable skills. As a senior buyer once told me, "*Working with one of our competitors is a conflict of interest. Working with multiple organisations in the sector makes you a sector specialist.*"

Experience counts. When we meet our new clients for the first time, they often ask what we've done in their sector. People think it's important. Why?

“ ”

Moving from one sector to another can be a steep learning curve, but it is also very rewarding to individuals and can be seen as bringing in fresh ideas to employers.

**Familiarity. Terminology. You get it. You can start quickly.**

If this is really what your employer wants, it's probably because they want you to write on behalf of their subject matter experts (SMEs). In that case you really do need to know the market you're working in. On the other hand, perhaps you're editing or managing and reviewing, so bring the advantages of not being in the SME echo chamber. Horses for courses. Whether you're a contractor going into a new role or applying for a new job, it's important to know what your future employer is looking for.

That aside, here's what I've seen in terms of differences across the sectors I've worked in and what perhaps makes a difference.



## Technology

## Professional services

<p><b>Buyers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move from just procurement, finance and IT department decisions</li> <li>• Stakeholders from the business now make much more complex contact plans</li> <li>• Move to seeking solutions more than just product purchase</li> <li>• Pricing of solutions is key</li> <li>• Typically focused on the return on investment (ROI) and cost-effectiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often interested in forming long-term partnerships</li> <li>• Trust, credibility and working collaboratively seen as crucial</li> <li>• May rely on referrals and word-of-mouth recommendations</li> <li>• Strong emphasis on compliance</li> <li>• Intermediaries can be used to play the procurement role – strong gatekeepers who can issue vanilla, sometimes anonymous tenders</li> </ul>
<p><b>Internal teams</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lots of marketing effort to position brands</li> <li>• Strong sales and BD influence, with often very experienced, expert sellers who work on bigger deals</li> <li>• Lots of inexperienced sales people building their skills and experience on the job working on smaller deals</li> <li>• Technical specialists are critical to developing those solutions</li> <li>• Finance input is critical on pricing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contributors are usually fee earners who are focused on delivery (so time poor), though they are critical to success</li> <li>• Often super-intelligent, highly educated team members who may struggle to use non-technical language in the proposal</li> <li>• Senior management input (e.g. partner level) prevalent, but can be last-minute</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key characteristics</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competition fierce</li> <li>• Typically formal processes, but often lots of proactive proposals and pitches</li> <li>• Many high value deals, but many more lower value</li> <li>• Often quick turnarounds, high pace</li> <li>• Lots of sub-sectors with distinct differences</li> <li>• RFPs/ITTs with sometimes large numbers of technical questions – sometimes solution overviews required to paint the ‘big picture’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mostly very competitive</li> <li>• Several big global dominant forces and then large numbers of relatively smaller organisations often battling it out between scale and depth, versus specialism and lower rates</li> <li>• Concern over a race-to-the-bottom on price on day rate-based standard services</li> <li>• Capture prevalent for large ‘big four’ type deals, but then much more reactive in other contexts</li> <li>• Shorter ITTs/RFPs with typically a small number of questions (outside of compliance sections)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Public vs private end customers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lots of frameworks in public sector</li> <li>• Both tend to use formal processes, as deals tend to be large (when compared to sectors like professional services)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Much more formalised processes in public sector</li> <li>• Lower value deals more likely to be decided by a pitch in private sector</li> <li>• Lower value public sector tenders tend to be very cookie cutter in style</li> </ul>
<p><b>Top tips</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-engagement is key - if you haven’t been engaging with them, someone else will have</li> <li>• You need experienced sales and technical folks in your team to win</li> <li>• Key to understand customer’s unique needs, provide tailored solutions, and effectively communicate value</li> <li>• Lots of similarities across ITTs, so good quality and broad knowledge bases can help with efficiency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key is building trust with customer pre-tender</li> <li>• Responses need to showcase credentials, especially niche differentiators amongst proposed staff</li> <li>• Proposals need to show deep domain knowledge</li> <li>• Time poor contributors may need hands-on interview/writing type of support</li> <li>• Gain partner trust early to demonstrate you can/will bring value</li> </ul>

**The key to working in bids and proposals across different sectors is understanding what’s expected from you. Sometimes deep subject matter expertise may be expected, sometimes not. Moving from one sector to another can be a steep learning curve, but it is also very rewarding to individuals and can be seen as bringing in fresh ideas to employers. Working in different areas is certainly one of the reasons why I still love doing what I do.**