AgDevCo

A guide to technology implementation in agribusinesses

Part 2: Working with technology providers

2020

mastercard foundation

UKaid
from the British people

STEP 1
CREATING REQUESTS FOR PROPOSALS

A request for proposal (RFP) is a formal document expressing your interest to connect with suitable technology providers. In this step, we'll explore how to create RFPs that help technology providers learn more about your organisation and vision.

Elements to include in RFPs:

1. Background on your organisation, the current state of your operations, and your long term goals
2. Description of why you are interested in learning more about technology solutions, including a high level vision for how technology will benefit your organisation.
3. A clear list of requirements, specific challenges you are hoping to solve, and the features and functionality you envision.
4. Instructions on how interested vendors should respond, including a time frame for submitting proposals and questions.
5. A high level legal statement allowing to you to cancel the project if all responding parties are not a good fit.

RFPs can be difficult to put together, so we have provided an example as part of this guide, available by **clicking here.** The RFP template resembles the one released by many of our partner companies and can be used as a starting point for any projects you solicit to vendors.

Your RFP should include the requirements developed in Part 1 of this technology guide, **available by clicking here.** Once you have finalised your RFP, you can send a copy of the document to the companies you are interested in connecting with. Make sure the RFP is sent in PDF format (or some other non-editable format) and that you provide clear instructions in your email about how each vendor should respond.

IMPORTANT TIPS:

Eventually you want to formalise the RFP process, but you can also reach out and informally connect with technology providers prior to creating an RFP. Most companies will be more than happy to provide free consultation in the early stages of their sales process, and they typically have representatives who can work with you to determine if the solution(s) they offer will be a good fit for your needs.

Remember that technology providers are ***always selling***. Even though they will use the first call to get to know you and learn more about your requirements, it's natural and probably expected that they are also looking for opportunities to 'upsell' you on features, functionality, or new technologies. Beware of 'scope creep': hold closely to your original priorities, budgets, and requirements that were created in Part 1 of this guide. This will help you stay focused on the solutions you really need.

Mother's Shea, Ghana

Mother's Shea is a Ghanaian business that processes shea butter for bulk export sales. Mother's Shea sources its shea nuts from nearly 7,500 women 'pickers' who are organised into cooperatives located in villages across the Savannah Region of Ghana.

Mother's Shea began to explore technologies that could streamline operations and digitise field activities. After finalising requirements for a new traceability platform, the company began to reach out to technology providers who specialised in software platforms for agricultural supply chains. A series of introductory calls helped to identify five vendors with experience solving Mother's Shea's key challenges. Each of these technology providers had a record of successful past projects and solutions that met key requirements without substantial fees for customisation. Mother's Shea created an RFP (previewed to the right) providing a background on the company's challenges, vision, and detailed requirements. Each technology provider was asked to respond directly to the requirements and requested features, which helped give detailed insight into the strengths and weaknesses of each proposed solution. The format also helped ensure that proposals were succinct, easy to create, and in a standardised format that allowed different vendors to be directly compared. All but one technology provider responded, despite a short deadline for submissions.

Mother's Shea created an RFP with a clear vision and project scope to keep interested vendors focused on the company's top needs and priorities

Current State and Goals

To date, the company operates completely on pen and paper, with data collection and data management on paper forms, Excel, or through emails, whatsapp, and texting. As Naasakle seeks to scale, a digital traceability solution is required to help the company understand their shea sources processes and improve the management of inventory and company operations. It is particularly difficult to operate a shea sourcing company without real-time insights because the nature of the industry, seasons, and buyer agreements often results in long lead times for payments. An understanding of available inventory, expenses, and operations will provide the company with the ability to plan and hedge risks as new opportunities are created.

The company also seeks to protect and support woman 'pickers' by making them a central part of the company's business model moving forward. Support for women is a key component to the technology implemented, and all technology solutions should have a demonstrative track record of how the platform can help the support women at an individual level through training and reporting that aids in highlighting areas where additional support is needed.

A key driver of improved traceability is also the desire to connect end products with the communities in which the shea originated so that end consumers are able to understand how their purchased products help and support women pickers. Technology solutions of greatest interest are those with an ability to seamlessly integrate traceability data with external platforms (either through an API or another type of integration) so that consumers have [limited] access to the data - for example, searching an end product code and seeing the community from which the shea in their product originated.

Project Scope

At a high level, Naasakle purchases shea from women who collect nuts and carry o
post-harvest processing, which is focused on stunting and drying the nuts. The n
eventually transported by Naasakle to either Damongo or Accra where they ar
ocessed into shea butter. For the purpose of defining requirements in scop
pany's operations can be broken into two distinct components: 1) sou
and 2) processing the shea nuts into shea butter.

is project seeks to digitize both (1) and (2) from above, namely Na
riginating from women collectors through the point at which the s
for processing and is eventually sold on international markets. F

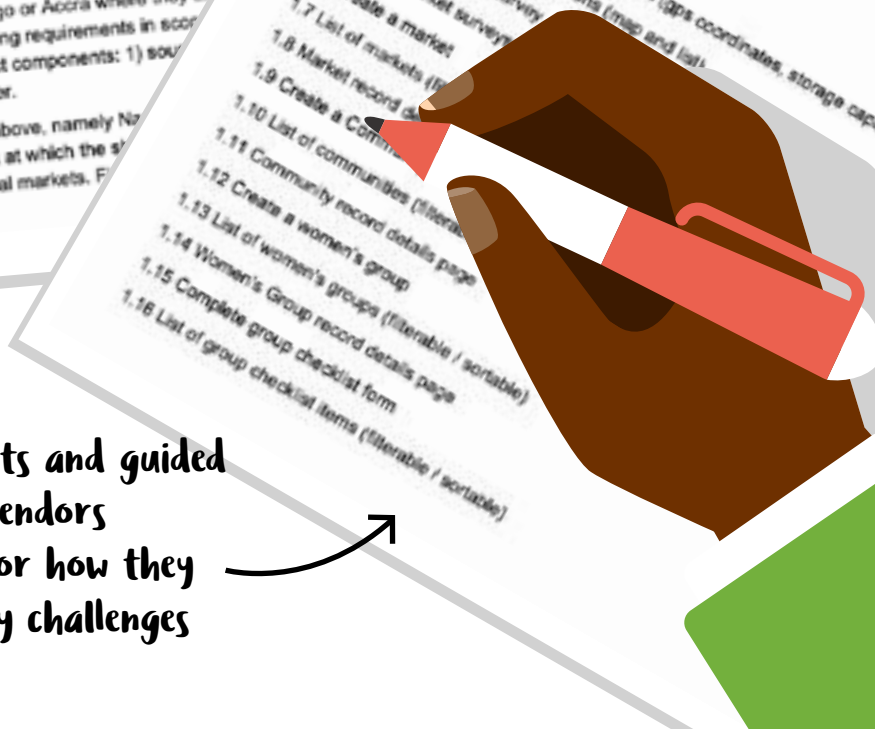
1.0 Business Setup

Please provide confirmation that the following business structure can b
developed within your platform. For each item, indicate at the end of this
document whether the feature or structure can be accommodated using
off-the-shelf functionality which is already available, or would require custo
development.

Please also note that each data object (i.e. Warehouse) and listviews (i.e list / ma
of warehouses) will have specific custom fields associated with it. These fields
may need to be customized or changed over time, so we are interested in
understanding your process for customizing fields and how much control we will
have long term in changing these fields.

[Response requested]

1.1 Create a warehouse storage location
1.2 Warehouse location record details (gps coordinates, storage capacity, own vs. rent)
1.3 View all warehouse locations (map and list
1.4 Create a market survey
1.5 List of market survey
1.6 Create a market
1.7 List of markets (fi
1.8 Market record d
1.9 Create a Com
1.10 List of communities (filtera
1.11 Community record details page
1.12 Create a women's group
1.13 List of women's groups (filterable / sortable)
1.14 Women's Group record details page
1.15 Complete group checklist form
1.16 List of group checklist items (filterable / sortable)



Detailed requirements and guided questions ensured vendors provided specifics for how they would solve priority challenges

STEP 2
REVIEWING VENDOR PROPOSALS

After technology providers have submitted their proposals, it's time to begin a high level review of each response. In this step we'll look at how to review proposals and make sure interested vendors have submitted all of the information you will need to select your ideal partner.

A vendor proposal should include the following elements:

Section or Content	Key Tips
Background on the vendor's organisation and experience, including the team who will be working on your project.	Make sure the team who will be working on your project has a structure that will facilitate clear organisation and communication. Usually technology projects should include teams with at least one of the following roles (or something similar): **Project Manager:** Organises the project and is your point of contact for updates and requests **Consultant / Designer:** Understands how your business requirements will be mapped to technology solution(s) **Developer / Architect:** The individual(s) responsible for building or configuring your solution Make sure to request additional information on the project team if the experience, certifications, and qualifications of personnel are not included as part of the proposal. There are very few official qualifications in the technology sector, so a team's level of relevant experience is make or break for your project.
Past projects and project experience	The credibility of technology providers is difficult to assess because there are very few certifications to help you know who is legitimately qualified to solve your challenges. In lieu of regulation and globally recognised credentials for technology, past project experience is usually the only avenue you have to know if the provider you are assessing is likely to deliver on their promises. If past project examples are not included as part of a proposal, be sure to ask for examples and review them carefully to see how they compare to your needs. Asking for references is also a good idea, and will help you validate some of the more 'intangible' aspects to a technical proposal, such as the quality of the company's customer support.
Explanation and understanding of your project's scope and vision	Although technology providers will not have a detailed understanding of your company at the proposal stage, you do want to make sure they have clear grasp of your vision for the project. It is usually a bad sign if a vendor has [essentially] copied and pasted your RFP's background section within their proposal. But it is also discouraging if they have made too many assumptions about what you need without getting to know you first. In general, you should feel understood and that they are ready to create a vision with you rather than for you.

Key tip: Even speaking with 'good references' from success stories can be helpful to confirm the vendor you are reviewing has solved challenges similar to yours.

Reviewing vendor proposals (continued)

Section or Content	Key Tips
A detailed explanation for how a solution will meet the requirements specified	Ideally the vendor should respond directly to every single requirement you have included in the RFP. These responses should include descriptions of their proposed approach and also examples of how they have solved similar challenges in previous projects.
Project schedule and implementation plan **Cost proposal**	Proposals should always include a draft schedule and plan for how a technology solution would be implemented. At the proposal stage, plans are often high level, but should be reviewed carefully to look for the following red flags: 1) Areas of potential cost and scope creep: Often cost proposals will be deliberately vague and include the potential for prices to be adjusted in later phases of a project. For example, a vendor might say that the final fees for development will be based on the initial requirements gathered from the field. This is dangerous - if they are uncertain about the requirements or think that the requirements may change, be sure to clarify with them where their uncertainty is coming from and make sure they have access to all of the information they need to provide a guarantee on costs. Pricing based on flexible requirements will put you at risk of the project being much, much more expensive than originally quoted, and will allow the technology provider to determine pricing based on their own judgment. 2) A lack of understanding of your business, operations, or the context in which you operate: Verify that costs for things like training, travel, and time frames seem reasonable, otherwise the technology provider may be missing some key context for where and how your organisation works. For example, it's probably not possible to go from Accra to northern Ghana and back in one day for a site visit or to assess your field operations in less than a day. 3) Hidden costs, add-ons, and Total Ownership Costs (TOC): Remember that many solutions will come with additional required services and fees. Make sure to understand the full costs required for initial implementation, such as data migration and customisations, as well as ongoing prices for support and licenses.

If any of the items listed in the above table are missing from a response, you should follow up with the vendor and request a revised proposal.

A view from the other side - the perspective of a vendor:

It is important to structure the RFP process with a schedule that allows vendors to get to know you and to showcase their experience and solutions in a way that is relevant to your requirements. Ultimately, this will make sure vendors are being realistic and are not overpromising.

Once you have received all proposals, you should schedule a call or an in-person meeting with each technology provider to clarify what they have submitted and to give them an opportunity to provide additional demos. If it is clear at this stage that some vendors are not going to be a good fit, you can eliminate them from the next phase and save everyone some time!

At a minimum, you should request a demo or example during your follow up calls and clarify that you want to see how proposed solutions will directly fulfill the requirements you have laid out in your RFP. Be very wary of vendors who refuse to provide a demo after they have submitted a proposal - this is typically a sign that they cannot meet your requirements. A top candidate at this stage will be very proud and confident to show you their solution (or proposed solution), and you should leave these follow-up calls and demos feeling confident in their offering(s) and excited about the potential of a partnership.

Although it is important to create an environment where vendors are evaluated both critically and objectively, you also want to ensure you have created a process that allows each potential partner (and their products) to shine in the best light possible. To help you structure your RFP process, we reached out to vendors to get their input on an ideal schedule. The below plan allows vendors to get to know you and your goals over time so that they can put their best foot forward in showcasing the ways in which their offerings will fit into your long term vision.

The Ideal RFP Process Timeline

1. Send out the RFP to vendors
2. Provide 1-2 weeks for the vendor to discuss the project internally at their company
3. 1 week for calls, allowing vendors to ask your staff or other key stakeholders clarifying questions about the project's scope and priorities
4. 1-2 weeks for the vendor to customize their product(s) and service offerings, and if they choose to, also provide a demo
5. 1-2 weeks for final evaluations and a project award announcement
6. 1 week for vendors to resubmit and revise a final proposal and implementation plan
7. 1 week for followup calls with vendor(s) to review and discuss the details of their proposal
8. 1-2 weeks to submit a final cost proposal and implementation plan

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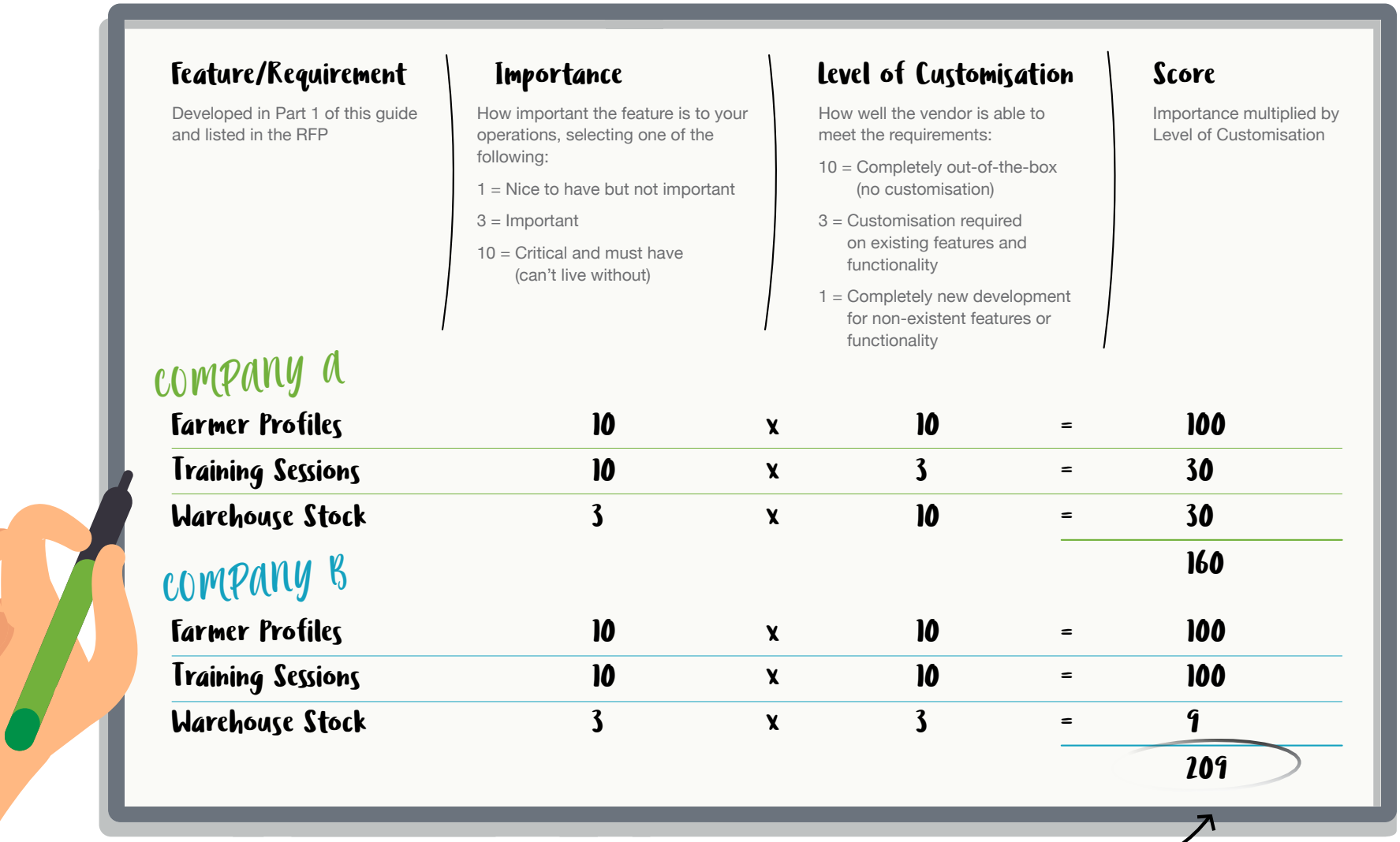
STEP 3
EVALUATING TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS

In this step, we will work through how to identify companies who are a good fit for your needs by assessing both their technical and non-technical performance during the proposal process.

Evaluating technical proposals

Once you have connected with all providers who submitted a proposal, choose your top three (if there are three you like) and then create a matrix to help evaluate the technical strength of their proposals. The below process will help you objectively evaluate which vendors are most closely aligned with your requirements. This is a great way to learn more about how different proposed technology solutions work, even if you aren't a technology expert.



Feature/Requirement	Importance		Level of Customisation		Score
Developed in Part 1 of this guide and listed in the RFP	How important the feature is to your operations, selecting one of the following: 1 = Nice to have but not important 3 = Important 10 = Critical and must have (can't live without)		How well the vendor is able to meet the requirements: 10 = Completely out-of-the-box (no customisation) 3 = Customisation required on existing features and functionality 1 = Completely new development for non-existent features or functionality		Importance multiplied by Level of Customisation
company A					
Farmer Profiles	10	x	10	=	100
Training Sessions	10	x	3	=	30
Warehouse Stock	3	x	10	=	30
					160
company B					
Farmer Profiles	10	x	10	=	100
Training Sessions	10	x	10	=	100
Warehouse Stock	3	x	3	=	9
					209

Right now Example Company B is probably a better fit for your requirements

Key tip: If you don't know how to score an item in the 'Level of Customisation' column, ask for input and an explanation from the technology provider. If their response feels confusing or vague, ask for a demo example that shows the feature in use.

Evaluating working relationships (continued)

It is important to also make sure you will have a good working relationship with a technology provider. Remember that it is usually hard and very expensive to switch away from technology solutions once they are implemented. You should think of the relationship with the technology provider as being like a marriage: you should select a provider who is able to become a long-term partner in your vision, goals and growth. Before choosing a provider to partner with long term, take time to reflect on and answering the questions shown to the right. Answer each question with the following options shown below:

Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Unsure | Agree | Strongly Agree

A vendor you choose should score as 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' for all questions by everyone from your team.

After working through each question and the technical evaluation matrix from before, you are ready to select a provider. The provider you select should, at a minimum, meet the following criteria:

- *They should have the highest score on your evaluation of requirements from the matrix you created on page 11*
- *They should have an 'agree' or 'strongly agree' answer for all the questions about the working relationship (on the right)*
- *They should have proposed a solution that fits within your budget and project time frame*

If you identify a vendor who meets all of the above, then you have probably found a great fit for a technology partner and you can proceed to Step 4 of this guide. Often companies may not be able to find a provider who meets all of the above criteria, especially for point number three where solutions must align around budgets and time frames. If you are unable to identify a suitable partner, go back to Step 2 in Part 1 of this guide and adjust the scope of what you seek to accomplish in your technology project. Even if you cannot implement everything you initially envisioned, smaller technology projects that you can afford will always be beneficial and will serve as building blocks for your longer term vision. Part 1 of this guide, covering the process of reviewing requirements and setting priorities, is available by **clicking here**.

TIP:

It is important to give technology providers a chance to push back on certain requests or requirements during the proposal process. A healthy relationship is one of mutual respect. While you are the expert in your business, they should be the expert in technology and hopefully will bring a huge amount of experience in solving challenges similar to yours. Giving vendors the flexibility and safety to provide real recommendations based on their insights from past projects will let them rise above being an 'order taker' and allow them to become more of a true and trusted partner.

Questions to ask

- Do we feel they have been kind and respectful?
- Do we feel supported through this process and that they have good support?
- Have they been responsive to our requests and questions?
- Do we feel they understand who we are and what our vision is?
- Did they listen to our needs and respond clearly?
- Do we feel they are passionate about their work, and passionate about helping us do what we do?
- Do they seem confident in their solution and in their ability to solve our problems?
- Are we confident in their solution, their ability to solve our problems, and their past experience?
- Do we trust them?
- Do we enjoy working with and interacting with them?
- Can we see them as a trusted partner in one year? In five years?

EXAMPLE COMPANY B

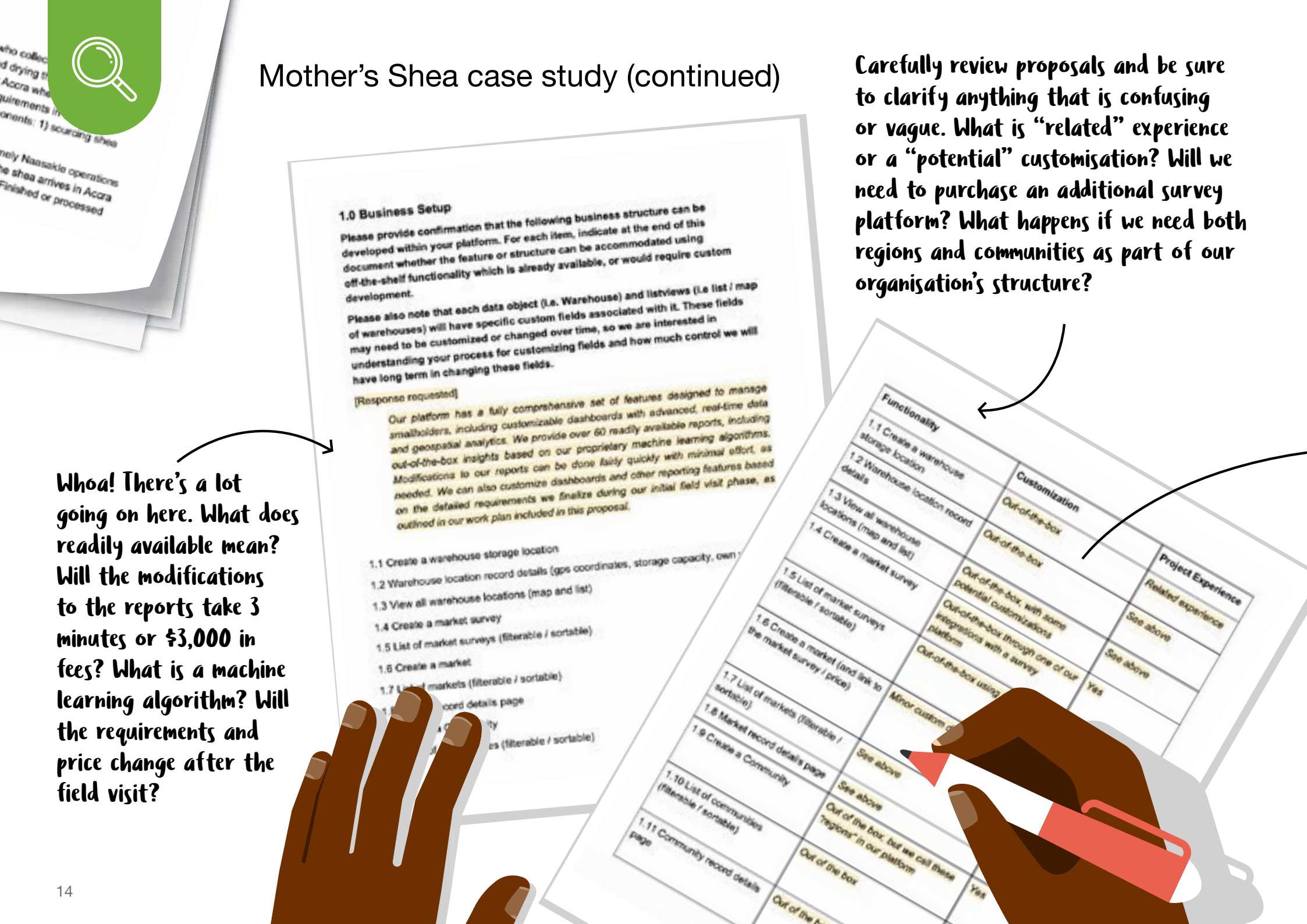
Agree
Strongly Agree
Strongly Agree
Strongly Agree
Agree
Strongly Agree
Agree
Strongly Agree
Strongly Agree
Agree
Agree

Right now Example Company B seems like a great fit for a long term partner.

Mother's Shea case study (continued)

Whoa! There's a lot going on here. What does readily available mean? Will the modifications to the reports take 3 minutes or $3,000 in fees? What is a machine learning algorithm? Will the requirements and price change after the field visit?

Carefully review proposals and be sure to clarify anything that is confusing or vague. What is "related" experience or a "potential" customisation? Will we need to purchase an additional survey platform? What happens if we need both regions and communities as part of our organisation's structure?



Once everything is clear, you can begin to evaluate proposals using the matrix covered in this step

		Vendor 1		181	Vendor 2		176	Vendor 3		127
Feature / Requirement	Importance	Vendor Response	Level of Customisation	Vendor Score	Vendor Response	Level of Customisation	Vendor Score	Vendor Response	Level of Customisation	Vendor Score
1.1 Create a warehouse storage location	10	Out-of-the-box	10	100	Out-of-the-box	10	100	Out-of-the-box	10	100
1.2 Warehouse location record details	1	Out-of-the-box	10	10	Customisation required on existing features and functionality	3	3	Out-of-the-box	10	10
1.3 View all warehouse locations (map and list)	1	Out-of-the-box	10	10	Out-of-the-box	10	10	Out-of-the-box	10	10
1.4 Create a market survey	3	Out-of-the-box We have a survey builder tool you can use to build your own surveys	10	30	Out-of-the-box	10	30	New development	1	3
1.5 List of market surveys (filterable / sortable)	3	Out-of-the-box Any survey developed in 1.4 above is available	10	30	Out-of-the-box	10	30	New development, see above	1	3
1.6 Create a market (and link to the market survey / price)	1	New development We will need 1-2 days custom development work to link the market prices into the survey	1	1	Customisation required on existing features and functionality	3	3	New development, as part of above	1	1

Selecting a partner

Mother's Shea used an evaluation matrix to understand the level of customisation required for each proposed solution. Technologies which require customisation are typically higher risk because they are often more expensive and there is less clarity on how the final solution will take shape. You should prioritise solutions with existing features and functionality that will meet your needs and have been validated on past projects.

When Mother's Shea completed an evaluation, the scores for each technology provider ultimately helped identify a solution which was able to solve the highest number of priority challenges with the least amount of customisation. Interestingly, the final winner was not the highest ranked candidate in the earliest stages of research, which shows the benefit of objectively evaluating proposals through tools such as the matrix shown above.

STEP 4
MANAGING IMPLEMENTATION

Great! You've selected a technology provider! What now? In this step we'll look at how to stay in control as you move toward the implementation of your selected solution.

Take control of communication

1) **Send out a formal email congratulating the selected company. Don't wait on them to take the lead - schedule a call in the very near future and relay that you want to finalise an implementation schedule. This is also a good time to note any final concerns or gaps in your understanding of their approach or solution, and request that the company makes sure your questions are answered right away on the next call.**

2) **Make sure to email all companies that were not selected and relay a few key items you like about their proposals as well as an explanation for why they were not selected. The agribusiness technology space is very small, so it's important not to 'burn bridges' - there is still a chance that your selected partner will not work out, or that you later grow into a potential partnership with a provider who was not a good fit at this time. Remember that vendors often put a lot of resources into responding to RFPs and that it can feel demoralising never to hear back!**

Following the initial call, you should request a final schedule and implementation plan in writing which lays out in detail when and how the technology solution will be available. If the partner you've selected seeks to implement the technology in phases (as they usually should), make sure to get in writing when each phase will be completed, the features and functionality that will be available in each phase, and what support and training will be provided at each step. A written implementation plan will ensure that everyone is on the same page in terms of expectations and will also hold the provider to a planned schedule, since you'll be mobilising your staff and organisation around the new technology. You should also establish expectations for long term support and maintenance with your technology partner, including their promise in writing for support response times, access to account managers, and costs for customised work.

Once you are comfortable with all these points, you can sign the contract that the vendor provides. Make sure you carefully read the contract before signing, and clarify any legal language you see that seems unfair, odd, or off base. Do not sign a contract prior to the first call, or to receiving the final implementation plan.

Establishing an implementation cadence

If the company will be developing features and functionality for you as part of the implementation, schedule regular weekly check-ins with a project manager or key contact who is accountable for the project's progress. In most cases, the company should also provide a demo of your solution's progress to date (even if it's in a partially complete form). Your technology partner should have a standard way of providing progress reports, but you as the customer also have control over adjusting the information you need and want to see in written progress reports.

At the end of each phase, designate someone internal to your company to test the solution and work through the checklist of planned features to ensure the technology meets all expected requirements. Always make sure you are satisfied with what has been produced before signing off and approving work for the next phase. In addition, many companies will have an invoice schedule tied to calendar dates, rather than deliverables. To protect your own interests, make sure you have agreed ahead of time with your partner that all invoices will be tied directly to the delivery of the milestone features and functionality.

As the project nears the deployment phase, it's time to mobilise your team to prepare for adoption and any process changes that will take place. The process of 'change management' for technology solutions can be long and complicated, but in general can be simplified through good communication to your staff about the benefits the new technology will bring, the plan for adoption, and any changes in expectations. Hopefully through the process of gathering requirements (covered in Part 1 of this guide), your team will already feel excited about the changes technology will bring.

You typically want to get through the first 'build' and deployment with your requirements from the RFP unchanged and fixed. Once completed, you can modify, customise, and add onto the original feature set by scoping out smaller projects that build upon your initial success. It's never a good idea when managing a technology provider to be a client who either does not know their requirements or changes their requirements after the build, implementation, and development process has already started. Technology providers have a lot of names for this type of client, and you don't want to be any of them!

Key tip: It's natural that your point of contact may change throughout the proposal, approval, and implementation phases as your project moves from sales representatives to project managers and account managers. Unfortunately across each transition there may not be perfect knowledge transfer, so be sure to document discussions and details that may be useful to reference as your point of contact changes.

Next Steps

You are all set! If you've completed this guide, you are on your way to a successful and rewarding technology project with a long term partner. As you manage the implementation of your solution, can turn your attention back toward the exciting process of creating a vision for how technology will continue to shape your organisation.

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AgDevCo's Smallholder Development Unit (SDU), with the support of the Mastercard Foundation and UK aid, supports rural agricultural enterprises to develop equitable schemes to boost productivity and incomes for smallholder farmers in Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

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