

# 20 Making a pitch



## Technique sheet

Problem-based learning resources

### Introduction

Engineers often have to pitch, or present, a project to get work. This involves showing your potential client how your project will solve their problem. You should explain what you will do (the proposal and how it benefits the users), when you will do it (the schedule) and what it will cost (the budget).

### What's the problem and who needs it solved?

Think about the problem you have been asked to solve – it may be building a new railway system or taking over maintenance of all the fridges and freezers in a large hospital. Why is this a problem, how serious is it and who does it affect? Local councillors, or company directors may make decisions about railway upgrades rather than the passengers themselves. The councillors, or directors may want the cheapest or greenest railway system or the minimum disruption during construction while passengers may want a station near to them and fast, cheap trains.

- Make sure you understand the problem, how it affects your potential customers and who decides whether to go ahead or not.

### How could you solve the problem?

A pitch or proposal can be very specific (e.g. 'I will modify the wiring in the building so that we can use energy-efficient LED bulbs') or more general ('we propose to build a new Engineering Workshop to support training with electric vehicles'). More general pitches may mean that you have to come back with more detailed plans once it has been agreed in principle. In either case you must be confident that you can solve the problem and have believable plans that show how you would do it. Remember, a pitch is a promise – if you can't keep that promise don't make it! It is tempting to bid for work even though you, or your team, do not have the skills or capacity and hope that somehow you will manage or pass it on to others. Do not do this. It is unethical and bad business practice. A good reputation takes years to develop but it only takes one or two disappointments or failed deadlines to make your clients feel that you are untrustworthy.

- Make sure you are clear about what you intend to do, can describe your planning and are confident you can deliver it.

### What about the costs?

Showing the costs clearly for any proposed project is critical. One of the commonest criteria for choosing between one proposal and another is 'value for money' where lower costs usually (but not

always) win. This means it is sometimes tempting to underestimate the costs for a project and hope you can increase the budget when the contract is won. Don't do this! Make sure your costings are as accurate as possible and include everything in your final total. These include the cost of components (including delivery and potential taxes), time for installing or building, any expenses and costs for subcontractors who will do a specialist job and any licence fees that may need to be paid on an annual basis (e.g. software). If a maintenance contract is part of the project or you are offering upgrades regularly (e.g. security upgrades for software systems) indicate the costs of these. Potential clients often have rules about how costs should be submitted so your costing document will need to fit in with their system.

- Make sure you include all relevant costs in your estimate and check that you supply the final costs in the format the client requires.

### What are the rules about pitching and when does it have to be submitted?

Often a potential client will ask several groups to make separate pitches and choose the one they like best. To make the selection process fair, and to comply with legislation, they may have rules about how the pitch is presented (e.g. number of words, how costs must be supplied, the closing date). If you do not follow these rules your pitch will be rejected automatically – even if the work you're proposing is excellent.

- Make sure you know how your pitch should be structured and when it must be with the client.

### What happens if you don't get the job?

Not every pitch will be successful. Sometimes you don't have the knowledge or experience required. This is another good reason for not pitching for a project you are not confident you can deliver. Sometimes the other suppliers were cheaper or could offer a faster start to the work. It is discouraging when a pitch is not accepted but always try to get some feedback from the contractor. A few words to explain why the pitch was unsuccessful can be very useful when you are planning your next one. However, remember that feedback is not compulsory and depends on the kindness of the commissioning person or body. If you are lucky enough to receive feedback, especially if it is delivered through a conversation, do not imagine that this provides an opportunity to argue your case and tell them why you should have got the job!

- Make sure you take advantage of any feedback offered to learn how to create better pitches –

not to convince the commissioning body that they were wrong not to give you the job!



### Check yourself

**You should be able to answer these questions easily after reading this sheet.**

1. What is a pitch?
2. Why is it a bad idea to underestimate your real costs just to win a pitch?
3. How is feedback useful?



### Taking it further

**These activities will deepen your understanding of this topic.**

1. Find at least 5 websites that offer advice on preparing a pitch. Identify the key points from each of them and create a set of 5 Golden Rules you can use to create your own proposals. These rules should be expressed as positive instructions (e.g. 'DO this, INCLUDE that'). Also look for 2 common mistakes or traps to avoid and add these to your list – so they should be 'DON'T do this, AVOID doing that'.
2. Choose a particular situation at your college or place of work that you think is a bit of a problem. Perhaps the cafeteria is too small? The workshop gets too hot in the summer? The lighting in the workshop is not bright enough? Pick something that you think could be improved with a bit of clever engineering.

Prepare a proposal that would show how you could use your engineering knowledge and skills to solve your chosen problem or difficulty. Your proposal should follow all the rules in the briefing section of this document and show your understanding of what makes a good proposal.

Your proposal may need some research (e.g. how is power supplied to the workshop? why do the extractor fans in the workshop run so slowly?) and make sure your proposal is reasonable in terms of likely cost and disruption (e.g. you can't just knock the whole building down and start again from scratch!). Your proposal should be a text document (<750 words) and include at least 2 photographic illustrations and 3 drawings or charts.