

Win in the flat world

Quantitative Vendor Comparison Technique for RFP or RFI

– Souvik Roychoudhury

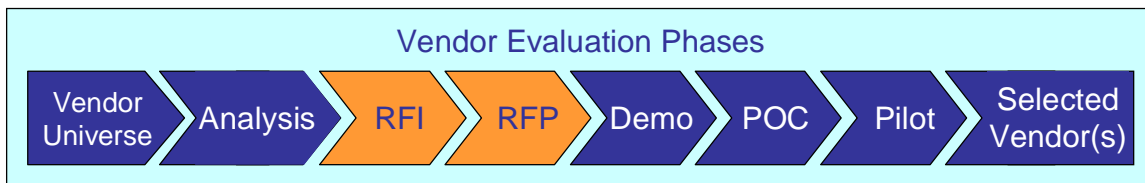
Abstract:

Clients are looking into the marketplace more often nowadays to buy a product or solution, rather than building it on their own. So it is extremely important for clients to follow an effective and efficient vendor selection process. In this article, I have presented a quantitative methodology to determine the best-fit vendor based on numerical scoring of vendor's response to a RFP or RFI. In this approach, a total score in "vendor points" is assigned to the overall RFP which is distributed to the RFP categories, subcategories and RFP questions based on their relative importance. Based on vendor's response, client evaluators will rate the RFP questions using predetermined qualitative choices. These will then be converted into a numerical score which will be summed up to determine overall vendor score. Analysis of vendor scores will help clients determine the best-fit vendor product or solution.



Introduction

Clients are more frequently looking to the marketplace to buy a product or solution, rather than building it on their own. These decisions often involve multi-million dollar investments and can have a huge impact on their realized business value, so the vendor evaluation process is becoming increasingly important. The following diagram shows the high level flow for a typical vendor evaluation project. Earlier, I wrote an article on the vendor demo phase of the project – [“Vendor Demonstration Guidelines and Best Practices for Clients”](#). In this current article I focus on the RFP and RFI phases - quantitatively evaluating vendors based on their RFP or RFI response. In the rest of the article, I have mostly used the term RFP though the concepts apply equally well to an RFI a.



RFIs and RFPs are important parts of the vendor selection process. This is the first opportunity for the client to get know the details about the vendor product or solution. Out of all the vendor selection phases, the RFP is typically the most extensive evaluation of the vendor products or solutions. Typically clients deal with a moderate number of vendors (2-10), and going through their response, clarifying their answers, evaluating their product or solution and finally ranking the vendor based on their fit-to the company's requirements is an arduous task .at hand. Often, clients need to make important decisions on who to eliminate and who to continue to the next phase, so it is essential that clients follow a robust and effective process for the RFP evaluation.

To address this need, I am proposing a quantitative approach - “Quantitative Vendor Comparison Technique (QVCT)”, where a finite number of points are assigned to the total RFP and then allocated to the different sections of the RFP and then to each of the underlying questions based on their relative importance. That means each section and each question within a section is assigned a maximum score. During the RFP evaluation, client evaluators assign ratings from a predetermined list to each of these questions for every vendor. These ratings determine how much a vendor will score for their response to each question – a response is worth between zero and the maximum score assigned. Summing up the scores of all questions in a section will give the total vendor score for that section. Similarly, the scores of all sections are finally rolled up and determine the overall vendor score. The scores for each vendor are then compared to determine who should move to the next phase and who should be removed. The unit used for this scoring mechanism is called a vendor point. I had the privilege of working in numerous vendor selection projects and have used the experience from those projects in defining this method. What makes it unique are the set of values used for scoring different ratings (for example, how many points a vendor should score if they exceed expectations for a question). I used these project experiences to determine the optimal set of values to quantitatively help determine the best vendor response in the cleanest way. Subsequent sections will explain these concepts in detail.. Before proceeding, let's first understand why we need a quantitative approach.

Challenges in Vendor Comparison

In this very tight market driven economy all vendors will try very hard to make their solution appear to be the best in the world. The onus is on the buyer to see clearly through the sales and marketing hype and select the optimal solution for their particular business situation. The following are some typical challenges commonly faced in vendor selection projects:

- **Everything that glitters is not gold:** Some of the products from the outside may look extremely good with lots of bells and whistles. They use the latest technology in the market or present an excellent user interface. However, deep down they lack the core features you need. In the same way, the best-fit product may not look the most glamorous from the outside. The Cinderella story sometimes applies to IT products as well
- **Can they walk the talk:** Sometimes the vendor may not have the best solution but have the best sales team. As it happens often, they may tell you everything that you want to hear and there may be a lot of promises on what the product can do. But decisions should not be made based on words but through a rigorous evaluation of the actual capabilities of their product against your well defined requirement.
- **Trust but verify:** Similarly, it is not uncommon for a vendor to respond “Yes” to most, if not all of the capabilities sought in an RFP. Promising to make the RFP response a part of any contract that is awarded may reduce the issue, but going to court and suing the vendor is unproductive and not an experience you should be seeking. As with all written communication, things subject to interpretation and often difficult to contest. Verifying the answers before trusting the response is the prudent choice.
- **Impression based judgment:** I feel this one is the most common issue in practice. Often evaluators like or dislike one particular feature of the product and that determines the overall impression which leads to a quick judgment about the vendor. The fact that the other 99% of the features may be the other way round doesn't affect the decision. Clients must ensure that the entire set of the vendor functionalities is the basis of the evaluation.
- **One influences others:** Another problem with qualitative selection is that one very strong stakeholder can impose his/her decision on the other stakeholders. For the less forceful stakeholders, it is easy to follow along as they can always fall back on the strong stakeholder as an excuse if the choice turns out badly. Companies must ensure all evaluators are making decisions based on their own judgment.
- **Difficulty in ranking & selection:** In absence of any numerical data, it is always difficult to rank the vendors and select or eliminate a few for the next rounds. This is all based on perception based and makes it very difficult to differentiate two closely positioned vendors. Things get even more difficult if the evaluators are split into two camps. Numerical scoring can easily resolve this issue.

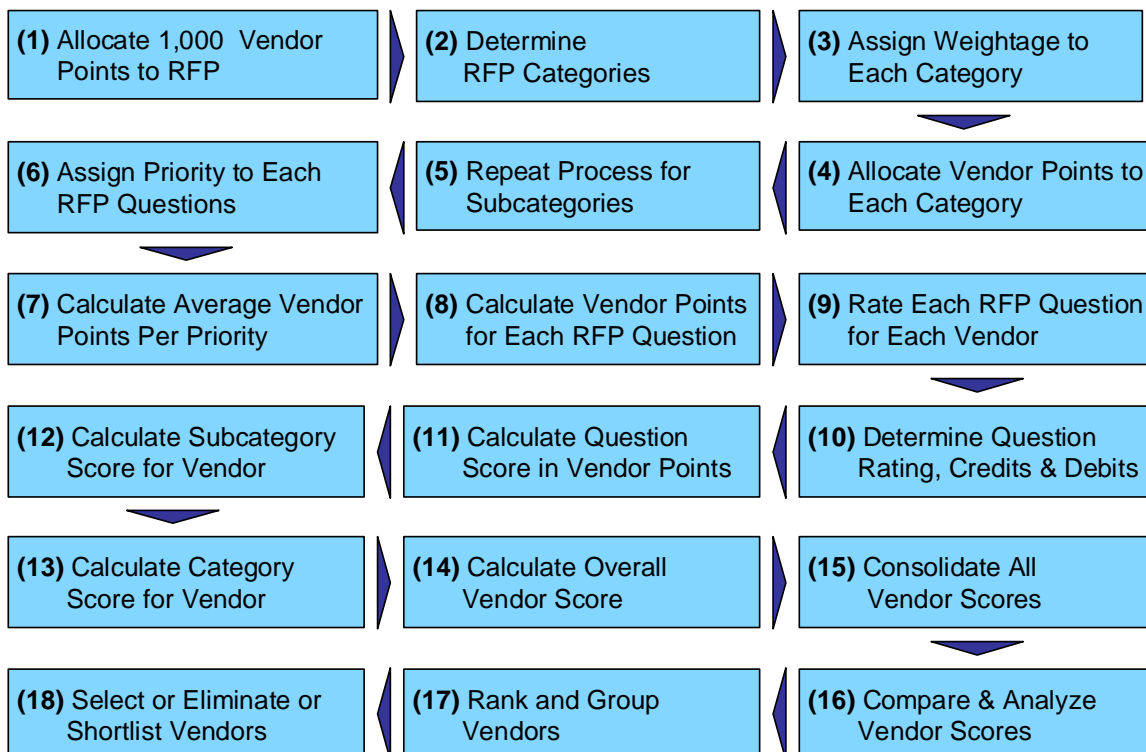
Advantages of a Quantitative Approach

The following are the most important advantages of a quantitative approach and address the challenges mentioned in the previous quantitative approach brings in an “objective” assessment over the “subjective” assessment of qualitative approaches. This takes the emotions out of the equation and provides a better evaluation of the solution.

- A rigorous process always reduces the variance in results due to people-related factors
- It is very easy to compare, rank and group the vendors and their product capabilities since these are assigned numerical scores,
- A quantitative approach requires evaluators to rate each and every question which in turn determines the overall score. This avoids impression based overall assessments.
- The approach is based on rating choices with clear cut definitions. No matter how much you like or dislike or how much you are influenced by others – if the vendor meets the definition, you have to rate them accordingly. This dramatically reduces perception based evaluation.
- Any quantitative approach can be modeled, refined and implemented through tools. You can use MS Excel or other home grown tools to tremendously boost the evaluation efficiency.
- Finally, in a typical vendor selection project, a small set of people makes a decision for the larger masses. The worst thing that can happen is that the choice is seen as “your” decision, not “theirs”. So you must do all due diligence and have a clear audit trail and explanation for your decision. A quantitative approach always scores better here.

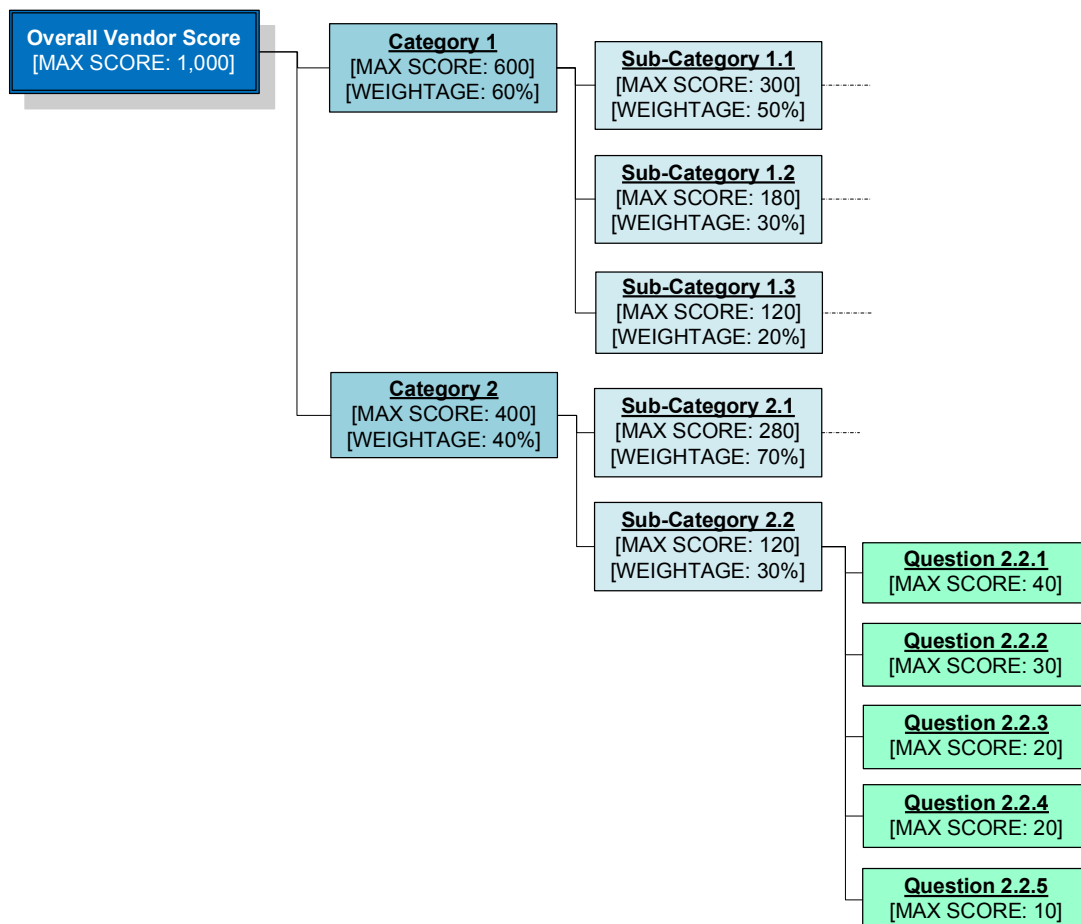
High Level Steps

The following is a high level workflow for vendor evaluation using the Quantitative Vendor Comparison Technique (QVCT). Each step is detailed in subsequent sections.



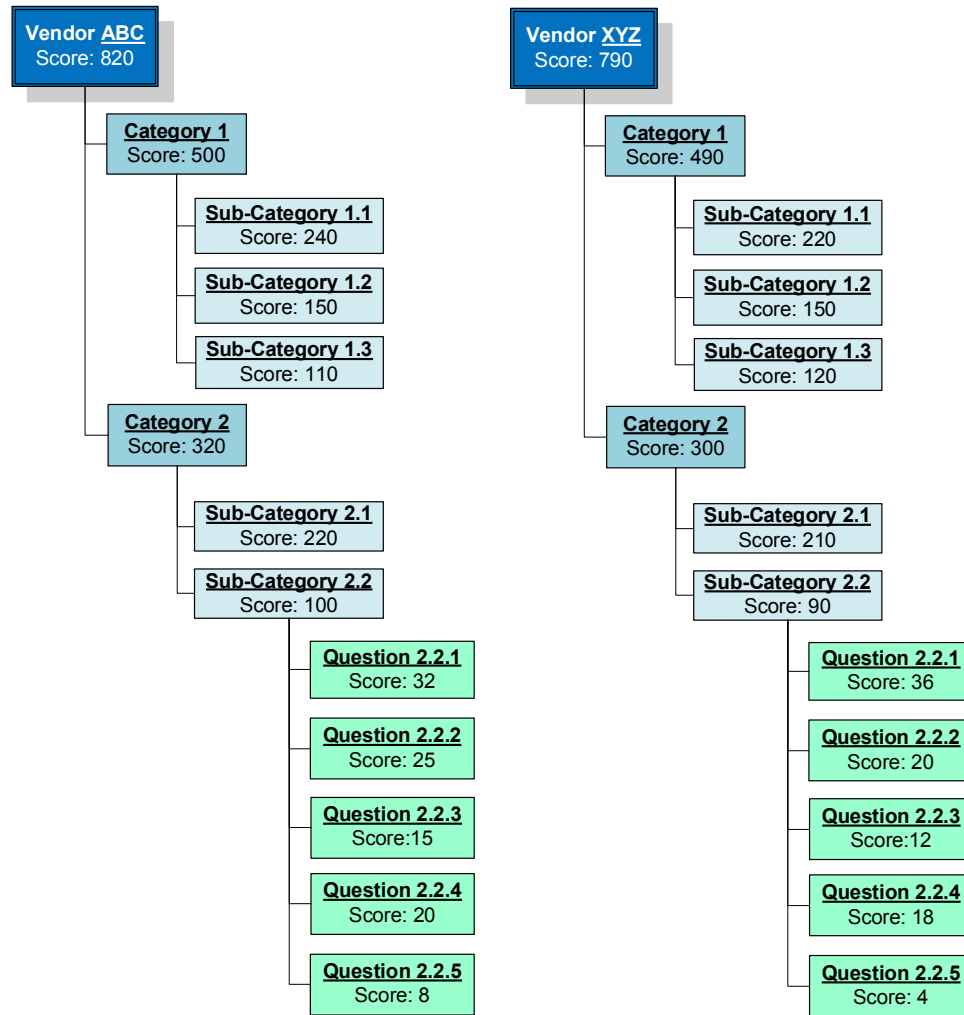
Methodology Summary

Quantitative Vendor Comparison Technique (QVCT) is a methodology to quantitatively compare multiple vendors for an RFP or RFI response. In this methodology, the overall RFP response is allotted a maximum total score of 1,000 Vendor Points which is distributed among the categories & sub-categories and then to the individual questions based on their relative importance or priority (i.e. Weightage). For example, in the picture below, the Category 2 was assessed as 40% importance and assigned 400 Vendor Points (i.e. 40% of 1,000). Similarly, Sub-Category 2.2 is assessed as 30% importance within Category 2. So it is assigned 120 Vendor Points which is 30% of the Category 2 total of 400 vendor points. Finally within Sub-category 2.2 each question gets a maximum score based on its relative importance. The sum of total max scores of these questions is 120 Vendor Points which is the same as that of Sub-Category 2.2.. Note, in the following picture only the questions for Sub-Category 2.2 are shown. Questions corresponding to other categories will follow the same pattern.



During the RFP evaluation process, each vendor will get a score for the response to each of these questions which in turn will determine the vendor score for each sub-category and category.

Based on their assessed capability, these scores will vary among vendors and different vendors will probably get a different Total Score. A comparison of these scores will help clients identify the “best fit” vendor product or solution. The following picture shows representative vendor scores for two hypothetical vendors responding to the above RFP. Vendor ABC gets a score of 820 Vendor Points which is higher than the Vendor XYZ’s score of 790 vendor points.



As shown above, overall vendor scores can then be used to differentiate vendors and will help clients to shortlist qualified vendors for the next selection phase. There are many complex issues to be handled in the process - e.g. Whether the vendor has achieved a minimum “passing score” in all categories, whether it has met all “deal breaker” RFP questions satisfactorily, what is the price etc. before just picking the highest scoring vendor. However, at the conceptual level, the above structure describes how the vendors are scored and compared. The intricate details of calculating scores of RFP questions, determining weightages etc will be described in subsequent sections, in a progressively elaborated fashion. *These sections also explain what tools, techniques and guidelines are used around this apparently simple concept which makes QVCT a unique methodology.*

Vendor Points

Any quantitative analysis is based on certain numerical parameters and units. Vendor score is the numerical parameter in QVCT and a Vendor Point is the unit. Like any units of measurement, Vendor Points designate how much desired functionality or feature is provided by the vendor product or solution. This helps to relatively measure how good a product or solution a vendor is meeting a requirement. No doubt, concepts like function points and use case points act as an inspiration. One key difference –is that Vendor Points are used for relative comparisons between different products while FP or UCP are used for absolute measurements of the size of the product.

In QVCT total Vendor Points is kept as a constant 1,000 for a particular RFP. This makes easier to allocate the maximum possible points to categories and questions. 1,000 is not a magic number but works well. If the number is set lower (e.g. 100) then it forces us to use a number of decimal to differentiate RFP question scores. While any larger number (e.g. 10,000) increases the number of digits before the decimal without adding much value. Based on my experience of past vendor evaluation projects, I feel 1,000 is optimal and having zeros at the end also helps a lot when applying weightages (e.g. as compared otherwise good 999).

As described in the summary, each category, sub-category and each question will have a maximum possible Vendor Points assigned – the sum of which will make it 1,000. The vendor can get from a score of 0 up to this maximum value for the response to each question. The total of Vendor Points for Responses to all questions determines the score for the corresponding sub-category score and the total of Vendor Points for all sub-categories determines the score of the corresponding category.

Category and Sub-Category

The RFP should always be structured around different sections focusing on different types of functionality or target audience. These are denoted by “Category” in the summary section. Again each of these categories can be further subdivided into multiple “Sub-Categories” for better grouping of RFP questions. QVCT methodology still works well even if there are no categories in an RFP and all questions are written in a single section. Unless the number of RFP questions are very low (e.g. 15-25), this approach is not recommended. For a moderate size RFP (e.g. 25-100), one can have only Categories but no sub-categories. For anything higher (e.g. if a category has 100+ RFP questions) it is better to have sub-categories.

What the categories and sub-categories are depends a lot on the type of RFP and target product or solution. It can represent the types of functionality and services, types of questions, or types of stakeholder involvement. Once the categories and subcategories are determined, it is strongly advised to structure the RFP document around these sections. The following is a recommended structure which I found to work very well in multiple vendor evaluation projects

- **General:** Vendor Profile, Operational, Financial, legal, licensing, support, training etc.
- **Functional:** Core section. Should focus on the functionality or services that are being requested
- **Non-Functional:** SLA, performance, capacity, maintainability, usability etc.
- **Technical:** Various IT topics like architecture, integration, framework, infrastructure etc.

Category Weightage

If no Weightage is used, a Category with higher number of RFP question yields more Vendor Points and plays a bigger role in deciding the eventual winner. However, different categories in an RFP rarely have the same importance – there are usually a few sections which are more important than the rest. In order to recognize differences in importance, category weightages are used. First, all stakeholders meet, discuss and agree on the order of importance of the categories. Once done, they reflect the relative importance by assigning a different percentage to each category. This is used to determine how many vendor points, from the total 1,000 are allocated to each category. Similarly, weightages and vendor point allocation are determined for the subcategories as well. The following is a sample Weightage for accounting software

Category	1	1	1	1
Category Name	Accounting	Claims	New Business	Marketing
Importance	High	Medium	Medium	Low
Rank	1	2	3	4
Weightage	50%	25%	20%	5%
Vendor Points	500	250	200	50

RFP Question Priority

Since the number of categories and sub-categories are low, their relative importance can be easily determined through Weightage percentages. However, in the case of RFP questions, the numbers are high and we need a different approach to achieve the same objective. Sorting hundreds of questions in the order of importance and then assigning fractional percentage is a difficult if not practically impossible task. RFP Question Priority is used to address this issue. In this approach, first a set of valid values for RFP Question Priority is determined and then each RFP Question is assigned to one of these values based on the RFP Question importance. This way an entire set of RFP Questions can be categorized into a set of priorities based on their relative importance. I would suggest not using any more than 4 values as the difference between the priorities gets blurred and it gets difficult in practice to assign a value. A presentation should be prepared to clearly articulate the definition and criteria for these priorities for each Evaluator's reference.

- Critical or Must Have: **5**
- Important or Should Have: **3**
- Optional or Nice to Have: **1**
- Not Required: **0**

Since this is a quantitative methodology, each of these priorities should be assigned a number to reflect their relative importance. You may see that each of the above priorities has a value next to it. I could have assigned a value like 0-1-2-3 for these instead of the proposed 0-1-3-5. However, during the past vendor evaluation projects, I realized that non-linear increase of the values with extra weight on 'Important' and 'Critical' RFP Questions brings better results. As I mentioned earlier, these proposed numerical values for translating a qualitative evaluation to a quantitative evaluation is a key aspect of the QVCT methodology.

RFP Question Vendor Points

Once the priority is determined for each question, this is used to allocate the total Vendor Points available in the corresponding category or sub-category to all the RFP questions in that section. For that we first calculate **Average Vendor Points Per Priority (AVP3)** for that section as following

$$\text{AVP3} = (\text{Total Vendor Points in the Section}) / (\sum \text{Priorities for all questions in the section})$$

We then determine the **RFP Question Vendor Points (QVP)** by multiplying AVP3 for the corresponding section with the Priority of that question. QVP tells us the maximum Vendor Points a vendor can score for that question.

$$\text{QVP} = (\text{AVP3 of the section}) \times (\text{Priority of the RFP Question})$$

In the following example, let's assume total Vendor Points assigned to the Category 1 is 48 and Category 2 is 15. So the AVP3 for Category 1 is $48 / (5+3+3+1)$ or 4. This is used to determine the QVP for each question.

Category	1	1	1	1		2	2	2
Question #	1	2	3	4		1	2	3
Priority	5	3	3	1		3	1	1
AVP3	4	4	4	4		3	3	3
QVP	20	12	12	4		9	3	3

RFP Question Rating

QVP determines the maximum assigned Vendor Points for a RFP question that one vendor can get for a response. However, they get the full score only if they meet all the qualities sought in that question. **RFP Question Rating (QR)** is used to determine how a particular vendor has fared in response to a particular question. This is done in two parts – the first part is the **Evaluation Rating (ER)** and the second part is scheduled **Credits (CR)** and **Debits (DR)**.

Evaluation Rating (ER) is used by evaluators to share their opinion in qualitative terms on how the vendor product or solution has met the expectation of the client for a response to a particular RFP question. Here again, I strongly suggest limiting the choices to 4 to avoid confusion. Also each ER should have a numerical value to fit into this quantitative approach. A vendor can get a maximum 5 rating points for ER. The following choices I have seen work very well in practice. The nonlinear numerical values are based on my experience of what worked best in my past vendor evaluation projects.

- Exceeded Expectation: 5
- Met Expectation: 4
- Below Expectation: 2
- Not Available: 0

In addition to ER, clients must define a set of Credits (CR) which can fetch up to +5 rating points and set of Debits (DR) which can get a negative score up to -5 rating points. Credits are good features of the product which help clients meet its needs in a better way and Debits are inhibitors in leveraging the vendor product. The scheduled list of choices for Credits and Debits are a predefined list of factors which are important to clients and each of these factors can have a different rating point. Following is a sample of CR and DR. The numbers assigned below are just a representative values – clients should assign their own values based on relative importance.

Credits

C1. Business user can configure rules: **1**
 C2. Improvement available in next release: **0.25**
 C3. Context sensitive help available: **0.75**
 C4.

Debits

D1. Only Vendor IT can customize app: **-1**
 D2. Too many concurrent windows: **-0.5**
 D3. Requires third party license: **-0.5**
 D4.

The concept is that ER tells us whether the solution is provided by vendor and CR/DR qualifies how the solution is provided. In some past projects I have seen clients trying to combine these three choices into one which resulted in a long list of rating choices which creates confusion for evaluators and results in incorrect evaluation.

QR is the absolute sum of ER, total CR and total DR where total CR can not be higher than 5 and total DR can not be lower than -5. If the sum of ER, CR and DR is negative, QR is set to 0. So QR can be maximum of 10 and minimum of 0

CR = \sum (Individual Credits for that question up to maximum 5) = C1 + C2 + C3 + ...
DR = \sum (Individual Debits for that question up to minimum -3) = D1 + D2 + D3 + ...
QR = (ER + CR + DR)

RFP Question Score

Now that we have the Question Rating (QR) and Question Vendor Points (QVP) calculated we can determine the vendor's score for that question by calculating **Question Score (QS)** using the following formula. This determines how many Vendor Points a vendor scored for a response to that question.

QS = QVP x QR / 10

Category Score

A vendor score for the corresponding sub-category (CS_n) is determined by summing up the vendor scores for responses to all questions in that sub category. Similarly, the vendor score of the corresponding category is the sum of vendor scores of all underlying sub-categories

$CS_{n,n} = \sum QS$ when the category or subcategory contains questions
or
 $CS_n = \sum CS_{n,n}$ when the category or subcategory contains sub-categories

Pass Fail Tests

Deal Breaker Questions: There are always some requirements which must be met by the vendor product. No matter how high they score, if they do not meet certain requirements, they cannot qualify as a valid choice. To address this, Deal Breaker questions are used. Deal breaker questions are Critical or Must Have requirements but if vendor doesn't provide any solutions to these questions, they are disqualified. That means vendor score must be non-zero for responses to these questions.

Passing Scores: In similar vein, there may be some important category or sub-category where the vendor solution must be better than a certain level. For these categories, clients must determine a minimum passing score (e.g. 75% of the QVP for that category). If a vendor score falls below this minimum score, they are disqualified, no matter how high they score in the other sections and overall.

Vendor Scorecard Sample

This methodology can be easily implemented through an Excel workbook. The following is an example using fictitious data an approach a client (typically a business analyst) should perform to prepare a scorecard

- Create an xls worksheet with the columns shown in the following picture (next page). Note the template has five sections:
 - RFP: Based on the RFP sections and questions
 - Evaluations: Based on the rating choices
 - Credits: List of all credits and their values
 - Debits: List of all debits and their values
 - Question Score: This will be automatically calculated based on formulas
- Include all category, subcategories and underlying questions in separate rows as shown below
- Apply formulas in Question Score columns to automatically calculate values based evaluator selections (Through "X") in columns Evaluation, Credits and Debits. Please refer to Excel formula help to determine which formula (e.g. CountIf, Sum etc) to be used.
- Use the formulas discussed earlier on how these numbers will be calculated.
- Apply formulas in category and subcategory rows to sum up the values from underlying sections or questions.
- Add validations to ensure evaluators are not making invalid choices (e.g. Putting "X" in both "Met Expectation" and "Below Expectation" for one question
- The evaluators will apply their rating by entering "X" in Yellow colored cells and the rest of the data will be automatically calculated.

RFP				Evaluation				Credits			Debits			Question Score				
Vendor	Type	Identifier	QVP	Exceeded Expectation (5)	Met Expectation (4)	Below Expectation (2)	Not Available (0)	C1. Business user can configure rules (1)	C3. Context sensitive help available (0.75)	D1. Only Vendor IT can customize app (-1)	D3. Requires third party license (-0.75)	ER	CR	DR	QR	QS
V1	Category	C1	63											13	3.3	-2.5	14	19
	Sub-Category	C1.1	46											13	3.3	-2.5	14	19
	Question	R1.1.1	10	X				X	X			X		5	1.75	-0.75	6	6
	Question	R1.1.2	22		X				X		X	X		4	0.75	-1.75	3	6.6
	Question	R1.1.3	14		X				X					4	0.75		4.8	6.7
	Sub-Category	C1.2	17											0	0	0	0	0
	Question	R1.2.1	17				X							0			0	0
	Category	C2	131											16	1.5	-2	16	49
	Sub-Category	C2.1	66											10	1.5	0	12	38
	Question	R2.1.1	39	X					X					5	0.75		5.8	22
	Question	R2.1.2	27	X					X					5	0.75		5.8	16
	Sub-Category	C2.2	65											6	0	-2	4	12
	Question	R2.2.1	25		X						X			4		-1.00	3	7.5
	Question	R2.2.2	40			X					X			2		-1.00	1	4
	Category	C3	37											2	0	-1	1	2
	Sub-Category	C3.1	37											2	0	-1	1	2
	Question	R3.1.1	20			X					X			2		-1.00	1	2
	Question	R3.1.2	17				X							0			0	0
VENDOR TOTAL			231											31	4.8	-5.5	30	71

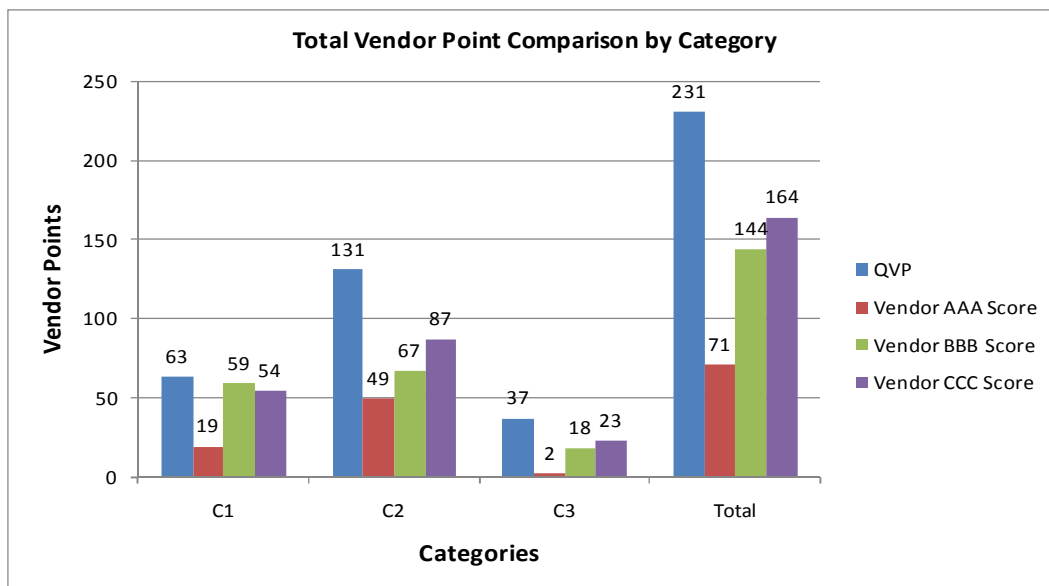
Vendor Score Comparison

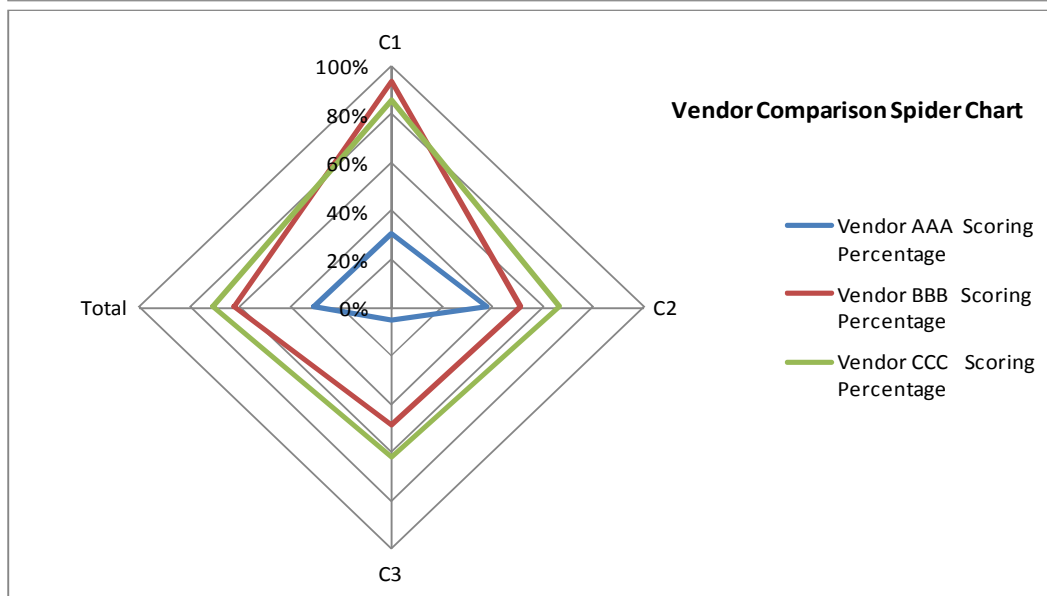
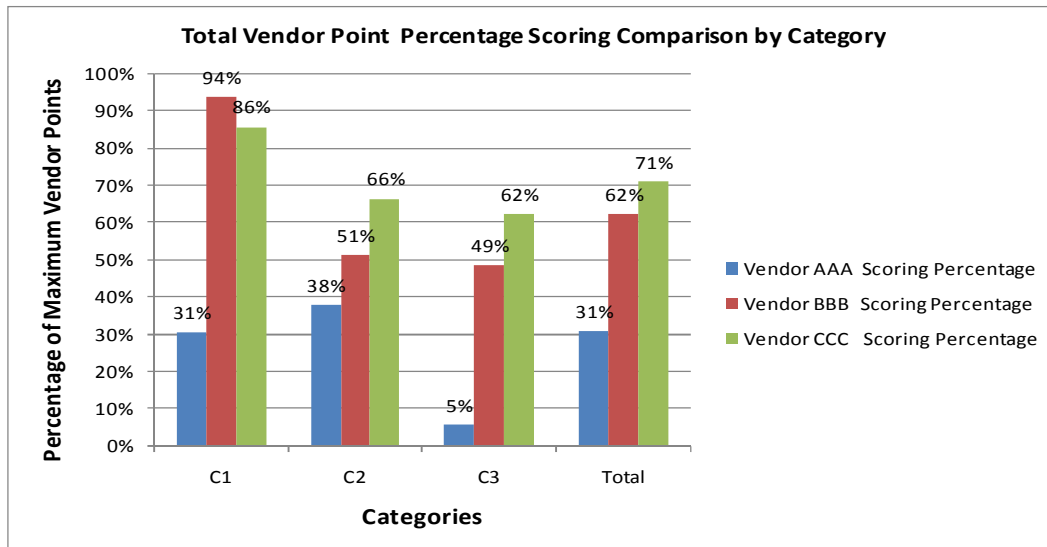
Once the scores of all vendors are calculated based on above template, the data can be put in a summary template to allow comparisons across vendors. The following is the comparison of total Vendor Points scored by three vendors AAA, BBB and CCC. These comparisons can be done at question level also but for simplicity I have only shown category and subcategory level data.

Type	Identifier	QVP	Vendor AAA Score	Vendor BBB Score	Vendor CCC Score	Vendor AAA Scoring Percentage	Vendor BBB Scoring Percentage	Vendor CCC Scoring Percentage
Category	C1	63	19	59	54	31%	94%	86%
Sub-Category	C1.1	46	19	42	37	42%	91%	80%
Sub-Category	C1.2	17	0	17	17	0%	100%	100%
Category	C2	131	49	67	87	38%	51%	66%
Sub-Category	C2.1	66	38	15	41	58%	23%	62%
Sub-Category	C2.2	65	12	52	46	18%	80%	71%
Category	C3	37	2	18	23	5%	49%	62%
Sub-Category	C3.1	37	2	18	23	5%	49%	62%
VENDOR TOTAL		231	71	144	164	31%	62%	71%

In addition to the total vendor points, other attributes like ER, CR, DR, QR can be used in comparison. Also instead of the total, we can use other dimensions like Average, Max, Min, Standard Deviation etc. We can determine many other statistics such as how many questions vendor scored Zero or how many 'Critical' question was evaluated with Met or Exceeded Expectation. The data is present in EXCEL and we can use an Excel Macro and other formulas to perform a lot of business intelligence analysis.. We can use Excel Group Data function to show all records, show only top categories, and show any level in between. We can use Excel Filter conditions to identify odd ball scenarios. If available, the data can be transferred to MS Access or other relational databases for many other complex comparisons. It all depends on what parameters the client wants to use to compare the vendors and the above template provides the appropriate data for slicing & dicing.

It is often easier to compare the vendors through charts as graphical information is easier to comprehend Based on the above data; the following are some of the different charts that can be produced.





Vendor Selection or Elimination

Based on the above data and charts, it is very clear that Vendor CCC is clearly better than the other vendors. Let's assume that vendor BBB and CCC both "passed" all the minimum passing scores and deal breaker questions. Whether any vendor will be selected may depend on many other factors most importantly being price. However, if a client needs to select a vendor based on the Quantitative Data, then it should be Vendor CCC. However, , if this is purely a vendor elimination process and qualifying vendors may be moved to a next phase (e.g. vendor demo), then from the data it is clear that Vendor AAA is too far below the other two vendor products and it will be prudent not to continue vendor AAA in the next stage. This illustrative analysis is very simple but based on real; data this can be a very difficult process and may need multiple discussions & workshops spanning days.

Closing Comments

Previous sections explained the methodology in a nutshell. Different vendor evaluation projects have the challenge of its own and we need to tune the process to the specific needs. In the article, "Vendor Demonstration Guidelines and Best Practices for Clients", published in www.informationweek.com, I have provided additional details on how to consolidate and finalize the ratings when different team member have different opinion about the vendor solution. The same concept and approach is applicable to RFP evaluation also and should be referred while following QVCT methodology. Wish you all the best to your vendor selection endeavor.

About the Author

Souvik Roychoudhury is a Senior Project Manager in the Insurance, Healthcare and Life Sciences practice of Infosys Technologies Ltd. He has over 12 years of IT experience in Infosys in which last 10 years are in the Insurance domain. Souvik has primarily worked in large scale business and technology transformation programs, and vendor selection projects. Souvik holds the designations of PMP, Six Sigma Green Belt, CSM, FLMI, FFSl, CCP, AAPA, ARA, AIRC & ACS and has a good blend of expertise & experience in Domain, Process & Technology.

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