



# The Top 7 Off-Target RFP Questions

What to Avoid If You Want a Great RFP for Employee Benefits Technology and Services



**“You’ve all heard foolish questions,  
And no doubt you’ve wondered why  
A person who will ask them  
Expects a reasonable reply.”**

“Foolish Questions” by Arthur Smith

Those lyrics to an old country song are as true today as when they were written so many years ago. And they apply just as much to evaluating and selecting employee benefits technology and services as they do to most other aspects of life.



When you issue an RFP, you want meaningful information to help you responsibly evaluate vendors and options. When responding, potential vendors want to showcase their strengths. Both of you want to learn whether you're a good fit for each other.

Unfortunately, some of the most common questions in this industry's RFPs suffer from being:



Asking questions that are more specific –  
and, yes, often more challenging – will yield

**better information and give  
you greater insight into the  
vendors you're evaluating.**

And it will start you off in a much better partnership  
with the vendor you eventually select.



# Want an example? How about seven of them?

Here are some of the most common foolish RFP questions for evaluating benefits technology and services vendors along with suggestions for how better information could have been gained with smarter questions.





# FOOLISH QUESTION

**“Can you confirm that your technology will accept data in our defined format?”**





What kind of reasonable reply can you expect when the question is so vague?



**The answer is most likely to be either:**

- ▶ **Equally vague** — “Our system accepts data in most standard formats.”
- ▶ **Overly detailed** — “Our solution accepts data in [insert technical list of several dozen formats here].”

## THE PROBLEM

Either way, the requesting organization has wasted its own valuable time and that of its solution vendor, while failing to gain solid, useful information. Worst of all, you’re getting an answer that’s unlikely to help you make an informed selection.





# BETTER QUESTION

**“Will your technology accept data in [state a specific file format]?”**





# BEST QUESTION

**“Will your technology accept data in [state every type of file specification, format, or application with which you share data internally or with your benefits vendors]? Please include file samples.”**





# FOOLISH QUESTION

**“Can you integrate with our carriers?”**





## THE PROBLEM

If you don't provide the vendor a specific list of your carriers as part of your RFP, you'll no doubt:

- ▶ Get a request for that information later
- ▶ Slow down your review process
- ▶ Waste your staff's time
- ▶ Get imprecise answers from the vendors
- ▶ Fail to get answers that matter to your organization





## BETTER QUESTION

**“Can you integrate with the following carriers?”** [followed at minimum by a list of every carrier you want to be able to exchange data electronically with]



# BEST QUESTION

In addition to your list of carriers, **include the frequency of data exchanges with each one, the types of plans each carrier provides, and other details** that will help a vendor determine whether full integration is possible or practical. (For example, state whether you currently exchange data with carriers or other vendors electronically.)

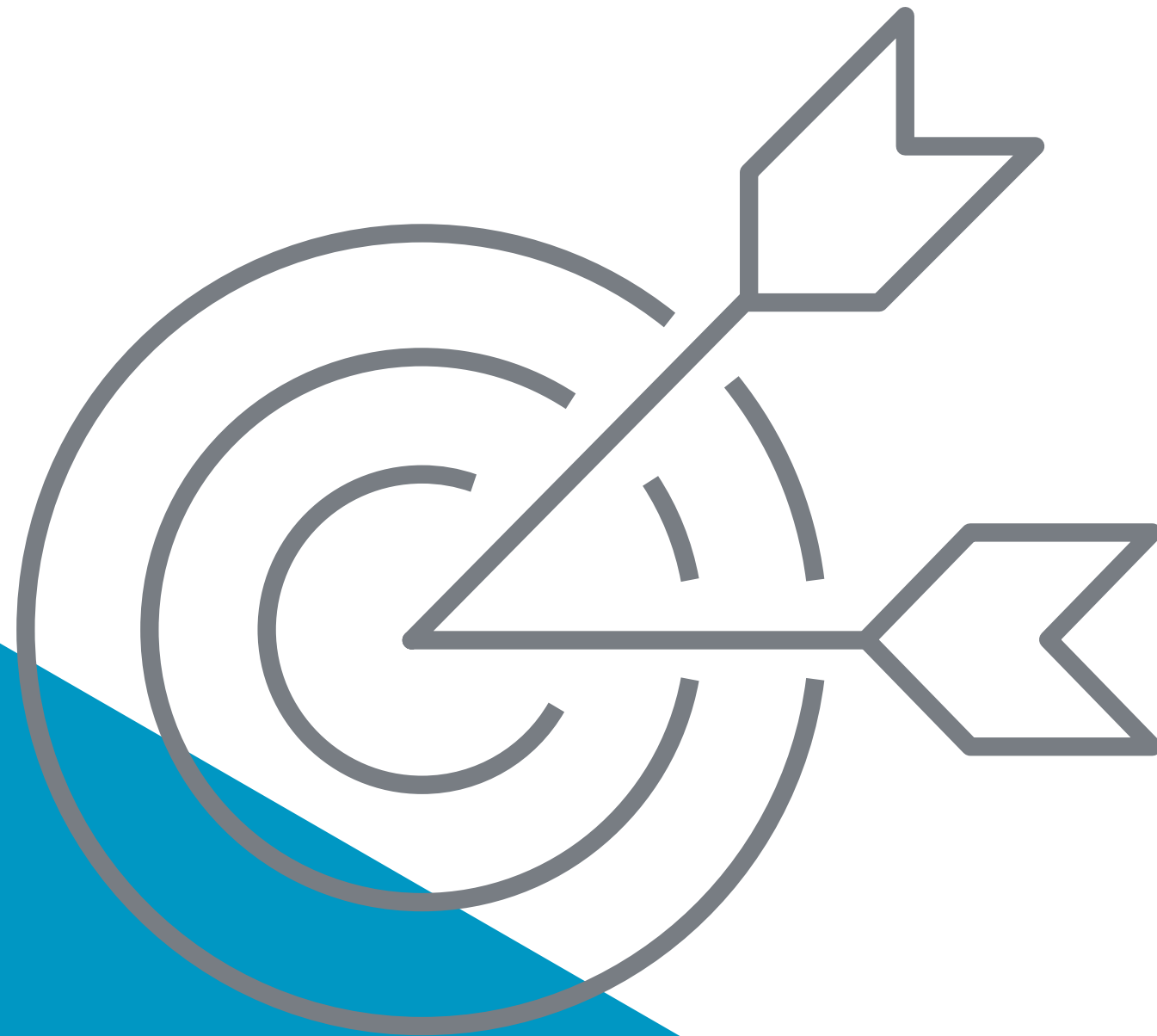




## FOOLISH QUESTION

“Can you allow for SSO (single sign on)?”





## THE PROBLEM

Without stating the goal of your SSO connection, it's impossible for a vendor to answer this question with any clarity or validity. **If a vendor simply answers, "Yes," you should be skeptical.**

What are you trying to achieve with SSO? That's what your potential technology partner needs to know to offer you meaningful insight into their solutions.



A large, stylized blue outline number '3' is positioned on the left side of the slide. The background features abstract geometric shapes in shades of blue and teal.

## BETTER QUESTION

**“Can you allow for SSO with [state the systems for which you’ll want to provide SSO]?”**







# BEST QUESTION

In addition to the systems for which you'll want to provide SSO, state whether you have SSO with any of your current carriers or vendors, whether that company has experience with SSO (if you don't currently have this integration with them), and what specific purpose you want SSO to serve for each of your systems.



# FOOLISH QUESTION

**“Can you support our enrollment fulfillment requirements [our current call volume – or any similar numbers-based benefits enrollment need]?”**





## THE PROBLEM

You may as well ask the real estate agent if the house she wants to show you is large enough — without telling her how many bedrooms you'll need, or if you want a guest room, study, separate family room, etc. **Some RFP questions simply cannot be meaningfully answered without hard numbers on which to base the response.**



# BETTER QUESTION

**“Can you support fulfillment of an approximately 20-page enrollment kit mailed to 1,200 employees?”**

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**“Can your call center handle our current volume of about 3,125 calls annually?”**



# BEST QUESTION

**For fulfillment: “Can you support the following fulfillment requirements?”**  
[followed by a list of all of your enrollment kit’s items, samples, and frequency]

If you can’t provide samples, at least include specific descriptions of them (e.g., number of pages, document size, if distribution is electronic or via hard copy, if any required printing is in black and white or color, whether any kits are mailed outside the continental U.S., etc.).



# BEST QUESTION

**For call center support: “Can your call center handle our current volume of about 3,125 calls annually - 3,000 active and 125 COBRA calls - with an average call duration of 12 minutes? What days and hours is call center support available, and how do you ensure that you have the appropriate resources in place to support this level of call volume?”**



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## FOOLISH QUESTION

**“Can you support our plan design and enrollment rules?”**



# THE PROBLEM

Every company is unique. Your culture, goals, and people are like no one else's. The right vendor will meet your current needs and help you plan for the future. With no documentation around your plan design, benefits guides, rules, and so on, the vendor is totally in the dark.

## You're likely to get one of two responses:

- ▶ A generic and useless answer (e.g., "We've supported plan designs and enrollment rules for some of the largest companies in the United States ...")
- ▶ A request for more details, wasting the time of everyone involved





# BETTER QUESTION

**“Can you support the plan design and enrollment rules as spelled out in the accompanying documents?”**  
[supported by full copies of all relevant summary plan descriptions, eligibility guides and matrices, benefits guides, and related documents]



# 5

## BEST QUESTION

**“Can you support the following plan design and enrollment rules?”**

[followed by sections of documents that define your design and rules]





# FOOLISH QUESTION

“Do you have an SSAE 18 audit report?”





## THE PROBLEM

HR often asks a single question about SSAE 18 audits, assuming that if the answer is “yes,” their employee data is secure. Other checks are necessary to ensure that your data is adequately protected — **and that you can sleep at night knowing all of your member data is secure.** Involve your IT team in developing security-related questions to ensure that a vendor meets your organization’s protocols.



# BETTER QUESTION

“Do you undergo an annual SSAE 18 audit? If not, are you transitioning from SSAE 16 to SSAE 18 auditing? Please describe your SSAE 18 capabilities, bearing in mind that our organization needs the **following areas included:** [data center, other systems in the company, etc.]”



# BEST QUESTION

**In addition to being specific about the scope of SSAE 18 auditing or transitioning you require your vendor to undergo:**

- ▶ Ask the vendor to provide copies of all current audit reports as part of the RFP response
- ▶ Ask the vendor to list any other measures it provides to ensure the security of client data (e.g., penetration testing, application scans, etc.)
- ▶ Include specific data-security questions your IT team recommends





# FOOLISH QUESTION

**“Provide a description of your client base.”**





## THE PROBLEM

Presumably, this question is trying to uncover whether a vendor works with organizations of your size and complexity, and in your industry. This is an important consideration. **But, sometimes there's more to fit and expertise than how simply many participants you have and what your business is.** Again, asking specifically for the information you want is a better approach.





# BETTER QUESTION

**“How many clients do you work with that have [xxx participants]? How many are in [state your industry]?”**



# BEST QUESTION

“Based on our size, workforce composition, complexity, industry, challenges, and objectives [make sure you have included all this information in your RFP] **describe your relevant experience with other groups that are similar to us. How specifically will your previous experience help you service us and our employees?**”



# Just Say No to Foolish Questions

The RFP process can be the start of a beautiful relationship between you and your benefits technology and services partner. The RFP process can plant the seeds for a long-lasting and mutually beneficial relationship between two organizations that have each other's best interests at heart.



# Getting there requires an RFP with specific questions that are supported by **helpful details and meaningful background information.**

- ▶ **The more information you can provide, the better!** You can't provide too much information to a vendor — especially a vendor that wants to offer responses that are meaningful and move the process forward.
- ▶ **Share more, trust more.** Really, what do you have to lose by sharing more information? You're not divulging trade secrets, creating a competitive disadvantage, or opening yourself up to blind sales calls. Information such as your carrier name, and eligibility and claims structure is a smart choice. With trust, you can help a vendor provide information that will help you ask better questions for the next round and reach a smarter decision faster.
- ▶ **Numbers matter — a lot.** Bring 'em on — from the number of pages in your printed enrollment kit to the exact number of employees enrolled in each tier of each health plan in each division of your company. Include data in the first round of your RFP and you'll save yourself time and headaches later.
- ▶ **No matter how much information you provide, be prepared for a truly qualified vendor to ask follow-up questions.** The RFP should be the start of a great conversation; when you respond to a request for further information, you ensure that the vendor gets you the most accurate information and can work more optimally with you. And remember, if you provide lots of solid information, you also need to give an appropriate amount of time for vendors to review and digest all your information and provide a thoughtful response.

