Seminole County is constantly seeking ways to become more effective and efficient in the procurement process. After working with Seminole County for a few months and going through their contract solicitation process a couple of times, and as a training assignment, I started my research for a Bidders Question and Answer Website. It was then that it occurred to me that my previous job experience may be beneficial in the addendum process.

The previous agency that I was with, developed and utilized a Bidder’s Question and Answer Website. The site was used for general questions regarding advertised solicitations. It worked like a public forum where contractors could anonymously post their questions and have them answered by the designated Project Manager. The questions and answers were publicly available for all to view.

I started with research both inside and outside of my agency. I asked for the opinions of the utilization of something like this from our Public Works Project Managers. I also contacted the Office of Information Systems Department of my previous agency to see if building this type of website for Seminole County would work. That is where I ran into a bump in the road, as the website I was looking to mirror had been internally built and now maintained by their in house OIS team. The OIS was outsourced and this isn’t something we at Seminole County would be able to do. I began to look for another option and that is when I decided to contact VendorLink to see if their assistance could be a potential option. VendorLink is an easy to use Internet portal for entities to post their bid solicitations, as well as other functionalities. Registered vendors can view and download bidding documents from such solicitations.

To my surprise, VendorLink already had this feature available, it was just a matter of turning it on for our agency. Their Question and Answer feature works like this: When a vendor pulls up a bid solicitation, if they scroll down, they will see the space provided to submit their question. Once they have submitted their question, the system will send an email to the contact person on the bid solicitation. The Analyst can then log into the site, answer the question, and the system will send an email to the plan holders of the bid solicitation with the question and answer that was provided. The only information that a vendor sees is the question and answer (and dates), not who asked the question or answered the question. This was perfect and exactly what I was looking to utilize for my agency.

I then contacted other agencies who were actively using this VendorLink Question and Answer feature to get their feedback. All were positive. The Purchasing Manager with the City of Sanford said that it works well for more minor questions that contractors may ask that don’t require a lengthy explanation and don’t affect the bidding process. He added that he has found it a quick and efficient way to handle simple questions.
After gathering and compiling the information, I presented it to my Purchasing and Contracts team for their feedback. Everyone was on board and enthusiastic about the potential time and cost saving this feature could provide for our entity.

The Question and Answer feature has been recently implemented for Seminole County. The anticipated outcome for our agency are cost and time savings. Giving the option to contractors to ask their questions on-line will save time on our part with the addenda preparation. As long as the solicitation documents are not being affected or there will be no impact to a vendor or contractor’s bid, a quick response can be posted online. In addition, those simple questions can help do away with lengthy back and forth, time consuming E-mails between internal departments, which will also leave fewer chances for mistakes. The Questions and Answers will always remain on the project’s solicitation page, making public records requests for those questions a simple task with a referral to the webpage. Another great feature is not only does the assigned bid solicitation’s contact person receive notification that a question has been submitted, the backup contact person is also notified. This is a great time saving and efficient tool for when a highly important solicitation is posted and the primary contact person is unavailable.

From my experience, I have wondered if other entities are aware that this is something their agency could be using as well. If you’re interested in streamlining your agency’s processes, becoming more efficient and saving time and costs, I recommend doing what I did. Reach out and talk to other agencies about their experiences with the VendorLink Question and Answer feature and get the feedback of its implementation within your agency.