

Is Association The Way Forward?

by [Richard Beeden](#)

The way education is organised and run has changed enormously since the SEC was founded 15 years ago. Involving consultants is now common. The volume of work being out-sourced by DfES, local authorities and schools is now huge. In theory that should mean lots more work for SEC members.

However as the volume of work outsourced has gone up so too has the size of many contracts. Formal tenders and financial guarantees to cover the risk transferred are normally required. Tender documents on this scale are substantial pieces of work requiring both time and money. Since many SEC members are individuals either working as sole traders or in small partnerships or companies, this poses new challenges. How do our members compete for this work when they have neither the time nor infrastructure to make bids on the required scale?

At the other end of the spectrum is still the personal contact route which is the traditional practice for many members. This is now threatened by LEAs and schools requiring more formal tenders and quotes even for relatively small amount of work. £5k is still a typical limit above which tenders are required and £5k does not go far these days! The informal routes do of course keep the costs down and this is an advantage to our clients.

Our members do of course become involved in big contracts but this is usually through association with one or more of the big players like Veridus, CEA and Tribal and becoming part of their team for particular contracts. This arrangement may or may not appeal to the independently minded sole trader or small partnership that makes up the majority of the SEC membership.

If this is a reasonably accurate description of our market place, its probable direction and our members' place in it, how might individuals and the SEC respond?

One solution would be to carry on as now with individual Members networking to keep the personal contact routes open for relatively small jobs, and to become an associate of one or more of the big companies for big projects. Another response might be to form some kind of loose federation with others in like circumstances. That way members might act collectively when invites for tenders are received through the SEC or otherwise. This is what some members have done to respond to a reorganisation project in Worcestershire.

If some kind of collective response is favoured by a significant number of members the question for the SEC is should it be facilitating that process as a service to members and if so what form might that take?

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