



When our chatters quit laughing so hard at the mental picture of the *perfect* procurement person, we got some interesting responses. So...

Sit down, take a deep breath, sip a beverage, open your mind and stay awhile while we chat with:



Melvin Rowe
Materiel Manager
City of St. John's, Newfoundland



Jean Lacelle
Director of Communications
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Rob Isbister
Director of Purchasing
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It's all in the game

Rowe: A successful public procurement specialist is a recognized team member that contributes significantly to an organization's efficiency and success. Perfection will never be found in any professional specialist. Such a person can only exist in an environment that is culturally mature and has strong leadership that supports the procurement function. Instead, many find themselves in organizations not yet ready to take advantage of the many contributions that a public procurement specialist can offer.

Isbister: Today's procurement staff is focused on relationships with our clients, as well as the supplier community. Interpersonal

Seeking the *perfect* procurement specialist

skills are key as the procurement professionals manage supplier/customer dialogue throughout the procurement process.

Lacelle: Ten or fifteen years ago we would have been looking for different attributes such as strong product knowledge and integrity. While those are still pertinent today, we are now looking for some of the softer people skills. Today's procurement specialist brokers transactions between clients and suppliers, translates business ideas and solutions into enforceable contracts that make sense, and converts complex concepts into simple, everyday, understandable solutions.

Back from the basics

Isbister: Analytic skills are required to review proposals, complete evaluation documentation and develop recommendations for award of competitions. Solutions are achieved through the application of program criteria and utilization of procedural guidelines. Considerable judgment and tactical skills – particularly important in reaching consensus when working with evaluation teams – are required during the management of the procurement process.

Lacelle: Bean-counting skills are still important – but not the sum total of the job. To select a vendor based on the lowest responsive bid, being able to calculate the bid assessment is very important – processing the invoices, making sure everything is in accordance with the contract ... the administrative function. Many administrative functions that used to require a fair amount of resources are now more automated allowing time-consuming tasks to be performed more quickly and easily. A procurement specialist can now concentrate on the higher value functions.

Rowe: Public procurement specialists have, in the past, expressed the view that they are held responsible for overseeing the organization's compliance with procurement laws and

regulations enacted by elected officials. This role sets up the procurement specialist to have to say NO to powerful senior managers, politicians and sometimes their own boss. Managers and politicians may evade or skirt around the laws and regulations, as is often reported in the press. This gatekeeper role impedes the development of a mature culture and management support for procurement.

Government ain't so easy

Lacelle: In many ways the perfect procurement person is the perfect manager. Good communication skills are very important. Expectations for integrity, transparency, fairness and openness in procurement require the procurement specialist to be able to convince people – to demonstrate that those objectives are achieved. We are a more litigious society and the process associated with a vendor challenging a contract award is relatively simple. The procurement specialist now has to navigate through new functions and activities.

Rowe: A procurement specialist in the private sector that demonstrates proactive cost reduction, avoidance and containment initiatives that impact on the bottom line, and in turn opens up opportunities, would be recognized as a valuable team member and contributor to the organization's success. That same procurement specialist in the public sector who demonstrates proactive cost reduction, avoidance and containment initiatives impacts department budgets, leaving departments with extra money to spend. However, all department budget money must be spent on *more* goods and services to ensure that next year's funding will be approved, therefore, the impact of cost reduction initiatives is quite different from the private sector. Cost reductions are recognized as an appropriate response, but the true reality of the public sector is that protecting the budget is more important than saving money. The public sector rarely rewards or recognizes managers that achieve programs under budget.

Isbister: Public procurement staff require a comprehensive practical knowledge of policies, procedures and practices related to procurement, along with detailed understanding of contract law, various trade agreements and tendering procedures. A working knowledge of government organizations is also required. Today we focus more on the strategic aspects of procurement, where before greater focus was given to processing transactions. Procurement is a continuous problem solving process, managing a large number of complex projects simultaneously, dealing with sensitive issues and projects as well as specific client and vendor requests, and analyzing proposals in terms of overall value for money and cost-savings to government. More frequently we look for best value, where before the purchase of goods was often simply based on the low qualified bid. On a number of our goods tenders, we now include as evaluation criteria supplier performance, delivery, service capabilities, warranty, etc. Staff need better interpersonal and writing skills to reflect requirements in an understandable manner, and to cover legal issues. Generally we're not product experts, we're procurement experts. We deal with more unsuccessful vendors on competitions than ones who win and our decisions need to stand up to public scrutiny.

The future is now

Lacelle: For the public procurement professional to be truly successful, the function should be endorsed by the community at large – the suppliers, the clients, the government as a whole, as a value-added function. The values of integrity, transparency and fair value can become a very strong motivator to getting things done, not only to make procurement, but also government, more credible. Unfortunately very few people come out of university saying they want to be a procurement officer. If they did, at least in their childhood, we should probably have concerns! In the past the attrition rate in the profession was not very high, but young people can now look at the government procurement community for opportunity. Many of us will be retired in the next few years. We need to change the environment to one

where the procurement function is respected as a noble profession, where the authority and accountability vested in procurement officers returns to what it once was. Procurement must become a job that is truly valued, not second-guessed as it goes through the process. Certification is the best way of ensuring that we sustain credibility in the long term.

Given the obstacles of the profession – a gatekeeper roll, management styles, customers' diverse and conflicting needs, the level of the organization's cultural maturity and management support for the procurement function – many public procurement specialists are resigned to the realization that the reward for success has to be a sense of personal satisfaction. ~~~

**Next Chatroom
discussion:**

**What materiel managers
want to get right**