

Rethink Government Purchasing and Supply Chains

by Raj Sharma

The Opportunity

The federal government purchases more than \$500 billion of goods and services each year, buying everything from pens and paper to engineering services and fighter jets. Most experts agree that the government purchasing process is cumbersome and inefficient; hundreds of purchasing offices work independently with little or no coordination. The term “purchasing” is used throughout to refer to what is more commonly referred to as “acquisition” within the federal government.

Without greater transparency into all transactions or supplier relationships, purchasing staff by necessity focus on tactics to reduce price and manage individual transactions, as opposed to strategically managing cost and supply chains. The result of the present system is redundancy of a high order and billions of taxpayer dollars wasted every year.

The good news is that within the Washington beltway, some have recognized this opportunity and have been pushing reforms into agency purchasing practices for years. However, these initiatives have only incrementally moved the needle toward a more efficient and effective system. Why?

The primary reasons previous reform efforts have delivered marginal results are:

- Besides the goal of reducing waste, there is no clear vision for what is required or expected of the purchasing system (or acquisition system as it is more commonly referred to). The lack of an end-state vision has resulted in a patchwork of reforms with no clear end goal or outcomes, sowing confusion and frustration on the part of those who can help drive the change.
- There is a narrow focus on basic commodities and an even narrower focus on negotiating better deals, as opposed to managing and reducing total costs across supply chains. It should be noted that some of this has started to change, especially with the broader information tech-



nology (IT) reform agenda laid out recently by the Office of Management and Budget.

- Necessary changes to organizations, processes, and policies are not made, thereby allowing inefficiencies to creep back into the system.

A Pragmatic Approach to Transforming Government Purchasing and Supply Chains

Given the current fiscal environment, there is an unprecedented opportunity to not only transform the way government purchases but also the way it manages its supply chains. Based on lessons learned from previous initiatives, input provided by various experts, and on-the-ground experience of some of the world’s leading companies, the pragmatic plan proposed below can drive efficiencies in the near term while transforming government purchasing and supply chains over the long term. While most elements of the recommendations proposed in this chapter require no formal policy or legislative changes, all will require the partnership and input of key

stakeholders including the White House, Congress, agencies, and suppliers. The overall intent of the following recommendations is to broaden the discussion beyond tactics and help inform the agenda for purchasing reform going forward.

The first recommendation focuses on redefining the role of government purchasing. Recommendations two through six focus on initiatives that can be implemented in the near term and begin to drive immediate benefits. Recommendations seven through nine require broader transformational and structural changes that can be implemented over the longer term.

Recommendation One: Re-Envision the Role of Government Purchasing From Managing Purchases and Price to “Managing Supply Chains and Total Cost”

The role of government purchasing, as defined today within the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), is to “deliver on a timely basis the best value product or service.” This definition can best be described as tactical and inward-looking, focused primarily on managing individual transactions and negotiating best price or value. This myopic view has also led to purchasing being perceived as a back-office function that gets in the way more often than it adds real value.

Many leading private-sector companies, meanwhile, define the role more expansively and strategically. Purchasing is viewed as critical to achieving corporate mission since it focuses on key activities such as cost management, supplier alignment, innovation, and risk management.

Going forward, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) should propose a new vision for purchasing, one that goes beyond current definitions. The new vision must bring forth a fundamental shift in thinking on the role of purchasing, from managing purchases and price to managing supply chains and total cost. More specifically, the role should be redefined as helping government agencies *achieve their policy priorities by aligning and managing supply chains to deliver capabilities at lowest total cost.*

Government agencies now need to anchor their resources around three key capabilities fundamental to world-class purchasing:

- **Modeling total cost:** Instead of focusing solely on price, world-class purchasing organizations develop an understanding of total internal and supply chain costs. Going beyond their own costs, world-class purchasing operations understand the cost breakdown for any purchased item or service (e.g. labor, materials, transportation, etc.).

- **Strategic sourcing and category management:** Second, we must shift emphasis from managing individual purchases to managing supply chains. This can be best accomplished by restructuring resources and processes to manage categories of goods and services (e.g. IT hardware, professional services). The obvious benefit is leveraged buying power. Even more important is the improved visibility into transactions, performance, and costs, as well as an overall reduction in resources required.
- **Supplier performance and relationship management:** Third, we must move from managing individual suppliers to managing entire supply chains.

Recommendation Two: Appoint a Chief Federal Supply Chain Officer to Lead a New Office of Federal Supply Chain Management

Elevating the role of purchasing to manage supply chains must begin at the top.

A new position of chief supply chain officer (CSCO) should be established, analogous to the creation of the federal chief information officer position. The Office of Federal Procurement Policy should be renamed the Office of Federal Supply Chain Management. The CSCO should head the new office and focus on gaining visibility, improving coordination, and reducing costs across the largest and most critical government supply chains. The CSCO should also be empowered to coordinate new initiatives, facilitate the sharing of best practices, and coordinate management and collaboration with government’s largest and most strategic suppliers.

Recommendation Three: Strengthen the Role of Departmental Headquarters and Redefine the Role of Departmental Chief Procurement Officers

Private-sector, corporate world-class purchasing departments wield significant clout. By building strong capabilities, corporations are able to help set standards, deploy critical capabilities (such as cost modeling), facilitate knowledge-sharing, and manage the sourcing of non-critical common categories. Benefits include reduced duplication, improved buying power, and enhanced coordination.

Unfortunately, the federal government has failed to realize many of these benefits. Often, federal agencies’ purchasing offices, located in headquarters, are weak or powerless and provide limited capabilities beyond writing and administering policy. In cases where some operational capability is present within headquarters purchasing offices, it often does not have the power to enforce compliance due to decentralized organizations and budgets.

required of world-class purchasing organizations include problem-solving, strategic thinking, financial analysis, and relationship management.

- **Culture.** The culture of government purchasing has traditionally been defined as risk-averse. It is critical that government purchasing leadership, starting at the top, begin to establish a culture that promotes collaboration and some level of risk-taking.

Recommendation Eight: Streamline the FAR and the Procurement Process

While the intent of the Federal Acquisition Regulations is to ensure stewardship of taxpayer dollars and a level playing field for suppliers, the morass of acquisition policies and regulations in many ways works against that very noble intent. Instead, purchasing processes have become so complex that only those in the know can compete for government purchases.

The primary goals underpinning any future reforms should be to:

- Simplify and streamline regulations including the FAR
- Rationalize the legislation and policymaking apparatus that currently results in conflicting rules issued by different parts of the government
- Standardize and streamline common processes, tools, and forms that impose significant costs on both government and industry
- Gain complete visibility into each government supply chain through an integrated data model that tracks key supply-chain metrics
- Define the role of technology in streamlining and standardizing processes

Recommendation Nine: Leverage Technology to Improve Transparency, Maximize Competition, and Drive Down Cost

One of the biggest opportunities lies in the government's ability to leverage proven supply chain technologies to enhance productivity and decrease overall cost of managing each supply chain.

Going forward, government should develop an integrated supply chain technology strategy, building on activities such as the Integrated Acquisition Environment, an ongoing presidential e-government initiative managed by the General Service Administration, with the goal of leveraging proven technologies already resident within the marketplace. Specifically, a holistic supply chain technology strategy should seek to:

Why Many Purchasing Reform Initiatives Deliver Marginal Results

All government agencies purchase common items like office supplies, software, and furniture. In most cases, these items and services are purchased independently, often by multiple offices within each agency. Not only does the current method mean that government misses out on the efficiencies that result when buying collectively and managing suppliers together, it also means there are numerous, redundant resources. Does it really make sense for hundreds of contracting officers to be buying office supplies across the government?

To fix this, many agencies have launched well-intentioned strategic sourcing initiatives to coordinate purchases and better manage suppliers. In many cases, agencies or government as a whole, through programs like the Federal Strategic Sourcing Initiative, have been able to negotiate better deals and drive changes to other behaviors that lead to substantial savings. However, because these initiatives are layered on top of fragmented processes and decentralized budgets where each office controls its own money, getting everyone across an agency or government to leverage these deals remains difficult. In many cases, compliance remains very low and savings have been slow to come by.

- Leverage commercial sourcing and marketplace platforms that maximize competition and open up the federal market to more qualified suppliers
- Gain complete visibility into each government supply chain through an integrated data model that tracks key supply-chain metrics
- Standardize government contract writing systems
- Integrate end-to-end processes with suppliers ■

Raj Sharma is a visiting fellow at the Center for American Progress. He is the founder of the Federal Acquisition Innovation and Reform Institute (FAIR), and is also the founder and chief executive officer of Ceseo Consulting Group.

TO LEARN MORE

Excerpted from **Governing to Win: Enhancing National Competitiveness Through New Policy and Operating Approaches**. See page 63 for more information on this book made available from the Center.