



Exploring the Operational Challenges that Confront Procurement Practitioners in Ghanaian Polytechnics

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to assess the operational woes of the procurement practitioner in it day to day activities in the context of Ghanaian Polytechnics. Open ended interviews, discussions together with observations were used in data collection whereas thematic analysis was applied in data analyses. After a comprehensive investigation it was revealed that the function is entangled with a lot of challenges among which are; high level of bureaucracy in the procurement process, lack of logistics such as photocopiers, fax machines, scanners, printers, telephones and vehicles and the tedious, laborious and slow characteristics of some requirements/clauses of the Public Procurement Act (Act 663 of 2003). The researcher therefore concluded that the procurement function should be upgraded to a strategic position where it would be independent, well-resourced and be involved more in the institutions long term strategic planning process.

Key words: procurement, public procurement, procurement practices, bureaucracy, public procurement act.

Introduction

Procurement in Africa is nothing good to write home about as there are perceptions that it is a clerical activity and all attention has being geared to accounts and financial management forgetting that procurement department work tediously to put the business on the right path by creating quality services to the internal customers to work with so they can achieve the intended purpose of the organization. Procurement in this 21st century has gone beyond the traditional method of buying goods and services for all departments to the level of buying non- traditional services such as consultancy, audit, training and legal and plays a major role in drafting the organizations' strategy for buying goods and services, in this case, the procurement department do not only contribute to the organization's quest of reducing cost but also controls the purse of the organization. To deepen procurement in Ghana the Public Procurement Act 663 was enacted to harmonize public procurement processes in the public service, secure judicious, economic and efficient use of state resources, ensures fair public procurement and to reduce or eliminate corruption in the procurement process (Public Procurement Act 663, 2003). Though this Act has some setbacks, it has contributed immensely to the economic development of Ghana. Procurement as an economic instrument for guaranteeing national development, has the potency of contributing to the realization of; improves resource mobilization, promote debt sustainability and effective management of debt, improves public expenditure management, enhances national income generation and reduce economic and financial dependency (Chowdhury and Kirkpatrick, 2009). Besides, public procurement accounts for between 50% and 70% of total Government expenditure, representing about 10% of Gross Domestic Products (GDP) and accounts for about 24% of total imports in Ghana (World Bank, 2003) implying that improvement in the public procurement process will in no doubt create wealth, enhance value for money and reduce cost of imports. However, it appears the people involved in the management and operations of these processes are stack with a lot of operational challenges. These challenges as posit by several writers (Thai 2008; Tassabehji and Andrew 2008) if not examine and addressed may erode the numerous benefits this function has achieved. This study is therefore aim at ascertaining the woes that public procurement practitioners go through in the execution of their duties. To achieve this aim, the research will attempt to address this research question; what challenges impede the efficient operations of the procurement professional? The major importance of this research is that it will highlight the key concerns impeding the effective contribution of the procurement practitioner in Ghanaian Polytechnics and recommend ways of overcoming these challenges.

Literature Review

Procurement and Public Procurement

Procurement is broadly defined as acquisition of goods, services, capabilities and knowledge required by businesses, from the right source, at the right quality, in the right quantity, at the right price and at the right time to maintain and manage the company's primary and support activities. Besides, procurement activities include: determining specifications in terms of required quality and quantities; selecting the right suppliers to provide the required goods and services; establishing agreements with suppliers; supplier relationship management and placing orders with the selected suppliers (Bailey and Farmer, 1985; Bailey et al 1998; Giunipero et al 2006; Porter 1998; Wee 2000). According to Lyons and Farrington (2006) procurement is also a wider term than purchasing, which implies the acquisitions of goods or services in return for a monetary or equivalent payment. They further stress that procurement is the process of obtaining goods or services in any way, including borrowing, leasing and even force or pillage. Shaw and Felecia (2010) in their research also posit that it is important; goods/services are procured at the best possible cost to meet the needs of the purchaser in terms of quality and quantity, time, and location. They further argue that, corporations and public bodies

often define processes intended to promote fair and open competition for their business while minimizing exposure to fraud and collusion. Public Procurement on the other hand is any purchasing performed by any public authority within the classical sector or within the utilities sector. The public procurement rules applicable to purchasing entities also depend on whether the total purchase value is over or below certain so-called “threshold values”, which differ as regards goods, services and construction works. Furthermore, Public procurement is the process by which organizations acquire goods and services using public funds. It includes planning, inviting offers, awarding contracts and managing contracts (Wara (2007). For procurement to achieve its goals, it should follow these two principles: Professionalism and Value for Money (World Bank, 2003).

Procurement Practices and Skills

Procurement practices have been defined by the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply (CIPS) UK, as how a buying firm conducts its procurement activities. However, procurement practices encompass a wider range of supply activities than those included in the procurement function; it includes the conduct of materials studies, the conduct of all purchasing function activities and abiding by purchasing ethics. Thus to effectively and efficiently deliver on its obligations it is critical that key stakeholders are involved in the procurement arrangements to make sure that decisions are jointly made and supported from the start to the end of the procurement process (Bailey et al. 1998; Hines, 2004). There is also a general consensus that best in class procurement practices includes building and sustaining strategic partnerships with suppliers and cross functional teams within the firm (Ellram, 1998). Again Monczka et al. (1998) argue that there are three major benefits that can be achieved by a stronger focus on procurement practices. This includes: cost savings, positive impact on quality, and contribution to technology development. Ellram (1998) again also argues that cost-savings programs result in cost reduction and cost avoidance. However, some researchers are of the view that procurement professionals with an undecorated “skills gap” is a major threat to the procurement function in itself (Whitehead, 2006; Duggan and Fogg, 2006). To support this it has been revealed by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2001) that there are recruitments of people without procurement experience into senior procurement manager roles from marketing or engineering in some companies but Carr and Smeltzer, (2000) posit that the procurement function has undergone tremendous change over the last couple of decades from where employees were traditionally placed without much regard to the (specific) skills they possessed. A comprehensive training and development program helps in deliberating on the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to achieve organizational goals and also to create competitive advantage (Peteraf 1993). For Handfield and Nichols (2004) only formal staffing and professional development will enable organizations to retain and develop personnel with outstanding skills, education and experience which are needed to manage global supplier relations.

Challenges in the Public Procurement Process

According to Weele (2000), purchasing procedures are usually embedded in lots of bureaucracy and require that every superior puts his signature under the intended order. The extensive authorization procedures make procurement a tedious, laborious and slow process. It explains why most procurement entities within the governments of developing countries are more procedural rather than result oriented. He argues that his experiences with governmental procurement projects show that lack of proper procurement procedures and a professional approach to purchasing leads to significant cost overruns and overruns of time schedules. According to him, the European Commission (EC) estimates that its member countries annually would save at least 4% of their purchasing budgets, provided that they would apply consistent and competitive tender procedures in their dealings with suppliers. This means that bureaucracy and undue procedures in the procurement process may lead to loss of money through over spending and it affects government budget. It is also clear that Weele’s view is not far different from the World Bank’s assertion that delays as a result of bureaucratic system increase government expenditure. Tassabehji and Moorhouse (2008) also in a study ‘*changing role of procurement; developing professional effectiveness*’ found that: The major challenges faced by the majority of procurement professionals in their role could be grouped into four main inter-related categories: (1) Being acknowledged internally: Many practitioners highlighted the difficulties of being acknowledged by the heads of other departments or sectors and being involved in investment decisions. (2) Early involvement in the decision process: An overwhelming majority complained that they were not brought in early enough in the buying process to add any real value. (3) Getting internal ‘Buy In’ to procurement strategy: Many practitioners expressed difficulties getting their strategy accepted by the rest of the company: The challenge is to get other staff to buy in to our strategy. (4) Cultural barriers and resistance to change: Even those considered to be in a strategic role face challenges to impose change on an inflexible corporation, both within their own teams and those of other departments. An assessment of Ghana’s procurement system in 2007 by the OECD/DAC affirm that although substantial progress in public procurement has been gain since 2003, it also alluded to the fact that some provisions in the Public Procurement Act have proven to be ineffectual and require adjustments or modifications. These include, incorrect interpretation and application of some provisions of the procurement law, slow pace in regularizing draft regulations, lack of clear procedures for emergency procurement, lack of training avenues for practitioners, poor record management, poor handling of suppliers’ complaints, poor procurement planning, poor contract management and high cost of advertisement. According to the report these challenges cut across most African countries (OECD/DAC, 2011). According to Barath and Hugstad, (1977) Procurement professionals did not have the authority to decide on organizational buying decisions and had to fight for their legitimacy within their organizations. They further argued that, the formal scope of activities of procurement agents was extremely limited, and procurement professionals were involved rather late into the procurement process. The restricted influence and power led to a low visibility of procurement professionals as procurement was neither perceived as a function with high status, nor was seen as a priority of top management (Cruz and Murphy, 1996). A poor procurement system results in higher costs to government and the public. It delays project implementation which further, leads to poor project execution performance and delays the delivery of benefits to the beneficiaries. Procurement problems also increase scope for corruption, generate more complaints and raise concerns about the integrity of the procurement process. Finally, poor procurement discourages

good firms (both national and foreign) from participating in bidding, thus depriving the country of receiving better prices on goods, works and services. Besides, there is less participation in economic activities by the private sector if the government is not seen as a reliable or fair business partner. This reduces private competition and value for money obtained by the government which reduces private sector growth and investment (World Bank, 2003).

Methodology

The qualitative approach was used. This enables the researcher to describe perceptions more accurately and thoroughly, interact with staff in real day-to-day organizational contexts, have access to authentic and open answers from respondents and discover new themes and interpretations because of personal contact (Bryman and Bell 2003). The researcher adopted a case study approach. Punch (1998) proposes that the case study aims to understand the case in its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context. Further, the case study research is used to study the contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context (Yin, 2003). Given that research on public procurement particularly in Ghana is scarce, there is the need to understand the subject area based on real-life practice therefore, the case study method seemed appropriate for this study. For this research, the multiple case study approach was chosen. According to Yin (1994), choosing the multiple case study approach over the single case approach is a good thing because multiple cases provide capacity to handle the complexity of the phenomena under study and also uses replication logic to achieve methodological rigour. It also triangulates evidence, data sources and research methods (Eisenhardt, 1989). It is important to note that case studies are not meant to represent the entire population nor do they claim to be (Yin, 2002). A total of two research cases out of the ten Polytechnics will provide reliable and valid information sufficient to assist in the study of operational challenges of public sector procurement based on available resources. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2000), population refers to the complete set of individuals (subject or events) having common characteristic. The population of the study is therefore defined as various employees of the Accra and Koforidua Polytechnics who are employed and are directly or indirectly connected with the procurement of any goods or services. The sampling procedure that was used was purposive sampling or judgmental sampling, this sampling technique was used because in a research like this the researcher has to hand pick the subjects or respondent who in the opinion of the researcher has the knowledge that is going to be very useful to the research. The key advantage of this approach is that the people who have been selected for the sampling have been selected with a particular purpose already in mind. However purposive samples, irrespective of the type used, can be highly prone to researcher bias. The main instruments used in data collection are; semi structured interviews, conversations and observations. According to Kvale (1996), the qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences and to uncover their lived world. For this research a total of 3 focused group discussions were conducted in addition to 50 interviews from the two institutions used as case study. This is consisting with principal officers, heads of procurement, procurement staffs, development officers, finance officers, estate officers, stores officers, heads of departments and the deans of the two institutions. There are no fixed rules as to the ideal number of interviews as some qualitative research takes a positivist stance, tending to adopt the approach, the more interviews, the more scientific (Kvale, 1996). Alternatively, within an interpretivist framework Travers (2001) advises that researchers will simply need enough data to explore and document a range of themes. A semi-structured approach to the interviews was used because views of the interviewee will be more freely expressed when the format of the interview is more flexible and open-ended than where the interview style is regulated and confined to a standard set of questions or a survey (Flick, 2002). Recorded interviews were later transcribed into Microsoft Word. Thematic analysis (Silverman, 2005) was employed to reveal recurring themes from the data. In order to analyze opinions, the two cases were put together to assess the nature of their procurement challenges. Findings obtained from the various interviews, conversations and observations made, were analyzed and then used as an evidence for discussions. The ethical issues considered in this study include worthiness, consent, and confidentiality (Diener and Crandall 1978).

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Descriptive analytical technique has been employed as the main tool for data analysis based on the interpretivist philosophical stance of the researcher.

Qualification and Experience of Procurement Staff

Evidence from the research shows that, the staffs of the procurement function are well educated in terms of procurement activities. Poly3 and Poly8 who happens to be heads of the procurement departments in Accra Polytechnic and Koforidua Polytechnic respectively were holding Masters Degrees in Procurement and Supply Chain respectively. The least educated were Poly9 and Poly10 who were observed to be pursuing the CIPS qualifications at the time of the interviews. This observation is contrary to the finding by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2001) that there are recruitments of people without procurement experience into senior procurement manager roles from marketing or engineering in some companies. In addition, the majority of the procurement staffs also had practicing experience prior to their present positions. For instance, stating his expertise, Poly8 noted, *"With procurement here I will say 3 years but I have also worked with Cocola for 4 years before coming to Koforidua Polytechnic"*. This evidence confirms the view by Carr and Smeltzer (2000) that the procurement function has undergone tremendous change over the last couple of decades and has moved from a position where employees were traditionally placed without much regard to the (specific) skills they possessed.

Challenges of the Procurement Practitioner

Evidence from the research reveals that the function is affected by numerous challenges;

(i) Public Procurement Act (Act 663 of 2003)

Majority of the respondents Poly 2, Poly 3, Poly 6, Poly 20, Poly 31, agreed that the Public Procurement Act (Act 663 of 2003) is a major problem. The threshold of 5000 Ghana Cedis to the head of institution has become inadequate.

Poly2 commented that the thresholds are not realistic to the times hence unnecessary delays are being encountered in the procurement of small value items such as stationery and office equipment. Again, the study revealed that procurement practices indulged in by the Polytechnics is directly influenced by the Public Procurement Act (Act 663 of 2003) because it was practically impossible for procurement staff to do anything outside the procurement law no matter how economically justifiable that it is as this will be considered an illegality. Besides, because most of the user department does not understand the procurement procedures as outlined by the Act, their request are always untimely, putting a lot of pressure on procurement staff to deliver. Ploy8 explains that *'one problem is about pressure coming from user-departments. Whenever they put in application for items they begin to mount pressure that same day thinking procurement is just about buying. Meanwhile it doesn't happen like that because we need to go according to the procurement law and plan'*. It was also observed that the provisions of the Procurement Act prevent the Procurement Officer from being a member of the Entity Tender Committee which makes most final procurement decisions. As a result; the procurement officers lack information's on items that the institutions intends to buy and when they are to be bought. This makes the function operational or tactical, which is only involved in supporting the functional level cascaded objectives usually tasked with making low risk decisions encountered during the course of everyday operational activities of the institute as observed by Bailey and Farmer (1985) and Hines, (2004).

(ii) High level of bureaucracy.

Majority of the respondent Poly 1, Poly 5, Poly 6, Poly 2, Poly 8, again claim that the Act has also outlined a hierarchy of approving authorities making the procurement process complex, difficult and impedes quick execution of projects. Poly6 describe this as, *if the threshold is beyond the Entity Tender Committees mandate, it moves on to either Regional Tender Board or National Tender Board making the process longer*. These causes delays in project implementation, leads to higher cost because of changes in prices as a result of inflation, increase scope for corruption as contractors and suppliers will use unethical means to get their bids approved on time , generate more complaints because others suppliers may felt cheated and raise concerns about the integrity of the procurement process, again discouraging good firms (both national and foreign) from participating in bidding, thus depriving the institutions of receiving better prices and goods, works and services as observed by (World Bank, 2003). This is also in agreement with the claim by Weele (2000) that the procurement process is complicated because of the size and bureaucratic nature of government and requires that every superior puts his signature under the intended order making procurement procedures a tedious, laborious and slow process.

(iii) Procurement officers involved late in the buying process.

Majority of the respondent Poly 40, Poly 20, Poly 19, Poly 14, Poly 7, are of the view that procurement officers are brought in late in the buying process. The procurement function though reports directly to the Rector is put under the Registrar in the organogram so in terms of administrative issues the Registrar represent procurement anywhere including management meetings. The position of the Finance Officer and the Registrar reports directly to the Rector and are labeled principal officers in the organogram but the Procurement Officer reports to the Rector but not a principal officer so the function is being sidelined in top management decisions and brought in the procurement process late some times when contracts are already awarded and some payments made. Again, it was observed that there was some form of team work and collaboration between management and the procurement staff. This is done usually before management meetings. Any information needed from procurement is taken but for the procurement officer/staff to attend management meetings and defend itself on buying issues, no. This may be because management is responsible to government on issues concerning finance. This supports Tassabehji and Moorhouse (2008) and Barath and Hugstad, (1977) view that an overwhelming majority of procurement staff complained that they were not brought in early enough in the buying process to add any real value.

(iv) No training and refresher courses.

All respondent agreed that there are no training programs for junior staff. Senior members in the Polytechnics are staff with Master's Degree which includes heads of procurement whilst senior staffs are people with First Degrees and other related qualifications. It appears training and refresher courses are only available to senior members when available and non-existent for senior staff that form a majority of the procurement staff. Poly11 stated *"Ok, currently I am not personally aware because I have been here for close to two years and I have never seen or heard about any training programme"*. Poly13 added by lamenting that the institution doesn't have any plan for training and that training comes with a cost. Evidence from the research entirely supports this proposition implying that the greatest challenges organizations are currently facing are how successful they can develop the essential skills of their staff as observed by Handfield and Nichols, (2004). Benefits from training in terms of; improvements on the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to achieve organizational goals and the creation of competitive advantage as proclaim by Peteraf (1993) would be lost. This is also in support of an assessment of Ghana's procurement system in 2007 by the OECD/DAC that there is lack of training avenues for practitioners.

(v) Resource base of the function.

It was obvious that the human resource levels of the procurement functions in the Polytechnics are adequate as observed. However, majority of the staff agreed to the fact that logistics to work with are not adequate. *Poly4 lamented that confidential documents such as evaluation reports and other documents are sometimes sent out for photocopying because of break downs of the central photocopier machine and that photocopiers, fax machines, scanners, printers and vehicles are to be provided to enable procurement to function properly.*

(vi) Performing only operational / non-strategic roles.

It was revealed from the focus group discussions that the final decision to buy rests with the Rector, Management, Entity Tender Committee, Regional Tender board or National Central Board making the procurement function playing only an administrative role thus doing only paper work. This is in line with the proclamation by Barath and Hugstad, (1977) that procurement professionals did not have the authority to decide on organizational buying decisions and had to fight for their legitimacy within their organizations. Besides it was revealed that the procurement function is placed at middle level status and provides administrative roles. Poly6 lamented that *strategic decisions are taken by the Rector and Management and the procurement department is not part of management. We provide the tactical and the operational roles to help them make their decisions.* Procurement functions in this context were neither perceived as a function with high status, nor were seen as a priority of top management as observed by Cruz and Murphy, (1996).

Conclusion

Public procurement practitioners have faced numerous challenges caused by diverse factors over the years. This research addresses some of these challenges. There are many others that have not been touched. Moreover, due to its nature, public procurement practitioners will never get bored as they continue to face contradictory and contrasting procurement requirements and objectives imposed by policies and legislations. This is a challenge that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency as a non-functioning procurement practitioner will cause the establishment to malfunction.

Recommendations

To begin with, the procurement function should be upgraded to strategic position where it would be independent and be involved in the firm's long term strategic planning process. Further, management in consultation with Public Authority should organize workshops on procurement procedures for non-procurement staff who has something to do with procurement and student leaders of the Polytechnics to equip them with the understanding of the procurement process which will perhaps lead to the timely submission of their purchase requests and subsequently resolve some of the confrontations between procurement and user-departments. Again, adequate logistic should be provided. Furthermore, the polytechnics must also appeal to the Public Procurement Authority to review the Public Procurement Act to suite their current demands for thresholds and procedures. Besides, Public Procurement Authority in its desire to solve these problems should increase its efforts in procurement research, knowledge advancement, and experience exchanges. Finally, the function should be involved more in the decision making process in the institutions because their contributions are critical in achieving organizational goals.

Limitations of the Study

The study focused on the procurement challenges only in two Polytechnics. This implies that the results may be handicapped to represent the general population of Ghanaian Polytechnics. Again, only qualitative method was used in data collection. A major criticism of this strategy is that it is purely descriptive and therefore not rigorous, and that it is too subjective and impressionistic. Notwithstanding these limitations, the background experience of the researcher in the field of enquiry and the phenomenon under study may have some consequences to reduce the biases that may affect the credibility of this research. Hence, the findings of the study can be concluded that they are not seriously flawed.

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