Foster a community of practice

Summary

A community of practice refers to a shared platform, forum or social network, where procurement practitioners can exchange knowledge and experience, ask questions, share documentation or collaborate on common projects. Having such a space is important because, very often, knowledge and expertise in public procurement is dispersed throughout the different layers of government, with pockets of highly skilled procurers within some institutions or regional areas, but more limited knowledge elsewhere.

With the creation of a community of practice, knowledge can be more easily centralised and subsequently disseminated, without the need to build up extensive capacity. Thus, a community of practice is potentially relevant in countries that have limited access to central level expertise and are starting the path to professionalising practitioners.

A community of practice can be fostered through the creation of a platform that gathers procurement practitioners with similar professional interests, where participants are active and willing to support each other. The community of practice can also be supported through regular conferences and events, where practitioners are able to meet and interact in person. These kinds of interaction help practitioners to identify and implement good practices, avoid common errors, and deliver better value for money. Finally, a community of practice can help practitioners tackle more challenging aspects of procurement, such as green, innovative and socially responsible procurement.

Input

Cost – €€
- Low set-up cost (software acquisition and yearly maintenance cost)
- Medium operation cost (0.5 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) to moderate the community)

Time – Less than 6 months

Complexity – Medium
- Involvement of stakeholders, including practitioners in the development of the platform through the creation of an advisory board where frequent users are invited to participate on a regular basis
- The need for IT infrastructure depends on the type of solution selected for the platform, namely whether the platform is on the Internet or is integrated into the IT infrastructure of the State
    - If the technology is acquired externally (e.g. software for running the platform), it requires the analysis of existing professional social networks to draft a statement of requirements
    - If an existing technology is used (e.g. online discussion forum), the implementation is straightforward
- Dissemination strategy to raise awareness about the platform
- Conduct of a pilot phase for familiarisation with the tool

Good Practice Examples

✓ France
✓ The Netherlands
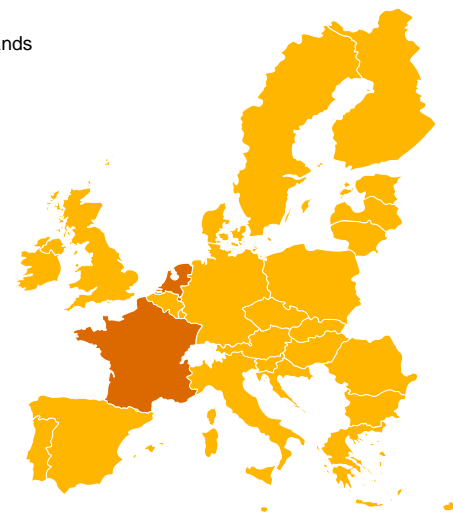
Impact

Promote professionalisation

Thanks to the exchange of knowledge and experience, practitioners learn from the experience of their peers, making them less likely to make mistakes and better able to achieve value for money.

Ensure better compliance

Better access to resources and the ability to ask questions of experienced peers through the community of practice, allows practitioners to avoid mistakes and thus contributes to better compliance with procurement rules.

Enhance value for money

The community of practice also allows practitioners to benefit from their peers' knowledge of the market and experience in choosing the best procedure for the procurement at hand, defining tender criteria etc., in order to foster competition among suppliers and improve value for money when procuring.

Incorporate strategic public procurement

Particularly in MS with less experience with strategic procurement, the sharing of experience via a community of practice is invaluable in showing practitioners that these more advanced techniques are possible, and can help to implement it.

Key success factors and potential pitfalls

Develop incentives for participation
Providing a large range of topics for discussion and inviting members to join at least one discussion group on a topic of interest to their everyday work is an important way to stimulate members' participation. It is also important to find the right balance between moderating the discussion and allowing 'self-management' of the community. If necessary, the moderator needs to step in to keep the discussion active and maintain interest in the platform.

Set the right framework
Confidentiality is needed to encourage free discussion among practitioners, hence only registered buyers should be allowed to participate in the platform. Importantly, participants need to feel free to express their questions and concerns, without being afraid that any action on the platform may backfire. Thus, it must be very clear that users act on their own behalf and do not represent their organisation when they interact on the platform.
It is key to adapt the platform to the communication habits and preferences of different users, so that members feel comfortable using the tool on a regular basis. Thus, the platform chosen needs to be easy to use.

Provide space for interaction
Foreseeing space and time during events for peer-to-peer discussions/exchange allows to strengthen the community.

Losing touch with the community
Changes are very often not easily accepted once the community is established and, if not properly managed, can lead to loss of users. Any change needs to be implemented with prior consultation with key stakeholders to assess whether it reflects the needs of the community and what operational modalities are feasible.

Competitors on the horizon
As technological developments advance, other useful alternative online platforms are emerging thus undermining the relevance of the online community of practice. Therefore, integrating the community of practice with established social networks could ensure a more active and regular use of the group and ultimately help keeping the community of practice active.

Limited cost-effectiveness
In an environment where alternative inexpensive platforms are emerging, it is very important to be cost-effective to keep the community of practice alive. Hence, the professional platform needs to be genuinely useful to members in their day-to-day work.

Monitor the quality of the community of practice
Introducing the possibility of giving feedback allows a better response to the needs of practitioners and therefore improves the quality and usefulness of the community of practice. In addition to feedback, appropriate indicators need to be chosen for monitoring purposes, such as the level of interactivity of the platform.

Related Good Practices

- One-stop shop procurement portal
- Helpdesk for contracting authorities
- Credentials for procurement professionals

Case Studies (1)

FR – Social Network for buyers of the state (RESPAE)

In France, the newly created State purchasing directorate (DAE - *Direction des achats de l'État*) of the Ministry of Economy and Finance (*Minefi*) launched a social network for buyers called the *Réseau Social Professionnel des Achats de l'Etat* (RespAÉ), as part of its strategy to professionalise procurement. The testing phase of the social network was launched in October 2016. The full version of the social network went live in January 2017.

The social network is dedicated to state buyers and aims at fostering cooperation, exchanging of good practices and transferring of skills between buyers, sharing documents and ideas, and allowing buyers to capitalise on their knowledge and know-how. It aims to professionalise buyers on the economic dimension of the purchase as opposed to the legal dimension. While RespAÉ is a professional social network of buyers within the ministries and their public bodies, the target audience includes buyers from State central administrations, as well as buyers from decentralised ministries throughout France.

Members of the network are able to ask questions, share documents and consult the expertise of other members. The network is organised into communities according to various themes: sectorial communities, purchasing network communities and communities built around specific purchasing projects. Members are invited to join RespAÉ when at least one community interests them. All buyers have signed a usage code which allows them to contribute freely on RespAÉ because they act on their own behalf and not on behalf of their entity or their hierarchy.

Individuals from outside the State and its public agencies can participate if they are invited by a community manager for a specific topic. This could be the case, for instance, for buyers from local authorities or hospitals, lawyers, technical experts in the purchasing field, etc.

Since mid-March 2017, five months after its opening, RespAÉ has acquired more than 620 members from 11 French ministries and over 40 State public agencies, participating in 30 active communities of the professional network.

NL - PIANOo Forum

In the Netherlands, the Procurement Expertise Centre of the Ministry of Economic Affairs (PIANOo) has run the PIANOo Forum[1] since 2005, a discussion platform for procurement practitioners on procurement-related matters.

The PIANOo Forum was created with the idea of centralising knowledge on public procurement and creating a vibrant community, where procurement experts could share, discuss, exchange ideas and solve issues related to their daily work. Importantly, the forum is not meant to be a question desk, but a platform for discussion among practitioners. Suppliers and other non-governmental actors are not allowed to participate in the Forum.

The PIANOo Forum community includes 1,600 professionals in public sector procurement. The Forum contains approximately 80 sub-communities organised according to specific procurement topics, thus facilitating the search for specific information. These sub-communities may be organised per domain, e.g. teaching hospitals or construction, per secondary policy fields, such as social return or innovation. As no suppliers are allowed to the Forum, participants can share their questions openly. Topics that frequently generate interest from participants include changes in procurement regulations, the use of the European Single Procurement Document (ESPD), specific tenders, market consultations, secondary policy fields and complex procurement procedures. In particular, forum participants look for practitioners who have experience in those topics.

PIANOo's role in the forum is financing the platform and managing the tool. Furthermore, it acts as a moderator, even though each sub-community defines its own moderator, too. The Forum is largely self-sustaining thanks to the active participation from users, with some of them using the platform on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the PIANOo moderator can stimulate the discussion if he observes that activity in the Forum is slowing down. In addition, the PIANOo Forum is used for answering complex questions that PIANOo staff receives via its Helpdesk. These questions are posted for discussion to the PIANOo Forum.

Initially, PIANOo Forum was hosted on a local platform, but it subsequently migrated to the Procurement Forum, a similar professional networking space for procurers around Europe. The Procurement Forum is co-shared with ICLEI, the global network of cities, towns and regions dedicated to sustainability, and other partners. The Dutch and the English language are both supported on the platform.

✉ Contact

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[1] See: https://www.pianoo.nl/over-pianoo/online-instrumenten/pianoo-forum