



3 Strategies to Build Your Procurement Dream Team

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If you've had to fill vacancies on your government procurement team over the past few years, you've probably noticed some shifts in the landscape of hiring and retaining staff. A combination of crises and longer term trends mean that governments increasingly must think more creatively about hiring and retention.

Current Challenges in Hiring & Retention

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on hiring and staffing, both generally and especially for purchasing teams. Pandemic-induced supply chain disruptions and the need to rapidly source goods and services amidst constantly changing conditions taught many procurement teams the necessity of pivoting on the fly, quickly adapting to new technologies, working remotely, and persevering in tracking down new or different options for purchases. This new way of working required different skillsets, such as being agile, strategic, and proactive, which have not historically been skills sought out in new procurement hires. Additionally, personnel shortages in the face of a tight labor market and the Great Resignation led to procurement departments operating without the staff capacity needed to carry out basic functions, much less to think strategically about what they buy or to take on special projects, such as digitizing processes or making policy changes.

The pandemic isn't the only thing shaking up government hiring. A new wave of young workers with different expectations for work is entering the job market. Instead of clocking in and out each day, more job seekers are looking for community at their workplace, a positive office culture, and opportunities for development. A recent report by Glint on [Employee Well-Being](#) found that employees define an exceptional work environment as one that offers opportunities to learn and grow and fosters belonging. Members of Gen Z (those born between the mid- to late-1990s through the early 2010s) tend to have different expectations regarding schedule flexibility, professional development, and work-life balance, but they also bring fresh perspective and talent invaluable to innovation in government. Qualifications that were once non-negotiable for joining the government workforce, such as being located close enough to report to the office every day and having previous public sector experience, may no longer be essential.

The old way of hiring new procurement staff just doesn't cut it anymore. Although it might seem intimidating, we see these trends as an opportunity to breathe new life into your hiring process—and maybe even make it more enjoyable for both new applicants and your hiring managers! Taking steps to attract top candidates is especially important in public procurement, where talented staff can help you achieve policy goals and elevate procurement as a strategic function within your government.

This quick read outlines three key strategies for you to consider when seeking new talent for your procurement team. Each strategy includes tips and an example from a government. By utilizing these strategies, you'll be putting your best foot forward before your new team members even walk through the door.

Reimagine, Retain, and Recruit to Create Your Dream Team

Reimagine: Reconsider What You Are Looking For

Gone is the belief that candidates with extensive government or purchasing experience and a four-year college degree are the only ones who can execute impactful work on a procurement team. The following tips will help you identify the qualifications you need in your dream team member:

- **Reflect on top performers:** Sometimes the best resources are the ones right in front of you, so take a moment to think about what makes your top performers stand out. What skills did they enter the position with, and what have they picked up along the way? What did they do before they joined your team? What is unique about their relationships with the rest of the team or other key stakeholders? Make sure any common skills, experiences, or attributes you identify are included in your search—or consider an internal hiring process where an existing top performer could move into the position that you're looking to fill.

- **Survey existing staff:** Those working in similar roles can help you determine which skills are crucial to have on day one and which can be learned on the job. Conducting a team survey, as in the Long Beach example on page 4, can also help you understand if an existing issue such as lengthy solicitation cycle times is due to low staffing capacity or perhaps could be resolved with internal resource reshuffling instead. This survey can be as informal as a check-in during a team meeting or as formal as an annual team-wide Microsoft Form or Google Form. By asking questions of your staff about their overall experience at work, what they believe makes a strong team member, and where they need more support, you can prioritize what to look for in your candidate search.
- **Revisit minimum requirements:** Minimum requirements for education, experience, and civil service exams might be blocking non-traditional applicants with potential from getting through your screening process. Before setting strict minimum requirements, reflect on whether these qualifications are making your top performers succeed. For example, is having previous government purchasing experience critical for your team—or could a buyer from the private sector with strong communication skills execute their responsibilities proficiently? In general, lacking previous experience in government shouldn't automatically disqualify anyone from a position; their new skills and perspective may truly benefit your team. However, some requirements might be serving an important purpose for your team and should remain. For example, a new hire without any purchasing experience might get overwhelmed by the extensive list of rules and leave the position quickly. Additionally, consider alternative paths for non-traditional candidates to apply for your positions. For example, the procurement team in one California county allows for one year of satisfactory performance in the lower trainee position or having a relevant procurement certification like CPPO or CPPB to substitute for the experience requirement in their buyer position.
- **Look for evidence of soft skills:** While knowing how to process a bid received in an e-procurement system is useful, many technical skills can be learned on the job. Soft skills, such as thinking critically or collaborating well with team members, may be harder to teach. Using your own reflections and input from your team, think about the nature of your work and which soft skills are critical for this position. For example, if you frequently upgrade software, adaptability will be a key soft skill for any new hire. If collaborating with other departments is a core part of the job, as seen in the Long Beach example on page 4, being a collaborative team player and problem solver should top your list. You can gauge a candidate's soft skills by asking targeted questions during your interview process. For example, you could ask for examples of how they worked with a previous team to solve a problem, how they handled conflict in the past, or how they sold an idea to a colleague.

The Purchasing Team in the City of Long Beach, California issued an online survey to their staff on workload, job satisfaction, and top traits for success in their position. One key finding was that buyers were spending most of their time liaising with departments and vendors—and the ones that viewed this as an opportunity for collaboration rather than as a necessary but arduous part of the job were the most successful. This result showed department leadership that having a positive, collaborative, and professional demeanor was a critical soft skill for new hires, leading the city to include it as a desired attribute on job descriptions.

Retention: Offer More Than Just a Paycheck

There's more to having a career than just earning a salary (although that's important, too). Consider whether there are any perks or benefits you could offer new hires and the rest of your team to bolster job satisfaction and retention. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Provide flexibility:** Offering optionality in work schedules and office setups, such as a remote or hybrid work environment (where possible), can set your team apart for strong applicants who desire or need more flexibility. To decide if your team can accommodate this kind of setup, reflect on how you operated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most of your team was working from home at some point and bid openings and meetings were occurring virtually. Was work still submitted on time? Did communication channels remain open? Were there any workflow improvements you can make permanent? Not only can offering flexibility increase the appeal of job posting, but it can also widen the pool of potential applicants to those not living within commuting distance of your office (if your government doesn't have a residency requirement, that is!).
- **Outline professional development opportunities and promotion pathways:** Take a hint from the private sector and offer new and existing staff professional development support and a clear path to promotion within your office. Create a structure for professional development that includes regular check-ins, mentorship, and clear expectations and timelines for promotion opportunities. Investing in your staff right from the start will help them serve your team better and longer.
- **Help staff to see the results of their hard work:** The work we do each day in procurement can feel disconnected from its impact, especially in comparison to peer government staff who are engaging directly with residents or conducting site visits or community meetings. We encourage you to help your new and existing staff to view their jobs as something that brings meaning and purpose to their lives. What could that look like in a typical purchasing office? Perhaps you could arrange conversations or field trips to view the end results of a major

procurement that staff supported, whether that's new playground equipment, a senior center renovation, or a new fare technology on a regional bus system. Or consider whether there are lighter-touch ways for staff to see their impact, or ways department or agency collaborators can recognize purchasing staff who have gone above and beyond in their support on an RFP or bid.

- **Invest in your team culture:** Although a positive work environment has always been appealing, the demand for a fun, supportive, and collaborative team culture has significantly grown in response to the pandemic. The [Glint Well-Being Report](#) found that “when the pandemic not only stripped away physical interaction but also threatened our safety, the less tangible drivers of work culture—growth opportunities, belonging, and values—became much more important to employees.” A strong team culture doesn't develop overnight, but it can be fostered by staff covering for each other when someone is out sick, checking in after a tough day, or taking time to celebrate success as a team. Leadership can support this goal by implementing policies that promote work-life balance and supporting employees in being able to log off and disconnect at the end of the day. If you've built a culture that you and your staff are proud of, be sure to promote it in your job description. If your team values its informal and collaborative environment, use casual and lively language throughout to match the tone. If your staff enjoy regular team-building activities outside of regular hours, mention what you've done in the past and what you're doing next. New hires should be a good fit for your existing team, so feel free to include more non-traditional elements if that accurately represents your team.

The San Diego County Regional Airport Authority wrote a job description for a procurement analyst position to attract new hires who align with their team's lively culture. In the introductory paragraph, they explicitly invited candidates who were looking for a team that valued each other and had fun along the way to apply.

Recruit: Get the Word Out Widely

You wouldn't expect a multitude of vendors to respond to an RFP without seeing the posting, so you also cannot expect lots of job seekers to apply for an opening they've never seen. Below are some tips for spreading the word about your open positions:

- **Leverage your existing network:** In addition to your typical advertising process, think about how you can expand your outreach through your professional network. Are there upcoming procurement conferences you can attend and advertise your opening? Do you have any former colleagues who have since left your team but might have interested contacts? Are

there other departments in your government with talented staff who might be looking for a change of role? Leveraging your existing network can help spread the word about your position not only to interested candidates, but to their networks as well.

- **Promote on the GPL’s Procurement Excellence Network (PEN):** With over 600 members, the Procurement Excellence Network is an incredible repository of government talent. Post your job description on the [Community Conversations thread](#) to get the word out or reach out directly to members with relevant qualifications and experience through the [Member Directory](#).
- **Utilize new platforms:** Consider using any specialized online recruitment platforms relevant to your position and resources that appeal to younger candidates entering the workforce, such as community or university job boards. Here are a few to consider:

Posting Source	Considerations (updated as of April 2023)
<u>NIGP: The Institute for Public Procurement</u>	\$150 to post for non-members but gets access to a lot of very experienced candidates.
<u>Institute for Supply Management (ISM)</u>	Requires membership and posting fee.
<u>National Association of State Procurement Officials (NASPO)</u>	Free to post.
<u>International City/County Management Association (ICMA)</u>	\$300 to post for non-members.
<u>Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL)</u>	\$20 for members to post, \$250 for non-members.
<u>Daybook</u>	Free to post.
<u>What Works Cities and Bloomberg Philanthropies "Spark" Newsletter</u>	Work with a representative from the Government Performance Lab to post (contact us at gplpen@hks.harvard.edu).
<u>Miscellaneous contacts via LinkedIn, or other networks you participate in.</u>	Utilize the network of any partners or relevant stakeholders.
<u>Indeed and ZipRecruiter</u>	Common recruitment platforms with a wide audience, hosting both public and private sector jobs.

Conclusion

By utilizing these three strategies, you can transform hiring from a compliance-focused activity to an engaging approach that lets the best qualities of your team shine—and that attracts applicants who are the right fit for your team. By revisiting what you are looking for, by offering a reward job that feels like more than just a paycheck, and by looking beyond your usual candidate pool, you can find the right new team members that will make everyone on your team's work easier and more fulfilling!

The **Procurement Excellence Network** is an initiative of the Government Performance Lab designed to help public sector leaders use government procurement as a tool to improve resident outcomes and advance equity. The **Government Performance Lab**, housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are able to provide experiential learning as well.

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