GOVERNMENT PURCHASING: AN EVOLVING PROFESSION?
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ABSTRACT. As government organizations step hopefully into a new century, among the challenges they face will be the demands of the “New Purchasing” and persistent pressure to redefine the role of the purchasing practitioner in government. Reengineering of purchasing activities was a constant feature of the 1990s in many government jurisdictions. Those who manage the function usually influence a large share of organizational expenditure and must also cope with the demands of e-commerce, devolution of responsibility, partnering and strategic alliances, and the implications of globalization within the context of an accountable public sector. Applying some theoretical, functionalist models of a profession, this paper seeks to establish professional credentials for purchasing practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, it seems that many governments have developed policies that have “championed smaller government … and a shift in national income to profits” (Bell, 1997: 182). Government reform in the areas of competition, privatization, labor market practices and deregulation appear to be widespread (Thurow, 1992; Hughes, 1994;

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Savoie, 1994; Quiggan, 1996). The implementation of efficiency principles, which has been described as the economic rationalist (ER) dimension of public governance, could be said to have led to policies of public governance focused on “rational choice and efficiency … [where] choice is made necessary by scarcity and rationality, utility and efficiency” Caporaso and Levine (1992: 128).

The adoption of these market-focused ideals has led to the development of a complex mix of market-focused strategies by both public and private sectors. ER has shifted the balance of the macro-partnership between public and private sectors, which could be said to underpin the operation of capitalism, in favor of the private sector. The ER model has facilitated the operation of markets by both deregulating market behavior and encouraging free trade, seeking to increase the size of the private sector (Bernstein, 1996) and to shift government business enterprises (GBE’s) onto a more competitive footing (Callender and Johnston, 2000).

It could be argued that the emergence of “new” professions has also been a factor which has helped governments adopt more liberal, market-oriented policies. Using the evolving purchasing profession as a case study, this paper explores the functional concept of a profession and examines the status and role of the government purchasing practitioner in a “new” professional framework. Typically, the recognition of purchasing is in inverse proportion to the financial and technological influence of the government purchasing. Estimates of the financial activities of government purchasing managers are believed to be in the order of 10% B 30 % of GNP and in the private sector may be seen to be between 10% and 80% of expenditure (Callender, 1996). Hidden behind this financial data is the socio-economic involvement of purchasing managers in redrawing the public and private sector maps of government and business procurement that has taken as its major theme for the past decade: lowest cost, on time delivery of the right products or services at the right time. However pedestrian these objectives may appear, the outcomes of revolutionized government purchasing practice can be linked to changes in corporate wealth, greater government cost savings and the successful emergence of e-commerce (Stewart, 1994; Hodge, 1996, Thurow, 1999).
SOME THEORETICAL MODELS OF A PROFESSION

In keeping with the shift towards global transfer of ideas, the increasing use of global networks, the rise of professions (Perkin, 1996), and the availability of technology to facilitate these processes, it is not surprising that government purchasing practitioners are now defining themselves as a profession. The use of the term ‘professional’ has been broadened considerably over the past half century to encompass many other callings and careers. Freidson (1983) and Macdonald (1995) have explored the links between professional emergence and the development of capitalism in Great Britain and the USA in the 1900s and suggest that the role of the professional is largely peculiar to Anglo-American economies. In an era that reflects a resurgence of market models of economic management, especially in these economies, it should be no surprise that new professions continue to emerge to gain some of the benefits attached to new market opportunities. These ‘new’ professions also seem to have emerged from processes related to the aspirations of the middle classes to share some of the social status enjoyed by the “gentlemanly status of the traditional learned professionals (lawyers, medical practitioners and theologians)” (Freidson, 1983: 22).

Some of the essential elements of a profession, from the functionalist point of view, were outlined by Barber (1968), who suggested that a group fitting the description of a profession would demonstrate:

- a high degree of generalised and systematic knowledge
- primary orientation to the community interest rather than to individual self interest
- a high degree of self-control of behavior through codes of ethics...
- a system of rewards (monetary and honorary) that is primarily a set of symbols of work achievement and thus ends in themselves, not means to some end of individual self-interest.

In exploring the nature of professions, semi-professions and occupations, Turner and Hodge (1970) saw the professions as having four key areas for review:

- the degree of substantive theory and technique in the practising of professional or semi-professional activities,
- the degree of monopoly over claimed professional...activities;
- the degree of external recognition of the profession..., and
- the degree of organisation of the profession.

In a discussion of whether public administration deserved the status of a profession, Pugh (1989) described the attributes of a profession in slightly different terms as:

- a cast of mind,
- a corpus of theory and knowledge,
- a social ideal,
- ethical standards,
- formal organisation to promote its interests,
- a "hall of fame" to recognize outstanding leaders.

Beyond these functional models, Freidson (1983), Rueschemeyer (1983) and Torstendahl (1990) have discussed notions of scientific knowledge, power, self-control, autonomy and social control as relevant to the understanding of the nature of the profession. Taken together, these various views tend to support the need for a profession to have a certain number of attributes, which in the case of the government purchasing profession could be summarized as:

- members both gather and develop a collection of knowledge aimed at focussing on the needs of particular aspects of an organization’s operations;
- members possess a sense of service: service to the community, to clients, to organizations;
- a code of ethics has been developed and is preserved by the members of the profession;
- there is a sense of elitism and power, designed to preserve and protect members’ group identity;
- members belong to a formal organisation, which promotes and maintains group identity;
- the profession has an image, created and maintained by its “heroes and heroines.”
GOVERNMENT PURCHASING AS AN EVOLVING PROFESSION

The functional attributes of a profession, which have been outlined in the previous section, can now be considered in relation to government purchasing practitioners to enable some conclusions to be drawn about their current professional status.

Knowledge

A number of professional organizations provide professional certification, which is a key factor contributing to the advancement of public purchasing. Each of these associations either offers, supports, or recognizes professional purchasing certification. Representatives from the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing (NIGP) (1998a, 1999b, 1999c) and National Association of State Purchasing Officials (NASPO) comprise the Universal Public Purchasing Certification Council (UPPCC), which was formed in 1981 and offers two professional designations. The UPPCC also boasts members from the Canadian government, higher education, and the Irish Institute of Purchasing and Materials Management (IIPMM).

The Certified Public Purchasing Officer (CPPO) and the Certified Professional Public Buyer (CPPB) are the programs offered through the UPPCC. The former was established in 1964 making it the oldest purchasing certification in the country. More recently, NIGP conducted a job analysis survey of purchasing professionals throughout the US and Canada in 1999 and updated their training and certification programs accordingly (NIGP, 1999c). The National Association of Purchasing Management (NAPM) is another leader in certification programs with the Certified Purchasing Manager (C.P.M.) and the Accredited Purchasing Practitioner (A.P.P.). With over 32,000 professionals achieving their C.P.M., these programs have gained worldwide acceptance and respect.

Many government purchasing professionals hold and support NAPM certification, which is also available to private industry buyers. Two other professional certifications that are widely recognized are the Certified Associate Contracts Manager (CACM) and the Certified Professional Contracts Manager (CPCM). Both of these are offered through National Contract Management Association (NCMA) and focus on the procurement and contracting profession with a Federal perspective. Other significant
programs include the Certified Institute of Purchasing and Supply (CIPS) Graduate Diploma and the Certified Professional Purchaser (CPP) offered by the Purchasing Management Association of Canada.

While there are many different purchasing and related programs available, they all have a common thread: they aim to promote professionalism within the purchasing field. Just as nursing and accounting have the highly recognized Registered Nurse (RN) and Certified Public Accountant (CPA) qualifications, professional purchasing strives for credibility and acceptance with accreditation. The professional purchasing associations and their certification programs have done just that. According to NAPM chief operating officer Paul Novak, “Certification will give you professional recognition, and cause others to recognize you as part of a great group B a profession” (Murphree, 1999: 51). As the UPPCC continues to bolster the public purchasing profession with certification programs for both the government buyer and manager, a sense of pride and belonging spreads throughout the ranks of public purchasing, increasing members’ sense of professionalism. As Robert Sheridan, past-president of NIGP, notes, “It is personally satisfying to know that you have met an established standard of experience, education, and knowledge to be recognized as a professional” (Murphree, 1999: 50).

Higher education has also been another significant player in the evolution of the public purchasing profession. Colleges and universities throughout the world are increasing knowledge and stature within this field by offering purchasing courses and partnering with professional associations in their education and training programs. Within the United States, institutions of higher learning that are offering purchasing specific course and degrees include Portland State University, University of Houston, and Duquesne University (NAPM, 1996). These are but a few samples of schools all over the United States that are offering purchasing programs and validating public purchasing as a viable career choice.

More specifically related to government procurement is John Tyler Community College in Virginia, which offers a two year associate degree in Public Purchasing, and Rutgers University, which offers the preparatory classes for New Jersey’s Registered Professional Purchasing Officer (RPPO) program. Some recent examples of NIGP’s involvement with higher education are the granting of college credit by Eastern Oregon University for NIGP training seminars, and the 1999 alliance NIGP entered into with Florida Atlantic University (FAU). This latest effort created a partnership with FAU
and NIGP that will bring public procurement even closer to the academic community through research by FAU’s School of Public Administration.

Just as other professional fields have aligned themselves with universities and colleges to support training and educational requirements, NIGP has also seen the importance of blending higher education into the public purchasing field. While fields like accounting and engineering may have a longer professional tradition with such academic alignment, similar commitment and involvement by government purchasers are critical to the evolution of the purchasing profession. In its ongoing effort to increase professionalism and increase the focus on education, NIGP has made a corporate commitment to improve the profession and its image by developing strategic alliances with institutions of higher learning (Moore, 1998).

A recent study published by the Center for Advanced Purchasing Studies (CAPS), which is a collaborative research center established by Arizona State University and NAPM, listed the primary skills that modern purchasers will need to successfully function at a world-class level. These eight attributes, applicable to private and public buyers alike, included interpersonal communications, teams skills, analytical problem solving, technical understanding of their organization, computer literacy, negotiation skills, education, and continual learning. Again, the focus is on more value-added and strategic functions combined with a sense of increased professionalism.

Purchasing professionals have also adopted a “scientific approach” to defining the basis of their profession through an economic instrument called the “purchasing multiplier.” The purchasing multiplier enables procurement specialists to claim their activities make a much more direct contribution to profit than a sale which usually provides only the marginal benefit between the selling price of the good or service and the cost of its production or provision (Jensen, 1992). For non-trading government organizations the multiplier is just as attractive. It appears to offer methods to reduce overall cost of operations in ways that meet financial efficiency goals, even though the cost reductions may affect service quality, operating efficiencies and public sector knowledge and skills (Callender and Johnston, 2000).

A Pursuit of Social Ideals

While government buyers are gaining increased responsibilities and respect within their field and respective organizations, the procurement profession as a whole has advanced over the years. Government and private
industry may have viewed the purchaser as a clerical support specialist in the past, but both arenas are now beginning to acknowledge the increased importance of professional buyers. This trend, which has led to the inclusion of purchasing professionals in the planning and strategizing phases of acquisitions, is indeed an indicator that purchasing practitioners have moved out of “the corporate back office” and “into the board room” (Baker, 1999). Particularly within the last twenty-five years, purchasing has progressed from being viewed as secondary support function to that of a crucial and strategic operation (Anonymous, 1999).

There have been several contributing factors to this trend. It is easy to suggest that with the passage of time, work environments evolve to a point where they are accepted as important just because they have been around so long. Even though this may be true to a certain extent with public purchasing, or any other field, it has been three primary areas that have been the catalyst of change for procurement. These areas are professional associations, certification programs and higher education. Each has contributed significantly to the advancement of purchasing as a profession, and fittingly enough, all revolve around the concept of professionalism.

Elitism and Power

While government purchasing has existed around for many centuries, it has really been in the last half century that this field has seen a distinctive evolution in the United States. Those who buy goods and services for all levels of government have seen their profession progress significantly. From an occupation focused on clerical duties, public purchasing has experienced a shift in primary duties to more value added functions. These functions include strategic planning, formal negotiations, and process engineering. What has prompted such a change? What has occurred in the last fifty years that has today’s purchasing professionals beginning to be viewed as top level executives and program managers instead of those generally unglamorous individuals (Stewart, 1994)? A number of issues have played a significant role in this transformation.

Public managers may find the concept of purchasing or procurement to be a familiar policy and operational aspect of public governance and one that has undergone a significant revolution in the past decade. However, like many other professions, public purchasing has a long history. Purchasing is a function that has probably existed since organized trading commenced. Fuwei (1996) records the development of the silk trade between China and a Greek
colony during the 8th Century B.C. In 15 B.C., Livy (1966) reported extensively on the contractual issues associated with supporting the Roman Army in Spain, while Gadde and Hakansson (1993) provided details of the stormy 16th Century relationship between the Swedish king and his armourers (probably private suppliers). More recently, Adam Smith (1776) noted the national and international implications of purchasing within the context of his much wider enquiry into the nature of the economic structure of societies. In 1915, Twyford (1915: 11) also noted that while organizations ignored the importance of purchasing at their peril, there was also “too great a tendency to belittle purchasing and treat it in a negligent and offhand manner.”

The first legislation passed by the US Congress that dealt with public purchasing was in 1792. This act authorized the Departments of War and Treasury to contract on behalf of the nation. A number of congressional actions followed over the years, including the anti-competitive practice laws around the turn of the 20th century and the more recent Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1994 (NIGP, 1999a). While these laws were directed at regulating how public purchasing was performed, they also served as snapshots in time that tell about the profession and how it was viewed.

When Congress first acted in 1792 to regulate the way public contracts were let, it was acknowledging that there was a public purchasing profession to attach rules to. While the lawmakers’ intentions were more likely to prohibit graft and corruption in the government, they nonetheless formally established the trade or profession of purchasing. From this eighteen-century perspective of needing a gatekeeper and administrative police officer for a purchasing agent, quite the opposite is evident in the more recent Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act (1994). In the latter case, the Federal government prompted purchasing professionals to consider alternative and value-added procurement methods, as well as to delegate higher purchasing amounts to agencies so that central procurement officers could concentrate on high-dollar and complex acquisitions.

Into the 1970s and early 1980s, government purchasing was still viewed largely as a quasi-clerical field. Many of the common functions that buyers performed were process-related. Tasks like printing purchase orders, processing stock requisitions, and preparing standard bidding forms were predominant. By the late 1980s, these common tasks had come to include pursuing innovative business approaches and building strategic partnerships (CMI, 1999). Since government purchasing practitioners spend approximately
25% of the gross national product (NIGP, 1999b), today’s public purchasers are routinely concentrating their efforts on larger sized contracts. Perhaps this is best stated by Rick Grimm (1999), who has noted the shifting paradigm of the purchasing profession from “gatekeeper to strategic player” and from “controller to collaborator.” However, recent research has shown that adoption of a purchasing or supply chain management approach remains in its infancy. Some evidence suggests that multinational organizations have been early to take advantage of supply chain models through their membership in institutions such as the Supply Chain Council in the U. S. and Europe. However, research by the Deloitte and Touch Consulting Group in North America found that 80% of the companies surveyed still have not developed any concrete initiatives for the optimization of their supply chains” (Heinzel, 1999: 126).

**Adoption of Ethical Standards**

Ethical issues are often alluded to by practitioners and managers seeking to assure their colleagues and clients that ethical behavior is a hallmark of purchasing practice. The theory and practise of ethical behavior is complex. As Solomon (1993: 37) notes, the Aristotelian virtues which he calls “community, excellence, role identity, holism, integrity, judgement”, are a view of ethics in a perfect world. Instead, the reality may be that “…business puts pressure on the corporate community…and the pursuit of personal integrity often runs against a corporate wall of resistance when corporate mandates contradict personal or other company values” (Solomon, 1993: 44).

In the public sector, the issue of probity is compounded by the need for financial and operating accountability to a government together with a need to protect government from unnecessary censure in both the legislature and the media (Fuller and Roffey, 1993). This dilemma reinforces the need for ethical standards which are developed, monitored and adjudicated by agencies such as the Office of Government Ethics, established under the terms of the Ethics in Government Act (1978) and a range of similar government institutions in other countries.

Professionalism underlies the status of a particular vocational field. How do its members conduct themselves? How do they, and others, view the profession? Most people would consider the field of engineering as professional, as it is easy to see a certain level of conduct (e.g., certified blueprints stamped with an engineering seal) and a demonstrated level of knowledge (e.g., an engineering degree and registration as a professional engineer, PE). Engineers in the workforce generally conduct themselves in
an ethical manner and are respected for their work and their service in most countries. This type of conduct, respect and even pride in their field all contribute toward advanced levels of professionalism. It is the achievement, status, and, rapport with society that purchasing professionals are pursuing in their quest for professionalism. In well-established, ethical principles and practices, these professionals see the possibility of further demonstrating their professional status.

Purchasing professionals and their related affiliated professional bodies also tend to place great emphasis on members’ conducting themselves with integrity, ensuring their behavior is above reproach and without any appearance of impropriety. This ethical commitment is present in the codes of conduct adopted by organizations such as the NIGP and NAPM. While they are separate organizations, representing public and private buyers respectively, both require members to support a published code of ethics in order to be considered part of the fold. Similar in nature and content, they prompt members to be governed by the highest ideals of honor and integrity, and to seek first what is best for their organizations. Personal gain or benefit is to be avoided, as are situations where a conflict of interest might exist. It is the ethical leadership provided by the professional associations that seems to compliment the self-regulatory nature of a profession.

**A Formal Organization Designed to Represent the Interests of a Profession**

Many associations have tried to unite the diverse groups of procurement professionals together in recent years. Each professional organization offers important advantages and supports excellence in its own right. All have contributed to the advancement of the profession. The NIGP is one of the strongest organizations behind the government buying force. Based in Virginia and founded in 1944, the NIGP has since been a national leader, building the government purchasing profession and carrying it into the twenty-first century. Like other professional associations, it offers formal and informal means to benefit the public buyer. The educational programs that are offered focus solely on government procurement, and the networking opportunities through chapter affiliates across the country support professional development and the grass roots level. Besides its strong presence in the US, NIGP has also been highly involved with government agents in Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom.
This global approach to increased professionalism has led to partnerships with other organizations that also have rich histories in public purchasing. The International Federation of Purchasing and Materials Management (IFPMM), the Irish Institute of Purchasing and Materials Management (IIPMM), the Purchasing Management Association of Canada (PMAC), the Australian Institute of Purchasing and Materials Management (AIPMM) and the UK’s Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply (CIPS) are all professional organizations that have, along with NIGP and others, worked toward enriching the field of government procurement and increasing its professionalism. The National Association of State Purchasing Officials (NASPO) is another such organization, and while focusing on purchasing at just the state level, it is another partner of NIGP.

NAPM and the National Contract Management Association (NCMA) are two other strong purchasing associations. Each is widely respected by the public sector, as each provides valuable training and networking opportunities for both public and private sector procurement officers. Founded in 1915, NAPM is one of the largest purchasing organizations in the world. Part of the community and business recognition of the NAPM seems to rest upon its “Report on Business” which claims readership across North America, including the Oval Office in Washington, and is now also widely quoted internationally in relation to the performance of the US economy. NCMA is based in Virginia and focuses on Federal level acquisition with its public buyers and private contractors.

All of these organizations, through independent and joint means, have promoted the purchasing field in recent decades and have corporately contributed to the betterment of both the profession and individuals within it. It is through these bodies, and their networking and educational offerings, that the procurement field has been brought to professional stature.

An Image Enhanced by Past and Present Leaders of the Profession

Government purchasing professionals, indeed, purchasing professionals generally, who are still struggling for recognition despite some legal support in Canada and the USA, may see Marco Polo as the originator of supply chain management, at an earlier date than Pacioli, the patron of the accounting profession (Brown and Johnston, 1984). According to some reports Marco Polo journeyed from Europe to Asia in 1271-1295 and spent most of this time in China, where the Emperor employed him. He was apparently involved in matters pertaining to the (then precious) commodity of salt, and
the administration of its monopoly. As a figurehead, Polo was a very flamboyant figure, the legends of whose life are ambiguous, yet comparatively very well known. However, more recent research by the Chinese scholar Fuwei (1996) suggests that trade between Asia and Europe occurred at a much earlier date than proposed by Polo and much has been made of the public and private sector contracting described by Livy (15 B.C.). Marco Polo’s role as a potential patron of the NIGP is therefore doubtful.

Whether or not the issue of “heroes and heroines” is an important attribute of professional status is arguable. However, at the start of the twenty-first Century, it seems that images of heroes and heroines do much to determine public perceptions of individuals seeking special standing in civil society (McKay, 1999). Without this social recognition, the fate of a professional group may be that experienced by British engineers, who, according to Sampson (1983: 33) developed their profession outside government patronage... But they paid a price for their lack of an elite education, their self made roots and aloofness from the world of power. The word engineer came to be associated more with the ‘grease monkey’ in overalls than with the grand technocrat and master-planner...they lost that unity of vision of the early Victorians who had both artistic and technical mastery...they lost out in elegant design to the Germans, Italians or Japanese."

The government purchasing profession may or may not have reformed itself from a mechanistic, clerically-focused, bureaucratic function to one that has significant strategic impact on both policy development and economic practice. However, government purchasing has developed a contextual structure over the past decade that has seen academics and practitioners develop methods of analysis and propose codes of behavior intended to reform the traditional concept of procurement, logistics, supply chain management and e-commerce. The result has been the emergence of a wider concept of purchasing centered on the strategic operation of the supply chain. This has enabled some practitioners in both private and public sectors to enhance the potential of the procurement function to fulfil a number of strategic outcomes mostly related to reducing costs and improving the quality of purchasing contracts for goods and services.
CONCLUSION

At the threshold of the twenty-first century, it can be seen that government procurement officials have come a long way from the typical bureaucratic, paper-pushing role of times past. Rather than providing clerical functions at the conclusion of acquisitions, practitioners today are being asked to play more of a strategic role in their organizations. This evolutionary change has taken some time and has seen a number of primary drivers elevate public purchasing practitioners to advanced levels of responsibility, stature, and credibility.

First, professional purchasing associations and their various certification programs, and strategic partnerships with academic institutions, along with their accredited purchasing programs, have demonstrated the public purchasing field’s commitment to knowledge. Second, while current government practitioners are advantaged by this increased stature, this service to their profession will also benefit future practitioners as well as increase the sophistication of purchasing in the public sector. This increase in professionalism should continue to make government purchasing a marketable and viable career choice for today’s students and tomorrow’s leaders. Third, a focus on ethics by practitioners as well as their professional associations ensures that the behavior of purchasing professions meets independently established behavioral criteria. Fourth, by adopting a strategic focus towards purchasing activities, practitioners are demonstrating a capability to assume the management of the entire range of purchasing activities and relationships that help to enshrine the professional status of members of this profession. Fifth, with well-grounded and established associations like the NIGP leading the way, professional purchasing certifications are becoming common and the status of professional purchasers more widely recognizable within the field. Sixth, the existence of purchasing heroes and heroines will provide a place in history to cement the image of the professional government purchaser in the minds of both government and the public alike. As the final, and most contentious of the criteria of the model used in this paper to describe a profession, contemporary figures are likely to be identified by government purchasers as having a special place in the purchasing “hall of fame” of their nation.

The emergence of professionalism in government purchasing, and the extent to which this professionalism emerges from the combined pressures of
politics, business and civil society and the complex inter-relationships that exist between these three groups, present key opportunities for the government purchasing professional. The demands of this “new” profession would be well understood by Francis Bacon (Dixon, 1996: 134), who as a member of the legal profession and contentious member of the British Parliament, described the duties of the professional in these terms:

I hold every man (sic) a debtor to his profession ... This is performed in some degree by the honest and liberal practice of a profession Y free from the abuses wherewith the same profession is performed Y to visit and strengthen the roots and foundation of the science itself, thereby not only gracing it in reputation and dignity, but also amplifying it in perfection and substance.

The government purchasing profession can be seen to be an emerging, professional force in government and a visible and influential link between government activities, the private sector and civil society.

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