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**PRE-TENDER PHASE COMMUNICATION DURING PUBLIC PROCUREMENT
PROCESS - EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS**

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Abstract

Public buyers are enhanced to communicate with potential suppliers before the actual tendering in order to co-develop services and service processes. However, the competitive environment and the uncertainty of future exchange may challenge open information exchange, which is a prerequisite for effective communication. However, there is no research of how the quality of communication is perceived by the actors involved in the pre-tender phase. *Thus, the aim of this study is to explore public buyer's and potential suppliers' perceptions of the pre-tender phase communication.* We have conducted an explorative single case study and collected dyadic data with the help of interviews and observation from a buyer and suppliers that we involved in the pre-tender phase interaction. In our preliminary findings, we discovered major differences between the buyer's and the suppliers' perceptions of the quality of the pre-tender phase communication. The buyer was satisfied with the communication, whereas most of the suppliers perceived the information exchanged during the pre-tender phase too superficial to be useful neither for the buyer nor for the suppliers. We contribute to the public procurement literature by exploring buyer-supplier communication in the early phases of the procurement process, and by taking a dyadic view. Managers in public organizations can utilize our findings when planning pre-tender phase interaction.

Keywords: public procurement, communication, pre-tender phase, perceptions, dyadic view.

INTRODUCTION

In public procurement context, communication that happens between a buyer and potential suppliers during the pre-tender phase, i.e. prior to the tender phase is seen as a policy instrument that aims to bring together anticipated needs and a wide range of potential solutions (Georghiou et al., 2014). Interaction and early information exchange help the buyer to learn to know the potential suppliers (Waara, 2008), which creates an environment of trust, enhances common understanding and increases the chances to innovate and find solutions for cost savings (Uyarra et al., 2014). Communication during the early phases of public procurement should guarantee that the contractual requirements are understood (Hawkins and Muir, 2014). To achieve the objectives of the procurement, purchasers should define their requirements clearly (van der Valk and Rozemeijer, 2009), because a supplier needs to have a comprehensive understanding

of the buyer's service requirement to be able to perform the work that the buyer assumes to receive (Hawkins and Muir, 2014). On the other hand, if the buyer defines the service specifications too detailed, there is no room for service development and innovation (Holma et al., 2020; Torvatn and de Boer, 2017).

Information sharing in relational exchanges is based on open, truthful, and frequent information exchange (Dwyer et al., 1987). However, competitive tendering in public procurement context is argued to be bureaucratic and inefficient (Erridge and Nondi, 1994), and legal restrictions are seen as one of the main reasons for the limited cooperation with suppliers (Erridge and Greer, 2002; Karjalainen and Kempainen, 2008). The pre-tender phase of public tendering does not have the same strict regulations that restrict public procurement practices in general, however, public buyer should follow the equality principles, which include compulsory documentation and distribution of all the information gained from a supplier to all the potential suppliers (Arrowsmith, 2014; Warland and Mayer, 2017). Thus, open information exchange may be challenging during the pre-tender phase, and particularly when open tendering is used and tendering intervals are short. Pre-tender phase communication under such conditions is relatively new for practitioners and academic researchers, and requires thus research.

The nature of communication has typically been investigated by scrutinizing the frequency of interaction, the bi-directionality of communication, and the level of communication formality (Hawkins and Muir, 2014; Mohr and Sohi, 1995). We use these aspects of communication to explore the quality of communication in buyer-supplier interaction at the pre-tender phase of the procurement process. Furthermore, because equal treatment of the suppliers is essential in public procurement context, we add fairness to our communication quality elements. Buyers and suppliers' expectations of their mutual interaction may be divergent (Andersen et al., 2009), and they may have different perception of the quality of the communication (Holmlund and Strandvik, 1999). Thus, it is important to include both parties' perceptions when studying collaborative efforts (Peng et al., 2014; Whipple et al., 2015). For example, Medlin (2004) emphasizes the understanding of the sources of disagreement between customers and suppliers in order for the relationship to survive. However, the majority of empirical research on buyer-supplier relationship has focused only on one perspective in the dyad (Corsaro and Snehota, 2011), which has most often been the buyer's perspective (Brito and Miguel, 2017). Hence, *the aim of the study is to explore public buyer's and potential suppliers' perceptions of the pre-tender phase communication.*

In our empirical case study of a municipality's catering services procurement, the data were gathered from the buyer and the potential suppliers before, during and after the pre-tender phase by observations, interviews, workshops and document studies. In our preliminary findings, we discovered major differences between the buyer's and the potential suppliers' perceptions of the quality of the pre-tender phase communication. The buyer was satisfied with the information exchanged, whereas most of the potential suppliers perceived the information exchanged during the pre-tender phase too superficial to be useful neither for the buyer nor for the suppliers. We contribute to the public procurement literature by exploring buyer-supplier communication in the early phases of the procurement process. Managers in public organizations can utilize our findings when planning pre-tender phase interaction.

The following section discusses the theoretical framework of the study. Thereafter, we explain the research methodology and data collection procedures, followed by case description and

preliminary analysis of the buyer's and potential suppliers' perceptions of the quality of the pre-tender phase communication. The final section provides summary and concludes the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Communication can be seen as a relational competency that enhances buyers' and suppliers' performance (Paulraj et al., 2008), and the glue that ties inter-organizational relationships (Heide and John, 1992). Communication fosters inter-organizational learning and has an important effect on both tacit and explicit knowledge transfer (Zhao and Lavin, 2012). Open communication and information exchange enhance trust building, commitment, and the willingness to engage in knowledge sharing and close interactions (Håkansson et al., 1999). The openness to communicate relevant information fairly and regularly impacts a company's operational performance and is critical to the development of information exchange capability (Fawcett et al., 2007). In a structured communication process corresponding buyer and supplier personnel are involved at multiple levels of their respective hierarchies, frequent discussions of key personnel is regularly-scheduled, and communication methods employ two-way interaction (Hawkins and Muir, 2014).

Communication between buyers and suppliers may imply an instrument for partners to resolve disagreements (Palmatier et al., 2013; Wittmann et al., 2009). Communication problems are a major cause of collaboration failures, and miscommunication can cause conflicts and misinterpretation between business partners (Paulraj et al., 2008). Reasons for miscommunication can be, for example, communicating partners' opposing norms and expectations (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Le Ber and Branzei, 2010), conflicting goals (Huxham and Vangen, 2000), and divergent institutional logics (Velter et al., 2020; Vurro et al., 2011) that may lead to the partners withholding information (Mohr and Sohi, 1995) and misunderstandings (Berger et al., 2004).

When looking for the right ways to enhance collaboration and develop communication strategies, dimensions such as the frequency and duration of interaction, the bi-directionality of communication, and the level of communication formality are important (Hawkins and Muir, 2014; Johnston et al., 2006; Mohr and Sohi, 1995). The quantity of communication refers to the *frequency and duration* of interaction between the counterparts (Mohr and Nevin, 1990), i.e. the timeliness, correctness and reliability of the information received, and on the breadth and richness of the information provided by the counterpart (Andersen et al., 2009). The counterparts expect that information exchange is proactive and provides useful information (Heide and John, 1992, p. 32). Higher frequency of contacts in a relationship has been found to increase cooperation (Heide and Miner, 1992). Frequent and intense communication across different functions and different organizational levels of the supplier and buyer enhance the transfer of tacit knowledge (Hansen, 1999). *Bi-directionality* refers to two-way information flows, i.e. to the extent to which each party gives and obtains feedback and input (Anderson et al., 1987). Communication between parties with unbalanced power is unidirectional and coercive, with lesser frequency and greater formality (Bai et al., 2016; Mohr and Nevin, 1990). The fear of knowledge spillover can impede information exchange (Melander and Lakemond, 2015; Mohr and Sengupta, 2002), and ensuring potential suppliers that knowledge will be protected – while simultaneously encouraging them to contribute valuable knowledge to the collective good – is a challenge. *The formality* of communication refers to the extent to which communication flows are structured, planned and routinized (Mohr and Nevin, 1990). The formality with which communication processes are specified may impact on the quality of

information shared (Mohr and Sohi, 1995). *Fairness* refers to the fair treatment of business partners, for example the parties' willingness to engage in two-way communication. Fairness in interactions is necessary for developing trust between business actors (Dwyer et al., 1987). The public procurement context, procurement professionals' obligation is to ensure openness, impartiality, and well-informed decision making (Hunsaker, 2009).

In communication, buyers and suppliers can line up their expectations and perceptions (Palmatier et al., 2013; Wittmann et al., 2009). Expectations are related to relationship norms, which are shared by a group (Dwyer et al., 1987), and which exist prior to the initiation of the relationship (Andersen et al., 2009). Norms specify and direct suitable conduct of the parties in communication (Heide and John, 1992). Actors may have norms for non-collaboration, or avoiding closeness in a relationship (Campbell, 1997).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This study is a part of a larger research project of public-private cooperation in procurement context (2014-2017). In this study, we apply a single case study of a municipality's catering services procurement to explore the buyer's and potential suppliers' perceptions of the quality and satisfaction with the pre-tender phase communication. Systematic combining approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002) was applied, in which the context and boundaries of the phenomenon were built with the help of interaction between theory, method and empirical observations. Data were gathered from the buyer and the potential suppliers before, during and after the pre-tender phase by observing situations in which the buyer and the potential suppliers communicated, and by interviewing the suppliers and the municipality's personnel involved in the pre-tender phase communication (see table 1). Furthermore, we organized numerous workshops with the buyer during the research project, and we had also access to documents developed during the pre-tender phase.

Table 1: Data collection methods

<i>Method</i>	<i>Time</i>
Observations: buyer-supplier communication -2 open information session (2x60 min) -12 face-to-face buyer-supplier dialogues (5x90 min/7x60 min)	Sep 2014/Oct 2015 Sep-Dec 2014/Oct-Nov 2015
Thematic interviews, regular workshops, Skype meetings, e-mails with the buyer 15 semi-structured interviews with 8 suppliers (30-90 min each)	Jun 2014-Nov 2017 Sep-Oct 2015/ Mar-Apr 2016/ Nov 2017
Document studies: Initial and final RFQs, contract draft, service definition, service processes, assessment of quality, pre-prepared material for technical dialogues	Sep 2014-Now 2017

We applied content analysis when we studied observation notes and interview transcripts. Our units of analysis were situations, in which the buyer and potential suppliers communicated, both face-to-face and in writing.

CASE DESCRIPTION

The buyer is a Finnish municipality, in which a decision to outsource all the municipal catering services was conducted when our research project began, thus these services were opened for

competition for the first time. Open procedure was applied, and the procurement was divided into four lots. This study explores the pre-tender phase communication during the first two procurements, which concern hospital catering (procurement 1) and catering to care homes and home deliveries to special groups (procurement 2), such as drug addicts and disabled persons. The municipality's procurement unit decided to organize a series of occasions to communicate with the potential suppliers before the actual tendering. These occasions included traditional communication methods such as open information sessions, face-to-face contacts, facility presentation and written communication (cf. Carr and Kaynak, 2007). The purpose of these occasions was to get the suppliers' insights to develop a feasible request for proposal, to enhance competition and to buy up-dated catering services. The municipality's procurement unit had no prior experience of this type of communication with the potential suppliers.

A heterogeneous group of potential suppliers took part in the pre-tender phase. One of the supplier candidates was the incumbent supplier (S2), a multisectoral company with c.1200 employees. The other suppliers were a large family owned international catering company with ca. 15 000 employees (S1), two multisectoral companies with more than 1000 employees (S5 and S7), two local entrepreneurs with fewer than 30 employees (S6, S6), and one local micro entrepreneur (S3). The large suppliers had taken part in similar type of pre-tender phase interaction, whereas for the local entrepreneurs, this type of communication with the public buyer was new.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

We discuss our findings of the buyer's and suppliers' perceptions of the pre-tender phase communication in relation to the frequency, bi-directionality, formality and fairness of the communication.

Frequency of communication. In both the procurements, the buyer allocated four months for the pre-tender phase interaction consisting of the different communication methods. The buyer perceived that the time allocated for the pre-tender phase, the communication methods, and the exchanged information was appropriate. However, most suppliers perceived the pre-tender phase, and the face-to-face discussions particularly, too short to obtain mutual understanding of the services and the development targets. They criticized that the focus of the communication was in details, and they did not see how this type of information exchange could benefit the procurement process or the service development in general. The incumbent supplier (S2) requested to have a second meeting, because in the first one, the time was used to ask S2 the details of the current service provision. However, the buyer refused because all the suppliers were allocated similar amount of time.

Bi-directionality of communication. The buyer did not expect the potential suppliers to share any confidential information in the open information sessions, thus in these occasions it was the buyer who informed the supplier and other interested actors about the forthcoming tendering and its planned time schedule. Face-to-face discussions with the suppliers were organized to enable deeper information exchange, and the buyer expected to obtain suggestion from the suppliers of how to develop the services. The buyer perceived the communication fruitful, even though only few new ideas from the suppliers were implemented in the new contract, and no remarkable changes were made in the tendered services. The suppliers' expectations varied based on their earlier experiences. The large suppliers' expectations of the pre-tender phase communication derived from their prior experiences with other public buyers.

These suppliers were skeptical about their own possibilities to impact on the buyer's decisions, because they expected the buyer to be careful in sharing information. Most large suppliers felt that they were not listened because their suggestions were not included in the tender documents. The suppliers, too, were not willing to share information: *"of course, we want to influence on the outcome, but, how to reveal your own business secrets or procedures or ideas for development, when we do not know if we are the selected partner (S2).*

Formality. The large suppliers' expectations of the pre-tender phase communication were in line with their perceptions; they expected the atmosphere in discussions with the public buyer to be more hierarchical than with the private sector buyers. A comment was that *"When you apply the open tendering procedures, then everything is predefined, and then you just answer the questions rigorously"* (S5). The S2 had a long and close relationship with the buyer, therefore, S2 expected the previous open communication to continue during the pre-tender phase. However, S2 was disappointed of the formal and non-communicative atmosphere of the face-to-face discussions. The buyer, however, perceived the atmosphere of the face-to-face discussions supportive for open information exchange, which provided the buyer with some new ideas: *"we obtained good information and also information that we could not even ask, we got kind of bites to the request for proposal. So we were pleased with the results"* (Service Manager, procurement unit).

Fairness. The buyer perceived to have treated all the suppliers equally, yet, all the suppliers did not agree. Some of the suppliers suspected that the buyer had already decided to award the contract to S2: *"There are many aspects that from the beginning lean on that direction (awarding the contract to S2). However, we are all human. And it (favoring S2) depends a lot on the people preparing for the tendering, and how much they want to support their own"* (Supplier 5). S2 perceived to be in a difficult position between the buyer and its competitors. On one hand, S2 perceived that its knowledge about the current service provision was used to require the same services from the other potential suppliers. At the same time, S2 wanted the competitors to know how complicated the service deliveries are, so that a supplier with an unrealistic tender would not win. The local entrepreneurs had never participated in public tendering, and they had no specific expectations of the pre-tender phase communication. However, with their limited resources they expected to be able to bid for a part of the required services, because that was the buyer's first message to the suppliers. However, later in the pre-tender phase the buyer withdraw this possibility, and accepted tenders only on all the municipal catering services, which was a disappointment for the local suppliers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The buyer and the suppliers entered the pre-tender phase communication with differing expectations, and they perceived pre-tender phase communication quality differently. The buyer was satisfied with the pre-tender phase communication with potential suppliers because of the number and quality of the submitted tenders. Despite being disappointed in the quality of the pre-tender phase communication, the supplies we satisfied to get a possibility to meet the buyer's employees in person before the tendering. The main problem in the pre-tender phase communication was that the buyer and the suppliers were not aware of each other's expectations and goals set for the communication. The suppliers wish was that public buyers would increasingly include pre-tender phase communication in their procurement processes, and that the information exchange would be more open and less formal. However, most

suppliers agreed that not all knowledge can be communicated explicitly in the pre-tender phase, and communication with the selected supplier/suppliers after the contract award is needed.

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