



Episode Transcript

How Using Procurement BPO Allowed Staples to Put Stakeholder Relationships First, with Mike Jacobs, Staples CPO

Announcer: Welcome to the Art of Procurement Podcast with your host Philip Ideson. Hear thought leaders share the trends, strategies, and tactics that you can use to elevate the role of procurement, and your career.

Philip Ideson: Hi there, and I really appreciate you tuning in to listen to another episode of the Art of Procurement. Today I have one more interview in this series of five that I recorded back in early May at the Coupa Inspire Conference at San Francisco. My guest on the show today is Mike Jacobs. Mike is the Chief Procurement Officer for Staples. Mike has significant experience both on the practitioner side, but also as a consultant, and a leader in procurement BPO, or procurement outsourcing. Mike has led the sourcing and supply chain practices for AT Kearney in Northern Europe. He was based in London, I think it was, for eight years also for PRTM Management Consultants, and then for AlixPartners. Mike has also previously led the sourcing and category management business for Accenture's procurement BPO practice, and has served as an acting CPO through his roles in procurement BPO and consulting for companies such as Best Buy, and Kodak.

In our discussion today Mike and I focus on how procurement departments, procurement leaders, can use third parties in outsourcing while building their procurement delivery model. It's an approach that Mike has taken at Staples, and with his Accenture experience he has worked on both sides of the table. We talk about the use cases, and the different delivery models for procurement outsourcing, and also critical success factors. We also go into a little bit more detail about what procurement professionals can do to really embrace procurement outsourcing, or the use of third party procurement service providers. If their organization is going down that route how do you make sure that it's a positive thing rather than look at it negatively.

Finally, before we go into the show I wanted to just let you know that I published a new report recently called 50 Lessons From 50 Shows. In the report I share 50 different lessons that I learned when I talked to thought leaders over the first 50 episodes of the Art of Procurement. It has been the most popular report that I've put together so far, that I've published so far. If you haven't got yourself a copy already you can do so just by heading on over to Artofprocurement.com/50lessons. That's Artofprocurement.com/50lessons. All right then, well enough from me, let's get straight into the interview.

Hi there, and welcome to another episode of the Art of Procurement. Today I'm really honored to welcome Mike Jacobs. Mike is the Chief Procurement Office of Staples. So Mike, welcome to the show.

Mike Jacobs: Thanks Philip. Glad to be there.

Philip Ideson: Thanks. I gave a rundown of your background in the introduction to the show. So I'd just love to jump into the first question that I ask a lot of guests on the Art of Procurement. That's how did you get into the profession? Is it something that chose you, or were you one of the few that actually sought out procurement?



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Mike Jacobs: I suppose it was fairly serendipitous. I was in management consulting coming out of business school, and I worked for AT Kearney Management Consultants, which was one of the leading operation strategy firms at the time. I was doing a wide variety of projects, and I stumbled into a project on procurement best practices benchmarking. It was the first ever that Kearney had done cross industry. There started to be a lot of demand internally for the results of that study, so I went on several projects to take that. Then I got assigned to a few sourcing projects. That was in the early 90's when AT Kearney really became a leader in the sourcing field, and so I was assigned to the team that commercialized that product, and it just took off from there.

Philip Ideson: Right. Once you get in it it's hard to get back out. I guess you get a bug.

Mike Jacobs: You do. It was really funny too, because as I became more specialized in it, and started running practices around it many of the young consultants would say, well I don't want to do another sourcing project ever again, and if you make me do it I'll quit. Then eventually they ended up quitting during the dotcom days, and went to a procurement startup.

Philip Ideson: Right. They stayed in the profession at least.

Mike Jacobs: They did.

Philip Ideson: Given your experience across a variety of different roles in procurement, what would you say the health of the profession is right now? Are we in a good place, or do we have a lot of challenges ahead of us?

Mike Jacobs: I think we're in an excellent place. I mean if you look back over the two decades that I've been in this profession we have, I think, in the consulting world helped to professionalize the profession quite a lot. You see people in the chief procurement officer's seat now who are tremendously experienced, have a wide variety of experience, and are not just lifer procurement people, but placed there from different functions. Then you also see chief procurement officers who go onto other C level roles as well. I think it's still a great place to be.

Philip Ideson: I was going to ask about that. Do you see more and more procurement leaders then moving into other functions in the company? It's not that this is a silo, and when you reach the top of the silo you don't have any options to move sideways, or you've seen that change.

Mike Jacobs: Yes. Definitely so, yes.

Philip Ideson: With that being said do you think that we're making inroads in terms of bringing more to the table than just cost savings?



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Mike Jacobs: It's certainly always my aim, and my vision. If you look at what we're doing at Staples right now it's a multi-year transformation. The first phase of it was really based on building capability, and driving a lot of savings, and essentially establishing credibility, and our presence in the business. The second phase, and the reason why I'm here at the Coupa Conference, is really to get the transactional side sorted, and to be able to shape the demand with the stakeholders, and further improve penetration. But then the third phase, and they are pieces that we already have in phase, but the third phase is really how do I then use this capability that I've built for the benefit of the broader business. There are already many examples where my people have brought some innovative supply arrangements to bear for the businesses that we're actually using to enhance revenues.

Philip Ideson: Right. Does that change the perception then inside of Staples on the procurement function from being one that is only focused about cost, than to one that's focused on helping them achieve what the needs are there.

Mike Jacobs: Helping the business, exactly. Even on the cost side we've been through at Staples a bit of a reinvention. We had a large billion dollar or so cost reduction take out program, and that money was funneled into new projects, expanding offerings, adding sales people, adding e-commerce capability. So something as boring as savings actually was very strategic.

Philip Ideson: Right. I imagine you had to be successful in doing this, in turning it from being procurement going and knocking down the door of stakeholders, to stakeholders recognizing they need to use you, to want to use you. How were you able to change from it being procurement led to business needing you?

Mike Jacobs: They did need us because of the large cost reduction program. What I always like to look for as a change agent, with a bit of a procurement specialty, is I look for the trigger points. The trigger point for Staples when I joined was we did have this need for a large cost reduction to fuel the growth initiatives. There was a program across function, and across business that I just naturally became part of. Each of the businesses had a large target, and they really needed my team to help. Now the challenge, always, is to match supply and demand. I didn't have the capability to move forward right away. I did have a consultant team with me initially, and that helped drive some of the initial good savings, and credibility. Then along the way I'm adding my own capability, and bringing some outsourced capability as well.

Philip Ideson: Do you feel that there always has to be a burning platform to be able to get the funds needed to invest in the transformation program like that, or can it be something that's more organic, that you see a need from within, and push it on your executives?



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Mike Jacobs: I may not be right in this, but I personally think there has to be a burning platform, or there has to be some trigger point. Whether we have a profitability issue, there's a big merger, there's a divestiture, whatever it is there needs to be. I think I was pretty fortunate looking back on it, because I've actually thought about this. If I had just been hired as the CPO, I don't have a consulting team, I don't have the ability to go hire people, I don't have an outsource partner to help me, I'm not sure I'd be able to do it on my own.

Philip Ideson: It needs an event almost to compel the leaders to act, or for them to understand the value that you can bring, and the investment you need to make.

Mike Jacobs: And to get the funding, right?

Philip Ideson: Yes.

Mike Jacobs: Because a lot of times the consultants will say, well if you only spend X million on me the return on investment is 10 times that, or 20 times on that. But the reality is getting those few million to invest is very difficult.

Philip Ideson: Right. You're competing against a lot of different people who are also probably saying the same thing to the CFO or the CEO.

Mike Jacobs: Not just for dollars, but for time, and attention, and resources as well, yes.

Philip Ideson: What I wanted to do today is really talk a little bit more about procurement outsourcing, or procurement as a service, or whatever words we want to use as we evolve the concept of using third parties to support the delivery model in procurement. Based on the experience, you've worked on both sides of the table now as a practitioner, but also as a service provider. Let's just take a step a back. For those who aren't familiar with procurement outsourcing what are the typical types of activities that as a CPO you can consider outsourcing to a third party?

Mike Jacobs: The way I think about it in broad terms, and you're probably more an expert at this than I. But what I see is you either think about a series of point solutions to help you with things ranging from spend analysis, to market research, to collaborative sourcing, to getting somebody to do auctions for you. I mean go through the whole range of the sourcing process, and I'm actually overwhelmed every week by the number of single point solution providers who are sending me emails. I don't even know how I would sort through all of that.

The other end of the spectrum where I tend to gravitate is a partner that can help me in a combined, or hybrid



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model, between my people and their people, do a better job. If you back up a little bit my situation at Staples was we have three billion in global spend, two billion or so in North America. My team that I inherited was looking at about 400 million of that, and they were looking at it on a very transactional basis, putting contracts together basically. I needed to get some quick capability in there, and get a category based organization. I knew that was going to take a while. But also I think that if you think about the value of how you generate value in sourcing and procurement it's maybe half technical, and it's half stakeholder relationships, stakeholder intimacy.

Therefore I don't believe in a model, as some in the industry have tried to do, which is essentially lift and shift. Take your whole operation, re-badge them, bring new people in, try to do things off shore, and whatnot. Where we didn't have penetration, and marketing, supply chain, all these areas, I knew you need to have an expert, you need to have intimacy. I found an outsource partner after a pretty rigorous selection process. I'm using a firm headquartered out of the UK called Proxima. Proxima was pretty flexible with me in actually adapting a model to my particular needs, and we really created this together. I talk about it as a hybrid model where essentially at the tip of the spear in all of the categories I have my people. They are the category directors with expertise in marketing, supply chain, IT, etc.

Then Proxima supports me on the top end and the bottom end. On the bottom end what they essentially do is relieve the sourcing category directors and managers from a lot of the burden of sourcing. So the market research, the analytics, turning the crank on the auctions, so they can do that in a little bit more of a factory mode. At the top end they have experts in these categories as well, because they multiple clients, and they're in the marketplace all the time. So on more of an ad hoc basis I'll bring them in on the top end for the expertise.

Then the third way is just for variable resource, because you can't ever have exactly the right number that you need, so they provide a variable resource. I've been able to do that in a construct where it works in my operating budget. I know a lot of the outsourcers, at least initially, would talk about hire us, but you can pay for us out of the savings, and it's a big ROI. But I found that really if I'm going to do this long term, and have a sustainable model I really need to look at my operating budget, and be able to carve out a piece of that that makes sense for the outsourcer.

Philip Ideson: I've got a bunch of questions, but I have one just on that last point. If you're giving an incentive to the outsourcer based on a cost savings model solely, does that drive the wrong behaviors from them then in terms of how they support you in wanting to build a capability that is sustainable?

Mike Jacobs: Yes. As a consultant I've done probably 20 contingency sort of deals, as a CPO I've done a few. I



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don't recommend them, quite frankly I don't recommend them, because I think they incentivize entirely the wrong behavior. For me in all of the categories of spend I have a couple of trusted partners. In terms of running my operation I have a couple of trusted partners. If you think you need a gain share, or a contingency relationship in order to incentivize somebody they're the wrong partner, is my belief.

Philip Ideson: No. I strongly agree with that. Because I think it just drives you to consider short term gains over long term relationships, over a long term sustainability program. Ultimately the savings that may be claimed aren't real savings anyway.

Mike Jacobs: That's exactly the case. Then prior to my arrival we had been operating without a CPO for about six or nine months. There was a consultant in who was helping that CPO, and they were operating on a contingent agreement, and it just fell apart. Claims of cost avoidance, or they start pushing on opportunities that the business really wasn't ready to go pursue for one good reason or another.

Philip Ideson: But the way they're incentivized compels them to go and do it.

Mike Jacobs: Yes. They're pushing, and knocking on the door. I'm persistent, but not aggressive in pursuing those opportunities.

Philip Ideson: Right. You mentioned part of your model was that you have an internal category director for your key categories of spend.

Mike Jacobs: Yes.

Philip Ideson: Is that so that it allows you to maintain the relationship?

Mike Jacobs: That's the intimacy right there. That's for the intimacy exactly. Also we talked earlier about do we get involved, or do you see the profession getting involved in things other than savings. Unless I have my person there who's sitting in on the staff meetings of the chief marketing office, or the head of supply chain, or head of an e-com business unit, we're just not there for those more strategic discussions, and we don't understand the direction that we're heading. Really understanding what we're trying to do in marketing now, moving more and more away from print, and into the digital space, and what we can do, it can really start to bring some innovation supplemented by that external resource. I feel very very strongly about that. Not that I won't occasionally supplement it with the outside experts, but I did actually try, because I didn't have in one category my own person. I tried the external person, and it just, they had the expertise, but they didn't have the relationships.



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Philip Ideson: How about for smaller firms? I'm thinking mid-market, maybe under five billion in revenue, they don't have the scale to invest in the expertise on a category level. Would you recommend them still going with in house, more generalist, but still in house people that own the relationship, and let the outsourcer do the rest, or is there a case for the outsourcer coming in and owning that relationship with the stakeholder?

Mike Jacobs: I don't know. I'm reflecting back on some of my AlixPartners work as a consultant when we were doing private equity work. In those cases there's still a head of procurement. It may not be elevated to the level you'd think of as a chief procurement officer. But there's generally some head of procurement, and a few people around them. Then they tend to use a fair amount of the group purchasing organizations, the consortia, and the like for some of their purchases. Then, I suppose, there's probably a role for some outsourcers there. But I still wouldn't advise a 100 percent outsource. I think you still need that cadre of a small number of people, internal. They're not category experts now, they're just relationship experts.

Philip Ideson: Right. At the end of the day for a relationship or a program like that to work it's all about change, and helping to manage change. I've seen relationships, just in my experience, where you have an organization who's committed to that, and understands that they have a role to play. Then I've worked with organizations who don't, and want to wash their hands of procurement, and leave it on the outsourcer, and say, that's your contract. You told me you were going to save all this money. Where is it? If you do wash your hands of it then you will never, in my opinion at least, achieve, maximize the potential of an outsource program.

Mike Jacobs: I think so.

Philip Ideson: When you looked at hiring Proxima, what were you taking into account? What were you looking for in a partner? What should people look for when they're looking for an outsourcing partner?

Mike Jacobs: It started with a discovery process of looking at the model. I had probably five or six different players come on board. So I just wanted to think through what is the typical model, and then how flexible are they. If you think about the range of services, are they providing services all the way from the inception of a sourcing program all the way through. Even some provide transactional engines. I was actually looking in parallel at P2P systems as well, and decided to unbundle, I guess that was the first thing, I decided to unbundle that. The second, back to the notion of the hybrid, there were a few that offered to take the whole thing off my hands, so to speak, and I wasn't interested in that. They didn't seem to have a mindset, or a commercial model that fit that. There were one or two who looked upon procurement not as a deep specialty all in and of itself, but did a lot of other BPO, and so they would tack this on to that.

I came down to Proxima because they were willing to be very flexible in how we built up the model, not just to



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start with, but I knew it wouldn't work right to begin with. I knew that we would have to iterate this model. They were very flexible commercially as well. They could see my long term vision, and knew they would be part of the long term if they only helped me deliver this. I just felt at the end of the day, and my team did, that they would be the most flexible, and most able to help us.

Philip Ideson: How important was cultural fit?

Mike Jacobs: Do I enjoy going out, and having a pint with them, is the simple test. But I mean we do have an occasional few pints, and we do a lot of creative thinking over those, and I think that's very important.

Philip Ideson: What are some of the lessons that you've learned, or some of the critical success factors when you think about implementing an outsourced procurement program? It can be a spot program where it's just using a one point solution, or it can be something broader than that. But what are some of the things that you would encourage others to think about as they embark on a journey like you've been on?

Mike Jacobs: Right. I think the first thing is to be very clear what you're asking of them, because they're only going to do what you've asked them to do. Usually what you're thinking they should be doing is different than exactly what you wrote in the contract. They can't be all things to all people. So I think I have to be very clear. When I have a pipeline of projects, am I looking to carve off a few of those projects, and just give those to the outsourcer, and they run it soup to nuts. Am I looking for them to provide support to my category managers across the whole spectrum, but the category managers still own all of that. We had to sort through a few of those things.

I think also I always have to be mindful that I'm selling. Half of my job is to sell every day to executives, and to sell to my own team. I realized a few months into the outsourcing that I was convinced, but my directors and everybody else weren't. I actually had to force the use of the outsourced partners for, I would say probably a good six or nine months until even my directors were believers, because you will struggle when you first start up. You have to have the vision that it's going to work, you have to have the trusted partner who you can sit down over that pint of beer at night, and figure out what do we do differently, and who are willing to maybe even over invest with you until you get it going. Now I mean we couldn't do without them, and my directors would yell and scream if I didn't have that support. But you do have to have that vision. It's an intangible that you have to have with them that you couldn't really write in a contract.

Philip Ideson: Is that skepticism from, you had mentioned your directors. Is it just a fear of the unknown?

Mike Jacobs: I think it's the unknown, and it's, they've grown up in a different world, a traditional model, and



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hired a new director in one area, and you're used to a certain model. He says oh, well thank you, I don't need your help Mr. Outsourcer. I'm saying well, I don't care if you need his help or not, yes, this is the model that we're going to use. He says I would like to hire my own person to do this work that we're giving to them. I say well you might like to, but no, we're not going to do that because there's a bigger picture here.

Philip Ideson: Do you see this model, this delivery model that uses third parties like outsourcing, is it going to grow? Are we ultimately as a profession going to move more in that direction, or is it just situational based on individual company needs?

Mike Jacobs: I personally think it's going to continue to grow, but I don't think at anywhere near the rate of some of the big firms.

Philip Ideson: Yes. You see 20, 25 percent compound annual growth rates, and you don't really see that in the industry.

Mike Jacobs: I don't see that. I mean it's the same way that sourcing projects were huge in the early days when I was in the business. It wasn't unusual to have a sourcing project in over ten million dollars, and 25 consultants on it. The projects now are smaller, and pointed. I think that the outsourcers need to find easier onramps to their services. Whether that be point solutions along the sourcing process, or probably more likely point solutions in categories.

Philip Ideson: Yes. I often wonder if, I think that it's still an evolution of the services that are being provided. It's like went from being e-sourcers, consultants, catalogs, into more consulting, and then longer term engagements. Now it's going to the next step of smaller engagements, and a lot more agile. You're not necessarily getting the deals today that you were five years ago, where it's across all categories move everything. I think people are being a little bit more thoughtful about how they use outsourcing.

Mike Jacobs: I think that's right. They might take a category that's very gnarly because it's across 1,000 different retail sites or something, I don't have the data. I actually think having been at the Coupa Conference for the last couple of days, and looking at the evolution of spend management, and thinking about the data, and the analytics that start to come out of solutions, like a Coupa. I think the smart outsourcer would start to think about that, and think about how you take the outputs from a system like a Coupa, both in terms of data that start to suggest where there are hidden opportunities, as well as maybe carving off small tailspins, and thinking about how you do spot buys and the like. But I just think the smart outsourcer figures out how to integrate into that world.



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Philip Ideson: I've talked a little bit with a couple of guests that I've interviewed about a two tier procurement in the future where you have part of it, which is the tactical, transactional, administrative, being outsourced ultimately may be automated. Then the rest is where we're really creating a difference for our stakeholders. Do you see that that's the way we're going to evolve?

Mike Jacobs: I do think the transactional piece is totally separate. As we've been talking about outsourcing I've actually been thinking about the more strategic piece of that. So the transactional piece, yes. I mean I think you either automate that away to a large extent, or you do outsource it. I actually do have a different outsource partner that helps a bit on the transactional side that I actually didn't even think about as we were going through the discussion it's not that critical. Though back to the Coupa's of the world, and getting more sophisticated around spend management you think well, maybe there's actually more value in that transactional side than historically there has been. It's more now than just efficiently process those purchase requests, and orders, and invoices.

Philip Ideson: You're just now seeing the data that's coming out of that, then you can do different things with it.

Mike Jacobs: Exactly. That just makes me think maybe it's not a good idea to split those two anymore, and maybe the outsourcer should think about having a solution for both.

Philip Ideson: That integrates both.

Mike Jacobs: Right.

Philip Ideson: My last question on outsourcing, and this goes back to, you had mentioned about having to convince your directors of the value that, given that they were skeptical. If there's a procurement professional out there who works for a company that they have outsourced, or they're thinking about outsourcing, how should they think about it? How would you recommend they think about this, and make it a positive, rather than be negatively impacted by an outsourcer coming on board?

Mike Jacobs: You mean if there's an individual in a procurement group, and that individual is going to be outsourced?

Philip Ideson: No. So you're Directors for example. You've got two choices. You can either understand that the change is coming, and be a part of it, or you can put your head in the sand and think I'm going to lose my job because of this, and then because of the actions you take maybe that is actually what happens, it's self fulfilling



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in away. I'm interested in how you would encourage your team to recognize this as an opportunity, as something to take advantage of, because people in that same situation can then apply that thinking to their own positions, rather than have it impact them in a negative way.

Mike Jacobs: Right. I like to get people to think of procurement as a profession, and they themselves as individuals within that profession. I want them to increase their skill set, and their tool set so that they're more valuable to me, in procurement, they're more valuable perhaps in another role eventually within Staples, or even outside Staples if they find a role there. To have a well rounded skill set in procurement you really need access to things other than what you see within the four walls of procurement. I've had the privilege really, having been in a couple of different consulting, and outsourcing firms as first a young consultant, and then a partner, I've probably been in 50 different companies, if I were to count them, and led numerous procurement transformation programs.

Most of the people who work for me haven't, and they've seen maybe two companies, maybe three companies at most. To the degree that we can bring an outsourced partner on board who has that similar exposure to many other companies, and they could work with those outsourcers, and learn more about the category, or more about the profession, that does nothing more than enhance their skill set. That's job security in my mind, not keeping everything out, and just doing the same thing the same way I've been doing it.

Philip Ideson: As we're coming to time to wrap up I just have one final question that's more related to a procurement career perspective. Obviously you've done a lot of hiring, you see a lot of people in the procurement space, interact with a lot of people who are seeking to grow their careers, and ultimately step up to being a CPO, or a senior leader in the field. I was interested that from your experience what have you seen the people who are most successful do to stand out from their peers, and stand out from the crowd?

Mike Jacobs: I think that beyond delivering savings, of course, that's the fundamental. I think that the ones that can step outside the boundaries of it, and explore either new areas of business where we hadn't worked before. For example, with us just a small example. We have a promotional products business. We're actually pretty big on the thing you've got hanging around your neck there. We're one of the largest companies in that space, but it operates as a bit of an independent company. Somebody on the team, a fairly young person on the team, actually took the initiative to go work with that group, and developed actually not just purchasing recommendations, but looked at their whole purchasing process, and a number of other things, and came back with some good savings, and some good innovation. Now we have the door opened with those folks. That puts them on the map. Then developing the stakeholder relationships. If I think about some of the real stars in the group I'm always getting notes about those people from the stakeholders about how well they listened, how



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well they took their requirements, and consideration, and how well they teamed through the process. I think those would be the key things.

Philip Ideson: Great. Mike, I just want to thank you again for participating today, and for joining me on the show. I'm going to put up show notes from today's episode, so just a summary of the learnings, and a couple of links. I'll link up to your LinkedIn profile as well. Those will be at [Artofprocurement.com/MikeJacobs](https://artofprocurement.com/MikeJacobs). That's [Artofprocurement.com/MikeJacobs](https://artofprocurement.com/MikeJacobs). Mike, thank you very much.

Mike Jacobs: You're very welcome. I enjoyed it.

Philip Ideson: Thanks.

Thank you for listening to another episode of the Art of Procurement. To find an archive of all past episodes you can go to [Artofprocurement.com/episodes](https://artofprocurement.com/episodes). To ensure you never miss another show go to [Artofprocurement.com/subscribe](https://artofprocurement.com/subscribe).