Navigating the Future of Talent

NASPO's 2024 Partnership Forum on Workforce Challenges

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NASPO
National Association of
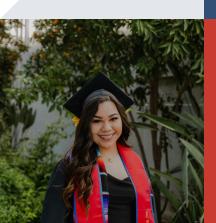State Procurement Officials

Lindle Hatton
CEO, NASPO

"NASPO's Partnership Forum represents a groundbreaking evolution in our commitment to strengthening the public procurement profession. What began in 2017 as the Academic Forum has transformed into a unique collaboration between academic institutions, students, strategic partners, and state procurement offices. Through innovative ideation sessions, expert panel discussions, and focused workgroups, we're addressing critical talent management challenges while creating practical solutions that will benefit our state members and shape the future of public procurement leadership."

Brandi Ann Willard
Director of Partnerships, NASPO

"The launch of NASPO's Partnership Forum opens an exciting new chapter in public procurement collaboration. By uniting the expertise of our academic partners with the real-world insights of our strategic partners and state members, we've created a roadmap for addressing talent management challenges. This expanded format builds upon our successful Academic Forum foundation while charting the course for the future. Looking ahead, our goal is to continue to expand this event, allowing for open discussion for innovative solutions in public procurement, where this cross-sector collaboration drives meaningful change and shapes tomorrow's procurement leaders."

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Introduction

Since its inception at Arizona State University in 2017, NASPO's Academic Forum continues to evolve to meet the growing needs of those in public procurement. Hosted by NASPO's academic partners, the previous forums focused on supply chain management expertise and, more recently, talent recruitment and student internships. To continue serving the procurement community, in 2024 the event evolved into NASPO's Partnership Forum.

The 2024 Partnership Forum took place at North Carolina State University on October 2-4 in Raleigh and brought together state members, academics, strategic partners, and students for the first time.

The Forum featured topical presentations and piloted specialized work groups, each addressing specific talent management challenges faced by state procurement offices. This collaborative approach enabled participants to contribute their unique perspectives while developing practical solutions for NASPO's state members.

Looking ahead, NASPO plans to continue the discussion and collaboration at future Forums to help innovate solutions in public procurement and shape tomorrow's procurement leaders. The report is meant to be a springboard for continued conversation and the development of talent management resources.

The Vision and Structure of the Forum

The primary purpose of the 2024 NASPO Partnership Forum was to bring together public procurement officials, academics, students, and strategic partners to address the challenges of talent management in public procurement and develop actionable, transferable solutions[1]. Talent management, often cited as a key focus area among strategic partners, was identified as the third priority in NASPO's 2024 list of top 10 priorities[2] for state procurement, making it the ideal first topic to tackle at the Forum.

By bringing together these stakeholders with similar interests, challenges around talent management were considered from a variety of perspectives, allowing all participants to gain a broader understanding and contemplate solutions they might not have yet thought about. The event also served as an excellent opportunity for these different stakeholders to explore openings for collaboration and address talent management issues in public procurement through a united front, thus helping to elevate the profession.

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[1] In attendance were 31 state members, 13 academic representatives, 7 students, and representation from 6 strategic partners: California Association of Public Procurement Officials, Florida Association of Public Procurement Officials, National Governors Association, National Association of State Personnel Executives, Texas Public Purchasing Association, and Virginia Association of Government Procurement.
[2] NASPO's Top 10 Priorities 2024," NASPO, accessed January 22, 2025, https://cdn.naspo.org/RI/NASPOsTop10Priorities2024.pdf.

To guide discussion on talent management challenges, participants were divided into seven work groups, each consisting of public procurement officials, academics, strategic partners, and students.

Over two days, these work groups completed five structured, facilitated discussions concerning their topic and attended additional talent management presentations from academics and procurement officials. Each work group engaged in ideation exercises to address their specific topic.[3] The seven working groups were determined based on ranked preference during event registration. They were:

GROUP 1

Communicating the Value of Procurement to the Workforce & Beyond: Conveying the benefits and importance of public procurement to employees, stakeholders, and the general public to further support and develop the profession.

GROUP 2

Leadership Strategies for Policy Reform: Facilitating collaboration and cooperation among political leaders and stakeholders to build consensus around necessary policy changes.

GROUP 3

Workforce Pipelines: Attracting and engaging with talent from a variety of pools for successful and lasting employment within public procurement.

GROUP 4

Staff Training & Development: Providing employees with the tools, resources, and knowledge they need to enhance their skills and performance in the public procurement workplace.

GROUP 5

Succession Planning & Retention: Identifying and developing future leaders within an organization to ensure smooth employee transitions with the goal of reducing turnover and maintaining a skilled workforce.

GROUP 6

Office Culture: Fostering a workplace environment of employee satisfaction and inclusion ultimately leading to a more responsive workforce.

GROUP 7

Technology Integration & Training: Incorporating tools and systems to modernize the procurement process through effective change management and training practices.

[3] A five-step design-thinking process was used: (1) empathizing to gather perspective; (2) defining to find insights; (3) ideating to consider big solutions; (4) prototyping to learn how the new idea might work; and (5) testing to validate that the idea is sound.

Throughout the Forum, the ideation exercise, led by Ken Szymusiak from Michigan State University's Burgers Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, was the event's main pillar. As explained to the participants, ideation exercises seek to utilize tools from various disciplines to address challenges and develop creative solutions based on design thinking.

The participants embarked on a process of divergent and convergent thinking that started with the work groups listing every challenge and need related to their topic. The second session narrowed the discussion down to one problem statement per group, along with potential solutions. Work groups then developed innovative solutions to address their problems before presenting their findings to the larger group.

Work Group Outcomes

By the end of the ideation exercises, every work group had explored their topic in detail and presented their discussion highlights with the other conference participants. The highlights of each work group are provided in the table below, which shares the key challenges, the primary problem discussed, and the group's solution proposal. Additionally, a summary of each work group process and solution is provided in the Appendix. The summaries are not exhaustive of everything that these work groups discussed, but they do provide a snapshot into the main focus of each group and a more detailed solution.

	Key Challenges	Primary Problem Discussed	Solution Proposal
Communicating the Value of Procurement	Those outside of public procurement typically do not understand its strategic importance or attractiveness as a profession.	How might we effectively communicate the value of public procurement to different audiences?	Development of a "Procurement Marketing Toolkit" which would include resources for talking points for procurement professionals.
Leadership Strategies	Public procurement offices struggle to convey their function and value to political leaders.	How to improve the reputation of public procurement as a profession so that public procurement officials are invited to conversations about policy change?	A website feature, "easy button," that would allow an individual to be routed to the appropriate section for them to better inform legislators and other leadership.
Workforce Pipelines	There is not a clear career path for public procurement from a student perspective and there is a lack of progression and career advancement in the profession.	What are the ways that we could modernize and innovate branding about public procurement to better describe the field and increase talent engagement?	A marketing plan with several approaches such as social media videos, project-based experiences with schools, and increased collaboration with local colleges.
Training & Development	Public procurement professionals lack clear guidance on professional development despite the many resources available to them.	How can the profession of public procurement be more efficient in the training and development of public procurement professionals?	Development of a training trail map to help guide public procurement professionals in their professional development journey.
Succession Planning & Retention	There is a need to promote public procurement in general along with addressing shortcomings in developmental resources, personnel rules, and regulations.	How might we develop an ongoing, focused process to retain employees and plan for succession?	Creation of a dashboard that displays employee responses to survey questions about talent retention and development, so that leadership can focus their efforts on direct employee feedback.
Office Culture	Public procurement as a profession is not marketing itself properly to attract a passionate and diverse workforce.	What are ways that public procurement can create a workforce that reflects the communities they serve?	Using existing technology and social media platforms to reach out to a more diverse candidate pool, geographically and demographically, along with highlighting the positive social impact public procurement has on local communities.
Technology Integration & Training	Public procurement is not fully or properly embracing technology in its professional development training process.	How can public procurement offices integrate technology to enhance training while avoiding key challenges like poor design, online learning fatigue, and a lack of collaboration between designers and end users?	Creation of an augmented and virtual reality training platform based upon a user-driven competency framework.

Key Takeaways

Despite each group's focus on different aspects of talent management, two common themes emerged:

1. Procurement officials struggle with communicating the importance of their work to a wider audience

2. Lack of access to specialized training is a professional development obstacle for many procurement officials

Telling the Procurement Story

Numerous participants across several working groups mentioned a need for public procurement officials to take more ownership in telling the story of public procurement and to share that message on a variety of platforms to reach a diverse audience. Essentially, the public, legislatures, and leadership all need to better understand the value of public procurement.

This resulted in work groups proposing solutions that focused on achieving these outcomes through a focused rebranding of public procurement and its social impact. Two central messages were frequently brought up as to what that rebrand should be about:

- Highlighting the value that public procurement plays in a strategic capacity as a government function

  Think: delivery of goods and services and how this impacts one's daily life

- Emphasizing the ability of public procurement officials to positively impact their communities

  Think: efficient use of taxpayer funds and small business development

In addition, many solutions offered focused on leveraging existing resources and marketing through social media platforms. There was a real concentration on reaching potential talent by meeting them where they are and being proactive, rather than simply posting a job opening and hoping for the best.

Many working groups emphasized the importance of engaging with communities through partnerships with educational institutions and enhancing their online presence. These strategies could meet the growing desire among young professionals to make their work more meaningful, as highlighted in the student presentation at the forum. Additionally, they suggested using approaches like the triple-bottom-line to reframe their messaging.

Specialized Training

Another theme that emerged throughout the work groups was the need for specialized, scaffolded training targeting the needs of new, seasoned, and veteran procurement officials. This need arose in the context of developing training for those entering the position, for example, the lack of college course pathways or re-skilling opportunities that lead to the field. Conversely, training needs were also identified for current procurement staff. Two major ideas emerged:

- Developing training pathways that cannot only be tailored, but scaffolded and accessible to all levels of procurement professionals

- Linking those training pathways to career advancements

It surfaced that the availability of training opportunities was not necessarily the problem. One challenging aspect is the disconnect between the training and the needs of the individual. Several work groups referenced that it was difficult for procurement professionals to understand which training they should utilize to advance their careers. Essentially, procurement officers were unclear as to which skills, and in which order, they should be learning to advance their expertise.

This sentiment was also echoed in the idea that many work groups saw the lack of a clearly defined career path as a major barrier. Work groups proposed creating career training pathways and roadmaps as an innovative way for procurement offices to define the skills they need and demonstrate to the workforce how they can acquire those skills and advance their careers. Additionally, the career and skill roadmaps would further help post-secondary training programs, such as universities or apprenticeship programs, align their curriculums. The call for standardization was abundant.

Conclusion

The Forum's work group discussions and educational sessions provided an important window into the challenges that state members face surrounding talent management and workforce development. It is clear that public procurement professionals need more support in these areas-at both the organizational and the individual level-and NASPO can play a vital role in this support.

Although NASPO offers a wide variety of resources, these insights offer a springboard for NASPO to further develop and revise resources to better meet the needs of the profession. Procurement professionals are encouraged to consider how the ideas from the Forum might bolster talent management practices in their offices and to reach out to NASPO for new resource ideas, inquiries, and updates on current initiatives.

NASPO will continue to examine the potential solutions from the 2024 Partnership Forum and looks forward to responding to those requests and recommendations to continue elevating the procurement profession through professional development opportunities. For more comments or suggestions, please reach out to NASPO's Research and Innovation team at research@naspo.org.

Appendix: Summary of Work Group Discussions

3.1. Group 1: Communicating the Value of Procurement

The members of this working group identified three key challenges regarding communicating the value of procurement:

- The first was workforce recognition which captures the stance that public procurement is undervalued, and leadership often fails to see its strategic impact

- The second challenge was communication regarding how agencies may prioritize costs over procurement strategy and avoid understanding procurement's importance

- Thirdly, education gaps, where students and the public don't grasp how essential public procurement is to the functioning of government operations

Regardless of the audience being discussed, it became clear that those outside of public procurement typically do not understand its strategic importance or its attractiveness as a profession.

There were a number of strategies mentioned during the initial discussion concerning potential solutions:

- One suggestion was to use private-sector language and comparisons to highlight the value in terms that leadership understands

- Another recommendation was to adopt a "triple bottom line" approach (profit, people, planet) in public procurement to appeal to values beyond just cost-saving measures

- Several members also discussed the importance of providing training to executive members about public procurement along with taking more ownership of the story of public procurement and framing it in a way that highlights its rewarding aspects more

Ultimately, the group focused on the following "how might we" statement: **How might we effectively communicate the value of public procurement?** The primary strategy the group decided to develop was a "Procurement Marketing Toolkit" which could be customized by states with the assistance of NASPO. In addition, the working group also encouraged the development of a website to house all of the resources mentioned in the "Procurement Marketing Toolkit." These included things like templates, case studies, and talking points for procurement professionals to use in order to more effectively communicate with various audiences.

3.2. Group 2: Leadership Strategies

One of the central struggles identified in this work group was the difficulty that public procurement offices and professionals have in conveying their function and value to political leaders and stakeholders to build consensus around recommended policy changes. Several participants mentioned that it oftentimes feels like the reputation of public procurement offices and professionals is being driven by others and often in a negative or critical light while failing to recognize the vital role that public procurement plays in the provision of essential and emergency services and commodities.

Thus, public procurement officials are often working from behind when they seek to advocate for change due to being perceived as the "No office" or a simple lack of awareness about the work that they do. Ultimately, the group created the following problem statement that they focused on addressing: **Public procurement lacks transparency and recognition which doesn't allow for its story to be told or its professionals to be valued, as problems.**

The central focus of the discussion then became about how to improve the reputation of public procurement as a profession, so that when discussions of policy change occurred public procurement officials would be invited members of the conversation and given the proper respect they deserve. Some of the initial solutions mentioned included:

- Connecting with others through speaking opportunities and conferences

- Branding focused on making a difference

- Becoming known as an office that is easy to do business with through streamlining internal procedures

The group's innovative solution focused on creating a sophisticated shortcut button for a procurement website, nicknamed the "easy button," which would allow an individual to click on it and, depending on the email address of their account, route them to the appropriate section. For example, if it was a legislator, they would be taken to a page that provided contact information for procurement officials, spend analysis in their district, and pending or recently passed legislation concerning procurement that would impact their district. The hope is that such a feature would allow procurement offices to quickly demonstrate their value to important stakeholders in the policy-making process, which would in turn improve the reputation of public procurement offices along with increasing awareness about their vital functions.

3.3. Group 3: Workforce Pipelines

The group recognized that students lack a clear career path in public procurement and do not have an easily recognizable degree program to focus on. Even supply chain management degree programs often overlook public procurement, exposing students only to the private sector. Additionally, several working group members noted the lack of career progression and advancement within the public procurement system.

Some potential approaches to address the challenges in workforce pipelines in public procurement focused on hiring practices. Members of the working group discussed how skills-based hiring, non-traditional education paths, and helping individuals transition from military service back into the civilian workforce might help attract new talent into the profession. In addition, the group also mentioned ways to remove internal barriers to allow growth for employees by working with the relevant human resources department. Lastly, the members also considered how branding opportunities might help recruitment and retention efforts by focusing on the positive impact that public procurement has on local communities.

After discussing these issues, and a number of others, they focused on **trying to find a way to modernize and innovate branding about public procurement to better describe the field and increase talent engagement.** In due course, the group developed a marketing plan and media campaign focused on the hidden heroes of procurement. This marketing plan included several approaches such as social media videos, project-based experiences with schools, increased collaboration with local colleges, and many more. The group also developed two hashtags, **#webuyitall** and **#wegotyou**, to highlight the focus of the rebranding campaign on the essential purchases public procurement officials make concerning disaster relief along with some of the more unique purchases such as the services of cowboys to herd loose cattle.

3.4. Group 4: Training & Development

This working group took the approach of not trying to reinvent the wheel of training and development, and instead dedicated their time to identifying ways that existing training resources might be better used in public procurement. The group emphasized developing the talent pool (current and future) and promoting knowledge transfer to retain valuable skills from experienced public professionals upon their departure or retirement.

A major challenge that new public procurement professionals face regarding training is analysis paralysis concerning all of the available resources available to them. In order to address this issue, the group proposed the development of a training trail map to help guide public procurement professionals in their professional development journey. **The group suggested utilizing resources like NASPO's Procurement U, to build a strong foundation in state procurement by taking courses like: Foundations of Public Procurement, Introduction to Market Research, and Introduction to Terms and Conditions.**

The group also discussed creating additional ways for newer public procurement professionals to learn from those who are more experienced. They suggested some potential approaches to this would be the creation of mentorship programs, state-to-state exchanges, and chat forums. NASPO would play a crucial role in every aspect of this group's proposed solutions by helping to develop free training resources and aiding states in the creation of state-specific training pathways along with the facilitation of networking between public procurement professionals.

3.5. Group 5: Succession Planning & Retention

This group focused on retaining talent and establishing office continuity. Group members discussed the need to promote procurement, and government in general, as a quality profession by emphasizing job security over higher salaries in the private sector. Developmental resources, available time, personnel rules, and regulations were identified as the most common hindrances to succession planning. The primary areas of need mentioned were more positive work cultures and adaptability to accommodate employees' specific career plans, as opposed to "cookie cutter" approaches.

To address these challenges, team members developed a statement: **How might we develop an ongoing, focused process to retain employees and plan for succession?** The four most common themes included seeking more input from employees, accommodating flexible schedules, recognizing outstanding efforts and achievements, and advancing individual employee needs and goals. The group's two most popular solutions were to create better-defined career ladders — through mentorship, training, and other methods — and facilitate more two-way communication between employees and managers, such as "stay" interviews intended to retain employees.

Group members identified an approach that leveraged an employee survey, regarding talent retention and development to create a dashboard of responses. The dashboard would allow professionals to discuss their careers, pose ideas to leadership, or report issues. The five survey categories would be:

- **Professional Development**
    Skills, technical proficiencies, and implementation,
- **Career Development**
    Where are you in your career? Have you completed the required training? What are you looking for in your career?
- **Office Culture**
- **General improvement**
- **Process improvements**

3.6. Group 6: Office Culture

The primary area that this working group focused on was trying to create a workforce in public procurement that reflects the communities they serve. **The main challenge in achieving this goal is marketing a career in public procurement as an impact-focused profession to potential talent, meeting them where they are at.** This working group highlighted how a diversity of thought and backgrounds amongst the public procurement workforce is an invaluable resource for developing new, innovative, and responsive strategies in the public procurement process. Leveraging public procurement's position to be involved in matters of building more inclusive, equitable business ecosystems and driving social change was discussed as a potential way to attract young professionals.

The group focused their implementation strategy on using existing technology and social media platforms that are popular with students to reach out to a more diverse candidate pool, geographically and demographically. The core message of the marketing strategy revolves around highlighting the value of public procurement to society along with emphasizing the chance to have a social impact on your community. In addition, the group also suggested the use of a virtual event specifically aimed at students or professionals interested in careers related to procurement or making a difference in your local community. By incorporating various apps, the virtual event would allow for potential candidates to experience panel discussions and breakout room conversations with public procurement professionals.

3.7. Group 7: Technology Integration & Training

Challenges mentioned included poorly designed technological resources, online learning fatigue, and lack of collaboration between technology designers and users. The group agreed that poor training design in particular is a significant detriment to effective technology integration. In addition, the working group identified several issues concerning poor design including irrelevant or outdated content, user needs not being prioritized, and difficult-to-navigate user interfaces. **Ultimately, the primary issue for this work group revolved around making technology and training more user-friendly and specialized for public procurement professionals.**

In an attempt to embrace technological advancements and to address existing shortcomings in training public procurement professionals, the working group proposed the creation of an augmented and virtual reality training platform. One of the key components of the implementation strategy they mentioned was to use a task force to help determine the competencies of the training from a user-focused perspective. Thus, not only would the training be more engaging than simply clicking through slides, but it would also be designed with end users in mind. The group acknowledged this ambitious project would require buy-in from critical business units, funding, and a process for continuously measuring the effectiveness of the training.