

Kevin Minor: 0:04

And welcome to the NASPO Pulse podcast. It's your go-to source for all things state procurement. I'm your host, Kevin Miner, and I am thrilled to bring you another episode of in-depth discussion and expert insight on the latest trends and topics in public procurement. And boy do we have a great episode for you to kick off this new year. First and foremost, I would like to introduce your new host, Hostess, with the Mostess, my colleague and friend, Talese Gillum Talese, how are you?

Telice Gillom: 0:37

I'm great, Kevin. How are you today?

Kevin Minor: 0:39

I'm doing fantastic Much better now that you're here. We're really excited to have you on board, talese, why don't you tell the Pulse takers just a little bit about yourself?

Telice Gillom: 0:47

Hello Pulse listeners, great to be with you. My name is Talese Gillum and I am a procurement content manager with NASPO. I've been with NASPO about a year public procurement experience at the city, county, state, federal and tribal levels.

Kevin Minor: 1:11

That's awesome, pretty experienced. Yeah, do you have one that you like more than another one, or what's your favorite?

Telice Gillom: 1:17

I would say that each level of public service gives you an experience that makes you a well-rounded professional.

Kevin Minor: 1:24

That's a good answer. That's a good way to look at that. And, talese, who are we talking with today?

Telice Gillom: 1:30

On today's episode, we'll be speaking with Valerie Bollinger, CPO for the state of Idaho and 2024 NASPO president.

Kevin Minor: 1:37

Yeah, and we're going to talk with Valerie about her presidential initiatives for 2024. She's got three of them. We're going to ask her initiatives on fostering innovation within public procurement and we're going to discuss how Valerie sees promoting the career of public procurement throughout her year as president.

Telice Gillom: 1:58

We're also going to ask her about the impact she would like her presidential year to have on the wider world of public procurement.

Kevin Minor: 2:05

Well said Talese. But before we do that, I'll have to ask you to please make sure that you subscribe to the NASPO Pulse on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google or wherever you get your podcasts. Make sure to send us an email with your questions, thoughts, comments, concerns.

Telice Gillom: 2:22

Give us a rating, but, most importantly, head back, relax and join us as we take the pulse of public procurement. Before we get started, valerie, would you like to tell us a little bit about it yourself?

Valerie Bollinger: 2:33

Sure. So I've been in public procurement for about 12 years now and in a previous life I was an attorney, got into procurement largely by accident, started in the university setting and then came to the central procurement office and worked my way from a buyer to state purchasing manager, which is our deputy CPO position, and then I've been the CPO of Idaho since August of 2020. The CPO of Idaho since August of 2020. And I got involved in NASPO almost right away when I came to the central procurement office in 2014. I led a NASPO sourcing team and participated in the Western region and conferences. And then, when I became the purchasing manager, I joined the Value Point Management Board and got increasingly involved and just absolutely loved NASPO. It was sort of the happy place in my job on days when the job wasn't so fun, so it kind of kept me going. Kind of kept me going, and so I have been on the board of directors for a couple of years now and I'm very excited to be serving as NASPO board president in 2024.

Kevin Minor: 3:55

Start at the bottom. Now we're here, right, that's it.

Valerie Bollinger: 3:59

Yeah, it's lower than being an attorney, so I think that's exactly right.

Kevin Minor: 4:03

Hey, I didn't. You said that, not me. We're here today to talk to you about your presidential initiatives for 2024. Your first presidential initiative is to unify the procurement profession. What exactly does that mean, and why is this so important?

Valerie Bollinger: 4:20

I, you know, I've always seen for a long time in Idaho, I've seen that there's not a lot of collaboration or crossover between state procurement. The counties, the cities, the school districts, even the universities now are kind of separate, but we all do largely the same thing and, most importantly, we all have the same fundamental beliefs about what we do and why it's important. And so my very strong feeling is that our ability to elevate the profession is tied to us unifying the profession, to us unifying the profession. We're stronger together and you know, if we want people to understand what we do, to value what we do, to value the expertise that we bring to the table and to see us as strategic partners, that those goals are supported by us all working together to get that recognition. And so I think it's really important that we any differences that we may have are far less important than the similarities, and so I want to pull that strength and passion that we have for this profession and use it to elevate all of us together.

Kevin Minor: 5:37

Okay, so I understand how uniting procurement professionals that is easy right, why that benefits the profession. Why is it important to include academics and universities and smaller public entities like counties or cities?

Valerie Bollinger: 5:51

I think academic. The academic partners are. The universities have sort of a unique role in this and it's that's because it's twofold role in this and that's because it's twofold. One is I don't know a single procurement office, whether it's central procurement or a city, county or university procurement for that matter. That doesn't struggle finding good talent. It's hard to find people who can come in and do the job and hopefully pick it up fairly quickly because we don't have the extra people to take time away to train them right. It's sort of a vicious cycle. So one role that I see in terms of partnering with the universities is to help build that talent pipeline that can come into our offices.

Valerie Bollinger: 6:43

So a lot of university students, even if they're in a you know a degree track that is clearly related to what we do like

supply chain, have no idea about public procurement. They don't even necessarily learn about a lot about procurement itself and when they do, it's almost always focused on the private sector. So getting students excited about the possibility of coming to government whether it's state government, local government, school districts, you know whatever, whichever one of those positions in a procurement role that to me is a huge opportunity to work with the academic partners. The other side of it is, I think, one of the things that we often encounter as procurement professionals is that we're not recognized as being experts and we're not necessarily recognized for the value that we can bring to our government, at whatever level. In terms of right, it tends to be thought of, the value tends to be thought of in terms of dollars and cents. Can we save the money, you know, can we save the state money? Can we make it easier for people to buy their, you know, pens and pencils and whatever else they need? We don't often, we're not often thought of in terms of how can we help to drive the strategic efforts of our, of our leaders right Of the governor's office, of the legislature, of the city council, of the, you know, the superintendent of schools.

Valerie Bollinger: 8:28

And so part of the opportunity, I think, with the academic partners, with our universities, is to the extent that we can get them work with them to focus on public procurement in their research, in their academic publications, in the way that they teach right, they largely frame the conversation around what is procurement and specifically public procurement, and so the more we can work with them to frame that conversation and do the research and show the benefits and the opportunities. I think that goes a long way, because I don't know about anybody else out there listening, but usually legislators don't listen to me when I tell them that I'm an expert and can help them, but they might listen to someone else who tells them that I'm an expert and can help them right. So having that that academic literature out there and the research to show what we can do, I think goes a long way to helping change the narrative around what public procurement is, even sort of fundamentally, and what, what, how we can support our government at whatever level. That is happening.

Telice Gillom: 9:41

So your second initiative is to foster innovation in public procurement. Why do you think innovation is important to the field?

Valerie Bollinger: 9:52

You know, I think any time that we get into the rut of this is how we've always done things we sort of feed the old narrative about what procurement is. We sort of feed the old narrative about what procurement is, and so, the more we can do to find new, innovative solutions, we become proactive instead of reactive. And that, I think, goes a long way again to sort of changing the mindset and changing the narrative about the role that we can play in in our, in our communities, right In our state governments, in our local governments. And I think that's true both for the procurement professionals out in the field as well as for NASPO. Right, naspo also has that opportunity to help foster that innovation in ways that are in some ways a little bit more safe. Right, I think, in the government, in the public sector, innovation is really great when it works, and it's a huge mistake when it doesn't right, and that you're not going to know until you try. And so there's a little bit of a hesitation to try anything too new, because what if it fails? So there's a little bit of a hesitation to try anything too new, because what if it fails? And then you know we don't get a lot of second chances sometimes in government. So, you know, I think the opportunity to try things out with you know, at NASPO is really awesome because there's not that same sometimes whiplash reaction that we have in government. So I think that's really important and I think it pushes us to look outside of just ourselves, right, and this kind of goes back to the idea of unification in some ways as well, that if we're only ever looking to our peers in state government to come up with ideas, we may be missing out on things that are truly outside of that box of state government and that could be just looking to local government, it could be looking to the universities, it could be looking to a totally different, you know, sort of functional area in government or in private sector to get those ideas and think about new ways of doing things. So that really resonates for me.

Valerie Bollinger: 12:11

I know when I was running procurements in my kind of early years with this central procurement office, the thing

that frustrated me the most was when I would get a draft solicitation from an agency and I would look back at the last time we ran that procurement five years ago and literally the only thing that changed was the date and I would say and maybe that's fine, because maybe really nothing's changed, but I never felt like that had been explored. It was just okay, we're buying the same thing, so slap a new date on it and ship it out the door instead of looking at it and saying, well, has it worked? Is there opportunity here to do it better? Could we save more money? Could we save more time?

Valerie Bollinger: 12:59

Um, and so I think that that curiosity about what's possible is something that is that I think about a lot, and and I think sometimes it takes practice for us to do that, and that's part of the reason I wanted to make it. One of my initiatives is to to really keep that idea in the forefront. I think people are probably tired of the word innovation, um, but for me that's it's keeping it in the forefront that we're never getting too comfortable with how we're doing things or how we're performing. We're always pushing to find new and better ways and asking those questions and at least saying is there a better way? And if the answer is no, okay, fine, but let's at least ask the question.

Telice Gillom: 13:45

So there are a lot of new technologies available. What do you think the future will be like for public procurement?

Valerie Bollinger: 13:53

Oh, that's a great question. I wish I knew the answer, because I hate surprises. But you know, I think the technology is going to push us in the direction that I hope we would go anyway, which is that we start to focus our time as procurement professionals on the more challenging projects, the more challenging questions that present themselves, and away from the more transactional work. So I think, you know, what I see with the technology is that it will sort of easily slip into that transactional space buying stuff right. So I don't know about the rest of the NASPO membership or anyone else who might be listening, but when I, you know, my mother still doesn't know what I actually do for a living, and if someone asked her, I'm pretty sure she would say that I buy stuff. I don't buy anything. I buy a lot of shoes, but not with state money, right, I don't. But as part of my job I don't do that kind of transactional work, but some of my staff do, right, there are still a lot of procurement folks in the state government and in local government who do buy stuff right. They order off of statewide contracts, they place orders for small dollar commodities, that sort of thing.

Valerie Bollinger: 15:25

I think that's where some of the technologies that are out there today and that are coming can easily step in and do that kind of work, which frees up time for us to do the work where I think technology is not as suited, which is the more complex strategic efforts right, figuring out how to use, leverage, our buying power to influence supply chains in certain ways. That isn't something that technology is going to. I think. Come in and do. It's something that we, as procurement professionals can potentially do right. If we have the authority to do those sorts of things, can potentially do right if we have the authority to do those sorts of things.

Valerie Bollinger: 16:06

Doing the really complex procurements, thinking about more of the problem-solving, innovative type of things. That's where I would love for us to spend. You know, I'd love for us to spend 100% of our time there, but certainly move toward. The majority of our time is in those strategic areas and I think technology will allow us to do that. I think that's scary to some people, especially if their comfort zone is doing that transactional work, but it's also an opportunity to expand their skills and challenge themselves and, with support from leadership and from NASPO and other organizations that support professional development in procurement, we can elevate the whole sort of skill set and function of procurement and let the technology do the easy stuff.

Telice Gillom: 17:02

I think it goes back to that, what we were talking about earlier elevating the profession beyond the idea that it is a

clerical type of job. It is a job that you sit in an office and do, and not a strategic partner to the legislature, to the governor, et cetera, et cetera.

Kevin Minor: 17:29

It requires certifications and training. So, with all these things that you've talked about, your third initiative kind of encapsulates all of these initiatives that you have. They interlock and they work in tandem with one another as well, as I think probably they work individually and with each other, which I think is really unique and worth pointing out. Your third initiative is to promote careers in public procurement, which has kind of been the running theme that we have discussed throughout this conversation. What do you tell people who ask about working in procurement?

Valerie Bollinger: 18:05

So I'm going to answer that question with a story, because that's the way my brain works.

Kevin Minor: 18:10

We love stories here on the Pulse.

Valerie Bollinger: 18:12

So I was on my way home from the incoming leaders meeting and law institute in November of 2023. And the last leg of my flight was from Salt Lake City to Boise and it was very late. It was not a very full flight and I happened to be sitting next to a college student who was flying home for the holidays and we got chatting a little bit and I don't usually like to talk people. To talk to people on planes, I'm like headphones in, don't talk to me, like I, whatever, um, but for some reason, I don't know, I was in a chatty mood and we struck up a conversation and he was um had, I don't even remember what his major was, but he was thinking about changing it because he wasn't really sure what he wanted to do. But he felt like business was a better sort of career path. And so we were chatting and I was like well, let me tell you about an awesome career opportunity, let me tell you about public procurement. And I did like no joke, I started just pitching jobs public procurement as a career to this college sophomore on an airplane, and you know it was.

Valerie Bollinger: 19:35

I think for me, what I tell people is, first and foremost, public service is, I think, why so many of us get into and stay in this profession. Right, we really truly believe in what we do and how it serves the public. It is meaningful to us in that way and I think that is. I think that's attractive to a lot of especially younger folks. I talk about the variety, especially younger folks. I talk about the variety. So I think a lot of people don't want to go to work and just do the same thing day after day, right, they don't want to just sort of be bored at work. I'm like I haven't had a boring day at work in you know 12 years that I've been in the profession. Sometimes I wish I'd have a boring day at work Yesterday. I would have taken a boring day because it was anything but. But it's interesting. It's different problems that we're trying to solve. It's working with different people buying different things.

Valerie Bollinger: 20:40

That, I think, is one of the things I love the most about this profession, and most people who are in the profession are really passionate about it. So you end up working with other people who are really you know. You build relationships with people. I think that's one of the things that is so awesome about NASPO is.

Valerie Bollinger: 21:00

It brings together all of us procurement nerds about the challenges and the fun part, and we all speak the same language and we get excited about the same ridiculous things and that is awesome. It makes me feel like I'm not on an island and I love that. So those are the kinds of things that I talk to people about. When I talk to them about this profession and I have had the great fortune to guest lecture at our local state university, boise State, a couple of times and apparently my passion for the profession has sort of been apparent because I have recruited people who have in their application said you know, valerie came and talked to our class and sold me on on public procurement

and I, one of my contract administrators, was in one of the classes because he was trying to figure out what am I going to do when I graduate. And now he works for me, and it's awesome that's cool.

Kevin Minor: 22:05

You, you passionate, no, never a parent. You know what you were. You were, you were telling that story and I just, I see you in um when you, you know you're retired, you're in the South of Spain and you're in the villa sipping tea. You pick up the newspaper because you get the, you get the Boise Gazette out in Spain, right and there on the front page, the young man who sat next to you on the plane telling the same story, and now he's the CPO.

Valerie Bollinger: 22:42

That's so. I mean, I love that thought. With a few corrections, I'm painting the picture for you. It would be the United Kingdom, it would be the UK.

Kevin Minor: 22:49

Okay, fair, fair fair.

Valerie Bollinger: 22:54

No, I mean, I think that's what's really exciting is to see the.

Valerie Bollinger: 22:59

You know, I sort of joke about the fact that it's a little bit scary to me now when a member of my team mentions like what year they were born, and then I'm sad for a little while. But, um, you know, it's really exciting to see these, these folks, new folks, come into the profession and get really passionate and get really excited about it and think about where are they going to take us in, you know, the next, however many decades? Um, and it is, it is really exciting. I mean, I think there is that shared passion and you have to be right, this job is hard and there are days when it is soul crushing, but then there are so many days that are so amazing and incredible and there's so many incredible people that are in this profession across the country and across the world, that are in this profession across the country and across the world. That's what keeps me going is those connections and the strength of our combined passion and resolve. That's what keeps me going through the days that are not so fun.

Kevin Minor: 24:05

Yeah, yeah.

Telice Gillom: 24:06

I take solace in knowing that the new folks coming into the profession are going to have hard days, but they're not going to have hard days like the fax is broken hard days. They're not going to have hard days like the copiers down hard days or the dot matrix printer is not working hard days. Hard days are OK when it's not old time machinery or having to write purchase orders by hand. Yeah, absolutely. With everything that we've talked about today, what impact do you want your presidential year to have on the wider world of public procurement?

Valerie Bollinger: 24:57

And that's like sort of a scary and exciting question because I hope genuinely that it has a really big impact. I want every procurement professional out there to be really proud of what they do, really passionate about what they do, and for all of us to work together to elevate all of us right. Elevate all of us. Make public procurement a career of choice. Make public procurement a strategic partner that, you know, leadership in whatever area of government feels like they absolutely is, you know are vital to meeting their goals and objectives.

Valerie Bollinger: 25:39

And I want us to do a better job of telling our story. I think we're sort of trained from an early age early age and experience years to right. Nobody wants to be in the paper. I was quoted in the paper this week and I was horrified

by the fact that I was quoted in the paper. But where I do want us to be quoted is in telling our own story about what we bring to the table and what we can bring and our vision for how we can support and move forward the really important initiatives of our state and local governments and our you know academic institutions and that sort of thing. So that is, I guess my hope is that at the end of 2024, we have an even more unified profession that is actively working together to elevate and to tell our own story and the important work that we do Well, valerie.

Kevin Minor: 26:35

thank you so much for your time today and we look forward to hearing from you more throughout this year.

Valerie Bollinger: 26:42

Thank you, thanks, kevin, thanks Talese, bye.