SmartBuyer

The Fractional Procurement Network

30-MINUTE PROCUREMENT GUIDE

How to Engage a Procurement Consultancy

Stop paying for savings you never see.
Buy procurement consultancy strategically.



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Message from the CEO

Procurement professionals are rigorous when buying on behalf of their organisations. We challenge specifications, push back on pricing, and demand measurable outcomes. Yet when it comes to buying consultancy help for ourselves, that rigour often goes out the window.

This guide exists to change that. Whether you're evaluating a major consultancy or a boutique specialist, the same disciplines apply, clear scope, honest pricing, and outcomes that Finance will actually recognise.

The pitfalls are well-documented: vague deliverables, gain-share arrangements that reward the wrong behaviours, senior partners who vanish after the pitch, and savings claims that evaporate under scrutiny. We've called them out plainly here.

If you'd rather skip the thirty-slide deck and the six-figure retainer, use this guide.

Fee; free to reach out if you'd like a conversation.

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Mark spent 30 years in senior procurement roles across manufacturing, FMCG and professional services before founding SmartBuyer to connect businesses with specialist procurement expertise on demand.

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1. Introduction

Procurement applies real rigour to every category it touches. Spend analysis, market testing, weighted scorecards, benchmarked rates, contracted deliverables. Then it comes to buy help for itself, and most of that discipline quietly goes out of the window.

The firm is chosen from a shortlist of names people already know. The fee is accepted because it is "market rate". The savings baseline — the single number that decides whether the engagement was worth anything gets agreed in a meeting nobody minutes.

That is not a criticism of the buyers. It is what happens when you are the internal expert, the budget is under scrutiny, and the thing you are buying is judgement rather than a product you can weigh. It is also why this category disappoints so often. In a recent poll we ran on LinkedIn, two thirds of the procurement people who answered said they found procurement consultancies underwhelming and overpriced. That is a striking number for a category bought almost entirely by professional buyers.

This guide works out what separates the engagements that deliver from the ones that do not. It covers who is actually in the UK market, what the different tiers genuinely cost, how gain-share really works and the behaviour it drives, what an external team does to your own people, and the specific contractual moves that protect you.

It is written for a procurement or finance leader who wants full value from an adviser. Plenty of these engagements are worth every penny. The difference is almost always in how they were set up.

2. What You Are Actually Buying

Procurement consultancy is help buying, bought in. You are engaging external people to do, or to teach, work your own function would otherwise do: analysing spend, running sourcing events, negotiating contracts, redesigning the operating model, or building capability in the team.

That makes it different from most consulting. The supplier is doing your job, in front of your stakeholders, and the results land on your scorecard. It is worth being precise about which type you are buying, because the tiers, the pricing and the risks differ for each.

Cost-out and Sourcing Execution

Strengths: Hands-on delivery against categories, aimed at a savings number. The most commonly bought and the most immediately measurable.

Considerations: The most commonly sold on gain-share, and the most exposed to argument about the baseline.

Procurement Transformation

Strengths: Redesigning the target operating model, processes, systems and structure. Suited to genuine enterprise-wide change.

Considerations: Longer and more expensive, and judged on capability rather than a savings figure, which makes success harder to evidence.

Category Specialist Support

Strengths: Deep expertise in one area you do not have in-house, brought in for a specific piece of work. Usually the best value per pound.

Considerations: Narrow by design. It solves one problem well and will not address a systemic capability gap.

Managed Service and Outsourcing

Strengths: The firm runs a slice of procurement for you, often tail spend or a transactional layer, usually with technology attached.

Considerations: This is an operating decision, not a project. Exit is expensive and slow, and the capability does not come back easily.

Technology Implementation

Strengths: Deploying or fixing a procurement platform, often with process redesign alongside it.

Considerations: Sold as procurement work, delivered largely as systems integration. Check which one you are actually buying.

⚠ **WATCH OUT** — These get sold as one thing and delivered as another. A cost-out engagement with a platform attached is a technology sale. A transformation that ends with a recommendation to outsource was, in effect, a business development exercise. Ask early which of the five you are commissioning, and write it into the scope.

3. Why This Category Is Hard to Buy Well

Five things make procurement consultancy harder to buy than the categories you buy every day.

3.1 You Are the Expert, Which Makes It Harder, Not Easier

In every other category you can lean on the internal specialist. Here you are the specialist, buying a service that implies you need help doing your own job. That is a politically exposed position, and it pushes buyers toward brand-name safety and away from hard commercial questions.

> **EXAMPLE**
> A CPO shortlists three firms she already knows, on the basis that a full process would take eight weeks and raise questions upstairs. All three quote in a similar range. A fourth quote from a boutique arrives later at 40 percent less for the same scope.

3.2 The Savings Baseline Is Negotiable, and You Are Negotiating Against Specialists

Everything in a cost-out engagement rests on the baseline: the agreed picture of what you spend today. Move it up and savings appear without anything changing. The firm proposing the work has run this conversation hundreds of times. You have probably run it twice.

> **EXAMPLE**
> A baseline is set using last year's list prices rather than the discounted prices actually paid. On day one, before a single negotiation has taken place, the engagement is already showing four percent of savings that exist only in the arithmetic.

3.3 Identified Savings and Realised Savings Are Different Numbers

This is the single biggest cause of disappointment in the category. Procurement typically measures against the last price paid. Finance measures against budget. Add timing gaps and contracts that are signed but never adopted by the business, and the gap between the closing slide and the accounts becomes very wide indeed.

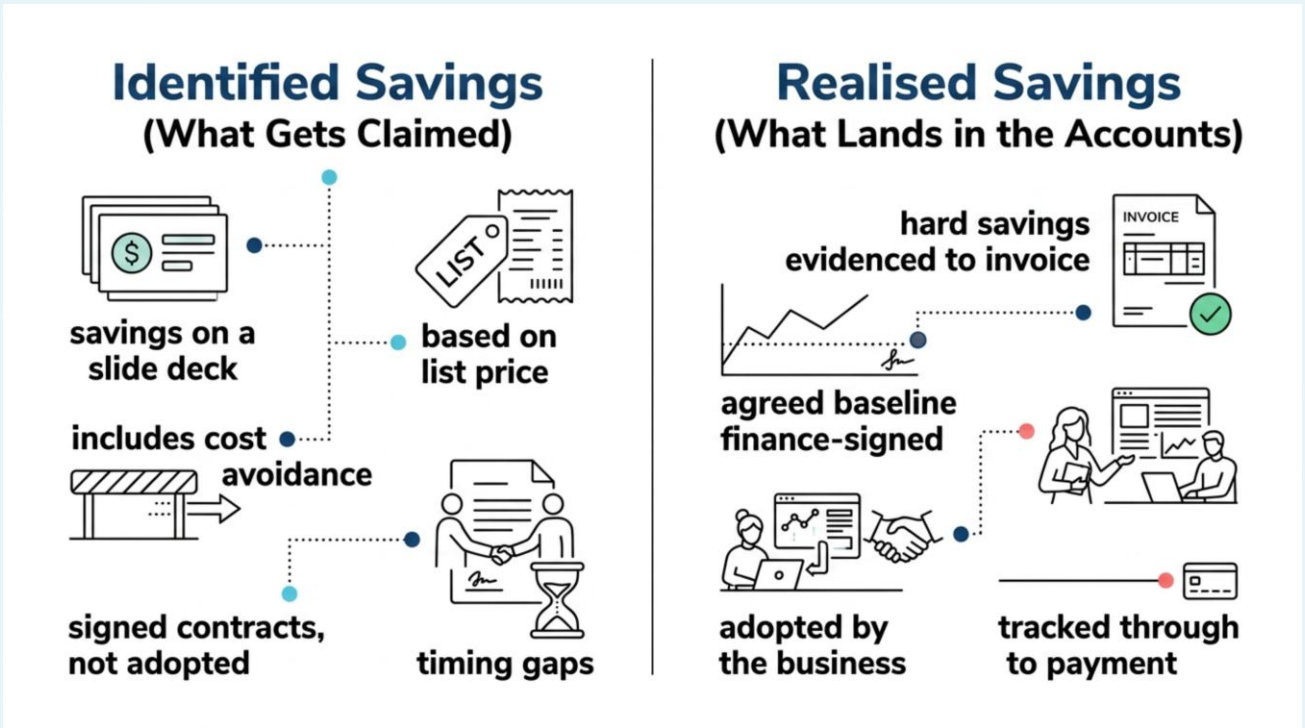
> **TIP**
> Agree the savings definitions with your finance director in writing before the firm is appointed, not after they report. Specify what counts as hard savings, what counts as cost avoidance, and which of those the fee is payable on.

3.4 You May Be Buying a Playbook Rather Than a Category Specialist

Larger firms run standard methodologies applied by capable generalists. That is genuinely effective in categories where process is the main lever. It is much weaker where the value sits in category knowledge. Ask who on the proposed team has bought your specific categories, and how recently.

3.5 The Pyramid Applies Here Too

Senior people sell the work, more junior people deliver most of it, and you are billed against a blend. That is not bad faith, it is the model. But it means the expertise that persuaded you is not necessarily the expertise doing your sourcing. Name the people you are buying, and make substitutions subject to your written approval.



The gap between these two numbers is where most consulting disappointment lives.

4. Do You Actually Need a Consultancy?

Consultancy is one of five ways to get capacity or expertise. Choosing well starts with being honest about which problem you have.

When a Consultancy Is the Right Answer

- The work needs scale you cannot assemble internally — ten or more people across multiple workstreams simultaneously, to a fixed deadline
- The board or an investor requires independent, brand-name assurance and an internal recommendation will not carry the decision
- You need proprietary benchmarking data or market intelligence that only a firm operating at that scale holds
- The mandate is genuinely enterprise-wide transformation, spanning operating model, systems and organisation design
- Political cover is needed for a decision that will be contested internally

When It Is Usually the Wrong Answer

- The need is one or two experienced pairs of hands on a defined piece of work — that is an interim or fractional requirement
- The gap is a single category you do not know well. Buy the category specialist, not a team
- You are covering a vacancy. An engagement priced for transformation is an expensive way to fill a seat
- The real problem is data visibility rather than strategy. Spend analytics will get you further, faster and cheaper
- You want capability left behind in the team. Very few engagement models deliver this, and none deliver it by accident

Route Selection

Your Situation	Sensible Route
Enterprise transformation, multiple workstreams, fixed deadline	Large consultancy or Big Four
Board or investor requires independent assurance	Strategy-tier or specialist procurement consultancy
One category, deep expertise needed	Category specialist, fractional or boutique
Defined project that needs doing rather than advising	Fractional specialist or interim
Covering a vacancy while recruiting	Interim or fractional
You cannot see the spend	Spend analytics tooling first, then decide
Running a transactional or tail layer permanently	Managed service, treated as an operating decision

TIP — Ask any firm you shortlist which of these routes they would recommend if they were not allowed to bid. The good ones will answer honestly, and that answer tells you a great deal.

5. The Supply Market

The UK procurement consultancy market is unusually well mapped. Consultancy.uk publishes an annual ranking of procurement consulting firms, assessed from more than 1,400 firms using client and peer surveys alongside a capability assessment. The tiers below are a reasonable starting point for a longlist.

Tier	Firms Ranked in UK Procurement Consulting
Diamond	Efficio, 4C Associates, Proxima, Kearney, Inverto (a BCG company), Bain & Company
Platinum	McKinsey & Company, Deloitte, Accenture, PwC, H&Z, Capgemini Invent, GEP, EY, Boston Consulting Group, Argon & Co, Procure4, IBM Consulting, BearingPoint, Baringa
Gold	EBIT, Elixirr, Clarasys, KPMG, Curzon Consulting, Alvarez & Marsal, PA Consulting, Oliver Wyman, BIP, Barkers, The Hackett Group, Atos, Prokura
Silver & Bronze	SmartBuyer, Capita, CGI, TCS, Akeso, Peru Consulting, Charles Kendall, Deecon, Evolve Commercial, Protiviti, Siemens Advanta, Infosys, Procurato, Cognizant, 7 Step Solutions, Wipro, eXceeding, Added Value Enterprises, The Procurement Hive, Echelon

Pure-Play Procurement Consultancies

Strengths: Procurement is the whole business, not a practice area. Deep sourcing methodology, real category libraries, and senior people who have done the work.

Considerations: Cost-out is the commercial engine, so the proposal will usually be shaped around a savings number. Check how much of the team is permanent staff.

Strategy and Big Four Procurement Practices

Strengths: Scale, board-level credibility, proprietary benchmarking, and the ability to run a genuinely global programme.

Considerations: The highest rates in the market and the heaviest leverage. Cross-selling into technology and managed services is part of the model. Confirm the named team and guard the scope.

Specialist Boutiques and Independents

Strengths: Senior people doing the actual work, deep expertise in specific categories or sectors, close partner access, and usually the best value per pound.

Considerations: Limited bench. Confirm they can resource and sustain the engagement if it grows, and check depth in your specific categories.

Managed Service and BPO Providers

Strengths: Take a permanent process off your plate, usually with technology and offshore delivery attached. Effective for high-volume transactional work and tail spend.

Considerations: An operating model decision, not a project. Exit is expensive and slow. Anything you outsource, you stop being good at.

WATCH OUT: Public Sector Buyers — Any organisation willing to use a public framework should look at Crown Commercial Service's Management Consultancy Framework Four (RM6309). Lot 6 covers procurement and supply chain, holds 37 suppliers, runs to July 2027, and supports time and materials, fixed price and risk and reward pricing. It is a compliant route with pre-competed terms, and it is free to look at.

6. Commercial Models & Pricing

Getting the commercial structure right is where the real money is made or lost. Understanding what the market actually charges — and why — is the foundation of any intelligent buying decision.

What the Market Actually Charges

Day rates vary more by firm type than by the work itself. The figures below are UK benchmarks published in 2026 for equivalent talent, and they are a fair basis for judging a quote before it arrives.

Provider Type	Typical UK Day Rate
Independent consultant or freelancer	£800 to £1,500
SmartBuyer fractional specialist (senior)	£950
SmartBuyer fractional specialist (partner level)	£1,000
Specialist boutique (5 to 50 consultants)	£1,200 to £2,500
Operations and procurement specialist, senior	£1,200 to £2,000
Operations and procurement specialist, principal	£2,000 to £3,500
Big Four (Deloitte, PwC, EY, KPMG)	£2,000 to £4,000
Strategy elite (McKinsey, BCG, Bain)	£3,500 to £8,000 and above

The Fee Models

Time and Materials

You pay for days at agreed rates. Flexible, but you carry all the delivery risk and the incentive runs toward more days rather than fewer. Always agree a hard fee cap and a not-to-exceed figure. An uncapped day-rate engagement is a blank cheque.

Fixed Fee

A set price for a defined deliverable. Transfers delivery risk to the firm and gives you certainty, but only works when the scope is genuinely clear.

Milestone Based

Payment released against defined, accepted deliverables. A common structure is 30% to start, 40% at a mid-point milestone and 30% on acceptance. This is usually the best default for a procurement engagement.

Gain-Share

A share of verified savings. Common enough in this category to deserve its own section, which follows.

Retainer

A recurring fee for ongoing access. Efficient for genuinely ongoing needs, and quietly expensive when the underlying need has ended.

The Fee Models: Which Are You Signing?

Five ways to pay for the same work. The model you choose decides who carries the risk when the engagement does not go to plan — and what behaviour it rewards along the way.

Model	How it works	Who carries the risk	Use it when
Time & Materials	You pay for days at agreed rates. Flexible, but the incentive runs toward more days, not fewer.	Yours	Scope is genuinely unknown — and only with a hard fee cap and not-to-exceed figure.
Fixed Fee	One price for a defined deliverable. Certainty on cost, delivery risk sits with the firm.	Supplier's	The scope is clear and unlikely to move.
Milestone-Based	Payment released against accepted deliverables — commonly 30% start, 40% mid-point, 30% acceptance.	Shared	Most procurement engagements. This is the sensible default.
Gain-Share	A share of verified savings. Aligns incentives, but the baseline becomes the whole negotiation.	Negotiated	Baseline, validation and sign-off rules are agreed in writing first (see section 7).
Retainer	A recurring fee for ongoing access to capability.	Yours, if the need fades	The need is genuinely continuous — with a six-month review built in.

Where the Risk Actually Sits

The same piece of work can sit anywhere on this line. Move right and you buy certainty; move left and you keep control — and the exposure.



Time & Materials | **Retainer** | **Gain-Share** | **Milestone-Based** | **Fixed Fee**

Risk mostly yours

Risk mostly the supplier's

Hidden Costs to Watch

Scope Creep

The biggest driver of over-billing, arriving in small reasonable increments.

Junior Leverage

Paying a senior blended rate for work done by analysts.

Expenses

Travel and third-party costs, occasionally marked up.

Rate Creep

Annual increases applied quietly at extension.

Technology Tie-In

Platform licences introduced during an engagement that outlive it.

Internal Cost

Your own team's time supporting the engagement — never appears in the fee but is entirely real.

TIP: Model three scenarios before you sign: scope delivered as planned, scope up 20 percent, and early termination. If the commercial model only looks sensible in the first, it is the wrong model.

7. Gain-Share: The Benefits, and the Behaviours It Drives

Gain-share, sometimes called contingency or risk and reward, pays the firm a percentage of the savings they deliver. Typical shares run from around 10 percent to 25 percent of documented first-year savings, often with a floor to protect the firm's economics and a cap to protect you from an open-ended payout.

The Real Benefits

- Little or no upfront fee, so the business case is easy to make
- Spend often falls below the threshold that would trigger a lengthy internal approval
- Risk appears to sit with the supplier
- Gives you access to capability you could not otherwise fund
- A partner motivated to find money can surface things nobody knew were there

The Behaviours It Drives

- **The baseline becomes the whole negotiation.** You are agreeing a number with a counterparty whose income depends on where it lands.
- **Payment can be untethered from reality.** Consultants are frequently paid on identified savings no matter if these savings are realised or not.
- **Easy categories get cherry-picked.** The incentive is to go where savings are quickest, not where value is greatest.
- **Price becomes the only lever.** The model pushes toward rate reduction and away from total value.
- **Your stakeholders learn to route around you.** When business units work out that involving procurement triggers a fee, they stop involving procurement.

⚠ **WATCH OUT** — If you use gain-share, get five things in writing before work starts: the baseline and how it was derived; what counts as a saving, agreed with finance; that fees are payable on realised savings evidenced through to invoice, not identified savings on a slide; the duration of the share and a hard cap; and how attribution is decided when a saving is contested.

ⓘ **TIP:** A Middle Path — Use a modest fixed fee to cover the analysis and baseline work, then a capped share of independently verified savings above an agreed threshold. You keep the alignment and lose most of the perverse incentives.

8. The Human Cost: Your Team, Your Stakeholders and Your Credibility

The fee is the visible cost. The one that decides whether you would do it again is usually organisational, and almost nobody prices it in.

Your Team Will Read It as a Verdict

Bringing in external specialists to do work your people believe they could have done lands as a judgement on them, whatever you say in the kick-off. Capable category managers watch someone else run the interesting sourcing event while they handle business as usual. This is a live retention risk, not a soft concern.

Marking Their Homework

Many engagements begin with a diagnostic that documents what is not working. It is necessary, and it is also a report on your team's performance, written by someone with a commercial interest in finding gaps. If that lands without framing, you have paid to demoralise your own function.

Stakeholder Relationships Get Rented, Not Built

Procurement's real influence comes from years of relationships with budget holders. Hand a consultant that access and the relationship forms with them instead. When they leave, it leaves.

Capability Rarely Transfers by Default

Knowledge transfer is the first thing to slip when a project runs tight, because it is nobody's deliverable. Without a contracted obligation, capability leaves in the consultants' laptops and the same gap reappears in eighteen months.

Dependency Is a Commercial Outcome, Not an Accident

Any model paid by the engagement has a structural interest in a follow-on engagement. Capability building genuinely reduces the need for the next piece of work, which is precisely why it needs to be contracted rather than assumed.

How to Protect Against All of This

1 Tell your team first, and tell them the truth about why

Frame it as capacity or specialist depth, and be specific about which parts remain theirs.

2 Pair every consultant with a named member of your team

Make them work alongside, not underneath, and make that pairing explicit in the scope.

3 Keep your own people in front of the stakeholders they own

The consultant supports the meeting; your category manager runs it.

4 Make knowledge transfer a milestone with an acceptance criterion

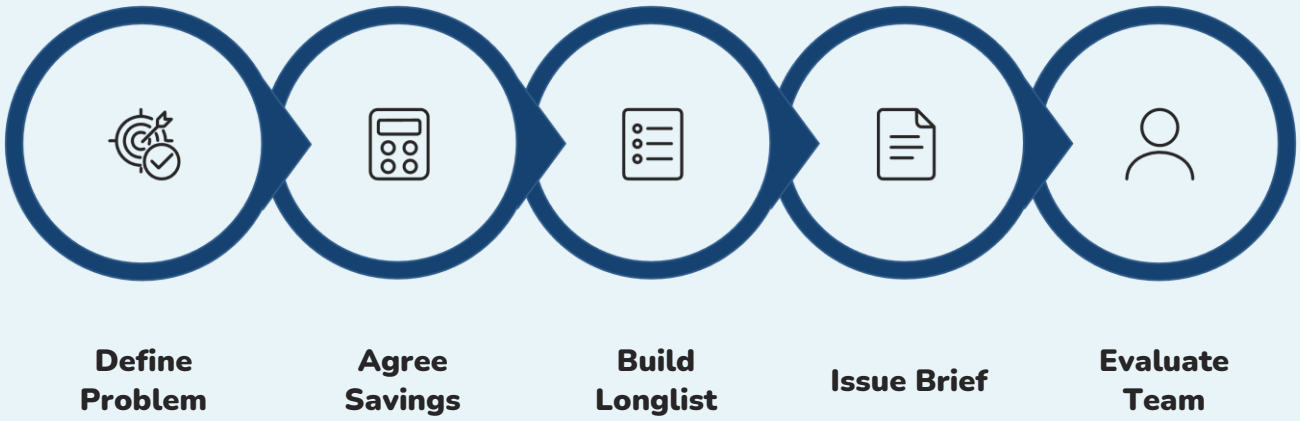
Sessions delivered, playbooks handed over, tools your team can actually operate — tied to payment.

5 Ask what your function will be able to do at the end that it cannot do today

Write the answer into the contract.

9. Step-by-Step Buying Process

This is your actionable roadmap. The difference between engagements that deliver and those that disappoint is almost always in how they were set up — not in the delivery itself.



Each step is designed to build on the last. Skipping steps or rushing the process is the most common cause of poor consulting engagements.

Step 9.1 Define the Problem and the Outcome

Start with the problem and the decision it informs, not a pre-written task list. Vague scope is the root of almost every consulting dispute.

State the problem, the outcome, and how you will know it has been achieved

Decide whether you need to build, buy or borrow the capability

Set the budget envelope and the value case before going to market

Step 9.2 Agree the Savings Definitions with Finance

Do this before any firm is briefed. It is the highest-value hour you will spend on the whole engagement.

1 Co-author the Savings Definitions

Define hard savings, cost avoidance and demand reduction with your finance director. Both sides must own the definitions before the firm is appointed.

2 Agree the Baseline Methodology

Determine who derives the baseline and who signs it off. The baseline is a commercial position, not a fact — derive it yourself, or have finance derive it.

3 Confirm Which Savings the Fee Is Payable On

Specify which categories of saving — hard savings only, or cost avoidance too — any fee or gain-share is payable against. Write it down before briefing a single firm.

Step 9.3 Build the Longlist Properly

Shortlisting from firms you already know is how this category gets overpriced.

Use Published Rankings and Frameworks

Use Consultancy.uk tier rankings and the CCS Management Consultancy Framework Four (RM6309, Lot 6) to build a longlist beyond your own contacts.

Include Boutiques and Fractional Options

Include at least one boutique or independent, and at least one fractional or interim option, so you have a genuine price and model comparison.

Verify Category Experience by Name

Check who has bought your specific categories, recently, by name — not by firm reputation or general claims about sector depth.

Step 9.4 Issue a Brief That Forces Comparable Answers

All firms must respond to the same problem on the same basis, or you cannot compare them.

Set Out the Outcome and Deliverables

Include acceptance criteria and an explicit exclusions list. Vague briefs produce vague proposals that cannot be compared.

Require the Named Delivery Team

Ask for seniority and time commitment, not just partner biographies. The person who pitches is not always the person who delivers.

State Commercial Requirements as Non-Negotiable

IP assignment, knowledge transfer, change control and the fee model you want should all appear in the brief as firm requirements, not as discussion points.

Step 9.5 Evaluate the Delivery Team, Not the Pitch Team

Interview the people who will actually do the work. Score against weighted criteria applied consistently — for example: delivery approach 35%, team quality 25%, price 25%, relevant experience 15%. Take references on engagements of comparable scope and sector, and call them.

Step 9.6 Negotiate the Terms That Matter

Fee is the least important thing on this list.

Name Key People in the Contract

Include written approval rights over any substitution. The expertise that persuaded you should be the expertise doing your work.

Tie Payment to Accepted Milestones

Include a hard fee cap and an agreed change-order process. A milestone-based structure is usually the best default for a procurement engagement.

Assign IP in Writing

Make knowledge transfer a paid milestone with acceptance criteria. If it is not a deliverable, it will not happen.

Step 9.7 Govern the Engagement

Assign a named contract owner internally. Review deliverables against acceptance criteria and do not release payment for outputs that have not been formally accepted. Track realised savings through to invoice with finance.

10. Ten Traps to avoid

1

Accepting the Firm's Baseline

It is a commercial position, not a fact. Derive it yourself, or have finance derive it.

2

Paying on Identified Savings

Pay on realised savings evidenced through to invoice. This one clause changes the whole engagement.

3

Buying the Pitch Team

The partner who won you over is not necessarily on your project. Name people in the contract.

4

Skipping the Boutique Quote

Without one you have no idea whether the large-firm quote is competitive.

5

Letting the Diagnostic Land Unframed

A report on what is broken is also a report on your team. Manage that before it is presented.

6

Assuming Knowledge Transfer Will Happen

If it is not a milestone with an acceptance criterion, it will not happen.

7

Handing Over Your Stakeholder Relationships

Influence you rent is influence you lose when the engagement ends.

8

Uncapped Time and Materials

No cap, no not-to-exceed, no protection.

9

Mistaking a Technology Sale for Procurement Help

Ask what the firm sells besides consulting days, and what happens to licences after exit.

10

Not Asking What Happens After

If the engagement's success creates the need for the next engagement, it did not build capability.

11. Quick-Reference Checklist

Run through this before commissioning any procurement consultancy engagement. Every tick protects value or control.

- ☐ Problem and outcome defined in plain English, not an activity list
- ☐ Savings definitions and baseline methodology agreed with finance in writing, before briefing
- ☐ The five routes considered honestly, including fractional, interim and doing nothing
- ☐ Longlist built beyond existing contacts, using published rankings or a framework
- ☐ At least one boutique or independent quote obtained for price comparison
- ☐ Day rates benchmarked by provider type before any quote arrives
- ☐ Named delivery team confirmed, with approval rights over substitutions
- ☐ Category experience verified by name and by recency, not by firm reputation
- ☐ Fee model chosen deliberately, with a hard cap and a change-order process
- ☐ If gain-share: baseline, savings definition, realised-not-identified basis, duration, cap and attribution all documented
- ☐ IP assigned in writing and knowledge transfer contracted as a paid milestone with acceptance criteria
- ☐ Internal team briefed honestly, paired with consultants, and kept in front of their stakeholders
- ☐ Contract owner assigned and realised savings tracked with finance through to invoice

12. Further Resources & Next Steps

Consultancy.uk

Annual UK rankings of procurement consulting firms, market data and firm profiles.

www.consultancy.uk

Crown Commercial Service

Management Consultancy Framework Four (RM6309). Lot 6 covers procurement and supply chain — 37 suppliers, pre-competed terms, free to access.

www.crowncommercial.gov.uk

MCA

The annual industry report with Oxford Economics: market size, growth and standards for buyers and sellers of consulting.

www.mca.org.uk

CIPS

Professional guidance on services procurement and contracting.

www.cips.org

Need a Second Opinion Before You Sign?

Most of the value in this category is won or lost before the contract is signed — in the baseline, the scope and the named team. If you would like a straight view on a proposal in front of you, or on whether a consultancy is the right route at all, we are happy to look at it.

SmartBuyer is a network of more than 500 procurement specialists across 300 plus categories, available fractionally at £950 per day for a senior specialist and £1,000 per day at partner level. Sometimes the honest answer is that a consultancy is exactly what you need, and we will tell you that too.

Book a call

www.smartbuyer.co
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You don't need an expensive consultancy, fractional Procurement is the solution.

Markets constantly change, Procurement teams are stretched, securing the best commercial deals on everything you buy is an ongoing challenge.

SmartBuyer solves this, providing your Procurement Team with access to 500+ Specialist Buyers in a rapid, fractional, pay as you go service. Minus the expensive consultancy fees.

Our network of specialists work flexibly, delivering both short and long term projects:

Sourcing & Tenders

- Reviewing or drafting RFPs and tender documentation
- Running competitive sourcing events end-to-end
- Negotiating renewals and framework agreements

Analysis

- Providing independent spend analysis
- Drafting category strategies
- Delivering category-specific market intelligence

Strategy

- Supporting cost reduction and value engineering projects
- Advising on supplier selection and risk management
- Building procurement strategies and operating models

SmartBuyer, The Fractional Procurement Network. 500+ specialist buyers across 250+ procurement sub-categories. Rapid. Flexible. No commitment.



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