SmartBuyer

The Fractional Procurement Network

THE NEW PROCUREMENT LEADER'S FIRST 90 DAYS

Insights & thoughts from ex-CPO's on how to hit the ground running



DIAGNOSE / BUILD THE CASE / COMMIT AND MOVE

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Message from the CEO

Firstly, congratulations on the new role.

This 90-day guide was assembled from the collective experience of the former CPOs and procurement leaders in the SmartBuyer network, cross-checked against the published research on leadership transitions. It is deliberately opinionated. Where our people disagreed with the textbooks, we sided with our people.

We built SmartBuyer to pool the expertise of our procurement peers, for their benefit and for yours.

You shouldn't have to jump through hoops trying to justify expensive consultancies. You need swift access to the best category expertise, cost effectively and without commitment. We built SmartBuyer to deliver this.

SmartBuyer is the UK's leading Fractiona Procurement Network, built to give you access to experts, without any of the usual hurdles.

Mark

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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. Intro

You have done this before, or something close to it, which is exactly why this guide is not going to explain what a category strategy is. What changes in a new seat is not the craft; it is the context. New politics, new data (or the absence of it), a mandate that may not match the job spec, and a clock that starts the moment your appointment is announced. The average tenure at this level now runs four to six years and is shrinking, which concentrates the mind: the patterns you set in the first 90 days are usually the ones you live with.

The shape of it is simple. Days 1 to 30 are for diagnosis and framing, 31 to 60 for building the evidenced case, 61 to 90 for committing publicly to a plan and landing the first proof points. Then the year-one arc, the tools and external help worth knowing about, and the traps that catch even experienced operators. Use what fits, discard what does not; you are the one in the seat.

2. Before Day One

The transition starts before your badge works. What you learn while you still have distance, and no political weight on your words, is disproportionately valuable, because after day one every question you ask becomes a signal.

02.1 Interrogate the Mandate, Not the Job Spec

The single most important thing to establish is why they really hired you, because the job spec rarely says. Cost out ahead of a tough year? Fixing a function the business has stopped trusting? Professionalising ahead of a sale or acquisition? ESG and risk pressure from the board? Each implies a different first 90 days, and misreading it is the most common transition failure our network reports. Ask your hiring sponsor directly, before you start: *what does success look like at 12 months, and what happens if nothing changes?*

> **INSIGHTS FROM OUR NETWORK**
> One of our former CPOs took a role sold as transformation, and discovered in week two that the CFO wanted only one thing: £20 million out of third-party spend within the year, and no restructure. The transformation language was decoration. He wished he had asked the 12-month question before accepting, not after.

02.2 Do the Outside-In Homework

Read the Numbers

Read the accounts, investor materials and strategy statements. Note where cost, margin, supply risk or ESG appear. That is your board vocabulary.

Map the Supply Base

Review what is public about the supply base: major contracts, known disputes, supplier news.

Take Soundings

Use your own network to gauge the company's reputation as a customer. Suppliers talk, and how a business pays and behaves tells you plenty about what you are inheriting.

WORTH DOING
Draft your 90-day plan before you arrive, on one page, in pencil. Not because it will survive contact, but because having a structure lets you adjust deliberately instead of drifting into the inbox on day three.

3. Days 1–30: Diagnose and Frame

The first month is for finding out what is actually true, at pace, and framing expectations before someone else frames them for you. You are doing three things in parallel: listening to the business, sizing the assets you have inherited, and quietly forming a view on where the value is.

03.1 Run the Listening Tour Like a Diagnostic

Meet the executive team, budget holders and your own people, but use the same handful of questions with everyone, so the pattern speaks. *Where does procurement help you today? Where does it slow you down? What one thing would you change? What deal or supplier keeps you awake?* The gap between what the executive team says and what budget holders say is usually your real diagnosis.

From the Network: Several of our leaders keep a simple stakeholder grid from week one: support versus influence, updated monthly. Not sophisticated, but it forces the question every transition depends on: who moves the organisation, and where do they currently stand on you?

03.2 Size the Inheritance Fast

Three assessments, done roughly and quickly rather than perfectly and slowly:

- **The spend:** Pull the accounts payable file into a first-cut cube. Expect 40–60% visibility and cleanse from there.
- **The pipeline and contracts:** What renewals, disputes and commitments land in your first year. Surprises there are yours now.
- **The team:** Capability, morale, and who the business actually trusts, which is not always who the org chart suggests.

03.3 Frame Expectations Before the Machine Does

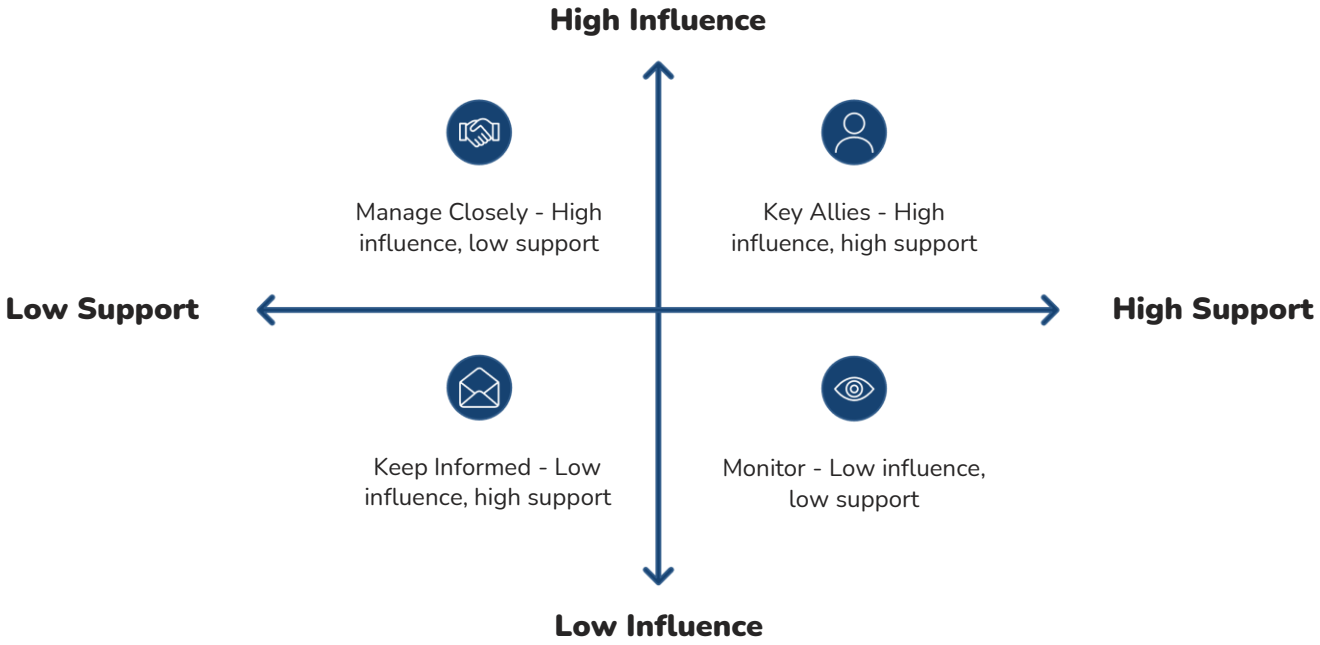
The biggest credibility killer in month one is letting expectations run unmanaged. Half of successful new CPOs actively set stakeholder expectations early. Tell your sponsor and peers what they will see at 30, 60 and 90 days, and what they will not. An early, modest, kept promise beats an ambitious slipped one every time.

⚠ **WATCH OUT**

Resist the urge to reorganise in month one. Structure moves are irreversible signals made with the least information you will ever have. Almost every leader in our network who restructured in month one says they would sequence it later if they did it again.

The Stakeholder Grid

Map every key contact by influence and support. Update it monthly.



Manage Closely

Where the transition is actually decided. The resistance is usually rational: a category they built, a supplier they trust, an autonomy your operating model threatens. Find the reason before you build the argument, and give them a visible early win. Neutral is a good outcome.

Key Allies

Scarce, and easily spent on reassurance. Ask them for capital rather than time: sponsor the day-90 readout, put their name against a quick win, correct a peer's assumption in a room you are not in. An ally who has never backed you publicly is a supporter, not a sponsor.

Keep Informed

Goodwill that compounds if you feed it. These are your intake stories and your usage evidence, the people who tell you what the spend cube cannot. Give them a rhythm, a short monthly note in the same format, and quote them by name in the readout.

Monitor

Cheap to watch, expensive to ignore, because influence moves. A new CFO, a reorganisation, a category that turns strategic overnight. Re-score monthly and watch for movement out of this quadrant rather than for strength of feeling.

INSIGHT FROM OUR NETWORK

The grid earns its keep only when it changes your diary. One of our leaders re-scores hers before each monthly session with the CFO and checks one thing: has anyone moved quadrant, and what did I do that moved them? Two names moving the right way in a quarter is a good return. A grid that looks identical in month three was filled in once and admired ever since.

4. Days 31–60: Build the Case

Month two converts what you heard and what the data says into an evidenced point of view. This is where you decide what kind of function you are going to run, and start assembling the argument that funds it.

4.1 Turn the Spend Cube into a Value Map

By now the first-cut spend analysis exists. The move is from data to argument: category by category, what is the addressable value over three years, at what confidence, requiring what effort? Cost is only one lane. Risk removed, cash unlocked (payment terms, stock, demand), and speed for the business are the other three. The mix you lead with should match the mandate you validated before day one.

4.2 Pick Quick Wins on Evidence, Not Opportunism

61% of successful new leaders land a visible cost or efficiency win early, ideally before the next board meeting. Choose wins that are **visible, attributable and repeatable**: a renewal renegotiated with usage evidence, a demand rule that finance can see in the run rate, a consolidation with a named sponsor who will vouch for it. One clean, attributed win is worth three that dissolve into someone else's numbers.

From the Network: In week five, one CPO stopped a routine auto-renewal, ran a three-week competitive process, and banked a 14% saving on a contract renewed unexamined for six years. Small money against the year target, but every budget holder heard about it.

4.3 Fix the Experience, Not Just the Cost

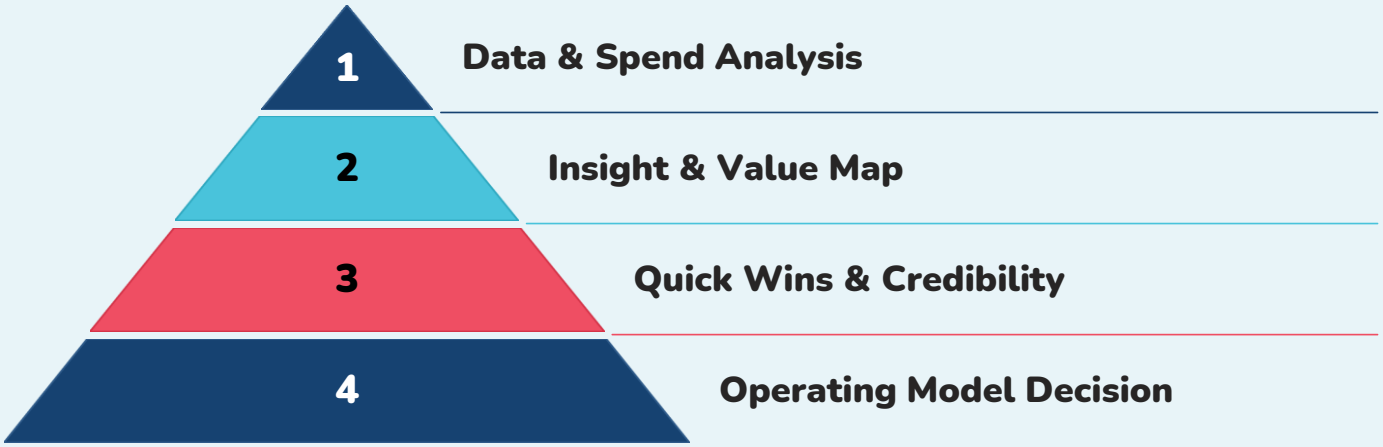
Nearly half of successful new leaders prioritise the stakeholder experience: intake friction, cycle times, the small daily irritations that define how the function is perceived. One visible fix (a faster intake route, a threshold raised, a sign-off chain shortened) buys more goodwill than any savings slide. Perception is a currency you will spend later; earn it now.

4.4 Decide the Operating Model Direction, Quietly

By day 60 you should know, privately, what the function needs to look like: the centre-led versus devolved balance, the capability gaps, what to build versus borrow, and what technology is missing versus merely unused. Hold the conclusions until day 90. Announcing them now, half-evidenced, spends credibility you have only just started earning.

Building the Case: The Logic Stack

Each layer funds the next, so don't skip to the top.



1. Data & Spend Analysis

Nothing above this layer survives challenge without it. Get the accounts payable file into a first-cut cube, accept 40 to 60% clean visibility at the start, and publish the baseline you are willing to defend rather than waiting for perfect data. Finance will test your baseline long before they test your savings.

2. Insight & Value Map

Turn spend into an argument: addressable value by category over three years, graded by confidence and by effort. Work four lanes, not one. Cost taken out, risk removed, cash unlocked, speed returned to the business. Lead with the lane that matches the mandate you validated before day one.

3. Quick Wins & Credibility

Evidence the business can point at. Choose wins that are visible, attributable and repeatable, and bank one before the next board meeting. A renewal renegotiated on usage evidence buys more permission than three savings that dissolve quietly into someone else's budget.

4. Operating Model Decision

Only here do you earn the right to redesign the function: centre-led versus devolved, capability built versus borrowed, technology missing versus merely unused. Land it in the day-90 readout with the three layers beneath it doing the arguing for you.

FROM THE NETWORK

Our leaders describe the same failure in different words: the new procurement leader who arrives with the target operating model already drawn. It may even be the right answer, but with no baseline, no value map and no banked win underneath it, the board hears a preference rather than a case. Build the layers in order and the structure argues for itself.

5. Days 61–90: Commit and Move

Month three is when you go public: a clear point of view, a costed plan, and the first structural moves. The asset you have built is evidence; now you spend it.

1 Tell the Board a Value Story, Not a Procurement Story

The 90-day readout is the most important document of your first year. Lead with what you found (in the business language of margin, risk, cash and speed), the size of the prize with numbers you are prepared to be held to, the plan in horizons, and the ask. Never present targets without the investment case attached. Agreeing numbers first and resources later is the oldest trap in the function.

2 Make the People Moves You Now Have Evidence For

By day 90 you have seen the team under load and know what the plan requires. Make the calls: the structure, the key hires, the development bets, and any exits, done respectfully and quickly. Secure your anchor people before the market does, and be honest about which gaps you will hire for versus borrow.

3 Launch the First Wave, Visibly

Announce the first wave of category and improvement work with named owners, sponsors and dates. Stand up a simple governance rhythm: a monthly value report in finance-agreed numbers, and a short executive session where decisions actually get made. Momentum, visibly governed, is what converts a good first 90 days into a mandate.

⚠ **WATCH OUT**

Beware the savings number you cannot govern. Agree the measurement basis with finance before any target goes on a slide: baseline, method, who signs off. A saving finance does not recognise is not a saving, and relitigating the basis in month eight is a fight you will not enjoy.

> **FROM THE NETWORK**
>
> One of our CPOs put a one-page value dashboard in front of the executive team every month from day 95, same format every time, savings in finance-signed numbers only. She credits that single artefact, boring on purpose, with more career capital than any transformation deck she ever wrote.

6. Beyond 90: The Year-One Arc

The first 90 days earn you the right to run the year. The arc that follows is broadly consistent across our network experience, whatever the industry.

Days 90–180: Deliver & Bank

Deliver wave one, finance-verified savings land, key hires arrive, technology selections made, first board update against committed plan.

Days 180–270: Scale What Works

Wave two categories launch, operating model changes go live, supplier relationship and risk programmes stand up, function invited early not late.

Days 270–365: Institutionalise

Rolling pipeline, value reporting routine and unchallenged, year-two targets set on your baseline, talking strategy with the board not savings.

Two disciplines carry the arc. First, never let the value pipeline empty: the moment delivery is all in-flight and nothing is queued, next year's target has already slipped. Second, revisit the mandate quarterly with your sponsor. Mandates drift, and the leaders who last are the ones who notice before the drift becomes a gap.

WORTH DOING

Diarise a personal 90-day review: what did you believe on day one that turned out to be wrong? Write it down and adjust the plan. The discipline of admitting your own early misreads, privately, is what keeps the plan honest.

7. The Toolkit: Data, Tech & External Support

You will move faster in the first year renting capability than building it. This is the shortlist our network actually uses, by job to be done.

7.1 Spend Visibility, Fast

Spend Analytics Platforms

Use for: Sievo (sievo.com), SpendHQ (spendhq.com), Suplari (suplari.com) and Simfoni (simfoni.com). All classify and visualise spend with AI-assisted categorisation. Suplari and SpendHQ score strongly on Gartner Peer Insights and Spend Matters SolutionMap.

Bear in mind: Best-of-breed beats suite modules for speed to first insight. Budget for a data-cleansing effort rather than being surprised by it.

Source-to-Pay Suites

Use for: Coupa (coupa.com), Ivalua (ivalua.com), Jaggaer (jaggaer.com) and GEP (gep.com) for the full platform play, once you know what operating model you are building.

Bear in mind: A suite selection in month two is premature; a suite selection in month eight, off the back of your operating-model decision, is well-timed. Do not let an incumbent renewal force the sequence.

Point Solutions Worth Knowing

Use for: Zip (ziphq.com) for intake and orchestration. Icertis (icertis.com) and Sirion (sirion.ai) for contract intelligence, useful for the renewals sweep in month one.

Bear in mind: Pick the two that serve your 90-day plan, not the six that look interesting.

07.2 Benchmarks, Intelligence & Peers

The Hackett Group

The standard for function benchmarking when you need an external yardstick for the board. **thehackettgroup.com**

Spend Matters

Independent procuretech intelligence and the SolutionMap vendor rankings. **spendmatters.com**

Procurement Leaders & CIPS

Peer networks, benchmarks and market intelligence worth re-joining under the new employer. **procurementleaders.com** | **cips.org**

7.3 Borrowed capability

The renewals wave lands in month three. The permanent team is signed off in month nine. Every transition has this gap, and hiring will not close it in time.

Borrowing closes it. One experienced specialist, one defined piece of work, no permanent cost while you are still designing the permanent shape.

This is the model SmartBuyer runs, so read what follows as a practitioner's view, not a neutral one.

Category Expert

For managing renewal waves and specific procurement categories.

Interim Baseline Specialist

To rapidly establish a spend baseline and initial data analysis.

Negotiation Specialist

For high-value contracts crucial to year-one savings and impact.

Fractional, consultancy or permanent: the honest trade-offs

Permanent hire

Best for: capability you need every year, and roles that carry relationships.

Limits: three to six months to land, and headcount committed before your operating model is agreed.

Consultancy

Best for: scale, method, and pace the board can see.

Limits: leverage means junior delivery on senior rates, and the knowledge leaves with the team.

Fractional specialist

Best for: Experienced operators on your side of the table, against a named outcome.

Limits: it will not carry a full programme alone, and it works best where the scope is pre-defined.

Buying borrowed capability well

Buy an outcome, not days. A cleansed baseline by week six is contractible. Support for the transformation is not.

Give it one accountable owner. The specialist reports to you or a named lead, never to a steering group.

Make handover a deliverable. The model, the cube and the negotiation file stay when the person goes.

Agree status and exit up front. Determination before mobilisation, and a named trigger that ends the engagement.

FROM THE NETWORK

Our leaders report the same pattern: a borrowed specialist earns their keep inside two weeks or not at all, because an experienced operator working to a defined scope does not need onboarding. One CPO ran her renewals wave with two fractional category leads while she recruited, and said the real value was not the day rate. It was being able to test what the permanent shape should be with the work already running, rather than hiring against the structure she drew on day one.

8. Traps the Network Flags

Ten failure patterns, collected from people who have made or watched most of them. You will recognise several; the value is in noticing them early.



The Mandate Misread

Solving the problem you were told about instead of the one they hired you for. Revalidate the mandate in week one, and quarterly.



The Month-One Reorg

Restructuring on minimum information. Sequence people moves for day 90, when you have evidence.



The Lone-Wolf Diagnosis

Doing it all personally to prove capability. Borrow hands for the baseline; spend your own hours on stakeholders.



The Savings Number Without a Basis

Targets agreed before the measurement method. Fix the baseline with finance first.



The Transformation Deck

A grand redesign announced before any delivery. Credibility funds transformation, not the reverse.



The Toll-Booth Persona

Tightening controls before improving the experience. The business decides your reputation faster than the board does.



The Incumbent Tech Renewal

Letting a suite renewal in month three dictate a decade of operating model. Buy time, then decide.



The Empty Pipeline

Everything in delivery, nothing queued. Next year's target slips six months before anyone notices.



The Predecessor Autopsy

Winning arguments against someone who left. Diagnose forward. The room notices grace.

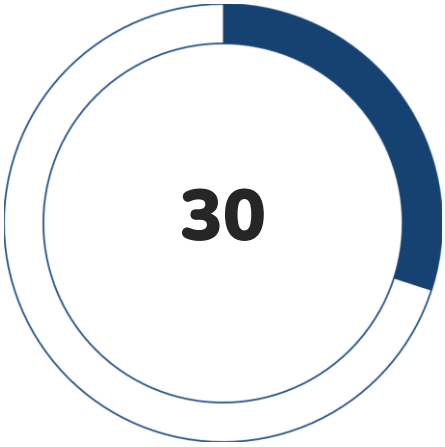


The Forgotten Sponsor

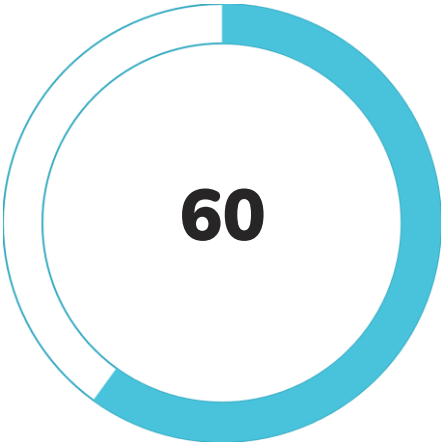
Assuming the person who hired you still holds the same view in month six. Tend that relationship like a key account.

9. The 90-Day Checklist

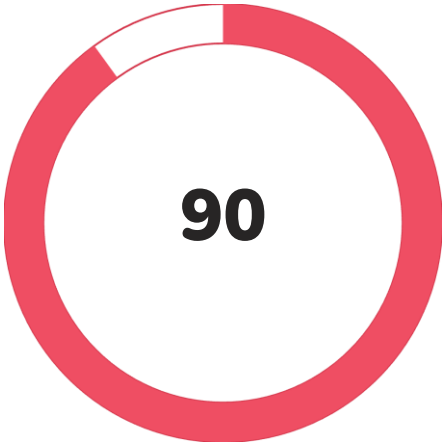
The roadmap in one place. If you can tick these, you have landed well.



Days to Diagnose & Frame



Days to Build the Case



Days to Commit & Move

- ◯ Mandate validated with your sponsor: the 12-month success picture, in their words.
- ◯ Outside-in homework done before day one; one-page plan drafted in pencil.
- ◯ Listening tour run with consistent questions; stakeholder grid started.
- ◯ First-cut spend cube built; renewals and commitments for year one mapped.
- ◯ Team assessed: capability, morale, and who the business actually trusts.
- ◯ 30/60/90 expectations set with sponsor and peers, and kept.
- ◯ Value map built: cost, risk, cash and speed, sized over three years.
- ◯ Two or three quick wins landed: visible, attributable, repeatable.
- ◯ One stakeholder-experience fix delivered and noticed.
- ◯ Savings measurement basis agreed with finance before any target published.
- ◯ Day-90 board story told: findings, prize, plan, ask, with the investment case attached.
- ◯ People moves made; first wave launched with owners, sponsors and a monthly value rhythm.

10 Further Resources

McKinsey: Your First 100 Days as CPO

The classic structured view, worth an hour even where you disagree with it.

mckinsey.com

Michael Watkins: The First 90 Days

The general transition playbook underneath every version of this genre, including ours. Essential reading for any leadership transition.

Deloitte Global CPO Survey

The annual read on what your peers are prioritising and struggling with.

deloitte.com

You don't need more people in your Procurement team, fractional 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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