

## SMES PARTICIPATION AND SUCCESS OBSTACLES IN PUBLIC PROCUREMENT: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** There are numerous factors which have been identified in the literature as potential obstacles for SMEs participation and success in public procurement market. This study systematically reviews these factors and proposes some directions for future research.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research is conducted employing the critical and systematic review of the extant literature, encompassing studies conducted across business sectors. Future research directions are proposed accordingly.

**Findings:** Several factors have been identified as potential obstacles for SMEs participation and success in public procurement market. These factors could be classified into six categories. These obstacles generally affect SMEs success in public procurement market in two different phases. While some of these obstacles hinder SMEs from participating in the market, others may affect their success in the contract bidding and competition phase.

**Research limitations:** The main limitation of this research lies in its current method of literature review. A subsequent empirical validation is necessary to assure the reliability and validity of this research.

**Originality/value:** This research is original as it provides a comprehensive and systematic review and understanding of factors affecting SMEs participation and success in public procurement market. Based on this, the recommended research directions provide indications for future studies as well as guidelines for SMEs in their preparation for successful public procurement projects.

**Keywords:** small and medium enterprises (SMEs), public procurement, public procurement participation, public procurement success, critical factors.

### **Introduction**

A large part of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) in every country is related to public purchases. Therefore, public procurement related costs can have a substantial impact on the economy (Croom and Brandon-Jones 2007). In Australia, enterprises with less than 200 employees are considered to be medium-sized, and enterprises with less than 20 employees are deemed to be small enterprises (OECD, 2015). Based on the statistics by Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2017), small businesses contributed about 33% to total industry value added in 2015. Industry value added (IVA) is a measure of contribution by firms in each industry to GDP. In 2015, SMEs (small and medium enterprises) added 343.4 billion and 233.6 billion respectively to the economy, together they account for 57% of GDP in Australia. Construction, real estate, professional services, healthcare and military are sectors which make the majority of contributions (OECD, 2015). In Australia, SMEs employ 70% of the Australian workforce and provide 55% of the economic outputs (OECD, 2015). Australia is the 21st among 34 countries in terms of the size of government purchasing and public procurement accounted for 12% of the GDP in 2011. In 2013, statistics show that procurement expenditures account for 33.9% of government spending. This is higher than the average global percentage of 29.0% (OECD, 2015).

Based on the statistics of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2015) in 14 countries including Australia, SMEs are the major economic operators in terms of quantity, accounting for 95% of the organizations. A survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2017) provides a count of Australian businesses in each industry and sector. Based on these statistics, finance and service are the fastest growing sectors while the agriculture and farming sector have the highest amount of decrease in the number of businesses. Meanwhile, households are still the largest institutional sector although the number of the household businesses that accounts for 56% of the total number of businesses has decreased by 7% since last year (this sector had the highest exit from business rate

during the last year) (ABS, 2017). Based on 2015-2016 statistics produced by the ABS, although SMEs represent about 89% of participants in public procurement contracts, they just succeeded in getting 24% of the entire value of the contracts (Department of Finance, 2017). According to Australia's Department of Innovation, Industry Science and Research, Australian SMEs face two main problems for survival: one is the lack of sufficient access to technology and networks, and the other is the insufficiently developed managerial skills. Public purchasing could, therefore, be used to provide chances of growth for local enterprises and therefore assist SMEs. By encouraging SMEs' participation in public procurement, both employment rate and economic growth would improve (Karjalainen and Kemppainen, 2008). Although SMEs' share in public procurement contracts is 24% during 2015-2016 period, this amount has dropped by 15% over the last few years from 39% during 2011-2012 period. The decreasing share of SMEs in public procurement, in the context of Australia, is a point of concern (Thurbon, 2015).

This paper, therefore, addresses the topical issue of critical success factors for SMEs in public procurement. These factors are categorised into two groups. The first group contains factors which may impede SMEs' participation in public procurement contracts and meeting pre-requisite conditions, while factors in the second group are those which could be hindrances for SMEs when they have decided to participate and enter the competition by bidding for those contracts. Specifically, these factors will be systematically reviewed so that future research directions can be proposed accordingly. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. The next section explains how the literature review is conducted, followed by findings from this review. Discussion and recommendations are then elaborated and the last section concludes the paper.

### **Methodology**

This paper employs a systematic approach to reviewing extant literature through multiple databases. The critical factors identified in this paper are drawn from 38 academic papers. These papers are selected from 165 different research papers based on their relevance to the topic using the keyword of "factors that are hindering SMEs success in public procurement". After the critical factors had been identified from this process, they were divided into two groups, namely, critical factors in the participation phase and those in the contract bidding phase. Based on their nature, these factors were further divided into six different categories.

### **Critical factors for SMEs' participation and success in public procurement**

Public procurement is used to achieve multiple purposes and benefits, and promoting innovation is one of them. Therefore, it is the perfect tool for promoting innovative technologies because it allows the demand and supply to meet while preserving sustainability and efficiency goals (Aschhoff and Sofka, 2009). Public organisations can help the private parties in delivering the public procurement contract in multiple ways, and the most common ways include providing specialized knowledge and know-how or helping with compliance cost. The rationale behind supporting SMEs in awarding public procurement contracts could be classified as follows (Zheng, et al., 2005):

- SMEs encourage innovation and entrepreneurship.
- SMEs are more adaptive to the needs of the purchasers.
- SMEs contribute to job creation.
- SMEs development leads to economic growth and local sustainability.

Despite the above, there are numerous obstacles which hinder SMEs from participation and being successful in public procurement contracts. These are classified as follows.

### **Critical factors in the participation phase**

**Financial obstacles:** In the research by Curran (2000), cost of participation, and most important of all the payment delays are the obstacles identified for SMEs. Payments made by the public sector are relatively late compared to that of the private sector (Curran, 2000). A report published by Morrison and O'Dwyer (2015) explained certain financial obstacles in the case of Australian SMEs. Mortgage or loan interest rates for SMEs are higher than that of bigger firms. The reason is the increased risk associated with SMEs. These enterprises either have no credit history or do not have enough assets as a deposit and this

increases the perceived risk and hence the interest rate for these enterprises. Although the loan approval rate had increased severely for SMEs, the interest associated with them is still higher than other enterprises (Morrison and O'Dwyer, 2015).

**Information asymmetry related obstacles:** It has been identified in the literature that factors relating to information asymmetries can negatively affect SMEs' chance of winning public procurement contracts (Morrison and O'Dwyer, 2015). Specifically, lack of awareness has been perceived as the most important barrier by the SMEs. Lack of understanding about pre-requisite conditions and lack of knowledge of the procurement procedure cause difficulty getting on the approved supplier list and hinder SMEs from participating in public procurement contracts (Loader, 2015). SMEs do not always realize the benefits of participating in public procurement contracts and, as a result, they may not consider going through the training or promotion activities required to participate in public procurement contracts. The alternative drawback from participating in these contracts is that sometimes SMEs are scared that they will lose their autonomy over their business (Zheng et al., 2005).

The research by Love et al. (2014) shows that in Australia the traditional one-phase procurement is still the main way of procurement. Early contractor involvement (ECI) allows the private contractor to participate in the design, risk assessment, and planning phase of the project. Australian contractors are not well informed about benefits of ECI (Love et al., 2014). Adopting ECI can contribute to improving the communication between public and private parties, in providing realistic cost estimates and increasing the project design efficiency (Patterson, 2013). Certain barriers to ECI were identified during this research including a reduction in competitive tendering, fear of opportunistic behaviour by the contractor, and lack of experience from the contractor. Since ECI appoints contractor through the negotiated process, there exists the perception that this would decrease the competition, and hence the profit margins. However, in two-stage models, the contractor is required to submit the price in the first phase and the risk of decrease in the competition is removed. This signifies the fact that the main factor hindering ECI is the misconception about ECI benefits and costs (Love et al., 2014).

**Regulatory obstacles:** Factors such as lengthy and complex tendering process, overly prescriptive requirements, insufficient consultation prior to tender, scale of contract unsuitable to SMEs, restrictive requirements, e.g. environmental, lack of track record etc. are all identified as obstacles hindering SMEs in public procurement (Loader 2015). Although SMEs cannot be preferred to other firms, one improvement help would be increasing transparency and accessibility of the tenders since complicated and lengthy contracts with lots of conditions could eliminate SMEs from competitions (Aschhoff and Sofka, 2009). The regulatory framework could be the possible reason for some of the SMEs drawbacks in the public procurement market. SMEs face lots of problems in dealing with foreign public procurement including different regulations and language barriers and complex bureaucracy (Krumbholz et al., 2000). In order to increase the quality of public procurement, the awarding criteria must be changed from lowest initial cost to MEAT (most economically advantageous tender). Moreover, the procurement process must involve the suppliers more. The rationality behind this is, if the suppliers understand the problems and needs of the demand side, they would be able to help better design and implement the projects (Edler and Georgiou, 2007).

Lack of regulatory support for SMEs is another obstacle. In Australia, AUSTFA (Australia and United States free trade agreement) is the most comprehensive international agreement that also affects public purchasing. Based on this agreement, public agencies must act unbiased between foreign and domestic bidders. AUSTFA agreement has prohibited any bias against foreign firms as well as any offsets in procurement systems (Austrade, 2017). Being a member of AUSTFA, the US government has been able to provide support for its SMEs when public procurement contracts are less than the certified threshold in AUSTFA. In comparison, the Australian government has not provided enough offsets for SMEs (Bell, 2005). Although AUSTFA has limited purchasing power of the Australian SMEs, there is room for public agencies to use their power to nurture local SMEs through (Thurbon, 2015):

- Using the contracts that are below the value indicated in AUSTFA.
- Understanding that PTAs (preferential trade agreements), including AUSTFA, allow the governments to employ discrimination if it is for helping SMEs.

**Obstacles relating to SMEs' characteristics:** The study by Karjalainen and Kemppainen (2008) explored the problems that SMEs might face for participating in public procurement markets. The lack of resources, skilled staff and administrative expertise are slowing SMEs' development in public procurement markets (Karjalainen and Kemppainen, 2008). The majority of contractors do not have the ability or confidence to participate in ECI programs and therefore would rather have a traditional method of tendering (Love et al., 2014). This confirms the observation about uncertainty avoidance culture of SMEs (Love et al., 2008).

#### **Critical factors in the contracting phase**

**Contract-related obstacles:** The main elements influencing SMEs success, based on GHK study (2010) are nature of the procurer, the industry and sector of the procurement, tendering procedure used, the awarding criteria, "most economic bid" or "most economically advantageous tender" and the total value of the contract. Certain industries have a higher SME participation rate. In the UK's public sector, when partnership network is used in public procurement as tendering procedure SMEs have less success in getting public contracts. However, short term contracts with smaller size are more achievable for SMEs (Loader, 2011). Edler and Georgiou (2007) mentioned that the current major trend in public procurement in the EU is using MEAT as the awarding criteria. This method signifies lowest price possible as the contracts awarding criteria and, therefore, other features and aspects of procuring are not considered as much. Bigger suppliers can cope up with lower prices by reducing their income margin whereas such opportunities do not always exist for SMEs and, as a result, this contract awarding criteria could be another obstacle for SMEs (Edler et al., 2006). A study by Croom and Brandon-Jones (2007) suggested that, since the high value of the contract could be a barrier towards SMEs' participation, usually breaking the contracts into smaller lots could help in overcoming the problem.

**Regulatory obstacles:** A study by Johnston et al. (2007) revealed that the benefits provided by public procurement are not equally divided between firms based on their country, industry, technology and their size (Johnston et al., 2007). SMEs barriers for winning public procurement contracts are different based on the industry and country. Loader and Norton (2015) argued that, in order to be able to identify exact obstacles that SMEs face, their industry must be considered. In this paper, they identified certain barriers like the lack of sufficient feedback by the public sector and subcontracting procedure related problems. These obstacles are present to craft supplying SMEs that are active in the heritage sector of public procurement (Loader and Norton 2015). There are many strict rules regulating this process, so deviation from any of them could exclude SMEs from the bidding process (Karjalainen and Kemppainen, 2008). Thurbon (2015) examined the effects of PTAs (Preferential Trade Agreements) on the Australian government's ability to use public procurement for local industry developments. Although PTAs limit government's policy making abilities, they still leave enough room for governments to strategically support local businesses and SMEs (Thurbon, 2015).

**Obstacles relating to SMEs' characteristics:** Inefficient monitoring process is one of the main problems that SMEs face during participation in public procurement (Howe and Landau, 2009). In a study by Loader (2015), about 67% of the SMEs believed that certain barriers existed in the way of their participation and success in public procurement market. Strategic orientation of SMEs has a role in their underrepresentation in public procurement market. Strategic orientation includes MO (market orientation) and EO (entrepreneurial orientation) of SMEs. MO is about establishing good relations with current customers and providing high compatibility with customer's needs, whilst EO relies on staying competitive and seizing market opportunities. The result of study by Tammi et al. (2016) identified MO as a potential obstacle for SMEs.

**Cultural obstacles:** Australian public purchasing favours foreign (especially the US) suppliers. After the Second World War, most of the government departments prefer purchasing from the large, established, foreign companies, these companies are deemed less risky because of their history and reputation (Lember, et al., 2014). There are many cultural biases in the way of public purchasing as a technology oriented industry in Australia, from buy-non-Australian bias to complicated tender processes that make it harder for the suppliers (Lember et al, 2014). Table 1 provides a summary of the critical factors that are identified in the literature.

Factor categories	Phases in procurement process	Critical factors	References
financial obstacles	Participation	tender participation cost	( Loader, 2005)
	Participation	high mortgage or loan interest assigned to SMEs	( Flynn et al., 2015)
	Participation / Contract bidding	SMEs lack of capital record	(Loader, 2005) (Walker & Preuses, 2008) (Pickernell et al., 2011)
	Participation	lack of assets	(Morrison and O'Dwyer, 2015 )
	Participation	lack of credit history	(Morrison and O'Dwyer, 2015 )
	Participation	high risk associated with SMEs	(Morrison and O'Dwyer, 2015 )
Information asymmetry related obstacles	Participation / Contract bidding	insufficient information sharing and miscommunication	(Karjalainen and Kemppainen, 2008) (Loader, 2015)
	Participation	lack of knowledge about regulatory framework	(Karjalainen and Kemppainen, 2008 )
	Participation	lack of awareness about the benefits of public procurement	( Zheng et al., 2005 )
	Participation	Misconception about ECI benefits and costs	(Love et al., 2014)
	Participation	lack of awareness about areas of weakness	(Edler and Georghiou, 2007).
	Participation	negative perception towards the outcome of the tender	(Akenroye and Aju, 2013) ( Zheng et al., 2005 )
Regulatory obstacles	Contract bidding	SME uncertainty in market	(Love et al., 2008)
	Contract bidding	insufficient use of set asides by government	(Thurbon, 2015) (Bell, 2005)
	Participation	lack of government insurance for purchase of goods and services from SMEs	(Curran, 2000)
	Participation	complicated pre tender prerequisites for SMEs	(Akenroye and Aju, 2013) (Loader,2015)
SME related obstacles	Participation	lack of access to technologies and ICT	(Karjalainen and Kemppainen, 2008 )
	Participation	Lack of resources and capabilities	(smallbone et al., 2009)
	Participation / Contract bidding	insufficient information sharing and lack of awareness	(Loader, 2015)
	Participation	Lack of ability or confidence to participate in ECI	(Love et al., 2014)
	Participation / Contract bidding	lack of administrative staff and experience	( pickernell et al., 2015) (Karjalainen and Kemppainen, 2008 )
	Participation / Contract bidding	low annual firm turnover non effective	(Loader, 2011) ( Zheng et al., 2005 ) (Industry,

		management practices in firms	2017)
Cultural obstacles	Contract bidding	buying non Australian bias	(Johnston et al., 2007)
	Contract bidding	buying from reputable large companies	(Lember et al., 2014)
	Contract bidding	industry and sector related bias	(Loader and Norton, 2015)
Contract-related obstacles	Contract bidding	total value of the contract	(Erridge et al., 1998) (Loader 2007) (sedita and apa, 2015)
	Contract bidding	complicated, lengthy and unclear contracts	( Cabras, 2011 (Zheng et al., 2005) (Loader, 2007)
	Contract bidding	contract awarding criteria	( Cabras, 2011) (GHK, 2010)

Table 1. Critical factors to SMEs' participation and success in public procurement

### **Discussion and recommendations for future research**

SMEs are the biggest part of every economy and public procurement market provides many benefits for the supplier. As a result, it is important to make sure that the biggest part of economy exploits these benefits and is not excluded from public procurement market. Based on previous studies in the literature, critical factors that negatively affect SMEs participation and success in public procurement market are derived and also classified into six different categories. This systematic classification provides a clear overview of these factors for scholars who are conducting research in this area. In addition, it can also help SMEs to identify areas for improvement so as to increase their success in public procurement.

In view of the extant literature, one less explored area is the ECI and the relationship between SMEs and public buyer and supplier involvement. Supplier involvement provides multiple advantages for the public buyer and could be used for increasing SMEs' participation and success in public procurement. Adopting ECI can contribute to improving the communication between public and private parties, in providing realistic cost estimates and increasing the project design efficiency (Patterson 2013). Certain barriers to ECI were identified during this research including a reduction in competitive tendering, fear of opportunistic behaviour by the contractor, and lack of experience from the contractor. Future research can be conducted to explore the obstacles for ECI in public procurement and develop a model for optimizing SMEs success in public procurement market.

### **Conclusion**

In this research, several critical factors have been identified as potential obstacles for SMEs participation and success in public procurement market. These obstacles generally affect SMEs success in public procurement market in two different phases. Some obstacles hinder SMEs from participating while others negatively affect their success in the contract bidding and competition phase of public procurement contracts. These factors are further groups in six categories, namely, financial, information asymmetry, regulatory, SMEs-related, cultural and contract-related obstacles. Future research can further build on and expand from this research by focusing on supplier-buyer relationship and early contractor involvement (ECI) which provide several benefits for both the buyer and supplier and may enhance SME's participation and success in public procurement contracts.

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