



ENG

Career Spotlight: Laura Cook

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ENG had the pleasure of hosting a Q&A spotlight with procurement veteran – [Laura Cook](#).

With a remarkable Procurement career spanning nearly 25 years, and 15 of those within leadership roles, Laura gives us an overview of her career journey littered with achievements in a range of industries, alongside top tips for emerging Procurement professionals. We also touch on two topics of growing significance – sustainability & diversity.

Laura, please talk me through your journey to get into Procurement.

I've been in Procurement now coming up to 25 years – it really doesn't feel that long! Over fifteen years of those have been in leadership roles and I've worked across a really diverse set of industries including, pharma, tech, global recruitment, Cosmetics, hospitality and more recently retail. I've worked on both a national and international basis, so on a global scale, and as an employee, a salaried consultant and an independent consultant.

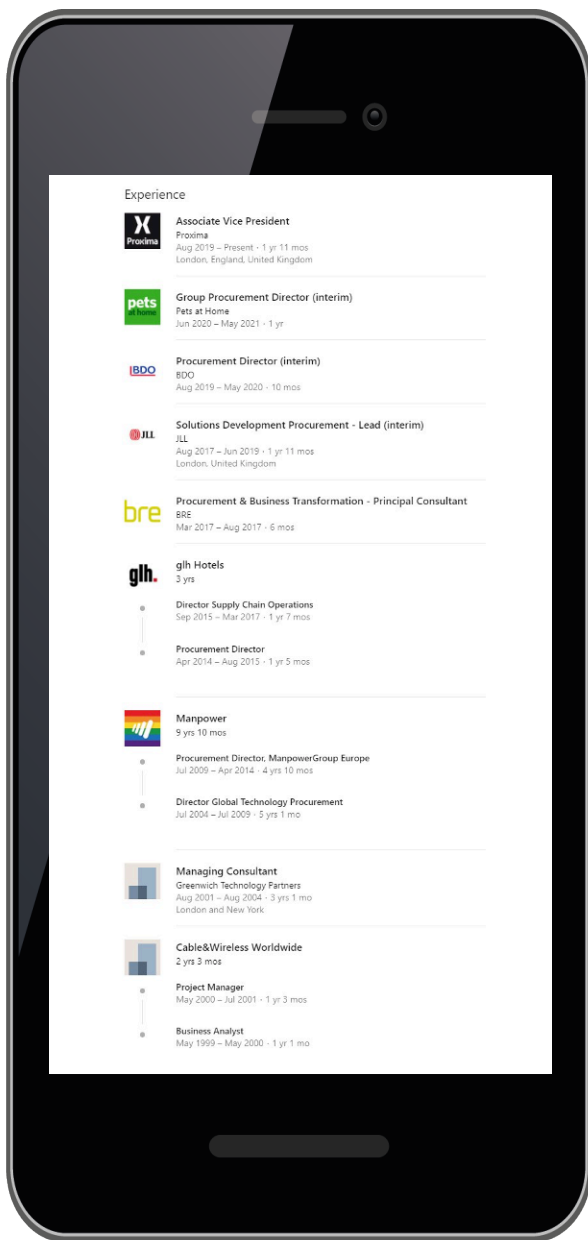
I believe my diverse experiences have really benefited me in terms of providing freedom and flexibility in the type of roles that I have been able to take. I think I'm possibly one of the few procurement professionals of my generation who actually studied and then actively pursued a career in procurement, rather than falling into it! This was following a European Business Degree at Manchester University alongside French – it was this exposure to negotiation and supply that led me to my first post graduate role in Birmingham.

I joined the graduate scheme at a banking software organisation that was the first I.T stock traded on the FTSE 100 in the late 1990's – a real privilege to be part of.

After that I joined Cable & Wireless as Business Analyst, focusing on business process around order management and provisioning, working very closely with the systems team and gaining a solid foundation in business process. This was followed by a program management position at C&W for the launch of their broadband services.

I then made quite a bold move from what was, a big and very successful company at the time, to a consultancy start-up in the UK. Throughout my career I have followed the pattern of working across diverse industries and sized companies - this for me, has kept things interesting!

“You can get some really great exposure in smaller companies because you generally have an opportunity to work outside the parameters of your role”.



I really, really enjoyed the international aspect of the work that I did at the consultancy firm, and so after being there for around 3 years, I jumped back into another large company, this time a global one, ManpowerGroup, with a presence in 80 plus countries and \$22 billion revenue. I had the opportunity to take on two incredible opportunities there, the first being Global IT Procurement Director, the youngest Director Manpower had employed at the time aged 29. Following 4 years in this technology focussed role I decided that I wanted to move to a more general Procurement role and was given the opportunity by Manpower to run the European Procurement division, focusing on other cross border sourcing and procurement opportunities. This spanned over 20 countries, with accountability for the central and local procurement teams that supported those countries.

I stayed at ManpowerGroup for as long as I did, 9 years in total, because they offered me some really great experience and opportunities – and I kept on learning and developing there. Having travelled a lot during my time at ManpowerGroup however, I decided to venture next into hospitality working on a national basis which meant that I could be at home more – and which provided me with broader operational experience and the opportunity to work on some exciting projects and new hotel launches.

It was following this point I made a step change in my career and certainly one that felt a little risky at the time, starting up on my own. This enabled me however to work more flexibly which is what I felt I needed at my stage in life, having a young family. Having worked independently for 4 years now, I feel very fortunate to be in a position where I can select interim, consultancy or permanent opportunities that best align with me. Absolutely critical to the success of this has been my network.

What is your current role and what do you enjoy most within this position?

I have recently finished an interim assignment, leading the Procurement transformation programme at Pets at Home, my first role in Retail!

I feel incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to work with the inspiring leadership at Pets at Home and talented procurement specialists at Proxima, who have so successfully supported the programme over the past year. It was a truly collaborative effort across the leadership, stakeholder community and the Procurement team.

I am super proud of the result that we have achieved - making both a significant financial impact in terms of cost take out, and in building and implementing a procurement operating model that will support the future growth of the Pets at Home business. And not least because we achieved this working entirely remotely through a global pandemic! I believe that we have truly changed the perception of the value that working with Procurement can bring, making a positive, value-led impact and getting Procurement a seat at the table.

What has been the biggest career challenge for you to date, and how did you overcome it?

Undergoing the transformation programme for Pets at Home, at the height of the pandemic and managing the team entirely remotely, has certainly been a significant challenge! And one that could only have been successful as it has been with the enhanced governance that we put in place. I think that it's been a very intense year for many of us, working in the way that we have been.

Another big career challenge or rather career decision, was when I made the move to work independently. At the time it felt like a big risk however it turned out to be a great move for me, and one which I could only have done with the support network and professional networks that I have.

What do you find most rewarding about working in Procurement (or can discuss a career highlight/achievement)?

After reflecting on this, I realized that the most rewarding part of my job has been consistent throughout my career and that is having the ability to positively impact someone else's development. Enabling progression and assisting people to fulfil their career aspirations under my leadership is absolutely the most rewarding part of my role.

A very close second is really changing the perception of the function within a business and proving that Procurement is that strategic business partner that can provide a positive business impact.

And last but not least, probably the part of the job that I enjoy the most is building successful partnerships both internally and externally. The Procurement team cannot be successful alone. That can only be achieved through collaboration with budget holders, contract owners, and our external third parties and partners within our supply chain.

“To summarise, the most rewarding parts of my role is getting people to where they want to go, driving value and building successful partnerships.”





Who in the industry do you find most inspiring and why?

I did really reflect on this question, but I would find it really hard to name one person. I have been fortunate enough to work with and for some fantastic people, both within and outside of Procurement, and at all levels and been helped and inspired by each one.

If there is someone that you find inspirational and have a rapport with, I would encourage you to actively pursue them as a mentor. I've had a number of mentors throughout my career that have been critical to my development and success.

Additionally, sponsors, either externally or within the companies I have worked for, have been really critical in assisting me to raise my profile and growing my network. They can play a slightly different role to a mentor but have been equally important for me.

What do you feel is the most important thing when trying to get people bought into to the procurement process?

Ultimately understanding both the wider business needs and the individual needs of your stakeholders - and proving that what Procurement is delivering is addressing those needs, is the key. Of course easier said than done!

Overarchingly, senior level sponsorship of a material program or project or the Procurement process is vital. Having that top-down support is critical.

When it comes to the individual stakeholder, you need to demonstrate that working with Procurement is a more beneficial way to address their needs (than going it alone). A great way to demonstrate this is to pursue some quick wins, which will showcase the process and build trust, which hopefully will lead to working together on more impacting programs in the future. It shouldn't be more onerous working with Procurement. We should remove pain for the stakeholder and their team.

A really critical way to get individual stakeholder buy in is to be clear that Procurement is not (usually) the final decision maker within the process. Procurement will be part of the evaluation, but ultimately the contract owner will make the final supply decision – after all they own the supplier relationship and budget. In my experience, stakeholder concerns around loss of decision-making power can be a really prohibitive factor in collaborative working between Procurement and the business.

What would be your top tips for someone starting their Procurement career journey?



Know your subject.

Build a good strong foundation – understand the basics such as the procurement lifecycle so you can confidently take your stakeholders on the journey.



Relationship build.

Never underestimate the power of relationships! These partnerships both internally and externally are critical, including of course with suppliers, who will help you tap into innovation and provide you with critical market information enabling you to think more creatively and differently.



Identify your motivators.

This is essential to understand how you will be happy within your role, this helps align your career goals and ultimately aim for a position that will get the most out of your skill set.



Give yourself the right PR.

Having a mentor and/ or sponsor gives you a great platform for raising your profile in the right way alongside accessing a wealth of knowledge. But also celebrate your success and talk to your peers about your achievements. Don't underestimate the importance of this!



Expand your industry knowledge.

I strongly recommend obtaining CIPs accreditation, which will give access to a whole host of resources and specialist knowledge, and a network of Procurement professionals.



Last but not least, be Authentic.

Be yourself, find a company with the best cultural alignment for you that will allow your career to flourish and where you can make a difference.

What factors (in your opinion) make a great Procurement professional?

A critical point is driving the sustainability agenda across all procurement decisions and everything that we do. If we don't think in this way, we simply don't have a future. The Procurement function has the platform to drive the thinking and lead change. Sustainability needs to be at the forefront of our thinking, strategy, and planning - and now, if it isn't already.

Another factor that I believe is imperative, is to develop a broader business knowledge, both commercially and operationally. This is a really important factor in ensuring that Procurement becomes that go-to strategic business partner.

Finally, possessing the ability to build successful relationships and work collaboratively are essential. As I mentioned before, Procurement will not be successful on our own.

What would you like to achieve in your career in the next 5 years?

Actually my five-year plan changes reasonably regularly! This is also something that I would mention is important to continually reassess throughout your career, to frequently check that ultimately your career is aligning with your needs, both personally and professionally.

For me personally, I'm now seeking my next leadership role, possibly on a permanent basis. The important factor for me however is the cultural fit and the opportunity to work with talented and inspiring people where I can truly make an impact, whether on a permanent or interim basis.

In the next few years I would like to undertake more coaching and mentoring work in a professional capacity. Non Exec positions and becoming a trustee are also things I'm setting my sights on!

ED&I is a huge topic at present, only gaining momentum that is no longer exclusive to board discussions. What is your view on this within the Procurement discipline?

My thoughts are that Procurement is no different from most other business functions in respect of the fact that there is absolutely not enough diversity, opportunities are not equal and many companies are not inclusive.

I have absolutely no idea why that is still the case when there is so much data available to show that diverse teams and diverse leadership teams are the most successful and deliver the best results. With that in mind, I'm completely flabbergasted that we're not working more quickly to ensure that we have that level of diversity within and outside of Procurement. There has undoubtedly been some progress, and the BLM and MeToo movements have helped, but it still feels like there's a really long way to go. If I'm going to be really truthful, I feel like this has been an ongoing topic for the last 20 years throughout my career – and we're still here! Despite this, I am, however, hopeful that we can change and move at pace – just look at how we've adapted to constantly changing business conditions over the past 12 months. We have demonstrated that we can move quickly when we need to. We just need to put the thinking around diversity at the forefront of business planning and make it happen.

I believe that ultimately, there are three things companies have to strive to achieve: Firstly an inclusive and welcoming environment that commits to the importance of and embraces diversity at all levels. Secondly, recruitment is critical, not just in attracting diverse talent, but also in facilitating a fair recruitment process that allows everyone to showcase their competency. Thirdly is retaining this talent, which stems back to ensuring that the inclusive environment has been created and will provide the structures needed to support minority colleagues. As I said previously, my view is not specific to Procurement, but a general view across business functions.

Again like with sustainability, there is opportunity for Procurement leaders to drive the ED&I agenda. We just need to step up to the challenge.

