A typology of social procurement champions in the construction industry

This is the eighth regular fact-sheet about recent 'social procurement research led by UTS.

This fact sheet summarises a research project which explored the proposition that multiple types of champions are needed for the successful implementation of social innovations like social procurement.

The detailed publications in which this research has been published are listed at the bottom of this factsheet. Please feel free to distribute this factsheet to anyone who may be interested.

Why the study

- Social procurement has a long history that goes back to the mid-19th century.
- Surprisingly, although the construction and engineering industry is a focus of these re-emerging policies, there is very little construction research in this area.
- Furthermore, research has largely neglected the individual actors involved in the implementation of social procurement policies into the industry.
- The limited research in this area shows that these emerging champions are performing relatively undefined hybridised roles which are often voluntary and informal and adopted on top of their existing roles.
- The new roles being forged by these emerging champions do not fit comfortably into established institutional structures and traditions in construction, meaning that these individuals often lack formal authority, identity and resources to carry them out.
- Existing research on organisational champions has been criticised for treating them as a homogeneous group, while in reality multiple champions are normally involved in implementing social innovations like social procurement

Aim

- The research traced the etymology of champion roles and drew on mainstream organisational champion research to explore the proposition that there may be different types of social procurement actors implementing social procurement policies into the construction and engineering industry.

What we did

- Data was collected via interviews with fifteen social procurement champions in the Australian construction and infrastructure industry.
- The interviews explored: what these champions do to bring about change; why they do it; where they do it; and how they do it.

References: Loosemore, M, Keast R and Barraket J (2022) A typology of social procurement champions in the construction and engineering industry, Construction Management and Economics, 40:5, 391-405

What we found

- Although the sample was relatively small, this exploratory research supports the proposition that the effective implementation of social procurement depends on the collective efforts of different types of social procurement champions performing different tasks at different organisational levels.
- We found that social procurement needs to be implemented through a range of people who play a multitude of roles at different organisational levels and across different organisational functions.
- We found four different types of champions in our data linked by common themes in the narratives we analysed.

Type of champion	What they do?	Why they do it?	Where they do it?	How they do it?
Champions of the concept	Collaborative (internally and externally); problem-solving; pragmatic; idealist; risk management; logos and ethos-based.	Compliance with externally imposed targets and imperatives;	Typically mid-level managers; no clear organisational position or identity; value-adding connectors between and within organisations	Hard working, tireless change agents; pushing bottom-up; reflective practitioners; Learning and refining by doing; creating new roles from nothing; challenging institutional norms;
Champions of organisations	Pragmatic; Instrumental; logos-based; normative; externally focussed and sales orientated;	Competitive advantage; legitimacy building;	Typically senior strategic actors; Separated from implementation; Detached from beneficiaries; operate at organisational boundary	Organisation-centric; operate in pre-implementation phases; promote top-down using formal power and access to resources; rely on information provided by other types of champions
Champions of people	Reflects personal experience of disadvantage; high level of personal empathy with beneficiaries; highly pragmatic and realistic; highly ethos based;	Changing lives of beneficiaries; breaking down negative stereotypes; addressing systemic inequity and injustice; political change; broader system change; often focussed on a specific group	Typically lower level managers; closely connected to beneficiaries; operating at coal-face;	Informed by deep personal insights into the economic, social, cultural and political causes of disadvantage; Practical implementation; passion, commitment and energy.
Champions of a solution	Focussed on reducing risk, building trust and credibility for their approach; highly ethos-based;	Advocate a particular solution; Often advancing interests of a specific cohort group; innovation in challenging traditional solutions; leveraging power of business to bring about change; activism; system change; political change	Typically lower level managers; closely connected to external change agents and aligned interest groups; operating at coal-face;	Typically affiliated with a particular interest group; working through sympathetic intermediaries to provide endorsement and legitimacy; informed by deep knowledge and personal experience of a particular approach and interest group

References: Loosemore, M, Keast R and Barraket J (2022) A typology of social procurement champions in the construction and engineering industry, Construction Management and Economics, 40:5, 391-405

- We found that some types of champion appear to be more common than others. *Champions of the concept* were most common followed by: *Champions of organisations*; *Champions of people*; and *Champions of a solution*. Why this is the case is unclear and further research is needed to understand whether this balance within an organisation has any influence on the effective implementation of social procurement.
- We found no pure types of champions. Although all participants anchored to one particular type of champion role, they also switched between different types of champion roles in different contexts.
- There are overlaps and similarities between some of the champion categories presented above.
- So while the results provide support for the overall proposition that there are multiple types of champions involved in implementing social procurement into the construction industry, they portray a more complex and dynamic picture of champions who have to be pragmatic, nimble and responsive to different organisational contexts.
- It is clear that different champion roles have merits in different situations and more research is needed to further refine and test this new typology to understand how these various champions roles shift and interact and what type of role is a most appropriate and when.
- We found that project sponsors are critically important for all champions in helping them build trust and credibility in project teams.
- Our results also highlight the importance of demonstrating the tangible benefits of social procurement in the context of specific project deliverables which may be different to central corporate deliverables.

What this means

- Giving the responsibility to one person to implement social procurement is likely to fail.
- Organisations need to nurture different types of social procurement champions.
- Successful implementation is more likely when champions are given a clear organisational role, power-base and resources to drive change across an organisation and its supply chain, where there is likely to be significant resistant to change.
- These findings reflect research in the field of sustainability which shows that allocating the role of champion to one person creates the risk of creating an organisational fiefdom which can undermine the collective responsibility and collaboration which is crucial to implementing these new reforms into the construction industry.

References: Loosemore, M, Keast R and Barraket J (2022) A typology of social procurement champions in the construction and engineering industry, Construction Management and Economics, 40:5, 391-405