

# Building supply chain competence in the health sector

Elinor Caborn on the growing awareness of the importance of integrating logistics within organisations



As health procurement and supply chain management gain recognition in the developing world, the global health community is increasingly turning its attention to capacity building within organisations to ensure robust human resource support for health systems strengthening. Numerous organisations have delivered training courses for many years and training budgets have steadily increased for supply chain functions. More recently, recognition of the need to professionalise supply chain managers has led to more comprehensive human resource development approaches in this field.

Traditionally, governments and health organisations have provided in-service training in supply chain management for doctors, pharmacists, and other health professionals, but this is expensive and takes health professionals away from the jobs they are trained to do. Many universities have started to provide pre-service training in supply chain management, which instils an early appreciation of the value of supply chain management, but it remains a time-consuming 'extra' for health workers in the workplace. In the longer-term, it is only by valuing supply chain management as a profession in its own right that health institutions can ensure a consistent supply of health commodities and a well-functioning health system.

A number of initiatives and resources are building momentum for the strategic role of supply chain managers in health systems. The People That Deliver initiative is working to improve health outcomes by developing a sustainable health workforce for managing supply chains. Separately, the new 'LAPTOP' resource, recently launched by the Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition, provides a comprehensive database of supply chain training opportunities, including classroom-based courses and workshops, distance learning programmes, and degree programmes.

Health sector efforts are part of a wider trend towards the increased professionalisation of public sector supply chain managers more generally. Following a wave of legal and institutional reforms to public procurement across Africa, attention is now firmly turning to the question of capacity building. The availability of procurement training is increasing at all levels, from basic introductions to new procurement procedures to academic courses run by universities.

Ghana provides an excellent example of this wide range of training options. When its Public Procurement

Board first developed a procurement capacity building strategy, it recognised the need for short-, medium-, and long-term training. Crown Agents partnered with the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration to develop a modular training programme to meet short-term needs, with 25 modules which could be combined to meet the varying needs of four different target groups. Given the cross-cutting nature of the procurement function, the short-term implementation plan was based on training an estimated 25 000 people including procurement staff, tender committees, the private sector and oversight institutions. Crown Agents then teamed up with selected tertiary education institutions to develop curricula, modules and lecture notes for medium and long-term training, which included a bachelors level degree course in procurement to ensure a supply of qualified new recruits to the profession in future.

Professionalisation is not just about training; Africa has seen a rapid growth in membership of professional bodies. International bodies such as the UK Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply and Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport have expanded significantly in Africa, while many countries are establishing their own national professional bodies.

Training and professionalisation often come together through the increasing drive to secure professional accreditation of public procurement training at all levels. With assistance from Crown Agents, staff of Botswana's Public Procurement and Asset Disposal Board developed a series of procurement training modules and completed a training-of-trainers course prior to building capacity in its procuring entities. The rollout of training started with health sector bodies as the first priority. The Board is now seeking accreditation of its training materials, both nationally and internationally.

The public sector is learning important lessons from recent trends in the private sector for the professionalisation of supply chain management. Martin Christopher captured this trend in his book, *Logistics and Supply Chain Management – Creating Value-Adding Networks*, when he said, 'It is only recently that logistics and supply chain management have emerged as key business concerns and there are still many companies where these ideas have yet to be fully implemented. The good news is that, generally, logistics and supply chain management have moved much higher up the agenda in organisations in every industry and sector.'

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