

# 1:1 User Interview

Dennis Baker

Dennis managed the California State Assembly Reprographics department, starting as a print operator in the 1970s and becoming manager in the 1980s. He retired in 1997. I told him we're doing research and wanted to hear his experience of purchasing for the state reprographics department he managed.

## Learning Goals

- Better understand the type of person who may be tasked with acquiring IT hardware/software/services
  - What attitudes and concerns inform their thinking?
  - How does purchasing fit into the context of their other responsibilities?
- Get a glimpse into the operation of a state institution
  - Understand the sequence of events that comprise a purchase decision.
  - Understand the range of purchase decisions and how they differ.
  - Understand the stakeholders involved in purchasing.

## Take-Aways

1. Insight from subject matter experts would have relieved a burden from non-IT individuals.
  - **"The biggest pain was having to do research into something I knew nothing about. When you're trying to run a department, you don't want to waste time on figuring out what to buy."**
  - "Time invested in research is money spent"
  - "Making purchases is a risk" (risk mitigation & institutional validation/justification was a recurring theme)
    - Summary: Desired insight into the suitability of equipment based on need. CDT may be the right technical partner.
  - "Vendors have biases which didn't always align with the needs of the department"
2. Don't lose the real people in the process...these goods serve a person's needs to get their job done. The tools can influence the job.
  - "People who operate the thing have their own opinion on how the job should be done"
3. Tracking purchases was manual, a personal spreadsheet. Spreadsheet would be re-visited for repair/replace.
4. "Managers use what they already have. It's hard to get anybody to change."
  - Question for future consideration: Where did the CDT master list come from?
  - Thought: CDT likely has the technical discernment to define a short list of recommended options.

## Summary

Dennis managed the reprographics department including personnel, print projects, and purchasing facility equipment. He purchased almost everything for his department, including paper, furniture, printing presses, computers, inks, oils, service for having rags cleaned, pencils, delivery trucks and a couple shuttle vans. Usually they consulted vendors and went for the lowest bid that still met their requirements. The exceptions were furniture and computers. The state departments handled those requests.

His department had roughly 6 design computers and 15 PCs for data and project tracking to include job costing etc. He researched printers and equipment specific to his department, but there was a separate computer unit that did computer research and was responsible for installing software and maintaining systems. He would sign off on those purchases.

Dennis described purchasing managers as conservative, time-conscious and risk-averse. Researching major purchases was time consuming and risky. You don't want to make a poor choice because state agencies are always under scrutiny for how they spend their money. However, time spent researching is also a cost.

He included employee input in the purchasing decision to ensure their opinion was honored & that equipment met their needs.

On his wish-list, Dennis would have liked being able to draw on experience of other departments to inform purchasing decisions. This would have reduced his research burden and mitigated the purchase risk, because he could include the other department's feedback in his justification.

## Raw Notes

We're going to purchase a bunch of computers.

Talk to other departments.

Find out if vendors responded properly.

Eg wanted a PC & needed 100GB. You put that in specifics.

State has to take the lowest bid from a qualified vendor.

He'd keep track of products and read periodicals.

Vendors come in and show you--they have their own biases.

He'd hear from a chief administrator, some cutting edge things. Printing presses or fork lifts.

We'd buy furniture, go to ergo officer.

Process: Write a proposal, justify the purchase.

Talk to people who actually use the equipment. People who operate things they have their own ideas about how it should be done. You get their agreement, then in general they're going to go overboard to make it work.

Eg buying a printing press, lead operator prefers a certain type. Research it.

State isn't like everywhere else. If someone screws up a job, wouldn't perform as well.

Some pieces wouldn't work for some people.

He always read periodicals, eg for graphic designers, vertical chairs. Manager gets info from employees, sometimes employees have good ideas.

### How often?

Most things have a longevity pattern.

How quickly the technology turns over.

You ask, what's the usage pattern?

### Re-order point.

Copier longevity is 1.8 million impressions. Will use up in 5 years. You keep it out of your budget for 5 years.

### **What would you purchase?**

Paper, furniture, printing presses, computers, inks, oils, service for having rags cleaned, pencils.

### **How do you keep track of that stuff?**

Spreadsheets of when you bought it, if its replacement you had a reorder point (linked directly to the historical purchase).

### **Did you keep track of spending budget?**

Not at the Assembly.

State agencies would have budget. Payroll, rent, etc. equipment purchases.

### **Purchasing criteria**

Agencies might buy compatible systems. Agencies buy same type of equipment to reduce training etc.

How long does the equipment last. Dell vs Acer, it costs \$500 more. They know the technology will change fast.

**Managers use what they already have. It's hard to get anybody to change.**

Government budgets are 1 year. If you don't use money by end of year, so many purchase in may june july because they want to keep budget up.

[We talk about California Department of Technology, I explain what they do.]

### **Looking at other departments to make purchasing decisions**

Say I took over LDC. [Legislative Data Center](#) (this is State Assembly department). I would pull up their website, look at what is their usage, what are they doing? What is their function. They're going to need this type of equipment. There's not much difference between departments. **They do the same thing but for different agencies.**

Let's say you want to write a program to help people buy things. People that have bought things can see a rating system. State agencies can give input so other agencies can get feedback. Did you get good tech support? Notify user - 6 months out, how is it working for you?

Vendors always trying to sell you stuff. State agencies go to conferences or shows put on by vendors. Big print shows, what was available. They invite state agency people for demo. State agency would take a specific item, 13 in and 11 inch paper. Looking for a machine that accommodate 2 different sizes at the same time, in sequence. Examples of your actual tasks.

Sometimes vendors will group things. Had to watch out - if you buy this, we'll give you that. I'd want to know longevity, downtime, i'd want a lot of data. **Research takes a lot of time, you're going out on a limb, if you're using your own personal research and going on what vendor tells you.** State agencies do a lot of the same tasks, you'd think they'd draw on experience of other people in other agencies. Cross over information.

**Biggest pain was having to do research into something i knew nothing about. When you're trying to run a department, you don't want to waste time on figuring out what i want to buy.**

You're using public money. A big factor is cost based on value not just initial cost. The government gets in trouble for paying too much. But the quality is an issue.

You want to be able to justify your purchase.

**Who were you accountable to to justify a purchase?**

My boss - I could downsize headcount from equipment efficiencies.

Also - the public. State got system done by oracle, had a contract. Newspaper got ahold of it, it was ridiculously expensive. You don't want to be in that position. **One of the most important things is drawing on experience of other managers, it's less risk.** You can say we purchased this based on input from other departments. I'd like access to something that said 'our department saved xxx because we purchased this.'

**People constantly feel that government wastes money. As a manager wasting time is money. Research costs money. You have to watch all that stuff.**

Legislative Data Center did same as Dept of Technology. But they need to respond to specific needs for specific agencies. We had something like that - state furniture agency.

**Anyone else we could talk to?**

Rich Wageman. Purchasing representative for California State Legislature.

Gus Demas. Fiscal officer for State Legislature ([here's a deposition he gave](#) in a suit where newspapers were suing to get information on Assembly's spending)