Identifying strategies & barriers to sustainable procurement at Canadian universities: An exploratory study on information technology (IT) equipment & supplies

MScSM Master of Science in Sustainability Management

Institute for Management & Innovation
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO MISSISSAUGA

Marin Davidson | Supervisor: Brett Caraway | Class of 2021

BACKGROUND

- Sustainable procurement is a powerful yet underused mechanism for public institutions such as universities to address environmental, social, and economic issues stemming from purchasing decisions.

- Sustainability champions advocate for the evaluation of Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) in request for proposal (RFP) documents to account for all costs throughout the life cycles of services & goods.

- The materials extraction required for products including computers, printers, paper, and ink & toner cartridges makes the IT category an ideal candidate for sustainable procurement improvement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- *What strategies have Canadian universities adopted in their sustainable procurement practices for information technology (IT)?*

Supporting Questions:
- What sustainability criteria inform these sustainable IT procurement strategies?
- What barriers do universities face in advancing sustainable IT procurement?
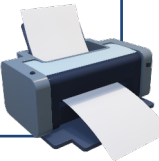- How has total cost of ownership (TCO) factored into procurement decision-making?

METHOD

- This exploratory study included primary research through semi-structured interviews.

- Six Canadian universities were interviewed, with staff from procurement, sustainability, and/or IT roles.

- Interview transcripts were coded using NVivo 12 to qualitatively analyze strategies and barriers.

KEY FINDINGS

- Centralized vs. decentralized procurement departments produce different outcomes in terms of employees' purchasing autonomy for sustainable products.

- The focus on "best" or lowest initial price is still prevalent, though a focus on triple-bottom-line (TBL) sustainability inclusion is increasing.

- Sustainability criteria in RFPs and supplier codes of conduct were not mandated, but rather encouraged/recommended.

- Several universities were shifting away from: (1) desktop computers in favour of laptops; and (2) personal printers in favour of commercial printers.

- COVID-19 created some positive impacts for paper reduction by accelerating the adoption of e-signing and e-procurement processes, though in some cases increased IT purchases for employees working from home.

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Meaningful sustainability criteria for IT requires greater weighting in RFPs.

- Universities have a responsibility to focus on the sustainability impacts and costs of services and goods over the whole life cycle (i.e., TCO), as opposed to a fixation on the lowest initial purchase price.

- Buy-in and collaboration is needed from administration, departments, and faculty for successful sustainable procurement practices.

- IT departments, in addition to procurement and sustainability, have a critical role to play in sustainable procurement.

- Coordination among universities through collective purchasing agreements/partnerships and other best practices can accelerate sustainability adoption and benefits.

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