Challenges in IT Services Procurement in Government

Caviling is not foreign to Indians. With this thought, I am reminded of a fable. Once a very famous painter kept his ravishing painting for public display and has invited people to list the shortcomings. He felt miserable to find that his painting was inundated with thousands of unsupportive remarks, shattering his self-worth into pieces. After a few days, he recovered from his depressed state of mind and decided to place the same painting seeking solutions to improve the piece and there were none.

My reason of citing this story is to highlight two kinds of people; doers and the backseat drivers. The story is emblematic of the challenges faced in procurement; in fact the word "challenge" also seems minuscule when the complexities are weighed in. Procurement involves an understanding of objective, stakeholders, and deliverables. It includes fixing of resources, formation of Request of Proposals (RFP), bidding & evaluation process, choosing the vendor within required timeline. The key stakeholders in this process include Ministries, Government Departments, Procurement agencies, vendors who can be the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) themselves or their authorized agents/distributors. The entire process has to comply with General Financial Rules & the CVC guidelines. The stakeholders, rules & procedures pose indefinite challenges results in undesired delay.

The procurement commences with formation of different committees. Conflicting interests forms the primary challenge in the entire process. On the other side, the challenges posed by the prospective bidders relate to:

1) Eligibility conditions

2) Failure to comply with the stipulated time frame

3) Challenges posed to the decisions of the technical committee

4) Quotations of unviable rates

Some bidders who are unable to bag the tender often question the integrity of the government officer or send anonymous letters to the ministry leading to the process being viewed suspiciously. Avenues like RTI, CAG, & CVC become their potent weapon for debilitating the system.

Rules are made to avoid anarchy and not flexibility. The rules that are designed to smoothen the process often hinder it. The GFR rules are not conducive to innovation and therefore cradle stagnation. What is required is re-working of these rules to create a stimulating environment and a process like Strategic Alliance in NICSI can be part of the GFR considering specialized nature of ICT niche products.

At times, the rigidity of the committee members ruins the entire process. The rules are the guiding beacons but should never be the over-riding factor, compromising things like efficiency, speed, skill and quality. The system should be the base for overall working and the members should decide the superstructure which should be in tandem with innovation and achieving the primary object for which procurement is made. It is thus imperative to weed out the environment of fear and offer space to the government officials. Entertainment of anonymous/ pseudonymous complaints by CAG

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& CVC inhibits the progress. Audit should be a parallel exercise with processes i.e proactive corrections and not reactive penalization. Let us not make Governance and Procurement contradictions to each other.

Visionary ideas such as Digital India, which promises to transform India into a connected knowledge economy, entails critical sourcing of ICT products. The mindset requires transformation from A (Avoid), B (Bypass), C (Confuse), D (Delay) to R (Responsive), O (Ownership), A (Accountable), D (Decisive). After all, progress is determined when second mindset overcomes the first. Why make this struggle an unending exercise?

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