Getting the First Mile Right:

How Early Moves Shape the Success of Digital Procurement Transformation

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In an era where digital procurement transformation can define competitive advantage, the success of initiatives like SAP Ariba hinges less on technology and more on behavioral readiness, institutional trust, and early alignment; elements too often assumed but rarely secured. Consider the case of MED-X Inc., a global pharmaceutical company, whose SAP Ariba rollout was scheduled to go live on October 1st. One month before launch, the project stalled. A late-stage earned-value analysis revealed that technical infrastructure had been over budget and behind schedule for months—yet no one had escalated the issue. The cost was a multi-week delay and millions in lost anticipated savings. This is the "First Mile" failure in action. For supply chain and procurement executives, the early phase of transformation is both the most underestimated and the most critical. This white article delivers executive-level insights to accelerate this foundational stage, not because the first mile is the only phase that matters, but because it sets the conditions for whether the rest of the journey can succeed. We focus on the true enablers of success: strategic alignment, data clarity, and disciplined execution.

1. **The First Mile Bottleneck:** Digital transformation stalls not because of insufficient tools but because of unclear vision, fragmented ownership, and misaligned expectations. The First Mile is

where great strategies often falter. Without a clear and shared understanding of procurement goals, technology becomes a source of complexity instead of clarity. This phase is marked by competing definitions of value, incomplete visibility into the procurement lifecycle, and data scattered across disconnected systems. Until these issues are addressed, any digital procurement platform remains underutilized.

2. **Build the Right Core Team Early:** Strategic execution requires more than good intentions. It begins with assembling a transformation team that reflects both operational depth and enterprise vision. This includes a procurement business lead with authority, an integration-savvy IT partner, a data custodian with cross-system knowledge, and a stakeholder who champions organizational change. Weekly cadence meetings, governance charters, and a clear escalation path must be established from day one. Without structured collaboration, alignment will remain superficial and decisions will be reactive.

3. **Identify Stakeholders Then Align**: Procurement transformation affects more than just the procurement function. Finance, compliance, legal, category managers, and key suppliers are all impacted and must be engaged early. Leaders should prioritize inclusive workshops that address shared goals and interdependencies, operational pain points and constraints, and success metrics that transcend function-level KPIs. These early engagements surface latent risks and foster a culture of shared ownership, essential for cross-functional agility.

4. **Capture Business Requirements the Smart Way:** One of the most overlooked drivers of success is the ability to translate operational friction into meaningful system requirements. This means resisting the temptation to replicate old processes in new technology. Executives should demand requirement capture that is grounded in user narratives and real scenarios, quantified by business impact and urgency, and filtered to distinguish foundational needs from future enhancements. This approach ensures the solution design is outcome-driven, not feature-driven.

5. **Get Your Data in Order Early and Proactively:** Data is the backbone of digital procurement. Yet, in many organizations, supplier and contract data live in silos, lack standardization, or are riddled with duplicates. Relying on late-stage cleanup risks derailing timelines and eroding trust in the system. A rigorous data readiness effort should include appointed data owners accountable for critical domains, a working definition of data quality aligned to SAP Ariba requirements, and parallel cleansing efforts initiated during discovery phases. The investment in data is an investment in future analytics, automation, and supplier collaboration.

6. **Executive Acceleration Moves**: The C-suite's role is not just to sponsor but to lead transformation with intent. Executives can accelerate early progress by demanding outcome-based steering reviews every two weeks, enforcing readiness criteria before greenlighting implementation, and actively removing structural or political obstacles. However, even in mandate-driven cultures, successful adoption depends on how the system supports daily decisions, reduces friction, and aligns with how procurement teams actually work. Mandates may enforce usage, but only perceived value ensures sustainability.

Pro tip: If your KPIs are system usage and not behavioral impact, you're measuring compliance, not adoption.

Equally important is signaling that this is not an IT project but a business-led shift in how value is created through procurement.

7. **Adoption: The True Test of Transformation:** Digital procurement isn't about going live, it's about being used. Across dozens of transformation programs, we've seen that poor adoption isn't caused by system flaws, but by misaligned incentives, disengaged stakeholders, and early decisions that fail to reflect end-user realities. That's why the first mile matters: adoption is never just an end-stage challenge—it's a downstream reflection of how inclusively, clearly, and consistently we design transformation from day one. Engagement, trust, and relevance drive sustained use.

Conclusion: Fast Foundations Create Scalable Transformations

Digital procurement is not a system go-live; it is an enterprise redefinition of how value flows across the supply chain. The first mile is where momentum is won or lost. But success is ultimately measured by adoption. Fast foundations matter—but only if they lead to lasting change in how people work and engage with the system.

Ultimately, adoption isn't a phase, it's a verdict. And it's passed not at go-live, but in everyday use, across hundreds of decisions made by people who either trust the system or work around it.

The Questions for Procurement Executives and their Teams:

- Have we clearly defined what success looks like across all stakeholders?
- Is our data accurate, owned, and ready for intelligent automation?

- Are we investing as much in change leadership and adoption as we are in technology?
- Have we created conditions where adoption is driven by value, not obligation?

Image source: https://tbtech.co/news/the-future-of-procurement-how-leaders-can-seize-the-moment-by-digitizing-procurement/

About CMC

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