



# Successful Tool Re-Use in Open Contracting

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## Research: Summary of Findings and Methodology

# This document is a summary of findings from research into what conditions support the successful re-use of open contracting tools.

This research was commissioned by The World Bank, conducted by The Engine Room in collaboration with the Open Contracting Partnership from May to October 2019.

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# Summary of Research Findings

## What affects whether an organisation successfully re-uses an open contracting tool?

Open contracting tool re-use involves a complex set of challenges, in part because needs, skills and resources can differ widely across contexts.

Through research, however, we were able to identify a number of conditions that can dramatically improve a re-use project's chances of success. These are outlined broadly below.

### 1. Sufficient support

From our interviews, it became clear that the following types of support play a significant role in successful open contracting tool re-use.

**1.1 Direct help and troubleshooting from the original tool author, or others who have in-depth understanding of the original tool.** Ideally, this support will be local, and available in person. In almost every case of success we documented, whether in open contracting or in civic tech more generally, direct support played a crucial role – particularly where support was provided under contract and with dedicated funding.

**1.2 Thorough and clear tool documentation.** Detailed, comprehensive and accessible documentation ensures that a tool can be implemented in a new context smoothly, without unexpected gaps or hidden surprises. In cases where documentation is inadequate, this can lead at best to frustration and struggle, at worst to the abandonment of a project halfway through.

**1.3 Community.** One of the key draws of re-use cited in our interviews was the opportunity to become part of a global community of people involved in related work, grappling with similar challenges and potentially able to offer advice or support. Community-building around tools and approaches can and does happen in a variety of ways, including through in-person events, mailing lists, Google Groups and GitHub. In the field of open contracting, there is a lot of room for strengthening and supporting these.

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**1.4 Good learning resources.** There are already some good resources out there available for new implementers, but our interviews showed that more are needed, particularly on a relatively ‘intermediate’ level – i.e. pitched at those who are not necessarily programmers, but who would still like to get into more detail than provided by more ‘overview-level’ resources.

**1.5 Financing.** Though this is, of course, a necessary condition for any technical project, it came up repeatedly in our interviews as something that tended to be underestimated in re-use projects. Though these projects can do away with licensing costs as well as some of the costs involved in building tools from scratch, there are still significant costs to be covered. These include substantial developer time (for adaptation and implementation of the tool), as well as project management, long-term maintenance and sustainability, and infrastructure. Our research also found that joint funding models, which provide financial support to both the new implementer and the original tool author, have had success in re-use projects outside of open contracting.

## 2. Tool adaptability, modularity and usability

**2.1 Tools should ideally be as adaptable as possible.** For a tool to be successfully re-used in a new context, a degree of adaptation is generally needed. For tool authors, this could mean building tools with adaptability in mind. A number of our interviewees noted the difficulty of adapting complex tools, and expressed a need for smaller, more modular tools that can be used together or extended.

**2.2 The barrier to entry for many open contracting tools is too high for many potential users.** Open contracting systems often need to be used by a cross-section of users with differing technical abilities. In our interviews, technical complexity came up repeatedly as a barrier to successful re-use, and a need was expressed for tools that are easier for a wider range of people to use (e.g. web-based tools).

## 3. Recognition of differences in context

In open contracting tool re-use, differences between the context the original tool was designed for and the new context can be substantial, and can determine whether a re-use project is successful or not.

**3.1 Differences in technological infrastructure** were cited surprisingly frequently in our interviews as a barrier to success.

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**3.2** For practitioners interested in re-using a specific tool, this means looking at the context for which that tool was originally designed, mapping it carefully against their own, and adapting where necessary.

## **4. Adequate access to data, quality of data, and government buy-in**

Though not specific to re-use projects, the importance of quality data and political buy-in came up so often in our interviews that they deserve a mention here. Lack of access to data and lack of quality data in particular were highlighted as major challenges.

# **Methodology**

The research on which these recommendations are based was carried out with two goals in mind:

1. To better understand common challenges and opportunities facing practitioners when implementing open contracting tools.
2. To support open procurement practitioners in assessing their options in a more strategic and effective way that reflects their context-specific needs, in order to increase their impact.

The research was done in three overlapping phases.

### **Phase 1: Desk Research and Community Call**

- Desk research: Building on existing research in the field, we conducted desk research into current tools and approaches.
- Community call: With the aim of connecting actors who might not be up to date with current approaches, and to provide a good starting point from which to begin our work, we held an open conference call to which we invited four speakers to share their insights and experiences. The call was joined by more than 40 participants and observers.

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## **Phase 2: Interviews**

For this phase, we worked closely with the Open Contracting Partnership to identify potential interviewees, and conducted hour-long interviews with a total of 23 people. These interviewees fit the following profiles:

- open contracting and civil society practitioners
- civic technologists
- open contracting tool authors
- open contracting tool re-users
- open contracting support providers
- data analysts.

Our interviewees were based in the UK, Lithuania, Nigeria, Mexico, Romania, Colombia, Canada, the US, Uruguay, Malawi, Hungary, Kenya, Paraguay, Nepal and Pakistan.

## **Phase 3: Synthesis and analysis**

This phase involved synthesising our interviews and desk research to pull out key findings. These were then used as the basis for two sets of recommendations: one for potential re-users of open contracting tools, and one for open contracting tool authors and support providers.