How Are Acquisition Decisions Documented?

Idea In Short

Document acquisition decisions when they are made, while evidence and trade-offs are still clear. For each material choice, record the question, options considered, evidence, assumptions, rationale, decision-maker, approval conditions, and follow-up actions. Keep the record proportionate: a short decision log can support routine choices, while a complex or high-risk strategy needs a fuller analysis. Store documents so the team can find them and preserve versions when decisions change. Good documentation helps leaders review the reasoning, supports consistent implementation, and gives future contract managers the context they need. It should explain judgment rather than create paperwork for its own sake.

Acquisition decisions often rely on several sources of evidence and require trade-offs among competing outcomes. If the reasoning remains only in meetings, messages, or the memory of a few people, teams lose context when staff change or conditions shift. Decision documentation creates a dependable account of what was considered, what was selected, and who authorized the next step. It should support accountability and implementation, not become a substitute for sound judgment.

Decide what warrants documentation

Not every task needs a formal memorandum. Focus on choices that change the acquisition's direction or expose the organization to meaningful cost, risk, or commitment. Examples include validating the need, selecting a delivery model, defining competition, packaging requirements, approving an evaluation method, accepting residual risk, changing scope, and selecting a supplier. Routine scheduling or formatting choices may only need to appear in working notes.

Materiality depends on context. A low-value purchase may still involve a significant operational or integrity risk. A larger purchase may be routine if it uses an established

approach and market. Define documentation expectations based on value, complexity, uncertainty, and consequence rather than relying on a single threshold. The OECD's Recommendation on Public Procurement emphasizes accountability and evaluation through the procurement cycle, reinforcing the need for records that allow decisions to be reviewed.1

Capture the reasoning at the time

A useful decision record states the question clearly. “Approve strategy” is too broad unless the reader can identify what the strategy contains and what is being authorized. State the options considered, evidence used, assumptions, trade-offs, recommendation, decision, and any conditions. Note which alternatives were rejected and why. If the decision depends on an unresolved assumption, name its owner and validation date.

Record the date, participants, decision authority, and approval conditions. Distinguish advice from approval. A person who attends a meeting has not necessarily approved every outcome. If a decision is conditional, specify what must happen before the team proceeds. If authority is delegated, cite the relevant internal delegation or approval route. These details keep the record useful after the participants have moved on.

The acquisition.gov source material includes planning topics such as the need to document risks, trade-offs, and the content of acquisition plans. In a general setting, the same approach helps teams explain why a route was selected and how cost, capability, performance, and schedule were balanced.

Link evidence to the choice

Evidence should support the specific point being decided. A market study may support a supplier participation assumption, while a cost model supports affordability and whole-life comparisons. Keep source material or links with the decision record. Explain the limits of the evidence, such as small sample size, outdated market data, or estimates that depend on supplier input. Where no evidence is available, label the judgment as an assumption rather than presenting it as fact.

The World Bank's PPSD guidance describes strategy as an evidence-based combination of objectives, operational context, market research, risk management, arrangements, and

contract management. A decision record can make that chain explicit by connecting each conclusion to its supporting analysis.2

Avoid pasting large amounts of analysis into a decision memo without identifying the point. Summarize the key finding and link to detailed support. A leader should be able to see the choice, rationale, principal risks, and approval needed quickly, while analysts can inspect the full evidence separately.

Use a consistent record format

A short template can prompt teams to capture the same core elements. Useful fields include decision ID, question, owner, date, options, evaluation criteria, evidence, assumptions, rationale, approver, conditions, risk acceptance, and actions. Keep the format simple enough that people will use it. A complicated form can encourage box-checking and obscure the reasoning.

Maintain a decision log alongside the acquisition plan. Give each material decision a unique identifier and link related decisions where one depends on another. For example, the packaging choice may shape competition and evaluation. If a later change affects that choice, the team can quickly find its dependencies. The European Commission's better regulation approach promotes evidence, consultation, and transparency in policy work; clear records similarly allow an organization to show how analysis informed action.3

Store records for retrieval and control

Store approved records in an organizational repository with version history, access controls, and a naming convention. Link them to the plan, sourcing documents, approvals, and contract file. Avoid scattering final decisions across personal drives or informal chat threads. Provide access to people who need the context while protecting commercially sensitive or personal information.

Records management should address retention and disposal. Keep records for the period required by organizational policy and applicable law. Preserve original approvals and subsequent revisions. When a decision changes, do not overwrite the original rationale. Add a new record stating what changed, what evidence caused the change, and who approved it.

UNCITRAL's Model Law on Public Procurement treats transparency as a core principle that makes compliance and fairness visible. While specific legal duties differ across jurisdictions, organized records help demonstrate consistent treatment and support independent review.4

Make records useful during delivery

The contract manager should receive the key decisions, unresolved assumptions, performance measures, risk owners, and approval conditions before taking responsibility. This prevents the delivery phase from treating the contract as detached from the business case. The record can explain why certain measures matter or why a risk was allocated as it was. It also gives the organization a basis for interpreting changes and evaluating supplier performance.

Periodic review can compare the rationale with actual outcomes. Did the selected approach deliver the expected value? Were cost and schedule assumptions accurate? Did the market respond as predicted? Did risk responses work? Capture lessons in a way future teams can find, but avoid turning a past decision into a default rule for a different context. The Sourcing Playbook links preparation, selection, implementation, and end-of-contract planning, illustrating why the decision history should travel through the full lifecycle.5

Good documentation is concise, timely, and specific. It captures evidence and judgment without disguising uncertainty. When the record makes the decision understandable to someone outside the original meeting, it supports accountability and creates a foundation for better future planning.

- 1OECD Recommendation on Public Procurement
- 2Project Procurement Strategy for Development Guidance
- 3Better Regulation
- 4UNCITRAL Model Law on Public Procurement
- 5The Sourcing Playbook

Summary

A decision record is valuable when another informed reader can understand the choice

without reconstructing months of conversations. Capture rationale, evidence, alternatives, authority, conditions, and open actions at the time of decision. Keep records accessible, controlled, and linked to the plan and contract. When a decision changes, preserve both the original and revised reasoning. This gives the organization a dependable account of its commitments and a practical source of learning for future acquisitions.