



## OPERATION EXCELLENCE THROUGH CURATED, GOVERNED CATALOG BUYING

### Abstract

Procurement organizations continue to face pressure to improve speed, compliance, and cost efficiency, yet a large share of spend still occurs outside structured buying channels. This paper argues that strategic catalog management is one of the most underutilized levers for driving procurement effectiveness at scale. When treated as a governed, user-centric digital product rather than a static repository, the catalog becomes a primary mechanism for policy enforcement, spend control, and operational discipline. Drawing on market benchmarks and practitioner insights, the paper demonstrates how strong catalog governance, standardized item data, and consumer-grade user experience can deliver material benefits. It outlines a pragmatic framework for procurement leaders.



## Executive summary

Procurement organizations are under pressure to deliver faster cycle times, stronger compliance, and measurable cost efficiency, yet a substantial portion of spend continues to bypass structured buying channels. From our perspective, strategic catalog management represents one of the most underutilized levers for driving structural improvement. When governed rigorously and managed as a dynamic digital asset, catalogs shift from being transactional tools to becoming a primary mechanism for policy enforcement, spend control, and operational discipline. High catalog compliance directly reduces maverick purchasing, increases transparency, and ensures adherence to negotiated supplier terms, making catalog buying foundational to procurement effectiveness at scale.

Our assessment of one of our customers' current environments highlights significant upside. Only 14% of total spend flows

through catalog and punchout channels (7% each), indicating low adoption in comparison to best practices and substantial opportunity to standardize buying behavior. This is compounded by catalog complexity driven by supplier and SKU proliferation, where legacy maintenance approaches have resulted in inconsistent data, duplication, and fragmented user experiences. Organizations that establish strong catalog governance and data standards consistently outperform peers, achieving procurement cycletime reductions of up to 60%, compliance improvements of 30–40%, and savings in the range of 8–12% through tighter specification control, according to **McKinsey's procurement transformation research**. In a procurement landscape defined by volatility and scale, catalog excellence is no longer an operational enhancement, it is a strategic enabler. Market benchmarks reinforce

this conclusion. Poor product data quality costs organizations an average of \$12.9 million annually through inefficiencies and lost opportunities, according to Gartner research on data quality. Nearly 48% of B2B buyers identify inaccurate product information as their primary source barrier, while 87% rely on online product data when selecting suppliers, as reported by the CMO Council and cited by Catsby PIM. Furthermore, organizations that invest in enriched and wellmaintained product data report up to a 35% increase in conversion rates, underscoring the direct relationship between catalog quality, user adoption, and financial outcomes, according to SuperAGI's B2B data enrichment research (2025). These benchmarks confirm that disciplined catalog management is not incremental value, it is a proven and material driver of procurement performance.

## Current landscape and problem statement

Despite broad adoption of ERP and P2P platforms, our customer procurement teams continue to face several structural and operational challenges related to catalog management:

- A significant portion of key spend still flows through NCI PRs, consuming valuable tactical sourcing capacity, particularly within the packaging L1 category.
- The current catalog is not user-friendly and lacks standardized item

descriptions, making it time-consuming to identify the correct items. This complexity contributes to maverick buying and low compliance.

- Pricing is inconsistent across locations due to the absence of robust master data governance. Catalog ownership is local and fragmented, resulting in uneven review and update cycles.
- Many catalog items have outdated descriptions, incorrect prices, or expired commercial terms. This leads to supplier

escalations and encourages requesters to bypass the catalog altogether.

- Catalog search and structure are non-intuitive, driving low user satisfaction and reduced adoption.

Over time, catalogs have grown organically without clear ownership or governance, resulting in cluttered, inconsistent catalog environments that erode contract value, increase workload, and limit the effectiveness of procurement systems.



## Recommendations

### 1. Catalogs must shift from static repositories to dynamic, experienced procurement channels.

Traditional procurement catalogs were built and controlled by procurement teams, designed mainly for compliance and supplier management rather than usability. However, modern digital procurement demands a fundamental shift from static, procurement-centric catalogs to dynamic, user-centric procurement experiences. Most catalogs are built by procurement, but they should be designed for end-user behavior. Intuitive navigation, consumer-like search, and guided buying radically improve adoption and compliance.

### 2. A well-curated catalog is the fastest route to procurement efficiency

A well-curated procurement catalog

transforms the buying experience from a manual, multi-step process to an automated, policy-aligned workflow. When employees purchase through a catalog, they aren't just selecting items, they're engaging with a pre-validated marketplace that automates the most time-consuming parts of procurement.

- **Catalogs automate sourcing:** They use pre-vetted suppliers and negotiated pricing, so users don't need to search or request quotes manually, speeding up sourcing.
- **Catalogs automate price validation:** Contract-compliant, pre-negotiated prices ensure automatic price accuracy and prevent off-contract purchases.
- **Catalogs streamline approvals:** Since catalog items already meet policy

and compliance rules, approvals become faster or automated, reducing bottlenecks.

- **Catalogs automate fulfillment routing:** Items are routed to preferred suppliers or internal sources automatically, improving accuracy and reducing lead times.

By automating routine, repetitive steps sourcing, price checks, compliance validation, and routing catalog-based purchasing significantly reduces tactical workload. Procurement teams can redirect their time toward higher value activities. These strategic efforts deliver longer-term value than manual ordering or exception handling and directly impact cost savings, supplier relationships, and operational continuity.

### 3. Catalog governance is the real value driver not the catalog itself

A catalog, by itself, is simply a list of items but the real value comes from how well it is governed. Catalog governance ensures that what goes in the catalog, how it is structured, how often it is updated, and how tightly it aligns with procurement policies all work together to deliver efficiency, compliance, and user adoption.

- Governance ensures accuracy, consistency, and contract compliance
- Governance drives on-contract buying and reduces maverick spend
- Governance improves supplier performance and data quality
- Governance enables automation and guides buying to work
- Governance increases adoption by creating consumer grade experience

### 4. End-user behavior must drive catalog design

Instead of optimizing catalogs solely for procurement governance, organizations must design the buying experience around how employees search, compare, and select items. Evidence from leading

procurement platforms shows that modern catalog solutions increasingly focus on intuitive interfaces meant to mimic consumer shopping experiences.

- SAP Ariba highlights that “buying can be a pleasure with consumer-like shopping” interfaces, emphasizing ease of use and intuitive navigation.
- GEP similarly stresses that intuitive search functionalities allow employees to independently source approved items, improving satisfaction and reducing maverick spending.

This shift aligns with broader procurement transformations where simplifying the user experience is a core priority for digital procurement evolution. Merging procurement tools are now designed to simplify the user experience through modern, conversational, and intuitive interfaces, directly responding to user behavior patterns.

### 5. AI-enhanced catalogs will redefine the future of buying.

AI-driven procurement is shifting how organizations discover, evaluate, and purchase goods and services. At the center of this transformation is the next-

generation digital catalog, a dynamic, self-optimizing ecosystem powered by automation, intelligent insights, and continuous learning.

Organizations that invest today in clean, structured, and enriched catalogs will be best positioned to unlock these AI-first capabilities tomorrow.

**Automated item classification:** AI standardizes messy product data by auto-categorizing items, detecting duplicates or errors, and normalizing supplier attributes—resulting in cleaner catalogs, faster onboarding, and reduced manual work.

**Real-time recommendation of preferred items:** ML recommends preferred, compliant, cost-effective, and sustainable items based on user behavior and organizational buying patterns—improving decision-making and reducing maverick spend.

**Proactive price discrepancy detection:** AI continuously monitors catalogs and invoices for price variances or contract violations, triggering alerts and workflows—strengthening cost control and enabling real-time compliance.





## Implications for procurement leaders

Below are practical, cost-effective, and actionable implications for procurement leaders based on above points.

### 1. Treat the catalog as a “digital product”

**Implication:** Procurement leaders must shift from periodic catalog clean-ups to continuous catalog ownership, with a product-management mindset.

**Actions:**

- Assign one global catalog owner and local data stewards no new hires required, just clear accountability.
- Use a simple RACI and monthly health-check dashboards.
- Enforce “no NCI PRs raised for catalog categories”

**Impact:** Improves price accuracy, reduces escalations, and increases on catalog buying.

### 2. Standardized item descriptions to reduce maverick spend

**Implication:** Inconsistent and unclear item descriptions drive users away from catalogs.

**Actions:**

- Apply a description template (product name + unique ID + specs + UoM).
- Use Excel-based cleansing or lightweight auto-classification tools instead of MDM systems.
- Remove duplicates and consolidate SKUs quarterly.

**Impact:** Better searchability, improved user

experience, and 5–10% cost reduction from SKU rationalization.

### 3. Move tactical sourcing workload into catalogs

**Implication:** Catalog expansion is the cheapest way to free up sourcing capacity.

**Actions:**

- Identify top 30% repeat PR categories (like packaging L1) and convert them into cataloged items.
- Introduce guided buying for common services (e.g., monthly services, consumables).
- Push low-value, high-frequency items into catalogs rather than NCI (non-catalog item).

**Impact:** Expanding catalogs to cover high-frequency, low-value items can deliver **30–50% cycle-time reduction**, based on industry benchmarks and automation impact studies published by Versa Cloud ERP and procurement transformation leaders

### 4. Build a consumer-grade user experience, not complex hierarchies

**Implication:** Adoption will not improve unless the catalog looks and feels intuitive.

**Actions:**

- Simplify catalog navigation using plain-language categories (not procurement terminology).
- Use thumbnail images for top items (cheap, high impact).

- Implement keyword-based search enhancements with auto-synonyms in the P2P tool.

**Impact:** Higher adoption and fewer NCI PRs without any major system investment.

### 5. Establish a light, practical governance model

**Implication:** Governance drives catalog value.

**Actions:**

- Monthly price-change audit by supplier and procurement data agent.
- Quarterly catalog hygiene check (inactive items, outdated terms, duplicates).
- Introduce SLAs with suppliers for catalog updates (48–72 hours).

**Impact:** Reduces off-contract buying and price variation across locations.

### 6. Use AI selectively for high-ROI tasks

**Implication:** AI doesn’t need big budgets—start with targeted use cases.

**Cost-effective applications:**

- AI-based automated classification of items to clean the existing catalog.
- Duplicate item detection (free/low-cost marketplace tools available).
- Price discrepancy alerts that eliminate manual invoice-matching effort.

**Impact:** Improves data quality and reduces manual workload with zero major tech upgrade.

## Conclusion

Only 7% of spend goes through the catalog and 7% via punchout, so there's a big opportunity to move manual, ad-hoc buying into a simple, digital channel. Treat the catalog like a product: Give it a single owner with local stewards, use standard item descriptions, and shift repeat PRs into the catalog. Keep it clean with monthly

price checks, quarterly tidy-ups, and supplier SLAs for quick updates, and use light AI to classify items, spot duplicates, and flag price issues. Done well, the catalog becomes the fastest and most compliant way to buy, cutting cycle time by up to 60%, lifting compliance by 30–40%, and saving 8–12% as evidenced by **McKinsey-**

**led procurement transformation benchmarks**, while freeing sourcing teams for higher-value work and improving the requester experience. Start with ownership and the top repeat categories, track adoption and NCI reduction monthly, and scale what works.

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