

Early interaction among public and private actors in public procurement: a boundary work perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the boundary work strategies of buyers and suppliers during the early interaction phases of the public procurement process. It also examines how those strategies influence the transition from traditional arm's-length interaction to relational interaction.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative embedded case study examines boundary work in the early phases of public procurement of catering and home nursing services.

Findings – The pre-tender phase requires balancing formal procurement rules and relational practices, which can hamper the boundary work that promotes relational interaction. The early post-tender phase complements the pre-tender phase by promoting relational interaction, considering that suitable boundary work strategies are applied.

Practical implications – This study provides insights into how boundary work strategies applied influence relational interaction in public procurement. Trust-building and a rethinking of established procurement practices are necessary to implement relational pre-tender interactions without compromising equality principles. Early post-tender interaction is critical in strengthening collaboration and addressing challenges inherent in the pre-tender phase.

Social implications – This study provides insights into the challenges of the early phases of interaction in public procurement, addressing the gap between policy goals and their implementation.

Originality/value – This study contributes to public–private interaction research by conceptualising dynamic interaction patterns and how they emerge in the early phases of the procurement process and to the understanding of relational interaction development by demonstrating the influence of multi-organisational boundaries on such interaction. The study highlights the role of early post-tender interaction in boundary-crossing.

Keywords Boundary work, Early interaction, Public–private collaboration, Public procurement

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Existing literature acknowledges the significance of early interaction in public procurement (e.g. Holma *et al.*, 2022; Taheriruh *et al.*, 2025b), and the public sector has made great efforts to create new platforms for interaction with private organisations (Torvatn and de Boer, 2017). In Finland, for example, an amendment to the Public Procurement Act (1397/2016) seeks to encourage contracting authorities to organise market dialogues to provide firms with better opportunities to participate in tendering procedures. A further goal is to ensure that contracting authorities can obtain the information necessary to prepare procurement documentation (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2026).

However, integrating new interactive procurement practices into a standardised public procurement framework is challenging (Abrahamsen and Munksgaard, 2025; Taheriruh *et al.*, 2025a). Existing research notes that it requires a transformation from traditional, arm's-length transactional forms of interaction towards relational interaction (Keränen, 2017). Procurement legislation is said to challenge intersectoral

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interaction by highlighting the requirement for the non-discrimination of suppliers (Torvatn and de Boer, 2017; Rokkan and Haugland, 2022; Hawkins *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, bureaucracy in the procurement process tends to hamper public organisations' attempts to implement strategic policies (Neumann *et al.*, 2019) that promote early interaction with suppliers, thereby creating a gap between policy goals and implementation (Flynn and Davis, 2016; Taheriruh and Moshtari, 2024). Although regulatory frameworks provide flexibility for early interaction in public procurement (Fridner *et al.*, 2025), there is a discrepancy between the expected and existing interaction patterns (Waluszewski *et al.*, 2019). For example, although EU directives permit public authorities to organise a market dialogue to discuss plans and requirements with the parties prior to a procurement launch (EU directive 2014/24/EU), the option remains underused (European Commission, 2024). Furthermore, there are many examples of procurement exercises in which early interaction with private organisations did not achieve its goals. A recent EU report surmises that such inefficiencies may result from poor planning, ambiguous requirements and insufficient market awareness (European Commission, 2025, p. 47).

Additional research on early public–private interaction in public procurement could clarify the reasons for these failures and inefficiencies (Torvatn and de Boer, 2017; Taheriruh *et al.*, 2025a). Specifically, it is vital to understand how procurement strategies related to early interaction are implemented in practice (Grandia and Meehan, 2017; Plantinga *et al.*, 2020; Sloot *et al.*, 2025), and how informal interactions between public buyers and private suppliers unfold (McKevitt and Davis, 2015; Berkhout *et al.*, 2026). Such understanding is necessary for fostering change towards relational interaction, characterised by mutual communication and trust (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

To address these gaps, we focus on public and private actors' boundary work to understand the different strategies organisations use in interactions during the early phases of the public procurement process. We apply boundary work theory, which provides a complementary perspective for understanding the organisational and institutional boundaries inherent in public–private interaction by extending beyond theories that primarily emphasise economic incentives or contractual governance. Boundary work refers here to intentional individual and collective attempts to impact boundaries among groups and organisations (Langley *et al.*, 2019). Boundary work is critical in the context of public procurement, where the organisational boundaries between public and private actors are distinct. Boundary spanners must take on additional responsibilities in crossing them (Alexander, 2024). We apply the framework developed by Langley *et al.* (2019), which divides boundary work into three strategies: collaborative, competitive and configurational. The framework allows us to operationalise boundary work as observable practices and link them to the benefits associated with relational interaction (Lambrechts *et al.*, 2023), such as mutuality and trust. We examine how these three boundary work strategies are applied in the early phases of the public procurement process, including the pre-tender phase with potential suppliers and the early post-tender phase with the selected supplier preceding the signing of the contract. We also examine how those strategies influence

relational interaction. We focus on the open public procurement procedure, which is used in 82% of EU tenders (European Commission, 2025), and address the following research question:

- RQ1.* How do boundary work strategies applied in the early phases of the public procurement process influence relational interaction between public buyers and private suppliers?

This study contributes to the ongoing discussion on public–private interaction (e.g. Waluszewski *et al.*, 2019; Kronlid and Baraldi, 2020; Melander and Arvidsson, 2020; Holma *et al.*, 2020, 2022; Taheriruh *et al.*, 2025b) by developing a conceptualisation of dynamic interaction patterns and presenting how these patterns emerge from different configurations of boundary work strategies and sub-strategies enacted by public buyers and private suppliers in the under-explored domain of early-phase interaction in the public procurement process (Holma *et al.*, 2022; Sloot *et al.*, 2025). The study further contributes to understanding the development of relational interaction in public procurement (McKevitt and Davis, 2015; Berkhout *et al.*, 2026) by demonstrating that relational interaction in public procurement is shaped by the interplay of boundaries between public and private actors and by the boundaries among competing suppliers. Specifically, we identify that the pre-tender phase interaction is inherently competitive and requires balancing formal procurement rules and relational practices, which tends to hamper attempts to engage in boundary work that promotes relational interaction. In contrast, early post-tender interaction promotes such interaction more flexibly. It is thus important for boundary-crossing and relationship development, as it allows the parties to address knowledge gaps arising from the earlier phase and to build a trusting relationship based on mutuality during the contract period. By conceptualising early interaction as a multi-phase process and highlighting the critical role of early post-tender interaction for boundary-crossing, we enhance the understanding of early interaction implementation in public procurement (Grandia and Meehan, 2017; Plantinga *et al.*, 2020).

The following section discusses buyer–supplier interaction in the early phases of the public procurement process and presents the theoretical background regarding boundary work. The outcome is a conceptual framework that illustrates how early interaction unfolds between public buyers and private suppliers. Thereafter, the methodology and empirical contexts of the study are explained, followed by the analysis of boundary work in the early phases of municipal catering and home nursing service procurements. The key findings, their implications for theory and practice and the limitations and future research avenues conclude the study.

2. Literature review

2.1 Buyer–supplier interaction in the early phases of the public procurement process

Buyer–supplier interaction is a crucial part of any procurement process, whether in a public or business-to-business setting. However, its form, intensity and impact vary across different phases of the process. The focus of this study is on the early

phases of interorganisational collaboration in a public procurement context, which are critical for establishing mutual understanding, trust and commitment (e.g. Johnston and Hausman, 2006; Sloot *et al.*, 2025) and which thus form a basis for subsequent collaborative efforts.

In the early phases of the public procurement process, specifically within an open procurement procedure, interaction between public buyers (hereafter buyers) and private suppliers (hereafter suppliers) is strictly regulated to ensure transparency, fairness and competition. However, there are phases during which limited and controlled interaction may take place: during the *pre-tender phase*, before the tendering and in the phase preceding the signing of the contract, which we designate as the *early post-tender phase*. From an interaction perspective, the early phases of the open procurement procedure thus allow for essential but limited interaction between buyers and suppliers. These two phases often occur close together, but procedurally and legally they are distinct. While early buyer–supplier interaction in the public procurement context has frequently been empirically associated with pre-tender market dialogues (Holma *et al.*, 2022; Loijas *et al.*, 2024), a broader perspective is needed, specifically in the context of open procedures, in which buyer–supplier interaction is restricted. Because no contractual commitment exists before the contract is signed, these exchanges can be conceptualised as early interaction.

2.1.1 Pre-tender phase interaction

In the tender phase, direct negotiations and informal exchanges with suppliers are prohibited to avoid unnecessary influence or competitive advantage (McKevitt and Davis, 2013), making pre-tender phase interaction critical in gaining mutual understanding of the subject of the procurement (McKevitt and Davis, 2015; Hawkins *et al.*, 2025). Buyers are encouraged to engage suppliers in informal market dialogues. This practice has been acknowledged by policymakers, researchers and practitioners alike (Holma *et al.*, 2022; Loijas *et al.*, 2024) as a significant means of improving knowledge sharing between public and private actors (Edquist *et al.*, 2015; Keränen, 2017). For buyers, market dialogue may enable them to leverage suppliers' capabilities and expertise to develop public services and alleviate problems related to tender specifications. In contrast, for suppliers, it provides an opportunity to understand buyers' needs, support business growth and learning (Holma *et al.*, 2020) and use public buyers as a reference (Taheriruh *et al.*, 2025a). In the context of an open procurement procedure, market dialogue can be viewed as equivalent to the discovery phase discussed in business-to-business relationship development models. It is a phase during which the buyer may observe and evaluate multiple suppliers (Polonsky *et al.*, 2010). However, in public procurement, supplier selection cannot be based solely on such forms of observation and analysis, as organising a tendering process is mandatory.

2.1.2 Early post-tender phase interaction

Another opportunity for early interaction after the contract is awarded, but before it is signed, is the early post-tender phase. In this phase, the buyer and selected supplier finalise the successful bid and commence implementation. This phase is critical, as there are limited opportunities to adjust the contract once it has been signed (Arrowsmith, 2014). Any adjustments must be administrative or technical in nature, as substantial

changes would require a new procurement operation to respect the rules of fairness and transparency (Halonen, 2021). Furthermore, switching suppliers during the contract period is both difficult and costly for buyers (Fridner *et al.*, 2025). The early post-tender phase may correspond to the exploration phase identified in the relationship development model by Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987). In public procurement, this phase represents a stage of search and trial during which the buyer and supplier assess the feasibility of exchange; however, within a less flexible environment than in business-to-business settings.

In summary, early interaction in the open public procurement process is critical for fostering mutual understanding of the services procured and for their fluent implementation in collaboration with the private actor during the contract. Therefore, more research is needed on early interaction and how policies should be adapted to encourage better outcomes, because regulatory strictness and procedural formality can turn early interaction into transactional communication, undermining the relational benefits that interactive dialogue is supposed to bring (Holma *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, there are only a few studies in the public procurement context that highlight the importance of early interaction (e.g. Holma *et al.*, 2022; Sloot *et al.*, 2025), and most of those are directed towards public procurement of innovation (e.g. Adjei-Bamfo *et al.*, 2019; Berkhout *et al.*, 2026). Gaining an understanding of the early phases of different types of procurement is important because much of today's public procurement is completed without specific innovation purposes (Lember *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, while research on early interaction occurring before supplier selection is emerging, the early post-tender phase is a gap in academic research.

2.2 Boundary work theory

Boundary work theory facilitates the study of the boundaries between groups and organisations as they are enacted, and also how the actions of individuals in organisations cause them to change (Langley *et al.*, 2019). Viewed through the lens of boundary work, boundaries are a result of ongoing activities and a set of practices that individuals perform in their interactions with each other (Langley and Tsoukas, 2017; Langley *et al.*, 2019). Hence, boundary work differs from boundary spanning (Williams, 2002; Satheesh *et al.*, 2023; van Meerkerk *et al.*, 2024) and boundary objects, which connect organisations by spanning rigid boundaries (Star and Griesemer, 1989; Stephens *et al.*, 2024). Boundary work is critical for understanding and fostering the change towards relational interaction in the early phases of public procurement, as the establishment and reduction of boundaries may significantly shape the interaction between public and private actors.

We draw on the study of Langley *et al.* (2019) and define boundary work as *purposeful individual and collective effort to influence [...] boundaries among groups, occupations, and organisations*. Boundary work theory has been used to study boundaries among groups and occupations (Marrone, 2010; Comeau-Vallée and Langley, 2020), profit and non-profit organisations (Velter *et al.*, 2020) and cross-functional teams and external stakeholders (Ungureanu *et al.*, 2020; Wulff and

Finnestrand, 2022). Furthermore, boundary work has been studied in the context of service ecosystem boundaries (Razmdoost *et al.*, 2023) and project boundaries that influence the strategic change of organising work in interorganisational programmes (Vosman *et al.*, 2024). In the public sector, the application of boundary work theory has been limited, focusing on collaborative public management, including engaging stakeholders in solving public problems (Quick and Feldman, 2014) and investigating sectoral boundaries between the public and voluntary sectors (Frederiksen and Grubb, 2023), thus leaving the realm of public procurement largely unexplored.

In their broad review of literature, Langley *et al.* (2019) categorise boundary work as: competitive, collaborative and configurational. Competitive boundary work results in drawing boundaries between groups of people, whereas collaborative boundary work contributes to reducing the impact of boundaries and configurational boundary work to reconfiguring existing boundaries (Wulff and Finnestrand, 2022). We follow earlier studies (e.g. Wulff and Finnestrand, 2022; Razmdoost *et al.*, 2023; Vosman *et al.*, 2024; van Muijden *et al.*, 2025) and apply this threefold categorisation of boundary work to study early interaction in public procurement. The categorisation enables the examination of actors' intentions to establish, reinforce and undermine boundaries, and their influence on relational interaction between public buyers and private suppliers. We treat these three forms of boundary work as strategies used by buyers and suppliers in their interaction during the early phases of the public procurement process. These boundary work strategies are discussed next to understand the multiplicity of activities and practices associated with them.

2.2.1 Collaborative boundary work – reducing the impact of boundaries

Collaborative boundary work reduces the impact of boundaries by developing and sustaining the cooperation and coordination required to achieve collective goals (Langley *et al.*, 2019) across different organisations (O'Leary and Vij, 2012) and sectors (Bryson *et al.*, 2006). In the pre-tender phase, collaborative boundary work may relate to joint problem-framing across organisations; the key criterion is that interaction remains transparent, impartial and non-distortive. The early post-tender phase collaboration is different because it permits informal boundary work without such restrictions. Langley *et al.* (2019) establish that collaborative boundary work facilitates learning, addresses differences and conflicts and fosters collaboration among different sub-strategies of negotiating, embodying and downplaying boundaries. By *negotiating boundaries*, actors negotiate, collaborate, coordinate and blur or realign boundaries in interaction with others to get everyday work done (*ibid.*). *Embodying boundaries*, in turn, indicates the way of taking a specific position to manage the uncertainties of belonging to and navigating different contexts and parties (Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Azambuja and Islam, 2019). Finally, *downplaying boundaries* involves ignoring existing ones, which then go out of sight (Hinds and Bailey, 2003; Meier, 2015).

2.2.2 Competitive boundary work – drawing boundaries

In competitive boundary work, actors draw boundaries to establish an advantage over others (Langley *et al.*, 2019). In the context of public procurement, competitive boundary work

may manifest as the indirect practices through which the buyers define their relational distance with suppliers, for example, as with information asymmetry (Hawkins *et al.*, 2025) in the pre-tender phase. In this situation, boundaries are a source of self-protection, when actors use sub-strategies of defending, contesting and creating boundaries to differentiate themselves from others and define their territory (*ibid.*). According to Langley *et al.* (2019), *defending boundaries* is typically made visible by an external threat, such as a new governmental policy, which forces actors to mobilise practices that enhance their privileges, for example, by taking control and relying on normative rules and regulations. *Contesting boundaries* indicates that boundary work may differ depending on the status of the actors (*ibid.*). For example, such boundary work may favour incumbents and established boundary relationships that benefit the dominant groups (Bucher *et al.*, 2016). In the pre-tender phase of public procurement, a supplier without prior experience of collaborating with the buyer might have a different level of subject knowledge in relation to new suppliers. Newer or weaker groups may thus struggle to *create boundaries* and spaces for themselves to establish their position (Santos and Eisenhardt, 2005).

2.2.3 Configurational boundary work – reconfiguring boundaries

Configurational boundary work involves restructuring boundaries for organised activity, drawing on elements of collaboration and competition, thereby permitting the sub-strategies of arrangement, buffering or coalescing of boundaries (Langley *et al.*, 2019). Typically, the trigger for *arranging boundaries* comes from outside the boundaries. The intention is probably to create interaction, with a focus on doing new things or doing the same things differently (Langley *et al.*, 2019; Razmdoost *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, boundaries are important in introducing spaces where actors are set free from their social role and intend to discuss alternative models (Cartel *et al.*, 2019). For example, Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) use the term “experimental spaces,” in which the involved actors are exempt from criticism and sanctions and thereby open to innovation and changes in routines (Bucher and Langley, 2016). Similarly, reflective spaces facilitate interactions, mobilise boundary rearrangement and promote change (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010; Lunkka *et al.*, 2022). Temporary spaces within an organisational field encourage lateral thinking because a separation from regular activities and the inclusion of new patterns of action can enable actors to achieve collectively what otherwise might not be possible (Langley *et al.*, 2019). *Buffering boundaries*, in turn, is a special strategy of configurational boundary work that implies boundary shaping to accommodate collaboration among organisations from inharmonious social worlds (Langley *et al.*, 2019). Such boundary work is produced by boundary organisations that allow actors to continue belonging within their established boundaries, thereby deliberately allowing them to maintain both competitive and collaborative boundary relations (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2008; Mørk *et al.*, 2012). Finally, *coalescing boundaries* refers to integrating existing activities and spaces into newly redefined areas or spaces by combining elements from collaboration and competition to “an acceptable degree of coalescence” (Langley *et al.*, 2019, p. 725).

2.2.4 Boundary work in the early phases of public procurement

While the public procurement context increasingly promotes early buyer–supplier interaction, its practical implementation is shaped by procurement legislation and transparency, fairness and competition guidelines. We take a boundary work lens to understand this interaction. We argue that the boundary work strategies and their sub-strategies that the actors apply in this interaction influence how the boundaries between public buyers and private suppliers are enacted and altered across the public procurement process. Actors might reduce the impact of boundaries, create new boundaries or reconfigure existing ones, depending on their boundary work strategy. To broaden the understanding of early interaction in public procurement, we apply the three broader strategies of boundary work by Langley *et al.* (2019) – collaborative, competitive and configurational – and explore how boundaries are enacted in the frames of procurement legislation and guidelines through these strategies in the early phases of public procurement. That is, while we acknowledge the importance of boundary work sub-strategies in demonstrating actors' boundary work, this study examines boundary work at a broader level and focuses on its influence on relational interaction (Figure 1).

3. Research methods

A qualitative embedded case study is used to examine boundary work strategies applied and their influence on relational buyer–supplier interaction in the early phases of the public procurement process. This method fosters a holistic understanding of organisations and their interactions and collaboration in a specific context (Easton, 1995; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005).

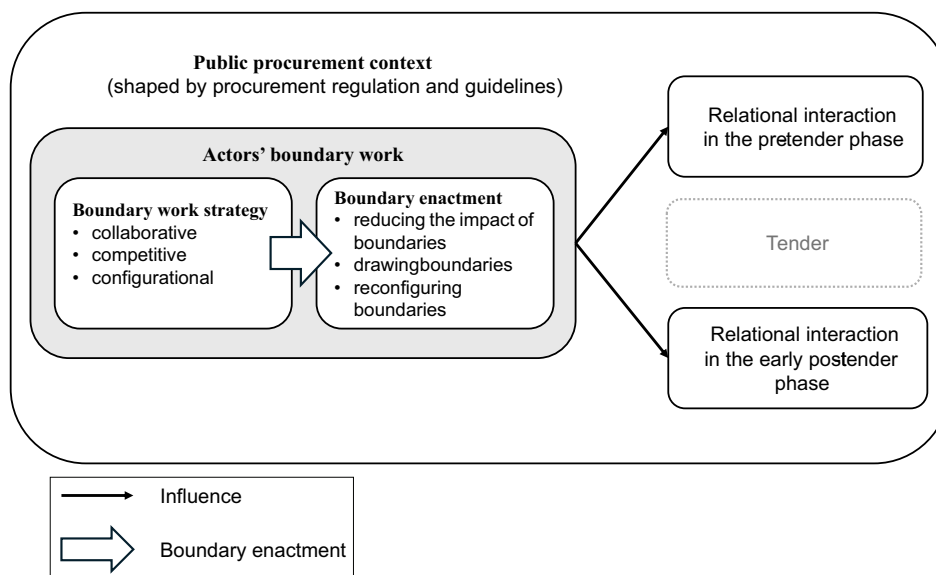
The study explores two public procurements in two Finnish towns relating to care-home and hospital catering services and home nursing services. The procurements were conducted in accordance with EU public procurement regulations (EU Directive 2014/24/EU). We define our case as cases of early interaction between buyers and suppliers in a procurement process. With two buyers and multiple suppliers per buyer, this results in multiple subunits of analysis, enabling an investigation of boundary work strategies that either enhance or restrict relational interaction between buyer–supplier pairs.

The two procurements were selected for investigation for three reasons. Firstly, they relied on an open procurement procedure. Secondly, they involved early interaction through market dialogues between the buyer and potential suppliers to facilitate information sharing, and early post-tender discussions with the selected suppliers to implement the terms of the contract in practice. Thirdly, we observed that the counterparts encountered challenges during these interactions; we therefore focus on identifying the underlying reasons for these issues by using a boundary work lens. This is critical as reflections on failure may lead to learning (Edmondson, 2011), and although there are studies on failure (e.g. Zhu and Zolkiewski, 2015), failed organisations tend to be underrepresented in research (Coelho and McClure, 2005).

3.1 Data collection

The data were originally gathered for a project investigating the pressures of change encountered by public-sector buyers in routine procurement operations. The focus was on the potential for enhanced cooperation and networking between actors to have positive effects. The data were gathered from both buyers and suppliers in several towns in Finland, and we observed that the absence of effective early interaction led to

Figure 1 The conceptual framework of the study



Source: Authors' own work

significant challenges in the later phases of the procurement process. Accordingly, we selected two public procurements from this project for this study. Those examples revealed insights into the challenges buyers faced when interacting with suppliers, specifically in the early phases of the procurement process. The qualitative research literature confirms that a secondary analysis of a rich qualitative data set is an effective approach when exploring emergent phenomena (Heaton, 2004; Köhler *et al.*, 2025).

The primary data include thematic interviews (Arksey and Knight, 1999), from which 16 interviews related to catering procurement and nine to home nursing procurement. Furthermore, the catering services data include information from four workshops with the buyer and observations of 14 instances of market dialogue interactions between buyers and suppliers. The interviewees were involved in the examined procurements. Their number included experts from procurement units (PUs) (e.g. PU manager and project manager responsible for the procurement), other public-sector units (e.g. city council, service manager responsible for catering, manager of home nursing unit and service managers), the supplier organisations (e.g. sales and service directors, key account managers, senior managers, a CEO, a regional manager and a director of food services) and other relevant organisations (e.g. consultants and technical procurement specialists).

The interviewing began with the two towns' PUs, who suggested additional interviewees from other units and the supplier side (Biernaki and Waldorf, 1981). The interview process was terminated once data saturation was achieved (Guest *et al.*, 2006), as indicated by the point at which additional interviews from either group no longer revealed new themes. We transcribed and coded the interviews. The secondary data include data from procurement documents and local newspaper articles, which were used to triangulate the interview data (Flick, 2004) by providing and confirming details on the events in early interactions. Table 1 presents the details of the data collection.

3.2 Data analysis

Two researchers conducted the empirical analysis, so each researcher was responsible for analysing a procurement. The authors described, compared and tabulated their procurements (including how early interactions were organised) to build mutual understanding, address the moderation problem arising from using different researchers in each procurement (Stewart, 2012), and assure investigator triangulation (Flick, 2004). In addition, the coding frame was deductively formed, and the two researchers analysed its categories. The process created a mutual understanding of the codes to mitigate researcher bias, and illustrated how the findings should be assigned to them (see MacPhail *et al.*, 2016).

The analysis followed the parallel steps of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing (Miles and Huberman, 1994), and it included three phases. Firstly, the early interactions between buyers and suppliers, before and after tendering, were inductively analysed. In this phase, we identified the activities organised among these actors for each procurement and their timelines and phases. Then, the activities were described in terms of their goals, the actors

involved and how the interviewees characterised the interactions. This allowed categorising and coding the activities (Maxwell and Miller, 2008). We used the framework by Langley *et al.* (2019) to distinguish empirically observable boundary work strategies (see Lambrechts *et al.*, 2023). Table 2 provides examples of the coding process.

In the second phase, we analysed the influence of different boundary work strategies on relational interaction in the pre-tender interactions with potential suppliers and in the early post-tender interactions with the selected suppliers. This required reflecting the findings within the context of the examined procurement actions (Maxwell and Miller, 2008). In the third phase, the findings of the two procurements were compared. The ongoing discussion among the researchers during each phase of the analysis enabled such a comparison of the findings and the drawing of conclusions about how boundary work strategies were applied in the early phases of the public procurement process and how they influenced relational interaction.

3.3 Descriptions of the catering and home nursing services procurements

Town A, which has around 200,000 inhabitants, outsourced its catering services, which were previously provided by a limited company owned by the town (the incumbent supplier). The purpose was to organise the municipal catering services more profitably and cost-effectively without sacrificing quality. The town's caterer provides approximately 10.6 million meals per year, and the total value of the procurement was €24.8m. The first step after the outsourcing decision was to invite internal stakeholders and external interest groups to discuss the needs for catering services and to develop the first draft of service specifications. The next step was to organise a pre-tender market dialogue with the suppliers. Eight suppliers took part in the tender, and a service agreement with a duration of five years was made with two suppliers.

Similarly, Town B, with a population of 70,000, outsourced 10% of its home nursing services. The outsourcing decision involved two districts, earlier managed by the town's home nursing unit, and included health services for 350 customers. The procurement was part of a training programme in which the buyer was taught to apply collaborative procurement practices and purchasing criteria that rely on results rather than detailed input. The motivation was to benchmark the private market and develop the productivity of the town's service delivery. The training course required the buyer to draft its service specifications and the penalty system that would be applied to evaluate the performance of the supplier over the course of the contract. Fourteen suppliers participated in the tender process, which was preceded by a market dialogue, resulting in the establishment of a three-year service agreement.

In both towns, the PU was authorised to arrange the tender and the pre-tender interactions (i.e. market dialogues) with potential suppliers. The market dialogues started with a joint information session in both towns, where the PUs presented information on the tender to prospective suppliers. In Town A, the joint session was followed by face-to-face discussions with the suppliers and facility presentations to familiarise the suppliers with the municipal kitchens and related logistics. The pre-tender discussions in Town A focused on procurement

Table 1 Data collection

Case	Data type	Object of data collection	Focus of data collection	Time period
Catering services	<i>Primary data:</i> - Five thematic interviews (9 h), four workshops (10 h) 11 thematic interviews (12 h) - Observations (14 occasions, 18 h) <i>Secondary data:</i> - Written documents - Six local newspaper articles	- Town's personnel, participating in the pre- and the post-tender discussions - Face-to-face pre-tender dialogues with suppliers, information sessions for groups of potential suppliers - PowerPoint presentations and tender documents - Relationships between the town and incumbent supplier	- How early interaction is organized and how interactions are perceived by the buyer and the suppliers - The content of shared knowledge and the atmosphere of the interaction and the depth of discussion - The content of shared knowledge and the impact of the pre-tender interaction on the final RFQ - Events in the relationships and in the service delivery	- Jun 2014–Nov 2017 - Sep 2015–Nov 2017 - Aug 2014–Jan 2016 - Sep 2014–Nov 2015 - Oct 2019–Mar 2020
Home nursing services	<i>Primary data:</i> - Five thematic interviews (6 h) - Four thematic interviews (4 h) <i>Secondary data:</i> - Written documents 10 local newspaper articles	- Town's personnel and an external consultant, participating in the pre- and/or the post-tender discussions - New supplier, participating in the pre- and post-tender discussions - PowerPoint presentation of the info session and tender documents - Relationships between the town and selected and new supplier	- Early interactions and their organizing and how interactions and their atmosphere are perceived by the buyer and the supplier - Organizing early interactions and the content of shared knowledge - Events in the relationships and in the service delivery	- Oct 2014–Dec 2014 - Nov 2014–Jan 2015 - Feb 2012 - Mar 2013–Nov 2013

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 2 Examples of coding process

Phase	Boundary work strategy	Actors involved	Example from the empirical data
Pre-tender	Competitive boundary work – defending boundaries	Buyer–potential suppliers	<i>"In-depth discussion requires face-to-face interaction with one supplier at a time. . . those most critical issues do not come out if competitors are there".</i> (Key Account Manager, Potential Catering Supplier, Town A)
Early post-tender	Collaborative boundary work – negotiating boundaries	Buyer–new supplier	<i>"Those [post-tender] meetings were very fruitful, we always looked at some of the sections [in the contract] and I asked what it means."</i> (Director of Food Services, Town A)
	Collaborative boundary work – downplaying boundaries	Buyer–new supplier	<i>"In every week, in different contexts, I get to repeat that from our perspective and the customer's perspective, it does not matter whether the service is provided by the firm X or by our own home nursing unit."</i> (Manager of Public Home Nursing, Town B)

Source(s): Authors' own work

details, such as the nutritional requirements for the meals and the percentages of required and permitted ingredients. In addition, the buyer presented the preliminary assessment criteria and the sanctions for insufficient service quality to the suppliers, inviting their feedback on the applicability of the criteria and the planned sanctions. In Town B, the pre-tender discussion revolved around the goals of the procurement training and the details of the procurement itself. The town PU paid particular attention to explaining the preliminary assessment criteria and the rewards and sanctions relating to supplier performance during the contract, again to obtain supplier feedback. After these market dialogue discussions in

both towns, the suppliers were asked to comment on and ask questions about the tender documents.

After the tendering, both towns organised *early post-tender interactions* with the selected suppliers to ensure that the terms of the contract were applicable to everyday service delivery. Several meetings were arranged to address the problems and shortcomings emerging from the market dialogues. In Town A, the PU organised early post-tender interactions with two suppliers who were awarded the contract: the incumbent catering supplier and a new supplier with no experience of providing catering services to the public sector. Town B, in turn, interacted with the supplier that was first awarded the

contract. However, collaboration with that supplier was terminated after 11 months in response to unresolved service delivery issues. The contract was then awarded to a new supplier, and new discussions on its implementation commenced with the replacement supplier.

4. Results

4.1 Pre-tender boundary work

The pre-tender phase involved interactions with the buyers and potential suppliers participating in the tenders. The data indicate that in both towns, buyers aimed to rely on collaborative boundary work in the pre-tender market dialogues as they tried to establish a shared understanding of the request for quotation (RFQ) with potential suppliers by sharing procurement-related information and allowing suppliers to pose questions to diminish the potential for varied interpretations of the RFQ requirements. The boundary negotiations provided the PUs with an opportunity to absorb the suppliers' market knowledge, formulate a rigorous RFQ and develop the services.

However, the data show that buyers and suppliers faced difficulties in using collaborative boundary work due to existing intersectoral boundaries, and none of the parties managed to reduce the impact of these boundaries or rearrange them to transform the traditional arm's-length interaction into a relational one. The data illustrate that boundary work remained competitive and defensive on both sides.

Despite recognising the value of engaging with suppliers to deploy their expertise in developing the RFQ, buyers defended their boundaries by maintaining a degree of distance and withholding information. The buyers controlled the discussions through unidirectional, buyer-led information exchange centred on predefined service specifications. The underlying reason appeared to stem from the relevant procurement regulation (e.g. 1§ Directive 2014/24/EU), which mandates equal treatment and non-discrimination of suppliers. The fear of legal challenge caused the buyers to be careful not to disclose any sensitive information obtained from one supplier to other suppliers during market dialogues. Specifically, in Town A, suppliers claimed that the lawyers representing the buyer were directing the discussions to the restrictions imposed by the Market Court (a specialised court that handles disputes over how public contracts are awarded). In contrast, in Town B, the fear of the Market Court led to a poor procurement decision involving a supplier whose bid proved underpriced:

In the market dialogue, you have to have a kind of filter, because each one of them [potential suppliers] wants to bring along something of their own, something that the others do not have, and which gives them a competitive advantage. We have to eliminate all such elements [from the RFQ] so that we comply with the Act on Public Contracts. (Service Manager, Town A)

They certainly socialise with people, not just us, so they keep firms close to them, but on the other hand, far away. (CEO, New Home Nursing Supplier, Town B)

The potential suppliers were unsure about their positioning relative to competitors, so during the competitive boundary work, they withheld information from the buyer. The buyers saw withholding information as necessary to defend their boundaries against other suppliers and maintain their position, fearing knowledge leakage from the buyer to their competitors.

Furthermore, during this phase, suppliers, facing uncertainty about future collaboration, were reluctant to share information, thereby reinforcing their need to maintain a boundary with the buyer. Their competitive boundary work therefore involved the suppliers in defending their boundaries against competitors, but also boundaries among themselves and the buyer:

These [group events] are unsuccessful. [...] They are just for unidirectional informing. There is no real discussion. [...] Service providers do not reveal their cards to their competitors, so they are generally a waste of time. (CEO, New Home Nursing Supplier, Town B)

No supplier will speak up in that phase [market dialogue] when you do not know if you will become the partner. (Service Director, Incumbent Catering supplier, Town A)

The data indicate that the situation led to restricted, arm's-length interaction and limited information exchange between buyers and suppliers in the market dialogue, making it difficult for suppliers to understand how to respond to the RFQ. Therefore, they followed the traditional procedures. In Town A, most suppliers expected the buyer to focus on price and short-term benefits. Consequently, they perceived their role as similar to that required in previous tendering processes: answering the buyer's questions thoroughly, precisely and with rigour. The suppliers were reluctant to advance new ideas, even though they might have provided cost savings and other long-term benefits. In Town B, the suppliers lacked experience in responding to the structure of the home nursing procurement. As a result, as in Town A, the suppliers reverted to established practices and habits, which reliance led them to underprice their bid to win the competition.

One reason for defending boundaries in market dialogues appeared to relate to buyers' and suppliers' lack of experience with the market dialogue activity, which affected their ability to adapt to the new collaborative way of interacting. Although the buyers were satisfied with the market dialogues, suppliers' perceptions varied, with many expressing disappointment. Group discussions were characterised as unproductive and limited, as they were influenced by supplier competitiveness, which led suppliers to defend their boundaries in the presence of competitors. Even individual face-to-face discussions were criticised. In Town A, the physical space allocated for these discussions was the buyer's premises, with competitors entering and leaving in sequence and bound by a tight schedule. This brought the competition between suppliers to the forefront, creating a tense atmosphere. Furthermore, although buyers made an additional attempt to ensure common understanding by giving suppliers the opportunity to pose written questions on the preliminary RFQ to avoid misunderstandings, the ambiguity of the responses, combined with the absence of opportunities for follow-up questions, posed significant challenges for suppliers concerning calculating their bids. The requirements of equal treatment necessitate that questions are made publicly available, which further encourages suppliers to protect their own boundaries from competitors.

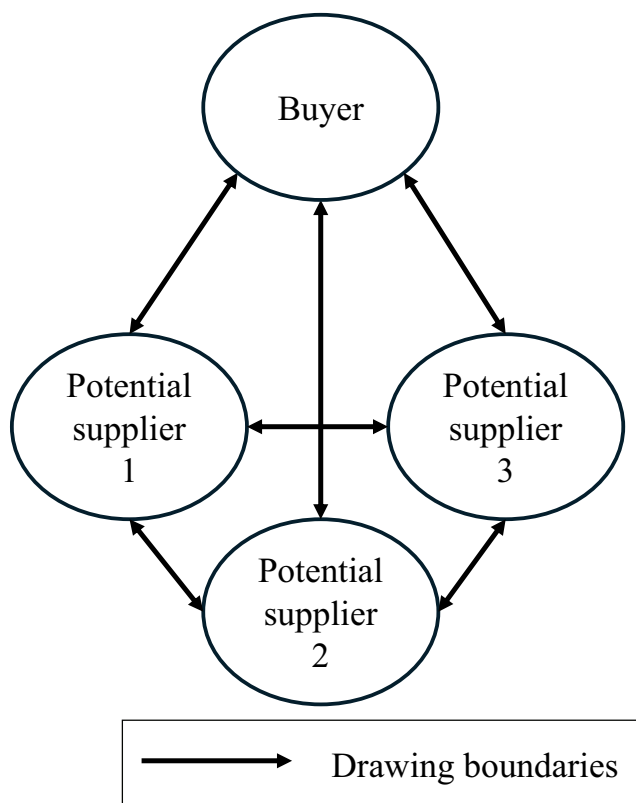
In summary, the challenges encountered during the market dialogues underscore that neither buyers nor suppliers mitigated the impact of existing boundaries. Instead, the interaction among competing suppliers was minimal or absent as they strongly focused on defending the existing boundaries. Furthermore, there was a lack of the configurational boundary work required to rearrange boundaries to produce different

results. That failure hindered the adoption of new collaborative interactive working methods, as both public and private actors were reluctant to divert from established routines. Conversely, the actors actively enacted boundaries by drawing and redrawing them, which allowed maintaining the arm's-length interaction typical of a public procurement context. It appears that the buyers and suppliers had not internalised the idea of market dialogue as a tool for developing relational interaction, or for understanding its nature. The concept requires sufficient time to foster reciprocity and trust. Figure 2 illustrates the actors' boundary enactment in the pre-tender phase, based on their boundary work strategy.

4.2 Early post-tender boundary work

Early post-tender interaction involved the buyer and each selected supplier. In both Towns, the PUs conducted several rounds of negotiations with selected suppliers to ensure that both sides shared an understanding of the contract terms. In contrast to market dialogues, these discussions were more flexible in terms of communication with no fear of knowledge leakage and future collaboration (almost) guaranteed. However, while discussions with each supplier focused on bridging the knowledge gaps remaining from the market dialogues, they were conducted in different atmospheres. In Town A, negotiations with the new supplier were largely collaborative, whereas negotiations with the incumbent

Figure 2 Buyer's and potential suppliers' boundary enactment in the pre-tender phase



Source: Authors' own work

supplier were characterised by conflicts. Similarly, in Town B, negotiations with the first supplier were marked by disputes, whereas those with the new supplier showcased a more collaborative interaction. These different strategies of boundary work and their influence on relational interaction are discussed below.

Competitive boundary work. In Town A, discussions with the incumbent supplier sparked mutual accusations of contract shortages and providing insufficient information during the market dialogue. The misunderstandings regarding the changes to the service processes stipulated in the new contract. For example, the buyer decided to save costs by requiring that, rather than warm meals, food should be supplied cold and reheated in the care homes. However, that required the supplier to use refrigerated transport. The incumbent supplier claimed that the change was not communicated during the market dialogue. The buyer accused the supplier of lacking the flexibility to adapt to changes due to their long-term relationship. In contrast, the supplier perceived that their relationship led the buyer to expect the changes to be implemented without discussion. Both parties remained focused on their differences, and the boundary work remained competitive, with interaction at arm's length:

There are many staff who do things their own way and cannot change their routines. (Service Manager, Town A)

We are the incumbent supplier, and they [buyer] supposed that when there is a new contract, we just change how we work, but there are so many collaborators affected by the changes. (Sales Director, Incumbent Catering Supplier, Town A)

The data from Town B showed that neither the buyer nor the supplier was clear on a realistic price for providing home nursing services. This was later identified as a knowledge gap that required addressing but was not properly discussed in either the market dialogue or the early post-tender negotiations. This became evident when the supplier immediately struggled to maintain the service quality at the price quoted to secure the tender. These problems led to additional post-tender discussions among the supplier, the PU and the internal customer to resolve them. However, although the problems were serious and generated negative feedback from end users, the parties were unable to agree on how to resolve them and thus negotiate their boundaries. That is, although the PU tried to organise meetings to resolve the issues, the supplier was said to have denied the issues, which prompted it to contest the sanctions imposed. The supplier's reaction thus competitively downplayed the need for change in its performance and created boundaries between the parties rather than fostering a connection. These divergent boundary work strategies thus led to asymmetric interaction between the parties, and they were unable to shift their interaction towards a relational form to resolve the issues:

The city has given feedback to the supplier and required correction of the deficiencies. Several negotiations have been held to rectify the situation. (Newspaper article, 20.3.2013, Town B)

The negotiations were chaotic, and the supplier admitted nothing, [it] saw nothing wrong in its own performance. In practice, it was as if the supplier was repeatedly challenging the sanctions imposed. (Manager of Public Home Nursing, Town B)

Collaborative boundary work. In Town A, with the new catering supplier, the gaps in the contract related to practical issues that

had not been raised during the market dialogues; for example, who should provide the crockery on which the meals are served. However, after discussing the misunderstandings and filling the knowledge gaps, the collaboration was successful in terms of the parties learning from one another. The new supplier introduced minor improvements to the products; thus, the buyer and the new supplier created a reflective and experimental space to co-develop the services. The early post-tender phase lasted about three months and included frequent, in-person meetings. Those meetings required the parties to continue to exchange critical information on discrepancies in the service contract and to pursue further alignment. The new supplier highlighted collaborative early post-tender interaction during which the buyer and supplier learned to trust each other, which appeared to generate a relational form of interaction between them. The supplier even surmised that the significant miscommunication arising from an ineffective market dialogue had ultimately strengthened the relationship with the buyer, owing to both sides having to invest time to address the knowledge gaps:

The positive side is, in a way, that if the contract had been totally correct, we would simply have implemented it [without these discussions], and I am not sure if we would know each other this well today. (Director of Food Services, Catering Supplier, Town A)

In Town B, the problems with the market dialogue and with the first supplier spurred the buyer and the new supplier to negotiate boundaries by developing new patterns of cooperation and coordination to make their collaboration work. The actors renegotiated the contract terms slightly and developed practices to ease knowledge exchange, which resulted in the efficient coordination of routine tasks. An example was the agreement that the municipality's nursing staff would call the supplier daily to ensure they had the most accurate customer data available. Furthermore, at the strategic level, the PU and the new supplier agreed to share information on their internal processes and improve service delivery, thereby allowing the parties to address their intersectoral differences in a mutually beneficial way. Such information sharing was viewed as honest and reciprocal. In combination, the new knowledge-sharing routines reflected collaborative boundary work on both sides, as they later permitted downplaying intersectoral boundaries by softening the division between the counterparts and by influencing the development of a discourse in which parties referred to themselves in terms of "we" rather than "us" and "them". The new routines further demonstrate reciprocity and trust between the parties, thereby fostering relational interaction:

It is good when those meetings are organised, for example, in the most difficult customer cases. The city is involved in them, and we are then shoulder to shoulder, so that we in Town B offer this kind of home nursing. It is not that we [private supplier] offer something other than what the town offers or that we try to make it easier than in the town's home nursing or something else. In that situation, we are suppliers of the same service. This is the home nursing service that is offered here in town B. [...] By calling either phone, you get the same answer. (Regional Manager, New Home Nursing Supplier, Town B)

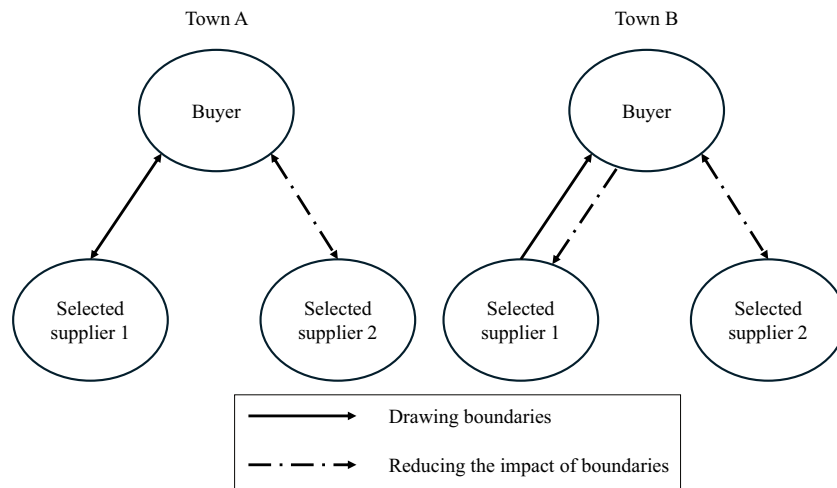
In summary, the data show that boundary work continued throughout the early post-tender phase. Interestingly, despite pre-tender market dialogues being identical and following equality principles, their consequences for early post-tender interaction varied significantly. In some buyer-supplier dyads, boundary work was characterised by the defence and contestation of boundaries and was therefore competitive, either

in a mutually competitive or a unidirectional manner. Examples included a single party setting boundaries while simultaneously attempting to undermine those of the other party. Consequently, the interaction remained either more at arm's length or asymmetrical. For others, the boundary work involved more negotiation and the downplaying of boundaries, making it more collaborative and counterparts were able to reduce the impact of boundaries and maintain relational interaction.

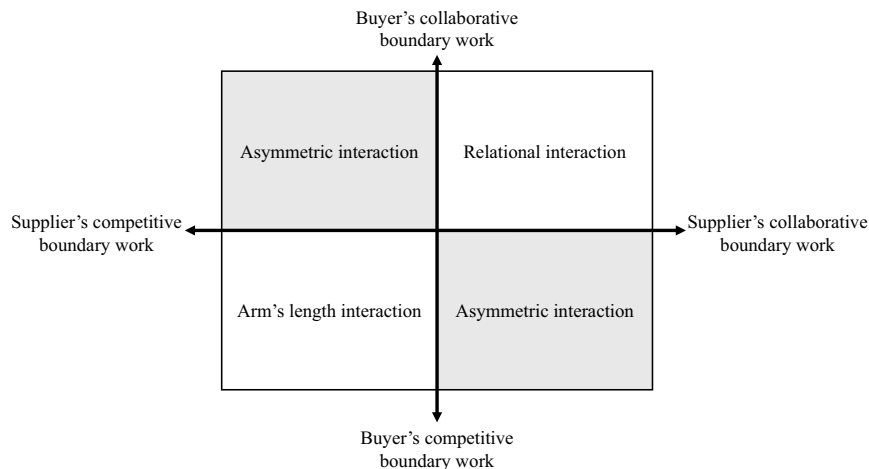
The differences in boundary work strategies appeared to stem from differences in relationship history and procurement experience, which shaped expectations concerning procurement implementation and the related collaboration on both sides. In the investigated procurements, some parties seemed to expect to rely on traditional and established routines and practices, which created conflicts they faced with the necessity for change. This was exacerbated by the asymmetry of understanding. In Town A, while incumbent suppliers typically possess superior knowledge of the buyer and the procurement process, mismatched expectations between the buyer and the supplier presented a significant challenge and led to competitive boundary work. A supplier with no prior experience of collaborating with the public sector was, however, more willing to adapt to the buyer's expectations, and the buyer was more understanding, thereby making the interaction more collaborative. In Town B, the initial supplier's expectations regarding procurement implementation did not align with the new requirements, and during the conflict, they resorted to competitive boundary work. With the new supplier, the need for changes in collaboration methods was recognised, resulting in collaborative boundary work. Furthermore, the impact of personal chemistry on more informal discussions in the early post-tender interaction, compared to regulated pre-tender interaction, should not be overlooked. [Figure 3](#) illustrates how boundaries were enacted through the actors' boundary work strategies in the early post-tender phase. The direction of the arrows indicates whether the process was unidirectional or bidirectional.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that a boundary work strategy influences the enactment of boundaries between the buyer and supplier(s), resulting in three types of interaction: relational, arm's length and asymmetric ([Figure 4](#)). Specifically, we find that when both actors use a collaborative boundary work strategy to reduce the impact of interorganisational boundaries, their interaction becomes relational. That form of interaction during the early phases of the public procurement process can advance achieving common goals; however, surpassing certain boundaries in public procurement remains challenging. Given that pre-tender interaction typically involves multiple suppliers and is inherently short-term, it often necessitates the buyer and potential suppliers drawing boundaries. When both parties engage in competitive boundary work, the outcome is likely to be an arm's-length interaction. In situations where the parties use different boundary work strategies, interaction becomes asymmetric, which can manifest as unresolved conflicts. However, the practical application of boundary work strategies can be understood as a continuum, ranging from competitive

Figure 3 Buyer's and selected suppliers' boundary enactment in the early post-tender phase

Source: Authors' own work

Figure 4 Conceptualising the types of early interaction in public procurement

Source: Authors' own work

boundary work to configurational and, ultimately, collaborative boundary work, thereby shaping interaction dynamics during the early phases of the public procurement process. This indicates that actors may shift, either intentionally or unintentionally, from one strategy to another across different phases of the procurement process.

This conceptualisation of divergent types of early interaction in public procurement enables the research question to be addressed: *How do boundary work strategies applied in the early phases of the public procurement process influence relational interaction between public buyers and private suppliers?* The findings can be summarised as indicating that, while buyer–supplier interaction in both early phases of the public procurement process is regulated, the dynamics of these phases differ. The effect is to shape the boundary strategies applied and thereby the development of relational interaction. The pre-tender phase involving multiple suppliers is inherently

competitive, requiring firms to defend existing boundaries and continuously drawing and redrawing them. It is then challenging for public sector and private actors to change established practices and promote relational interaction. The early post-tender phase is marked by dyadic interactions with the selected supplier and the prospect of long-term collaboration. This provides more opportunities for negotiation and the downplaying of boundaries. Consequently, boundary work becomes more collaborative, facilitating relational interaction. The underlying reasons for the differences in these phases are discussed below.

5.1 Crossing multi-organisational boundaries in the pre-tender interaction

We identify pre-tender interactions that involve multiple boundaries, occurring between public and private organisations, but also among private actors. These multi-

organisational boundaries, specifically those found in several buyer–supplier dyads and among competing suppliers, are influenced by, and influence, the parties' boundary work strategy. Instead of crossing these boundaries, the findings show that the public and private actors defended and retained their boundaries through their actions, thus hindering the development of relational interaction. For example, by firmly controlling the pre-tender interaction, buyers retained their boundary with potential suppliers and restricted interaction that would allow them to mutually share information and develop the public service.

This study's findings align with the insights of [Langley et al. \(2019\)](#) in identifying some intersecting boundaries. Specifically, the findings show how the defence and maintenance of boundaries against specific actors in pre-tender interactions influenced boundaries and, thereby, interactions among other actors. While suppliers defended their boundaries with each other by withholding information (cf. [Shiferaw et al., 2023](#)), this negatively influenced the boundary and, thereby, the relational interaction between the suppliers and the buyer. However, this behaviour is typical among competing suppliers: [Huxham and Vangen \(2005\)](#) suggest that their boundaries are difficult to cross because there is no collaborative advantage in achieving outcomes the suppliers would not attain individually.

The current research identifies the multiple boundaries between actors where subsequent competitive boundary work significantly hinders relational interaction. Furthermore, the presence of those multi-organisational boundaries means that pre-tender interaction remains incomplete in terms of knowledge exchange and the creation of mutual understanding of the procurement process. Accordingly, pre-tender interaction requires the management and balancing of the boundaries that promote intersectoral and interorganisational separation. During the pre-tender phase of the procurement process, it is crucial to develop spaces for configurational boundary work to cross certain boundaries, while retaining others. This notion highlights the importance of considering pre-tender interaction as a temporal space (see [Langley et al., 2019](#)), which facilitates experimentation (see [Bucher and Langley, 2016](#)) and reflection on new ideas (see [Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010](#); [Lunkka et al., 2022](#)), thereby promoting intersectoral knowledge exchange. The notion can further be characterised by quasi-integration (see [Cai et al., 2009](#); [Abrahamsen and Håkansson, 2015](#)) that, in the context of public procurement, appears to refer to the need for buyers and suppliers to blend formal procurement rules (e.g. equal treatment and transparency) with relational practices (e.g. mutual communication, trust and joint problem-solving).

5.2 Crossing interorganisational boundaries in the early post-tender interaction

Collaborative boundary work may incorporate tension and conflicts ([Langley et al., 2019](#); [Taheriruh et al., 2025b](#)). The pre-tender interactions observed in this study support this proposition. However, we identify that many of these pre-tender phase boundaries were temporal (see [Langley et al., 2019](#)) and their impact on interaction diminishes when the procurement process advances. That development, however, depends on the parties being able to shift from competitive boundary work to collaboration and to change their interaction

to foreground mutual communication. The early post-tender interactions are characterised by flexibility and the ability to complement the earlier phase by enabling more efficient knowledge exchange and fostering a shared understanding of the procurement requirements.

This study uncovers additional interesting aspects of boundary work strategies in early interactions: While buyers adhered to equality and non-discrimination principles in pre-tender interactions, the interaction resulted in gaps in shared understanding. The early post-tender interactions with suppliers varied significantly, with some being collaborative and others competitive. We show that, in two cases, solving problems during early post-tender interactions promoted collaborative boundary work. It did so by prompting relational interaction, leading to more fruitful service collaboration than would have occurred without such discussions. In the other two cases, the boundary work strategy led to conflicts and disputes and reinforced the boundary between the negotiating parties. In business-to-business relationships, such problems might be explained by a lack of shared goals and commitment to collaboration (e.g. [Dwyer et al., 1987](#)). Here, the differences in boundary work strategies appeared to relate to the differences in relationship history and procurement experience, which shaped the actors' expectations of the procurement and the related collaboration. The asymmetry in understanding further accelerated these differences. These findings align with the work of [Quick and Feldman \(2014\)](#) and [Brorström and Diedrich \(2020\)](#) on boundary work as an ongoing process, which we discover directs attention towards the importance of post-tender boundary-crossing to promote relational interaction, which is required to address the knowledge gaps arising from the earlier phase.

6. Conclusion and contributions

We applied boundary work theory and conducted a qualitative embedded case study to examine the boundary work strategies used in the early phases of the public procurement process and their influence on relational interactions. We identified boundary work with potential suppliers in the pre-tender phase to require balancing between collaboration and competition, which is a form of quasi-integration, in which the actors blend formal procurement rules with relational practices. This hinders the development of relational interaction between public and private organisations. Accordingly, the benefits of pre-tender interaction may remain limited in terms of creating a shared understanding of the procurement process. Early post-tender interaction with selected suppliers thus provides a better and more complementary arena for developing relational interaction by allowing the parties to apply collaborative boundary work more flexibly than in the pre-tender phase.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

The study shows how the boundary work strategies applied by public buyers and private suppliers in the early phases of public procurement influence their interactions. It develops a conceptualisation of three types of dynamic interaction patterns: relational interaction, arm's-length interaction and asymmetric interaction. Furthermore, it shows how these patterns emerge from different configurations of boundary

work strategies and sub-strategies, such as defending and negotiating boundaries, enacted by public buyers and private suppliers. The study complements public–private interaction research (Waluszewski *et al.*, 2019; Arvidsson and Melander, 2020; Holma *et al.*, 2020, 2022) related to the under-explored early phases of public procurement (Holma *et al.*, 2022; Sloot *et al.*, 2025), and specifically the ongoing discussion of how public procurement, within its legal constraints, enables relational forms of interaction, as opposed to merely promoting a transactional, arm’s-length type of interaction (Taheriruh *et al.*, 2025b). It does so primarily by providing a nuanced view of the interaction in early phases of the public procurement process.

By analysing the interplay between multiple boundaries and boundary enactment in public and private organisations, this study also advances understanding of the development of relational interaction in the early phases of public procurement (McKevitt and Davis, 2015; Berkhout *et al.*, 2026). The findings of this study demonstrate that relational interaction in public procurement is shaped by boundaries between public and private actors as well as by boundaries among competing suppliers. This reveals how multiple interconnected boundaries jointly influence the emergence of collaboration and competition. Specifically, in the pre-tender phase, the creation and reification of boundaries through competitive boundary work appear to generate situations demanding higher-level practice related to boundaries, that is, configurational boundary work (Langley *et al.*, 2019; Braun *et al.*, 2023) supported by quasi-integration (Cai *et al.*, 2009), which highlights balancing formal procurement rules with relational practices to cross certain boundaries while retaining others. Furthermore, by extending the Langley *et al.* (2019) framework to such a multi-actor context (Razmdoost *et al.*, 2023), comprising a buyer and multiple suppliers, these findings address the demand for studies of how boundaries are connected in real-world settings and how changes in a boundary may influence other boundaries (Langley *et al.*, 2019, p. 729).

The study highlights the significance of early post-tender interactions in fostering the relational dynamics essential for intersectoral collaboration. By extending the scope of early interaction to include pre-tender and early post-tender phases, and by illustrating the role of each interaction phase from a boundary work perspective, we clarify how early interaction occurs in practice (Grandia and Meehan, 2017; Plantinga *et al.*, 2020) in the context of products and services regularly procured using open procurement procedures. Specifically, this study adopts a novel perspective on early interaction, conceptualising early interaction as a multi-phase process and investigating the early post-tender phase as a distinct phase of the procurement process rather than merely a transition from competition to service delivery. We establish that the early post-tender phase constitutes a significant arena for boundary-crossing and relationship development, where actors may address the limitations created by the competitive dynamics of the pre-tender phase. This finding aligns with the work by Holma *et al.* (2020), which revealed the difficulty of defining service specifications in the pre-tender phase, and that the phase can be ineffective if the goals of the interaction and the roles of the counterparts are not clearly defined. Similarly,

Fridner *et al.* (2025) emphasised the importance of the transition between contract award and the start of delivery to clarify mutual expectations.

6.2 Managerial implications

The practical implications and feasibility of relational interaction vary across the different phases of the public procurement process. Relational interaction, fostered through a collaborative boundary work strategy, is challenging to implement during the inherently competitive pre-tender phase. The challenges associated with relational pre-tender interactions highlight the difficulties faced by purchasing agents tasked with operationalising and implementing procurement policies that promote early interaction. The findings of this study indicate that public and private actors often lack the requisite capabilities and experience to adapt to the demands of pre-tender interaction. Consequently, during the pre-tender phase, rather than merely “informing economic operators of their procurement plans and requirements” (EU Directive 2014/24/EU), it is imperative that contracting authorities prepare procurements in collaboration with suppliers. That process will necessitate an emphasis on creating a trustworthy environment for intersectoral interaction and on managing the existing boundaries that hinder mutual communication. To that end, additional policy guidelines will be required to facilitate market consultations.

However, instead of merely providing further policy guidelines for early interaction, we advocate rethinking how public procurement is implemented in practice. The findings of this study should encourage public- and private-sector actors to move beyond traditional procurement practices and assume new roles. For example, it is important to reflect thoroughly on how suppliers attend these market dialogues, either jointly or individually (see Berkhout *et al.*, 2026). It is also relevant to consider which other stakeholders are involved in discussions (e.g. layers and users). Buyers might have to relinquish some control and allow suppliers to participate in planning pre-tender interactions and express their ideas more freely.

However, the boundary work perspective does not resolve the challenges of pre-tender phase interaction, which requires accommodating the legal constraints of public procurement and the realities of competition among bidders. Given this competitive nature of pre-tender interactions and the fact that contractual details or ways of working cannot be agreed upon during this phase, boundary-crossing should not be limited to the pre-tender phase. That is, although traditional public procurement tends to strongly focus on interaction during the pre-tender phase, it is equally, if not more, important to emphasise collaborative boundary work and relational interaction during the early post-tender phase. The findings of this study suggest that sufficient time should be allocated to negotiating contractual details with selected suppliers. That is because doing so downplays the boundaries between public buyers and private suppliers and reveals opportunities to agree on how public–private collaboration should be coordinated during the contract period. Early post-tender interaction is shown to enable more flexible and personalised engagement at both the organisational and individual levels, but it too appears to require a mindset shift and rely on training and unprejudiced experimentation. Successful relational interaction can foster a

mutual understanding of the procured services and their co-development, thereby creating greater innovation potential and value for both parties. Furthermore, it may bolster suppliers' confidence to participate in forthcoming tenders. Therefore, while enhancing pre-tender phase interaction remains an intricate challenge, adopting a boundary work perspective offers insights that may facilitate the further development of buyer–supplier collaboration.

6.3 Limitations and future research avenues

This study is subject to certain limitations that provide avenues for future research. Firstly, a more comprehensive analysis of the EU legal framework governing public procurement is required to identify further opportunities for relationship-building while ensuring the equal treatment of potential suppliers in the pre-tender phase. Such an analysis could support the development of EU-wide best practices for engaging with potential suppliers in a collaborative and transparent manner during pre-tender interactions, thereby helping to address potential misunderstandings and information asymmetries.

A further limitation of this study arises from the limited number of procurements in Finland. We acknowledge that the findings might be influenced by the procurement selection, in which the buying and supplying organisations were inexperienced in collaborative methods. However, the implementation of early interaction practices is in its infancy, and finding experienced organisations is challenging. Furthermore, as Fridner *et al.* (2025) suggest, examining less mature organisations' interactions with suppliers can provide opportunities to learn from unsuccessful practices. In addition, the presented findings apply to municipal catering and home nursing service procurement actions, as well as other contexts that share similar characteristics with the public procurements examined. However, more research from other contexts is needed to further understand public–private boundary work and its influence on relational interaction. Specifically, further research is warranted on how different sub-strategies underlying broader boundary work strategies in early buyer–supplier interaction shape collaboration both during the early interaction phase and throughout the contract. Further research focusing on early post-tender interaction would allow the investigation of how buyer–supplier relationships are initially formed and subsequently stabilised. This can be conducted by extending the study of the pre-tender phase and by examining how the regulatory framework governing that phase can facilitate a more collaborative early post-tender phase.

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