Jean-Christophe Bève

Procurement Adventurer

Intro

From the strawberry fields of his grandmother’s garden in Picardy, France to helping scale high-protein products at Danone and supporting specialist pharmaceutical manufacturing, Jean-Christophe has followed **a career shaped by curiosity, growth and change.**

His perspective on procurement goes well beyond cost: it is about people, innovation, resilience and making a positive impact.

Here’s his story...

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What attracted you to Procurement?

The diversity. You are at the centre of so many different topics and people, from leadership teams to farmers and suppliers on the ground. Procurement gives you a real opportunity to drive change, whether that is sustainability, innovation or business growth. I also love connecting people, internally and externally, and working together to make better products and, hopefully, a better world.

I didn’t want Procurement to be the limiting factor in the brand’s growth


FRESH FRUIT
Real fresh fruit inside the container!
Cleaned, peeled and cut under strict hygiene regulations
Hand-picked by Sofia, a grower
CelebrateFruit
NATURALLY SWEET
ACTIVIA
REAL BEAUTY
#LetsCelebrateFruit

Tell me about a major transformation you helped deliver

At Danone, I worked on a high-protein product with enormous growth ambitions. Initially, there was a desire to source locally in each market. But we had to recognise that we could not always be both very big and entirely local. Forecasts were changing almost weekly, sometimes by by up to 60%. We needed new capacity, alternative sourcing regions and a resilient supply chain. **I did not want Procurement to become the limiting factor in the brand's growth.** Sometimes driving change means presenting the leadership team with difficult choices.



Where does your passion for food come from?

My grandmother’s garden in Picardy, in northern France. I remember being about five years old, picking strawberries straight from the field with my sister on summer days. The taste was extraordinary. She also grew red and white currants. It was such a simple pleasure: wonderful fruit that needed nothing added to it. Those memories have stayed with me.

What are you doing now?

I am exploring a new industry: pharmaceuticals. After many years in food, I wanted to broaden my experience. I am working on external manufacturing and helping suppliers support the company’s growth, including its future product pipeline. It is a fascinating change of perspective, with projects looking two to six years ahead.

How does sourcing in pharmaceuticals compare with food?

Quality and security of supply come first in both sectors, but the consequences can be especially profound in pharmaceuticals. Some of the treatments involved support patients with rare diseases, including children with leukaemia. Saving a few cents is meaningless if you put quality, availability or your reputation at risk. In food, agricultural supply and prices can be highly volatile, with crops forcing you to find alternatives. The pharmaceutical products I work with tend to have more stable pricing, but qualifying suppliers to the required standards is a major challenge.

What has surprised you most about pharmaceutical procurement?

How difficult it can be to find external manufacturers that meet the necessary quality standards. Even meeting those standards internally is demanding, so the pool of capable external suppliers can be small. I am sourcing finished products and supporting new treatments, where specifications can involve both raw materials and medical devices. Development and approval can take years, and requirements and timings vary between markets.


BROUWERIJ'TIJ
HET ORIGINEEL
BROUWERIJ'TIJ
GOUDEERLIJK EN PUUR
ONVERWACHT KRACHTIG
AMSTERDAM
NEDERLAND

What impact will Tech and AI have on Procurement?

AI will change how we work. It can **take away operational effort and give buyers more space to explore new solutions and help the business grow.** Supplier discovery is already much faster: in a few clicks you can identify companies, technologies and people worth speaking to. Risk management is another big opportunity. Instead of working through a spreadsheet with 100 risks, technology can help identify the five that really matter, anticipate disruption and show the potential impact on sales. That makes our time much more valuable.

Fluency with technology will become a basic requirement

What skills will the Procurement professional of tomorrow need?

The fundamentals will remain: curiosity, asking the right questions and being open to new ideas. But **fluency with technology will become a basic requirement.** Even more important will be the ability to explain ideas, influence people and bring them with you. Category knowledge alone will not differentiate you when AI can help with technical information. The value comes from engaging people and making things happen.

How do you see Procurement changing over the next ten years?

Sustainability will become a normal part of purchasing decisions, not a separate consideration. Tenders will assess price, ESG performance and capabilities together. I also expect much more collaboration. Procurement needs to be at the heart of strategic decisions and stay on the leadership agenda, helping the business turn ideas into action.

Should Procurement teams build their own technology?

For complex systems, generally no. There are already many strong solutions, and we are not necessarily the best people to design them. The important thing is to choose tools flexible enough for the business model. Simple applications are different: a buyer can create something useful, such as an automated weekly market-news update. Build simple things where it makes sense; do not reinvent complicated systems that nobody else will use.

Consumers value honesty more than a company pretending to be perfect

Is Procurement doing enough on sustainability?

We are making progress, but **we are too shy about the potential impact and about telling the full story.** Companies often talk only about what they do well. I think consumers value honesty: explain where you are not yet good enough, and show the plan to improve. For example, I admire the way Tony's Chocolonely talks openly about the challenges as well as the progress. That builds more trust than pretending everything is perfect.



What advice would you give a Chief Procurement Officer?

Attracting and developing the next generation of talent is one of the biggest challenges. Show people that **Procurement is a place where they can challenge strategy, make a difference and grow.** Give them room to question the way things have always been done. And move beyond the usual story about cost reduction. Procurement helps financial performance, of course, but it also fuels growth and protects the resources businesses will need in the future.

I love seeing the journey from the farm to the shelf

Direct or indirect Procurement – which do you prefer?

I enjoy both. Indirect Procurement offers an enormous diversity of topics, and the changes coming through AI are exciting. With direct materials, I love seeing the journey from the farm or supplier all the way to the finished product on the shelf. You can see the tangible impact of your work and connect the story of what you buy to the consumer.

What advice would you give your younger self?

Trust yourself. Do not be shy, and get out of your comfort zone as soon as you can.

What is the funniest experience you have had at work?

I once organised accommodation for a team meeting in an **exceptionally strange Airbnb.** The bedding appeared to have come straight from the French sleeper railway, SNCF. Imagine discovering that your entire team was sleeping in train-branded sheets that possibly been sourced in a dubious way!

A few more personal questions

Which language would you love to speak fluently?

Dutch. My children speak it fluently, and I can no longer understand everything they say!

What could you not work without?

My phone and AI. I do not work without AI any more.

Who would be at your dream dinner party?

Stephen Hawking for the cosmos and black holes

DJ Eric Prydz for the music

Jean-Marc Jancovici, French climate specialist for a constructive discussion about sustainability

Rapid fire

French galette or Dutch pancakes?
French galette, with Brittany cider.

Mountains or sea?
Sea, for the endless horizon.

Van Gogh or Rembrandt?
Van Gogh, for the vibrant colour.

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