THE TENDER DESK



How African SMEs Actually Win Government and Corporate Contracts

COURAGE GARIKAI

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ColdCode Si Labs · Harare

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Dedication

For Ropafadzo and Farai and Chipo and Tendai — the SMEs who bid, lose, learn, and win, one submission at a time.

For every business owner who has sat at a desk at 11 PM the night before closing, printing, binding, stamping, and hoping.

You will not win every bid. You will win enough.

Foreword

When Courage first told me he was writing a book about winning tenders, I told him it would be the most-read business book in Zimbabwe if it was honest. The reason is simple: almost every small business I know wants to sell to government and corporates. Almost none knows how. They see tenders advertised, they hear stories of who won, they occasionally submit a bid, and they almost always lose. Then they conclude the system is rigged and they go back to walk-in customers.

I have spent fifteen years in procurement, both as a procurement officer for a large parastatal and now running procurement for a mining house. I have seen tens of thousands of bids cross my desk. I have seen good companies lose because of avoidable mistakes. I have seen mediocre companies win because they were the only compliant bidder out of seven submissions. I have seen bids disqualified for a missing stamp, an expired tax clearance, a bid bond with the wrong beneficiary name, and a delivery that arrived four minutes late.

Most of these failures have nothing to do with corruption. They have to do with preparation, discipline, and understanding the process. That is why this book matters. It is not written by a consultant who has never sat in a bid evaluation. It is written by someone who has bid, won, lost, made mistakes, learned from them, and systematised what works.

If you run an SME, read this book. Then follow the ten-step "Build it" section. Start on Monday. You will lose bids at first. You will also win some, and each win builds the next.

The government procurement market in Zimbabwe is $2.3 billion a year. The corporate market is larger. You do not need a large share of that to build a good business. You need a system. This book gives you one.

— Farai Machirori, Procurement Director, mining sector, Harare, November 2026

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About this book

This is a book about winning tenders, written for African small and medium enterprises — not for the large construction companies who have been doing it for decades, not for the politically connected firms who do not need advice, and not for the consultants who charge $5,000 to write a proposal you could write yourself. It is written for the printer in Msasa, the IT supplier in Eastlea, the caterer in Chitungwiza, the stationery supplier in Bulawayo, the civil works contractor in Mutare, and every other small business owner who sees government and corporate tenders advertised and thinks: should I bid? And if I do, will I actually win?

The answer to the first question is yes, sometimes. The answer to the second is more complicated than most people admit.

Let me state the thesis up front: the tender market in Zimbabwe and much of southern Africa is not as rigged as the cynics claim, nor as fair as the procurement statutes

pretend. It is a market with rules, some written and some unwritten, some followed and some bent, some transparent and some deliberately opaque. SMEs can win — thousands do every year — but winning requires a systematic approach, a tender desk (even a one-person one), and a willingness to understand how procurement actually works rather than how the legislation says it should work.

The data bears this out. In 2025, 206,445 government procurement contracts were awarded in Zimbabwe across 372 procuring entities, with a total value of USD 2.3 billion. Of those, the smallest contracts — the sub-$1,000 awards that form the bulk of SME-accessible work — went to 609 different companies over three years, and 61 percent of those companies won only once. That is not a closed market. That is a market where hundreds of small companies win small contracts, where repeat winners are the exception not the rule, and where the difference between winning and losing often comes down to paperwork, pricing, and process rather than political connections.

At the higher end — the $50,000+ contracts, the construction jobs, the multi-year supply agreements — connections and incumbent relationships matter more. But even there, systematic bid preparation and a track record of delivery can get you in the door, and once you are in the door you can win. I have seen it happen. I have helped make it happen.

This book covers: 1. **The system.** How PRAZ (the Procurement Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe) works, how the eGP portal works, what the thresholds mean, how bids are evaluated, and what the law actually requires versus what people assume. 2. **The documents.** Tax

clearance, PRAZ registration, insurance, bid bonds, company profiles, capability statements — the minimum compliance folder every SME needs before they ever bid on anything. 3. **The bid.** How to read a tender document, how to construct a compliant technical proposal, how to price competitively without losing money, and how to avoid the thirty disqualification mistakes that eliminate 70 percent of submissions. 4. **The politics.** When connections matter, when they do not, how to tell if a tender is "wired" for someone else, how to build relationships without paying bribes, and what to do when you are asked for a kickback. 5. **Corporate tenders.** How private-sector procurement (mines, banks, retailers, NGOs, multilaterals) differs from government procurement, and how to get onto supplier panels. 6. **Delivery and repeat wins.** What happens after you win, how to deliver a contract without losing money, how to get repeat business, and how to scale from $500 stationery orders to $500,000 supply contracts.

This is not a book about tender fraud. It is not a book about how to cut corners, collude with evaluators, or front for politically connected individuals. It is a book about winning tenders legitimately, building a real business on public and corporate procurement, and doing it without sacrificing your integrity. That is possible. Most of the companies winning SME-scale tenders in Zimbabwe today are doing it that way.

A note on jurisdiction

The primary case studies, laws, and portal references in this book are from Zimbabwe. This is deliberate: I operate in Zimbabwe, my companies are registered in Zimbabwe, and the data I have access to is Zimbabwean. But the patterns,

documents, and processes described here are broadly similar across southern Africa: South Africa's CSD and eTender portal, Kenya's AGPO and IFMIS, Zambia's ZPPDA, Nigeria's BPP and NIPEX, Ghana's PPA — all of these systems follow a similar model inherited from British and multilateral public procurement norms. The threshold numbers, specific form names, and regulator acronyms differ; the underlying mechanics do not.

If you operate outside Zimbabwe, read this book for the patterns and substitute your local regulator, form names, and thresholds. The principles transfer.

Part I

The Tender Desk

Chapter 1 · Ropafadzo’s forty-seven bids

On a Tuesday in January 2026, Ropafadzo M. sat in her printing shop at 109 Seke Road in Msasa, Harare, with a spreadsheet open on her secondhand Lenovo laptop and a stack of forty-seven tender submissions she had prepared over the previous eleven months. She had won three of them.

Forty-seven bids, three wins. That is a win rate of 6.4 percent.

The three wins were: - A $3,200 contract from Chitungwiza Municipality in May to print 12,000 rate-demand notices. - A $1,875 contract from the Ministry of Women Affairs in August to print conference materials for a gender-based violence workshop. - A $940 contract from a local secondary school in November to print 2026 student diaries.

Total revenue from tenders in 2025: $6,015.

Ropafadzo’s print shop had three employees, two digital printers (a used Xerox Versant 80 and a smaller Konica Minolta), and a monthly overhead of approximately $2,100 (rent, electricity, paper, ink, two salaries). The $6,015 in tender revenue covered just under three months of overhead. The rest of her revenue came from walk-in customers, business cards, wedding invitations, exam paper printing for local schools, and a few corporate clients who had been with her for years.

The forty-four bids she lost had cost her, by her own reckoning, approximately $860 in direct costs: bid bonds that were never returned (or returned three months late), printing and binding of tender documents, fuel to deliver

submissions to tender boxes across Harare and occasionally to Marondera or Chinhoyi, and the time she spent writing bids at night instead of taking paying jobs or sleeping. They had also cost her immeasurable frustration: two bids she lost on technicalities (a missing tax clearance on one, a stamp in the wrong place on another), seven she believes she lost on price, eight she never heard back from at all, and the remainder she lost to other companies — some she knew, some she suspected were connected to someone inside the procuring entity, and many she never found out anything about.

When I met Ropafadzo that Tuesday in January, she was considering giving up on tenders entirely. “They are a waste of time,” she said. “Only the connected companies win. I should stick to my customers who pay cash.”

I asked her to show me her spreadsheet. It listed every bid, the procuring entity, the closing date, the value, whether she had submitted, whether she had heard back, the outcome, and a column for notes. It was thorough, well-organised, and honest. She had tracked everything. I spent forty-five minutes going through it, and then I told her something she did not expect: a 6.4 percent win rate for a new entrant with no track record in government procurement is not bad. It is actually slightly above average.

The data from the Procurement Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (PRAZ) bears this out. Across all SMEs newly registered on the eGP system in 2024, the average win rate in the first twelve months was between 4 and 7 percent. Most new bidders win their first contract somewhere between bid number twelve and bid number twenty. Ropafadzo had won her first contract on bid number

seventeen (the Chitungwiza rate notices), which is within that range. Her mistake was not that she was losing — it was that she was bidding on the wrong tenders, spending too much per bid, and not doing the three or four simple things that would have increased her win rate from 6.4 percent to the 15–20 percent range that established SME bidders achieve.

Over the next four months, Ropafadzo and I worked through her approach. She made four changes: 1. She stopped bidding on every tender that had the word “printing” in it. She started filtering for tenders under $10,000 from procuring entities within 50 km of Harare where she had either delivered before or had an existing contact. 2. She built a compliance folder (tax clearance, PRAZ certificate, insurance, company registry documents, bank statements) pre-prepared and stamped so she was never scrambling for documents the night before closing. 3. She started calling the procuring entity’s procurement officer five days after every submission to confirm receipt and ask about the evaluation timeline. 4. She raised her prices by 8–12 percent on subsequent bids, because she discovered that her bids were consistently the cheapest — which evaluators often treat as a signal of low quality rather than a reason to award.

By the end of May 2026, Ropafadzo had submitted seventeen more bids and won five. Her win rate had gone from 6.4 percent to 29 percent on the new batch. Her tender revenue for the first five months of 2026 was $21,400 — more than three times her entire 2025 total — and one of those wins was a $12,600 contract from the

Free sample

This is the opening of "The Tender Desk" by Courage Garikai.
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