

Managing client-contractors' working relationship in construction projects: a holistic approach

Farshid Rahmani

*School of Property, Construction and Project Management, RMIT University,
Melbourne, Australia*

Allen Tadayon

*Department of Civil Engineering and Energy Technology,
Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway, and*

Jacobus Daniel van der Walt

College of Engineering, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Abstract

Purpose – The client-contractor relationship is pivotal in construction projects, as the contractor is responsible for executing the client's vision while managing the operational aspects of construction. A successful client-contractor relationship can facilitate resource allocation, streamline decision-making, and enhance project performance. However, clients typically aim for projects to be completed on time, within budget and at a high quality, while contractors often focus on minimising risks and maximising profit. This divergence in priorities can lead to disputes over issues such as cost overruns, delays, and variations in project scope. This fundamental misalignment often results in adversarial relationships rather than collaborative partnerships, ultimately impeding project efficiency and sometimes leading to prolonged legal disputes. This paper, therefore, aims to address these specific practical issues by focusing on the relationship between client and contractor and provides recommendations to manage this relationship effectively.

Design/methodology/approach – Along with a thorough review of the literature, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced practitioners in the Norwegian construction industry. A total of 22 interviews were carried out with key professionals, including project managers and contract specialists, representing diverse organisational roles from the client side, consultants and contractors. This diverse participant pool was intentionally selected to gain a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder perspective on industry practices and challenges. The interviews were conducted either in-person or via video conferencing, each lasting roughly one hour, and followed a standardised interview guide while allowing flexibility for open-ended discussion. The majority of participants had over 10 years of professional experience in project-based environments, while three individuals had between 5 and 10 years of experience as project managers. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of insight, and all interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and viewpoints.

Findings – The findings of this study underscore the importance of structured and multifaceted relationship management practices between clients and contractors in achieving successful project outcomes within the construction industry. Relationship management strategies at both the organisational and project team levels are essential to fostering collaboration, communication, and effective resource use among diverse stakeholders. The emphasis on communication management is shown to be instrumental in establishing trust and facilitating transparency across project teams. Similarly, information-sharing protocols and risk management frameworks allow for collaborative handling of risks, ultimately enhancing resilience and accountability in project delivery.

Research limitations/implications – Participants in this study, both the clients and contractors, were all within Norwegian organisations. Although they had several experiences working on construction projects locally and internationally, their response was mainly influenced by their culture, mindsets and Norwegian construction norms and standards. Further research is recommended to explore the perceptions of experts in the construction industry from different countries with diverse cultures and standards.

Practical implications – This study makes theoretical and practical contributions to the construction engineering and management body of knowledge by classifying relationship management practices at both the organisational



and project team levels. This study offers a structured framework that provides practitioners and researchers with actionable insights into enhancing collaboration and communication in complex environments. Additionally, this paper adds depth to existing literature by highlighting the role of behavioural and interpersonal factors. These insights contribute to a more holistic understanding of relationship management in construction projects and set a foundation for further research into how these strategies can be tailored to different project contexts.

Originality/value – To bring a better perspective on the relationship between clients and contractors, a holistic approach is utilised in this study to ensure that factors from all relevant perspectives are considered, understood and dealt with. The holistic approach enabled the development of a conceptual model, which provides a method to yield more insightful and relevant findings, given the complexity of managing the relationship between client and contractor.

Keywords Construction, Client-contractor relationship, Conceptual model, Management strategies, Holistic approach

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Amongst different themes, lenses and angles of the project management practices and their impact on project teams' performance in a construction project, client-contractor relationship management is decidedly the core of the project dynamics. Despite literature highlighting the importance of collaboration, real-world examples frequently reveal challenges in client-contractor interactions resulting in project failures, cost overruns, and extensive delays (Dahlin and Pesämaa, 2021). For instance, the cost and time overrun of the Edinburgh Trams Project highlighted severe repercussions of the deterioration of the relationship between the client (Transport Initiatives Edinburgh) and the contractor consortium (Bilfinger Berger, Siemens, and Construcciones y Auxiliars de Ferrocarriles [CAF]) (Lowe, 2010).

Effective management of working relationship between client and contractor addresses the areas that should be focused across teams once the potential partners have been selected. Existing research has examined multiple dimensions of project performance, including technical, managerial, and behavioural factors. Pinto and Slevin (1988) proposed a widely used framework for project success but primarily focused on generic managerial dimensions, with limited emphasis on relationship dynamics. Larson and Gobel (1989) explored human factors but did not directly address inter-organisational trust or cross-team collaboration. Meng (2012) acknowledged the importance of collaborative working but focused more on contractual and risk-sharing mechanisms than on behavioural or communication practices. Furthermore, Cleland and Ireland (1999) highlighted the difficulties of defining and measuring project success due to philosophical and cultural differences between stakeholders but did not propose practical strategies to manage these complexities. These studies, while valuable, fall short of addressing the evolving realities of contemporary construction projects. Today, the complexity of projects has increased due to tighter regulatory constraints (Wang *et al.*, 2023), the adoption of digital tools and platforms (Attencia and Mattos, 2022), and rising expectations around sustainability (KPMG, 2021). These developments demand new frameworks for collaboration, trust-building, and communication that go beyond traditional project management models. The success of a construction project requires more than just knowledge of technical and engineering fundamentals. It requires abilities ranging from design and strategy to personal and interpersonal competences, such as leadership and communication for professional teamwork (Jóhannesdóttir, 2019). With increasing emphasis on sustainability and digital transformation, effective relationships between clients and contractors become even more crucial for successful project delivery (KPMG, 2021). Effective collaboration, mutual trust, and clear communication contribute to project success, while poor relationships often result in delays, cost overruns, and disputes. As the construction industry continues to evolve, fostering effective client-contractor relationships remains essential for achieving sustainable, high-quality project outcomes.

This paper addresses the critical need for improved client-contractor relationship management. Specifically, it aims to identify and evaluate key practices essential for

enhancing collaboration, communication, and risk management. This study differentiates itself by adopting a holistic, practice-oriented approach to client-contractor relationship management. To bring a better perspective on this, a holistic approach is utilised to ensure that factors from all relevant perspectives are considered, understood and dealt with, from managing processes to effective communication. A holistic approach ensures factors from all relevant perspectives and allows project teams to integrate diverse project objectives such as sustainable construction goals and digitalisation initiatives into cohesive management practices, thus addressing the multifaceted nature of contemporary projects. This approach is rooted in the idea that to fully understand complex issues, multiple factors and perspectives must be considered to examine the relationships and context surrounding the research subject. It involves systems thinking, where the focus is on how different parts of a system interact. Systems thinking sees components of the subject not in isolation but as part of a dynamic whole. Unlike traditional management practices that often address project aspects separately, the holistic management approach adopted in this study systematically integrates various elements such as stakeholder interactions, technological innovation, and sustainability requirements to ensure cohesive and balanced project outcomes.

For this study, this holistic perspective has led to developing a conceptual model that provides methods to yield insightful and relevant findings, evaluating critical success factors of client-contractor relationships and their alignment.

This study, therefore, investigates how interpersonal dynamics and shared leadership impact the performance of project teams in construction settings. Building on both academic theory and industry reports, this research aims to identify and evaluate key practices for enhancing communication, collaboration, and risk management. It responds to the call for modernised frameworks that integrate technical, relational, and strategic elements within the increasingly complex landscape of construction project delivery.

Thus, the research questions guiding this study are clearly defined as: (1) What are the critical success factors in managing client-contractor relationships? (2) How can these factors be effectively integrated into a holistic management approach in a construction project lifecycle?

Literature review

Importance of client-contractor relationships in construction

The construction industry is characterised by complex, multi-party projects that require the coordination of various stakeholders, including clients, contractors, subcontractors, and suppliers. The client-contractor relationship is pivotal, as the contractor is responsible for executing the client's vision while managing the operational aspects of construction (Pryke and Smyth, 2012). A successful client-contractor relationship can facilitate resource allocation, streamline decision-making, and enhance project performance (Bilgin *et al.*, 2017; Rahman and Kumaraswamy, 2008). Conversely, relationship breakdowns often lead to miscommunications, contractual disputes, and even project failures. In a study conducted by Babaeian Jelodar *et al.* (2022), issues related to the relationship between client and contractor such as poor communication and misunderstandings; lack of collaborative mindset and opportunistic behaviour were identified as the major causes of the conflicts in construction projects.

According to Chan *et al.* (2004), a strong client-contractor relationship is associated with improved project performance in terms of cost, time, quality, and scope. When clients and contractors collaborate effectively, they are better able to achieve the project goals and overcome obstacles. Effective communication and trust between clients and contractors facilitate better decision-making, leading to smoother project execution and fewer delays. Research shows that projects with strong client-contractor relationships experience fewer delays and cost overruns due to the enhanced ability to tackle unexpected issues (Rahman and Kumaraswamy, 2008). When trust is established early, particularly through mechanisms like

early contractor involvement (ECI), in which the contractor is involved early, for instance, contractors are able to contribute expertise during the design stage, which improves constructability, mitigates downstream changes (Baiden *et al.*, 2018) and reduces misunderstandings and scope changes, thus enhancing efficiency and project outcomes (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000).

Factors influencing client-contractor relationships

Several factors shape client-contractor relationships, including contract type, communication quality, trust, and risk-sharing mechanisms.

Contractual arrangements. Contractual arrangements are a critical component in the construction industry because they set the foundation for defining roles, managing risk, establishing payment structures, and ensuring that expectations are clear between the client and contractor (Ferstad *et al.*, 2023). The choice of contract type significantly influences project outcomes, affecting collaboration, risk allocation, and performance incentives (Suprpto *et al.*, 2016). Lump-sum contracts, design-build contracts, and partnering arrangements each have distinct implications for collaboration. Studies indicate that partnering contracts can foster cooperative relationships by aligning client and contractor objectives through shared goals and incentives (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000). In contrast, traditional lump-sum contracts may prioritise cost control and impose strict project scopes, potentially leading to adversarial relationships if unexpected issues arise (Cheung *et al.*, 2001). Research has shown that well-designed contractual arrangements can improve project outcomes by clarifying roles, reducing conflicts, and encouraging cooperative problem-solving (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000; Cheung *et al.*, 2012).

Communication and coordination. Effective communication is widely recognised as a cornerstone of successful client-contractor relationships in construction, and it is essential for minimising misunderstandings and aligning expectations (Suprpto *et al.*, 2016). The complexity of construction projects, often involving numerous stakeholders and extensive technical details, makes clear, structured communication essential for aligning expectations. Research indicates that communication can directly impact project outcomes, including cost, schedule adherence, and quality (Dainty *et al.*, 2006; Meng, 2012). When communication is clear and frequent, it fosters trust, collaboration, and a shared sense of purpose across the project team.

Transparency in communication builds trust and reduces the likelihood of conflict. A transparent approach to project updates, cost tracking, and progress reports helps clients feel involved in the project, reducing anxiety and enhancing trust in the contractor's capabilities. Open-book policies, where clients have access to project costs and contractor expenditures, are one way to achieve transparency, particularly in cost-plus contracts. Research has shown that projects with high transparency levels experience fewer disputes and stronger client-contractor relationships (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000; Eriksson and Westerberg, 2011).

Poor communication, however, often leads to confusion, delays, and conflict. According to Thomas *et al.* (1998), unresolved communication issues can exacerbate disputes, while structured and transparent communication channels foster alignment and collaboration. Establishing clear communication protocols, such as regular site meetings and open channels for feedback, helps both clients and contractors address issues as they arise, reducing the potential for escalation (Loosemore, 1999).

Trust and reduced transaction costs. Trust is a foundational component of the client-contractor relationship and has been linked to numerous positive project outcomes (Suprpto *et al.*, 2016; Wong and Cheung, 2004). High levels of trust encourage cooperative behaviours, minimising conflicts and fostering a positive working environment (Gurgun *et al.*, 2022). Trust reduces transaction costs by lowering the need for intensive contract monitoring, which simplifies project administration and resource allocation (Ferstad *et al.*, 2023; Rahman and Kumaraswamy, 2005). Trust also promotes transparency and knowledge sharing, which are

critical in resolving conflicts amicably and in a timely manner (Lau and Rowlinson, 2009). In contrast, low-trust relationships are often characterised by rigid contract enforcement, adding to administrative burdens and project costs (Bresnen and Marshall, 2002).

Risk management. Risk management is a critical component of construction project success, significantly influencing the dynamics between clients and contractors. Construction projects are inherently risky due to the complex processes, uncertain environments, and numerous stakeholders involved. Therefore, effective risk management, which includes identifying, assessing, allocating, and mitigating risks, is essential for maintaining a healthy client-contractor relationship. Research highlights that well-structured risk-sharing mechanisms not only enhance project outcomes but also foster trust and collaboration, reducing the frequency of disputes (Ferstad *et al.*, 2023; Rahman and Kumaraswamy, 2005). Similarly, Inappropriate risk-sharing and opportunistic and adversarial behaviour would negatively affect trust and teamwork (Babaeian Jelodar *et al.*, 2022). The allocation of risk between the client and contractor plays a significant role in setting the tone of their relationship. When risks are allocated fairly, both parties feel more secure and motivated to work collaboratively, as neither is unfairly burdened with unexpected responsibilities (Zhang and Qian, 2017). An unbalanced allocation, however, can lead to adversarial relationships, increased conflict, and project delays (Lam *et al.*, 2007). For instance, transferring excessive risk to the contractor often results in inflated bids as contractors factor in potential contingencies, which can increase project costs unnecessarily (Chapman and Ward, 2008).

Balanced risk-sharing agreements encourage mutual cooperation and accountability. Projects with collaborative risk-sharing mechanisms experience fewer disputes and improved outcomes, as both clients and contractors are incentivised to manage risks proactively (Ferstad *et al.*, 2023; Palaneeswaran *et al.*, 2003; Laryea and Hughes, 2011). Such arrangements often include mechanisms like shared contingencies, joint risk assessments, and provisions for adjustments, which allow both parties to address unforeseen issues constructively rather than litigiously (Mills, 2001).

Effective risk management practices contribute to reducing disputes by providing clear guidelines on handling uncertainties and changes. Disputes often arise from misunderstandings over risk responsibilities or inadequate risk provisions, leading to delays and additional costs (Cakmak and Cakmak, 2014). By establishing clear risk allocation and resolution processes, projects can minimise conflicts and encourage a more cooperative client-contractor relationship. Research by Loosemore (1999) found that construction projects that incorporated clear dispute resolution protocols experienced significantly lower levels of conflict and higher levels of trust between parties. Partnering agreements, which include conflict resolution mechanisms such as mediation and adjudication, also reduce disputes, as they offer structured avenues for addressing disagreements before they escalate (Chan *et al.*, 2004).

Previous studies and knowledge gap

Previous studies analysed the management of relationship between the client and the contractor can be categorised by the focus of these study on different dimensions.

Some scholars explored the quality of the client-contractor relationship mostly in project-specific and short-term. For example, Jagtap and Kamble (2020), Pinto *et al.* (2009) and Wang *et al.* (2023) highlight that trust is a critical determinant of successful client-contractor relationships. Jagtap and Kamble (2020) demonstrate that trust and perceived competence from the client side directly enhance project performance. Pinto *et al.* (2009) empirically show that owners and contractors perceive trust differently—clients value integrity, while contractors focus more on competence. Wang *et al.* (2023) further show that trust embedded in long-term collaborative networks improves predictability and coordination in project delivery.

Some authors focused on the factors leading to the client-contractor relationship breakdown. For instance, [Harmon \(2003\)](#) identifies misaligned expectations, communication failures, and resource asymmetry as root causes of disputes in client-contractor relationships. He proposes a hybrid intervention model that blends structured mediation and partnering principles. [Dozzi *et al.* \(1996\)](#) show that ECI and mutual goal setting are vital for relationship stability, particularly in the face of complex or high-risk projects.

Influence of the contractual mechanisms on the client contractor relationship, [de Groot \(2025\)](#) shows that governance misalignment between clients and contractors such as over-centralised control in decentralised environments can undermine collaboration. [Nasir and Hadikusumo \(2019\)](#) use system dynamics to model feedback loops in decision-making, highlighting how contracts shape behaviour over time. [Drexler *et al.* \(2000\)](#) show that formal partnering arrangements are more stable and successful than adversarial contracts.

Some scholars explored the collaboration between client and contractor and demonstrated that partnering models are associated with enhanced communication, mutual accountability, and reduced disputes. For example, [Drexler *et al.* \(2000\)](#) find that relationships rooted in formalised partnering are more resilient over time and [Suprpto *et al.* \(2015\)](#) also supports Integrated Project Delivery and other collaborative frameworks that embed contractors early and align incentives from the outset.

For some authors, the client-contractor relationships are not formed in isolation, but within industry networks shaped by power dynamics and historical ties. For example, [Wang *et al.* \(2023\)](#) show that large, state-owned contractors often sit at the centre of collaboration networks in China, influencing how partnerships are formed and sustained. [Table 1](#) below summarises the previous studies on client-contractor relationship management and the knowledge gaps identified.

While existing literature focus on some of the factors affecting client-contractor relationship management in the construction industry, they mainly focused on a very specific area of focus. In addition, there are no studies that developed a methodology that investigate the dynamic of this relationship throughout the project life cycle and analyse the interrelationships among a holistic list of factors affecting the relationship between client and contractor in the construction industry. As such, while previous research efforts concentrated on different aspects of client-contractor relationship, no previous research study has been conducted to provide an all-inclusive list of factors that affect this relationship. This paper, therefore, aims to address this critical knowledge gap by identifying the strategies affecting the relationship between client and contractor holistically throughout a construction project life cycle.

Table 1. Summary of the previous studies findings on client-contractor relationship management

Category	Key insight	Identified gaps
Trust and relational quality	Trust improves performance; differs by stakeholder perception	No dynamic or longitudinal trust development models
Conflict and breakdown	Early misalignment causes disputes; mediation helps	Few scalable, proactive conflict mitigation strategies for diverse contract types
Governance approaches	Hybrid governance balances control and collaboration	Insufficient tools to adapt governance across contract lifecycles
Collaborative models	Partnering and IPD reduce disputes and align goals	Underexplored in public sector or low-cost procurement contexts
Network structures	Industry networks influence relational quality	Weak link between network roles and qualitative relationship outcomes

Source(s): Authors' own work

Methodology

The research aim in this article was addressed by conducting a thorough literature study in addition to a series of semi-structured interviews with a number of construction industry practitioners in Norway. A literature study was undertaken to develop the theoretical background for this study. Predominantly, the literatures in the field of managing working relationship in construction projects and its different dimensions are reviewed to obtain adequate information about the status quo and main issues regarding the topic. To build upon the findings from the literature study, interviews were conducted with practitioners in Norwegian construction industry. [Table 2](#) presents the details of the organisations participated in this study.

The results from the literature study were compared with findings obtained from interviews to draw the conclusion of this study. A holistic approach was adopted to develop the conceptual model for this study. The holistic approach was chosen to examine the client-contractor relationship in its entirety, considering the interrelationships between its components and the broader environment. According to [Amini \(2001\)](#), a holistic approach considers the world as an integrated unit not as a separated accumulation of parts. Rather than focusing on one specific variable or dimension, holistic studies aim to understand how various elements interact within the project life cycle. This approach is especially relevant in complex fields such as managing construction projects. As depicted in [Figure 1](#), the study began with a thorough literature review to capture existing theories and best practices. These findings directly influenced the formulation of semi-structured interview questions. Subsequently, the data from the interviews were analysed and synthesised, and finally the results were integrated with literature insights to formulate a holistic conceptual model.

Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key industry professionals in Norway. A key reason to conduct semi-structured format was to clarify questions, expand on answers and to delve much deeper into this research topic. All interviews were conducted through video conference calls. The interviews ran over a period of three-month, and they were conducted in Oslo, Norway while respondents were stationed in different cities in Norway. Each interview took approximately one hour. With the permission of the participants, interviews were recorded, and the main points were extracted and transcribed. The interviewees were contacted based on their experience in construction industry and specifically management discipline. Respondents were chosen among project managers and

Table 2. Organisation details participating in the study

Partner organisation	Description
NPRA	The Norwegian Public Roads Administration is a Norwegian government agency responsible for national and county public roads in Norway
BaneNor	Bane NOR SF, formerly Jernbaneinfrastrukturforetak, is the Norwegian government agency responsible for owning, maintaining, operating and developing the Norwegian railway network, including the track, stations, etc
Bodø municipality	Bodø is a municipality in Nordland county, Norway. It is part of the traditional region of Salten with the area of 1,395 km ²
Nye veier	Nye Veier AS is a Norwegian public limited company founded on 2015. From 2016, the company took over responsibility for the development and operation of certain motorways from the Norwegian Public Roads Administration. The company is established as a client organisation
WSP	WSP is a Canadian company with American and British roots, providing management and consultancy services to the built and natural environment

Source(s): Authors' own work

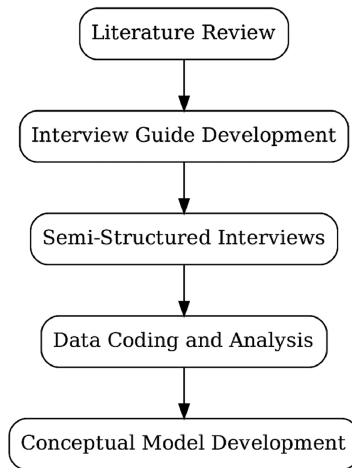


Figure 1. Flowchart illustrating the research methodology process. Source: Authors' own work

contract specialists, from client side, consultants and contractors to gain a full industry perspective.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria to ensure they had rich experience with client-contractor relationships in construction projects. The study targeted professionals with at least five years of industry experience (with most far exceeding this threshold) and who held roles directly involved in managing projects or contracts. In practice, respondents were drawn from the ranks of project managers and contract managers/specialists representing clients (owner organisations), contractors, and consultancy firms. This selection criterion ensured that each interviewee had first-hand insight into the client-contractor working relationship from their respective stakeholder perspective. The recruitment process leveraged the researchers' professional networks and referrals in the Norwegian construction sector to identify suitable candidates. [Table 3](#) summarises the organisational background of participating companies, which included both public and private sector client organisations, large general contractors, and engineering consultants. The final sample comprised 22 respondents (7 client representatives, 8 contractor representatives, and 7 consultants), which provided a well-rounded perspective of the industry. This extensive experience profile indicates that the interviewees were senior professionals well acquainted with the intricacies of client-contractor dynamics. The sample size of 22 was determined to be sufficient based on the principle of data saturation in qualitative research. By the 18th interview, the research team observed that no fundamentally new themes were emerging, suggesting that the saturation point had been reached. However, a few additional interviews were conducted to confirm this saturation and ensure no perspectives were missed. This sample size lies within the recommended range for qualitative interviews to achieve saturation in a heterogeneous participant group ([Guest *et al.*, 2006](#); [Hagaman and Wutich, 2017](#)), and thus was deemed adequate.

Data analysis

All interview transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 software for qualitative analysis, following a thematic analysis approach ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). The analysis proceeded through a systematic coding process to ensure replicability. First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading through each transcript in detail, noting initial observations. Next, an open coding technique was applied: transcripts were examined line-by-

Table 3. Participants' details

Participant	Organisation	Position
P1	Bodø municipality	Project director
P2	Bodø municipality	Project manager
P3	Bodø municipality	Project manager
P4	Bodø municipality	Project manager
P5	Bodø municipality	Procurement manager
P6	Bodø municipality	Project manager
P7	BaneNoor	Project manager (30 years)
P8	BaneNoor	Lawyer and contract manager (11 years)
P9	BaneNoor	Project manager (32 years)
P10	BaneNoor	Project director (30 years)
P11	BaneNoor	Project Planning and control manager (20 years)
P12	Nye veier	Project Planning and control manager (25 years)
P13	Nye veier	Project manager (15 years)
P14	Nye veier	Portfolio controller (25 years)
P15	Nye veier	Project director (30 years)
P16	Nye veier	Project manager (12 years)
P17	WSP	Project manager (12 years)
P19	WSP	Head of planning (20 years)
P20	NPRA	Project manager (22 years)
P21	NPRA	Project manager (26 years)
P22	NPRA	Engineer manager (12 years)

Source(s): Authors' own work

line to identify meaningful units of text, which were labelled with codes capturing the essence of each point. These codes were generated inductively (i.e. directly from the data) rather than forcing them into predefined categories, thereby authentically reflecting participants' views. For example, if an interviewee mentioned "we held frequent meetings to align expectations," a code such as "communication – regular alignment meetings" would be created.

As coding progressed through subsequent transcripts, the code list was continually refined; similar codes were grouped and redundant ones merged. The research team periodically met to discuss and compare their coding, ensuring a consistent approach was maintained. In line with Braun and Clarke's guidelines, after initial coding, related codes were collated into broader themes. For instance, codes pertaining to regular meetings, reporting systems, and informal check-ins were grouped under a theme "Communication practices." The themes were then reviewed and refined by iteratively checking against the raw data to ensure each theme was coherent and distinct.

During the analysis, the emerging themes from the interviews were continually compared with insights from the literature review. This ongoing comparison served two purposes: (1) to determine whether the interview findings corroborated or expanded upon established concepts in the literature, and (2) to identify any novel factors that the literature had not highlighted. Where a theme overlapped with the literature (for example, the importance of trust or communication protocols), the literature provided additional context and helped interpret the finding. conversely, when a new theme emerged (for example, a specific cultural or regulatory factor unique to the Norwegian context), it was noted as a potential contribution of this study. Through this rigorous analytical process, several key themes and sub-themes were identified that collectively describe effective management practices for client-contractor relationships.

Reliability and validity were ensured through intercoder agreement, triangulation between literature and empirical data, and member checking. This rigorous methodological approach provided credible, dependable, and transferable findings, directly informing the conceptual model.

Theoretical framework for managing the client-contractor working relationship

The development of the theoretical framework for managing client-contractor relationships is conceptually grounded in both the Project Management Institute (PMI)'s Initiating, Planning, Executing, Controlling, and Closing (IPECC) model (PMBOK, 2021) and well-established cyclical models in management literature. The IPECC framework provides a universally recognised structure for project management processes, offering a logical sequence for understanding how relationships evolve throughout the project lifecycle. For the purposes of this study, the "Initiation" phase was intentionally excluded, as the client-contractor working relationship typically begins after the client has completed feasibility analysis and issued the project charter at which point contractor engagement becomes operation. The framework presented in this study incorporates the remaining four process groups including Planning, Executing, Controlling, and Closing which serve as the foundation for analysing and managing relational strategies at each phase of project delivery. The cyclical nature of this framework is inspired by seminal works in continuous improvement and learning-oriented project management, such as the Shewhart Deming Cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act) and the Reflective Practice Cycle proposed by Steinfors and Walker (2011). These models emphasise the iterative and feedback-oriented nature of effective management processes, where lessons from one stage inform refinements in subsequent cycles.

Results and discussion

This section provides the results of the finding and discuss each component of the theoretical framework adopted in turn:

Managing working strategies in the "planning" stage

Managing working relationships addresses the areas that should be focused for managing the relationships across teams once the project scoped has been defined. Since there is a positive, quantifiable relationship between working relationship and the ultimate success of a project outcomes, the finding of this study investigated the planning strategies described by participants referring to the relationship between contractor and client.

The finding has shown that managing working relationship at the planning stage entails four planning functions namely "early planning", "briefing and preliminary design", "contractual arrangements" and "communication planning".

Early planning. Participants stressed the importance of early planning in their construction projects to align the client's expectations of contractors by defining the project effectively, gaining better understanding of project complexity and, assessing the uncertainty associated with the project. The role of early planning in attaining enough knowledge about the project was emphasised before appointing a contractor. One participant indicated, for example, that

To minimise the risk on the contractor side, we need to do a decent amount of upstream planning so that they've got enough information to define the scope of the work. If we don't specify what we want, and you go to market, you cannot expect the tenderers to be a mind reader and try to work out what you want (P3).

The early planning or up-front planning described by the participants in this study begins after the project definition is completed and project execution approach has been decided but before the contractor is appointed.

Briefing and preliminary design. Briefing is a process to interpret the client's intentions and objectives and present them in form of a document called the "brief" (Ryd, 2004). A construction brief is defined as a document exhibiting the background and requirements for a building project including quantities, quality, costs and times. In the past, the purpose of briefing was the development of practical methods and approaches for articulating the project specifications and writing a clear statement at the beginning of a project (MacPherson *et al.*, 1992; Markus, 1969). However, the current studies have shown that the briefing process

recently extends into the project conceptualisation and even into the design and planning phase in an effort to address the business case and re-engineering issues (Green and Simister, 1999).

The importance of briefing and undertaking preliminary design by the client before appointing a contractor was frequently stated by the participants. One participant explained

During the briefing you get a fairly good idea of what the scope is, what you want to achieve, you get reasonable understanding of your constraints, particularly from your stakeholders . . . but even though you might have the scope reasonably well-define, how to go about designing and constructing that [project] is pretty much up for grabs (P1).

Even though participants acknowledged the possibility of radical changes to the preliminary design at the later stage, they believed even if it was the case, the efforts would not have been wasted as the client could formulate scope, scale, and performance expectations, gaining better understanding of the possible constraints as well as the complexity associated with the project. Consequently, informed clients are able to engage in a genuine negotiation with tenderers about expectations and desired outcomes leading to selection of the best contractor who understands the client's value proposition. This finding is generally consistent with the view of Pernu (2000) which has argued that when the client assumes responsibility for preliminary design and function, the selection of the contractor becomes easier, and the client's objectives are more likely to be fulfilled.

Contractual arrangement. In order to create a sound relationship between client and contractor and achieve the mutual success of both organisations, defining a successful incentivisation in the contract was described as the key task of the client by the participants. One of the participants from the client organisation asserted that

From my experience, I've seen how incentives can make a significant difference in how a project progresses. they motivate contractors and their teams to meet or even exceed expectations. For example, when there's a bonus for early completion, it encourages them to plan more efficiently and stay ahead of schedule (P6).

Amongst various forms of incentives, introducing a successful commercial reward mechanism in the contract is essential for augmenting the working relationship. In addition the project performance is improved by motivating the contractor in return for enhanced reward (Bower, 2003). One participant in the contractor side explained

Incentives are a great way for the client to show they value my efforts. When a client offers a financial or performance-based incentive, it feels like they're recognising the work and the challenges my team faces. That respect and appreciation make me even more committed to delivering the best results possible (P15).

Communication planning. Setting up the internal communication protocols was identified as being a key function during the project up-front planning to ensure how the communication with the contractor should be carried out. Commenting on this, for example, one participant indicated

Having a fairly robust planning process up-front, we all normally prescribed how the communication goes, as to – if you're talking about public consultation during the life of the project, we will be quite prescriptive as to what the contractor is allowed to do and what they're not allowed to do (p13).

While communication is an essential component of a working relationship (Gabarro, 2014), this area is the most difficult management aspect to plan due to the lack of certainty in providing the present and future information required by all stakeholders (Globerson and Zwikael, 2002). Participants indicated that one of the techniques to plan for the communication before the commencement of the project is running an induction programme and having a discussion with people before they are actually put onto a team. In order to ensure the key individuals have an adequate understanding of the communication in

the project environment, organisations should introduce an induction programme where the principles of collaborative communication can be highlighted for those joining the project team. Project managers should talk to the team about what will be expected, how they work, what the benefits and drawbacks are. An induction programme can assure the organisations that appropriate communication skills are established before the team is engaged in the project and maintained as the project evolves.

Managing strategies in the “executing stage”

Successful project implementation requires carefully designed managing practices. The relationship management practices in the executing stage were found to be the management approaches essential to establishing the right environment to support the working relationship within the contractual context.

Amongst identified managing practices, this study concentrated further on two managing areas of risk management and communication management as the essential elements of relationship management. It also contended that integration of relationship management with risk management and communication management influences the quality of the working relationship between parties.

The risk management practices focus on the managing process of the project risks. The success of a project depends on the ability of the organisations involved in the project to develop a risk management approach and to accept responsibility for managing an integrated risk mitigation process with mutually agreed objectives (BSI, 2010).

Communication management reflects the practices to establish and maintain effective communication across all stakeholders. Managing communication is essential to ensure the full comprehension of everyone involved about the rationales and the changes that collaborative working can introduce (BSI, 2010).

Risk management. Best practice for risk management would engage all of the key-players involved in project delivery to share their joint understanding of risks associated with the project. In a wider sense, those from the designer’s side, the client’s side, the contractor’s side and other specialists’ areas, through a collaborative approach, assess project risks jointly, regardless of which party eventually takes the risk.

Participants suggested that the best practice strategy for risk management is to bring in the right level of expertise and the broad cross section of stakeholders who will be involved in the project to collaboratively manage risks and uncertainty, and potentially gain advantage from turning risks to opportunity. Jointly managing risks may also reduce or avoid the risk premium that contractors add in their pricing process when risks are meant to be managed only by them (Mosey, 2009).

British Standards Institution (BSI) 11000 (2010) instructs that competent personnel also should be appointed as the joint risk manager to be responsible for the overall risk management process. The position and authority of the joint risk manager is established through a joint risk management process in the governance of the collaborative arrangement.

Communication management. The participants’ responses showed that collaboration between project parties is largely influenced by the quality of communication and hence should be carefully managed. Communication was recognised as a concept that is incorporated within the relationship, and their understanding of it was over and beyond the literal definition of communication that is an act of exchanging information. Rather, communication was perceived as the means to engage teams in transmitting knowledge, expressions and feelings as well as technical information.

This point of view is generally consistent with Heath (1994) that communication can have different meaning depending on how the definition addressed the ability for organisations to interact. The finding, therefore, suggests that the practices for managing communication and working relationships are interlinked in terms of practical application. Effective

communication leads to a better understanding of the stakeholders' needs and engaging with them about what their preferences are.

One participant emphasised the engagement with stakeholders and its significance for the relationship. He explained:

... that engagement process is really important. So it's very much engaging with them, standing in their shoes and understanding what exactly they are trying to achieve and working through their issues in the way they want to have them worked through ... If you start to get that very good understanding, you build a lot of trust with them and from that you can start to build a very good relationship (P21).

Client and contractor have to evaluate methods of communications to identify which method should be utilised in the project and specific consideration should be given to the remote locations.

Managing strategies in the "controlling stage"

Measuring relationship performance to examine the effectiveness of current management strategies and to identify shortfalls and stagnation is a vital task in the relationship management process (Conchúir, 2011). Relationship performance measurement is also important to guide steady advancement toward established relationship goals by indicating the status and direction of the working relationship between project participants. All parties involved in a project are to agree on the assessment process including defining the relationship success factors and how those factors are monitored and measured over time against jointly defined measurable values (i.e. KPIs and KRAs).

The findings of this study suggest three strategies to assess and monitor the relationship between client and contractor including "formal", "informal" and "combination of formal and informal" practices.

Formal relationship assessment and control. Formal assessment and control is the process of gathering information of the relationship performance from different resources in a systematic manner in order to measure the effectiveness of the strategies in use. The findings of this study suggest the following practices based on the participant descriptions to assess the effectiveness of relationship management strategies in the project.

Regular review on quality of communication. An ongoing regular review around the communication management was indicated as a strategy to measure and evaluate the quality of communication between client and contractor. This process engages the parties to give their feedback on the effectiveness of the communication through a questionnaire or survey at different intervals throughout the project. Feedback is reviewed and areas of weakness are identified to put some actions in place to improve. It is necessary to establish interim milestone measurements to ensure that quality of communication can be monitored and corrective action taken where required.

Checking the health of project. Measuring project outcomes against the defined KPIs demonstrates how the project management strategies in place are effective towards achieving the project goals.

Therefore, measuring the performance of the project can act as a leading indicator of how the relationship between project parties is established and developed. If the project is running smoothly, all of the standards are being hit, and the quality and functionality is being met, that is probably a good indicator that the relationships are being managed effectively.

Reviewing risk and its occurrence. Another indicator of the effectiveness of a relationship is risk and its eventuation. Actual performances with evidence should be monitored to examine that the process has been effective on specific cases of risk, that the system has yielded effective results and that certain risks have been avoided.

Comparing the value of risk at the front end of the project against its value at the back end of the project also indicates the extent of trust development between client and contractor. One participant, for example, explained how risk value trend represents the quality of trust and

relationship: “... we started off on the order of the first package of the contract, and we had about 10% of total cost was risk. By the last package, we were down to about 1.5% of the price being risk” (P20).

Informal relationship assessment and control. In informal assessment the information gathering does not follow a structured process dictated by a certain set of rules and procedures instead information is obtained through unregulated approaches, and the judgements strongly rely on the intuition and feeling of the assessor. The following sections report the findings regarding the informal assessment practices for measuring and evaluating relationship management strategies in a project.

Regular open discussions. Analysis showed that some clients assess the relationship by looking at the communication through open discussion workshops with project teams to talk about how open and honest they perceive the communication between them to be. To monitor the strength and quality of the relationship, it is important to run the discussion workshops on a regular basis to enable the project managers to compare the trends and feedback over time. Once the areas of weakness are detected, project managers can implement a process of continual improvement to remedy those areas.

Relationship observation. Observing individuals working within the team at all levels can manifest the quality of the relationship. Project managers can evaluate the effectiveness of a relationship by assessing some of the fundamental leadership drivers, such as whether team members feel empowered, whether they feel they have autonomy over the work they do and whether they feel a certain sense of connectedness. In other words, do they think that what they are doing is important? For comprehending the atmosphere that prevails in the project, project managers are required to be sufficiently experienced in similar types of projects and be able to immediately recognise or perceptively sense without the use of rational processes (Forsberg et al., 2005).

A combination of formal and informal assessment and control. The findings suggest that project managers employ formal and informal assessment practices together to evaluate the relationship in the project. They intuitively feel the project ambiance while undergoing a structured relationship assessment process. In a project with a considerable level of complexity, formal assessments fail to address all elements of the project and it is essential to use a combined formal and informal assessment by project managers to identify and manage both visible and invisible issues.

Managing strategies in the “closing stage”

The strategies for managing relationships in the “closing stage” entail the practices that project managers need to employ to reflect on the outcomes of the evaluation during “controlling stage” and post-project review. This includes corrective measures and application of lessons learned after completion of the project. Past mistakes are to be reviewed, analysed and documented and a process to transfer lesson-learned knowledge across projects needs to be designed to ensure the lessons learned are utilised appropriately (Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2014).

However, the participants asserted that this is the area of management that needs improvement. One participant for example narrated that “the use of lesson learned is the gap between what we are doing now and best practice strategy. Organisationally, we probably do not do that particularly well as what we would like” (P18). Klakegg et al. (2010) acknowledge this difficulty and highlighted that organisations often cannot learn from many identified lessons due to the lack of capacity to value the knowledge attained from the past experience. Organisational culture probably is the biggest barrier against application of lesson learns from past mistakes.

Lessons gleaned from previous projects should be not only infused in the project team of a new project but also applied to the client organisation (Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2014). Lesson learned can be beneficial for project teams and organisations in two ways. First, the

project team is given an opportunity to comprehend the project results through the process of developing a lesson learned. Second, lesson learned functions as a documentation mechanism to facilitate the sharing of learning with others.

Analysis of the participants' descriptions suggests the practices in the "closing stage" are in two reflection loops. The first reflection addresses the managing strategies based upon documenting the experience gained from the project outcome and draws upon the lesson learned. One of the participants discussed the effect of learning from the past projects on managing strategies:

You look back at everything you have done, well if I did it this way, I probably could do it quicker, cheaper and I could do it easier. That would be through lessons learned at the end of your project, you would sit as a group, and you would do a lesson learned, where you would go back and look at steps. Where what worked well, and what didn't work well (P16).

The first reflection loop is to implement in the "planning" stage of the project when the strategies for managing the relationships are defined and formulated. Analysing feedback and learning from mistakes helps project managers to critically examine the strategies and reframe them.

The second loop reflects on strategies at organisational level for setting up policies and regulation based upon lessons learned. The past mistakes in relationship management require a wider analysis to detect the areas in which the current regulations are ineffective and need changing. Reflecting on the lessons learned helps to reframe and critically examine the strategy for managing their relationship with other parties and to make essential adjustments on internal policies and instructions if necessary. Comment like "*you use your experience to refine the policies at the organisation level based on your knowledge of how you delivered projects in the past*" (P1) indicates the effect of the second reflection loop on overall internal regulations and personal perception over relationship management. [Maqsood \(2006\)](#) pointed out that the knowledge attained from this learning process is accumulated in the project history and database which contains strategies, policies and procedures to use for future projects.

Summary of the client-contractor relationship management strategies at each stage of the project life cycle is demonstrated in [Table 4](#).

How does this compare to current thinking in literature?

The findings of this study present a nuanced view for managing the client-contractor working relationship that aligns with but also extends beyond prior studies. Overall, this study bridges a critical gap between relationship theory and project management practice, offering a context-sensitive, actionable view that enhances collaborative outcomes in construction projects. Similar to the reflective cycle proposed by [Steinfort and Walker \(2011\)](#), this research confirms the value of cyclical, feedback-driven management across project stages. However, unlike previous models, this study embeds relationship management practices directly within the project lifecycle ([PMBOK, 2021](#)), offering a practical and structured application tailored to the realities of the construction industry. The study reinforces existing literature ([Gabarro, 2014](#); [Globerson and Zwikael, 2002](#), [Jagtap and Kamble, 2020](#)) in underscoring the significance of communication and risk sharing ([Bryde et al., 2019](#)), yet diverges in its identification of pre-contract briefing, incentivisation mechanisms and importantly mutual respect as central pillars in relationship formation. Notably, the integration of formal and also very importantly informal assessment methods for relationship health monitoring adds a distinctive contribution, addressing the tacit or implicit dimensions of relationship quality often overlooked in traditional metrics-driven approaches. These findings can inform decision-making in construction project management by encouraging practitioners to make early planning, structured communication protocols, and dual-mode relationship assessments part of a healthy company culture throughout project delivery. Policymakers should consider embedding these relational dimensions in guidelines and contractor selection frameworks. For

Table 4. Summary of client-contractor relationship management strategies

Project stage	Strategy area	Key practices/findings
Planning	Early planning	Align expectations, define scope, assess complexity and uncertainty before contractor appointment
	Briefing and preliminary design	Client interprets intentions, documents scope and constraints to enable informed tendering
	Contractual arrangements	Use incentivisation (e.g. bonuses) to motivate performance and mutual success
	Communication planning	Establish internal protocols and induction for collaborative communication from the outset
Executing	Risk management	Joint risk planning by all stakeholders to reduce risk premiums and foster shared responsibility
	Communication management	Use communication to build trust, ensure mutual understanding, and improve collaboration
Controlling	Formal relationship assessment	Monitor communication effectiveness via feedback (e.g. surveys) and interim KPIs
	Formal relationship assessment	Measure project outcomes to assess relationship efficacy and goal alignment
	Formal relationship assessment	Track actual risk trends to evaluate trust development and collaborative risk management
	Informal relationship assessment	Hold open discussions and workshops to sense team dynamics and communication quality
	Combination of formal and informal assessment	Combine formal metrics with intuitive sensing of project ambiance for complex projects
Closing	Project-level reflection loop	Use lessons learned post-project to improve future planning and strategy development
	Organisational-level reflection loop	Apply reflective learning to revise policies and build organisational memory and improvement

Source(s): Authors' own work

future research, longitudinal studies that track relationship dynamics across multiple projects, regions and countries could provide deeper insight into the causal impact of specific practices.

Development of the client-contractor working relationship management conceptual model

What has been developed in conducting the analysis for the working relationship management between client and contractor is a conceptual framework of the cyclical managing process through four stages in the project life cycle including planning stage, executing stage, controlling stage and closing stage. Further analysis also has resulted in articulating the strategies within each stage that need to be practiced. [Figure 2](#) illustrates the client-contractor working relationship management conceptual model.

Client-contractor relationship management and contingency theory. While the conceptual model developed in this study provides general strategies to manage the working relationship between client and contractor critical for a successful delivery of construction projects, it is important to emphasise that there is no universally optimal strategy; instead, the effectiveness of management practices depends on situational variables. Within the construction context, factors such as project size, complexity, procurement method, organisational culture, and the external environment influence the most appropriate form of relationship management. For instance, complex infrastructure projects with high uncertainty may benefit from collaborative relationship approaches, while simpler projects may function adequately under traditional transactional relationship.

Contingency theory, originating from organisational and management sciences, posits that there is no single best way to manage a project or organisation; instead, optimal strategies

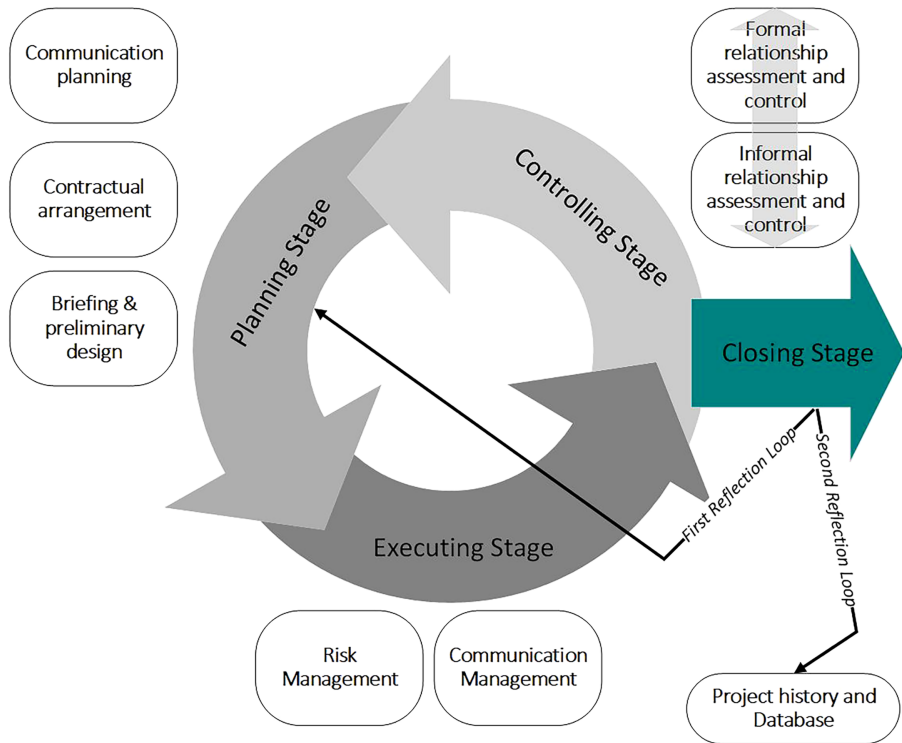


Figure 2. Client-contractor working relationship management conceptual model. Source: Authors' own work

depend on specific internal and external contextual factors (Donaldson, 2001). Contingency theory thus supports the view that the management of client-contractor relationships should be context-specific, adaptive, and responsive to the particular needs and risks associated with each project (Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2019; Engebø *et al.*, 2020). This approach aligns with the growing recognition that dynamic project environments require flexible governance structures and relationship strategies tailored to unique project characteristics.

Conclusion

This study contributes to both theory and practice by offering a holistic and cyclical framework for managing client-contractor relationships across the construction project lifecycle. Through a combination of literature review and in-depth interviews with industry professionals, the research identifies relationship management strategies aligned with each phase of planning, execution, control, and closure. Key findings highlight the importance of early planning, structured communication, incentivised contractual arrangements, integrated risk-sharing, and dual-mode assessment mechanisms (formal and informal) as critical success factors in fostering productive and resilient relationships. Communication and trust emerge as core relational enablers, not only facilitating information flow but also reducing misunderstandings and adversarial behaviour. The study also reveals that client-contractor interactions are relational processes influenced by contextual variables, supporting the relevance of contingency theory in guiding flexible and situation-specific management practices.

Practically, the proposed conceptual model offers a structured tool for project managers, contract administrators, and policymakers to proactively manage the working relationship

between clients and contractors. By embedding relationship strategies into each project stage, the model moves beyond reactive conflict resolution to promote preventative alignment, collaboration, and learning. For industry practitioners, this means prioritising pre-contractual briefing, developing reward mechanisms that align interests, conducting regular relationship performance assessments, and institutionalising lessons learned across projects. For organisations and policymakers, the findings recommend the integration of relational dimensions such as communication standards, trust indicators, and mutual goal setting into procurement frameworks and contractor selection criteria.

Theoretically, this research extends the application of contingency theory to construction relationship management by demonstrating that relational effectiveness varies with factors such as project complexity, organisational culture, and governance design. It challenges the one-size-fits-all assumption and calls for flexible, contextualised approaches that adapt to dynamic project environments. Moreover, by adopting a holistic lens, the study addresses the absence of a comprehensive, lifecycle-based model that incorporates the interrelated dimensions of communication, governance, behavioural dynamics, and performance measurement in client-contractor relationships.

However, this study is not without limitations. Participants in this study, both the clients and contractors, were all within Norwegian organisations. Although they had several experience working in the construction projects locally and internationally, their responses were mainly influenced by their culture, mindsets and Norwegian construction norms and standards.

Future research should focus on validating and adapting the proposed model in varied cultural, regulatory, and industrial contexts beyond Norway to assess its generalisability and scalability. Comparative studies across different project types, including public-private partnerships and international megaprojects, would further refine understanding of how relationship management strategies should be customised. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of client-contractor dynamics across multiple projects would deepen insight into the causal impact of specific practices.

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Corresponding author

Farshid Rahmani can be contacted at: farshid.rahmani@rmit.edu.au