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CULTURAL BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF CONSULTANTS AND CONTRACTORS DURING NEGOTIATIONS: THE CASE OF SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Negotiations are required in every stage of a construction project. The process of negotiation involves being able to understand the position and emotions of the other side of the negotiation. A reliable means for understanding cultural basic assumptions on negotiation tactics assist in better predicting how individuals may act in a negotiation. This research aims to analyse the effect of basic assumptions of consultants and contractors on negotiations in the South Australian construction industry. This was approached through a case study research strategy, utilising semi-structured interviews with two contractors and two consultants each from three large South Australian Road projects followed by a Content Analysis. Findings reveal that both the contractors and consultants believe the nature of human relationships as collaborative and therefore view negotiations as a mean of strengthening the partnership. They negotiate openly to reach win-win outcomes. They view the nature of human nature to be good, therefore more trust and more openness to creative new ideas in negotiation planning. Respondents mostly believe the nature of the human activity to be harmonizing and are more likely to use trade-offs in reaching mutually beneficial negotiation outcomes. The knowledge created in this research will be useful for anyone preparing to negotiate within the South Australian construction industry or similar cultural setups to understand and predict how contractors and consultants would react to different situations and issues within negotiation processes and to achieve effective outcomes. Further research can study the basic assumptions of sub-contractors about negotiations.

Keywords: *Basic Assumptions; Construction Industry; Culture; Negotiations; South Australia.*

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1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Construction projects have become highly complex due to the involvement of numerous parties with often conflicting goals. For example, the owner prefers projects that are inexpensive and completed quickly, whereas the contractor prefers large, income-generating projects with limited time constraints (Yousefi, et al., 2010). Trying to maximise their own benefits by project parties, incorporating special conditions in the contract, changing construction plans, and presenting contradictory and erroneous information in the mass of documents contribute to the emergence and manifestation of construction disputes (Cheung, et al., 2006). Once the disputes are crystallised, it is vital to resolve them. Negotiation is a fast, least cost and least hostile mode of resolutions, which have been proved efficient and effective in complex situations involving the beliefs and thinking of people (Yousefi, et al., 2010). Adair (2004) explain that different strategies of negotiation yield different outcomes, particularly communication strategies, being direct and indirect approaches, and power strategies, being hierarchical and egalitarian. Brett (2017) discusses the importance of gaining and giving trust between negotiation parties as well as the use of trade-offs and multi-issue offers. In a negotiation, it can be advantageous to understand the opposing party's position and how they are likely to negotiate (Lewicki, et al., 2015). To understand how a subject will negotiate, it is important to have an understanding on how they make decisions and what values, beliefs and morals underpin these decisions. Brett (2017) finds that global negotiation benefits from understanding how the negotiating parties' culture affects their choice of negotiation strategies and priorities. Gajendran, et al., (2012) describe that an understanding of cultural differences can aid to eliminate misunderstandings across cultures. This concept introduces that having background knowledge of another culture would aid in efficient communication and relationship building. Further, by having this understanding of the culture could potentially dodge a negative outcome such as no deal being achieved or offending the other party.

Schein (1984) recognise that to completely understand a group's values and overt behaviour, it is essential to investigate the unconscious underlying assumptions, which determine how people think, feel and behave. Research has been conducted into cultural beliefs, and it has been theorised that all cultures universally can be analysed from their basic assumptions about a small number of questions (Hills, 2002). Schein (1984) presents these as five major basic assumptions by all humans: the nature of human relationships, the nature of human nature, the nature of reality and truth, the nature of the human activity, and the organisation's relationship to its environment. Adair (2004) and Brett (2017) provide a depth of knowledge about the impact on culture on negotiation strategies but is limited and does not delve into basic assumption theory. Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework on how cultural basic assumptions are associated with elements of negotiation. It summarises and captures the above discussion on cultural assumptions of contractors and consultants during negotiations. The box on left hand side indicates the four basic assumptions proposed by Schein (1984), and the box on right hand side indicates the different components of negotiations that could be shaped through the underlying basic assumptions.

Whilst the literature has discussed different components of negotiation strategies and the fact that different cultures favour different strategies. However, it does not comprehensively analyse the effect of cultural basic assumptions on negotiation components. The way cultural basic assumptions drive the behaviour and thinking of

people into negotiations is an area without adequate existing knowledge. Therefore, the proposed research is aimed to analyse cultural basic assumptions of consultants and contractors and their effect on components of negotiation, adding significant value to negotiation efforts in construction project teams. This aim carries the following objectives:

1. Extract the basic assumption of South Australian construction consultants and contractors in negotiation situations
2. Investigating the impact of basic assumptions held by consultants and contractors on the common negotiation tactics and positions in the South Australian construction industry.

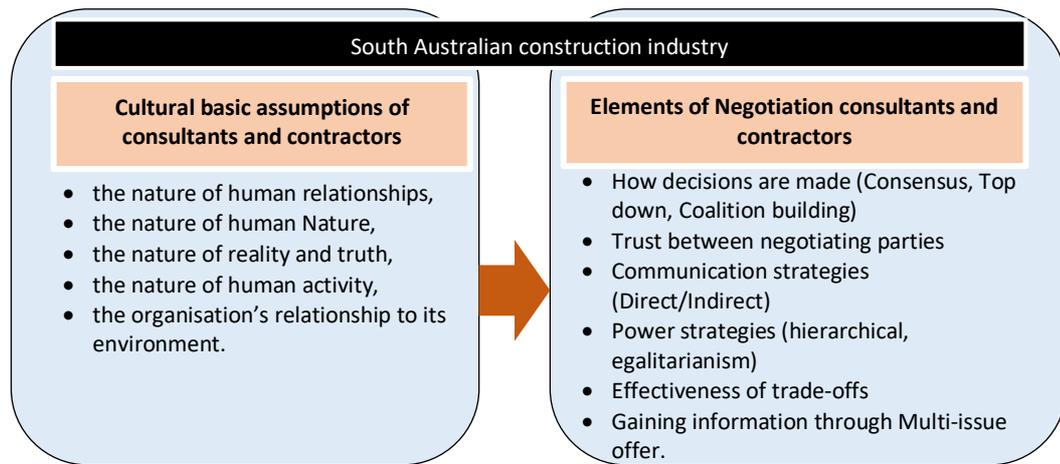


Figure 1: Conceptual framework on how cultural basic assumptions of contractors and consultants affect the elements of negotiation

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research attempts to analyse how cultural basic assumptions of contractors and consultants in the South Australian construction industry affect the elements of negotiation. As suggested by Saunders, et al., (2009), it is clear that the exploratory nature of this research topic, the limitation of time and the access to members of construction projects determined the appropriate methodology to be a qualitative approach, utilising an embedded case study research strategy. Case study research has been particularly useful as it has enabled us to get a rich understanding of the context of the research, and three case studies allowed us to generalise from the research (Saunders, et al., 2009). As such, qualitative data was collected from three separate case studies. With the theoretical replication expected from the data collection, three case studies allow for the required depth of observation and provide an adequate number of cases (Barratt, et al., 2011).

Three public sector road projects were selected as the cases. The cases were identified based on a number of criteria designed to ensure quality data can be collected to obtain a rich understanding of the cultural basic assumptions of contractors and consultants. As the criteria for the selection of the case studies, projects had to have been within the South Australian construction industry; utilised both contractors and consultants (traditional procurement); been valued at over \$100M; commenced works within the last 5 years (to ensure data was current). Three road projects were selected for the purposes of this research as road projects are the largest value construction projects in South Australia and therefore have the highest number of negotiations around claims. Within each case study,

data was collected from two consultants and two contractors. The details of the respondents are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondent's details

	Respondent Code	Project	Contractor or Consultant	Role	Industry Experience
CASE A	RA	CA	Contractor	Engineering Coordinator	8 years
	RE	CA	Contractor	Contract Manager	21 years
	RC	CA	Consultant	Infrastructure advisory	32 years
	RG	CA	Consultant	Estimating Manager	25+ years
CASE B	RD	CB	Contractor	Engineering Lead	12 years
	RB	CB	Contractor	Commercial Manager	25+ years
	RF	CB	Consultant	Engineer	24 years
	RJ	CB	Consultant	Advisory	5 years
CASE C	RH	CC	Contractor	Design Manager	12 years
	RI	CC	Contractor	Quality Manager	14 years
	RL	CC	Consultant	Consultant Advisory	2 years
	RK	CC	Consultant	Consultant Advisory	3 years

The primary data collection technique for this research was semi-structured interviews, using an interview guideline that focused on indirect questioning to extract underlying cultural basic assumptions. During data analysis, trends, recurring themes and principles were analysed using code-based content analysis. Content analysis is a method that enables replicable and valid inferences from qualitative data to provide knowledge, new insights and a practical guide for action (Woo and Heo, 2013). This study utilised manual coding, where the vast quantity of data was codified for ease of categorisation for the development of theory. Using a coding structure developed to clearly set out the themes within the collected data, a code was allocated to each project name, cultural basic assumption, negotiation behaviour and respondent, to create recognisable notations. From here data from many hours of transcribed interviews was easily collated and drawn from where relevant. Using these codes, three layers of coding were conducted; open coding, axial coding and selective coding. A cross case analysis was performed to derive findings. This analysis also aimed to uncover a set of recommended tools and strategies that can be developed to assist in negotiating with people of these sub-groups and other people holding these cultural basic assumptions.

3. CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Table 2 provides a brief background on the projects selected.

Findings from these three cases are explained in the subsequent sub sections to derive underlying basic assumptions of the contractors and consultants in the South Australian construction industry and to learn their association with the components of negotiation.

Table 2: Background details of the cases

Project	Background details
1 Darlington Upgrade Project	This is a large urban road project that is to deliver 3.3 km of motorway for South Australia. A Design and Construction contract was selected to build this infrastructure. The Australian and State governments have jointly committed \$754.5 million for the completion of this project. The project started in early 2016 and is scheduled for completion in mid-2020.
2 Oaklands Crossing	This Project is a road and rail project to remove a level crossing by lowering the rail line under the road. This project also included a new train station and a pedestrian bridge. Not only was this funded by the Australian and State Governments, but also the local council had a financial input. The amount committed was \$174 million for this project to be achieved. The project started in June 2018 and was completed for operation in July 2019, but residual works are still being conducted.
3 Regency to Pym Street upgrade	This is a large road project which consists of a 1.8 km section of motorway through metropolitan Adelaide. The type of contract executed to produce this work was an alliance contract. The Government has committed \$354.3 million for the project to be constructed. The project commenced on 10 July 2019 and is forecasted for completion on 31 January 2022.

3.1 THE NATURE OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

The first basic cultural assumption that will be analysed from the interviewee's responses is the nature of human relationships. In Case A, although one respondent indicated that they believed the nature of human relationships to be competitive, the rest of the respondents provided more signals about cooperative relationships. Speaking of their experience on project A, Respondent B indicated that *"most project team members would tend to start with trying to find a cooperative solution"* (CA, RB). This was reiterated by respondent F, who said, *"the vast majority look to cooperatively look at the holistic bigger picture. There is a small minority that looks to defend their party, but they're definitely in the minority."* (CA, RF). This showed an inclination of respondents to want to cooperate with contracting parties and work together. Case B respondents followed a similar vein to Case A and were unanimous in their response that they saw human relationships as cooperative. Respondent L discussed how performance issues are managed in the industry, offering: *"In terms of how we'd manage performance issues within our team as consultants, I think, um, it is a very cooperative process"* (CB, RL). When speaking about the process of doing work Respondent I said, *"We also focus on the experience. Making that enjoyable for all because that's the best chance of success and working collaboratively should help with the overall outcome."* (CB, RI). From these responses, it was found that contractors and consultants on case B also found the nature of human relationships to be cooperative. Keeping the trend with the respondents from Case A and Case B, respondent G from case C said, *"Generally at the start of the project they're fairly cooperative."* (CC, RG) when describing project members' attitudes toward conflict resolution. Also, on the topic, respondent E offered, *"I think generally, people try to do it cooperatively and [through] mutually accepted agreements. [that is what is] best for all parties but if it's not agreed then they'll go in another direction"* (CC, RE). These tend to show that Case C respondents also view the nature of human relationships as working together. They see relationships as collaborative more than competitive, and this showed in their negotiation tactics that they identified with. Respondent F showed a

willingness to work with contractors through debts rather than chase every cent contractually owed. “*We don’t want to send them bust even though contractually we might be able to.*” (CA, RF). When speaking ‘showing your hand’ in a negotiation to try and reach a mutually beneficial outcome, respondent G said, “*If you’re completely closed off, it is highly unlikely to have a productive discussion.*” (CC, RG). From analysing the three cases, it can be seen that all three cases agreed that the nature of human relationships was cooperative. So, people in the SA Construction industry view the nature of human relationships as cooperative, and this leads them to work collaboratively and look for ‘win-win’ situations in negotiations that are mutually beneficial.

3.2 THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE

The nature of human nature - whether humans are primarily good, neutral or evil also have an impact on negotiation tactics. A negotiating party that believes people are evil could be less likely to trust someone whom they are meeting for the first time. An absence of trust could require the terms of a contract to be much more stringent to mitigate the risk of agreements turning sour and resulting in litigation. Respondents from Case A had mixed views on the nature of human nature. One subject interviewed believed that if a party they were contracted with could breach the contract for gain and get away with it, that they always would (CA, RF). This respondent also found in their experience that men in the industry were often aggressive in their negotiations (CA, RF). Another respondent said that they thought people were generally good, however, later told a story of refusing to work again with a “*concrete companies [that] tried to screw me over about 12 years*” (CA, RB). This feeling that the nature of human nature is evil is not carried across the entire South Australian construction industry, however. Interviewees who worked on Case B returned different responses to Case A, finding mostly that people were good. Showing a keenness to trust and cooperate, respondent I (CB, RI) said that they enjoy working collaboratively with the client. This cooperation can extend to the openness of discussion in negotiations to reach win-win outcomes. Contractors and consultants who worked on Case C followed a similar course to those on Case B. Respondent E said, “*No-one’s going into a contract to hoodwink someone*”. This shows that they generally believe people are good and have honest intentions. This was not a completely unanimous position as Respondent D told that they would withhold key design information during the tender negotiations as they fear companies will take their design and contract with a cheaper builder (CC, RD) because they only want what is the best outcome for themselves. In comparing the three case studies’ responses to the nature of human nature, Case A stands alone in their responses of ‘evil’. This is interesting when examining against habits toward negotiation. Case A was also distinguishable from Cases B and C when looking at whether they would change negotiation plans upon recommendation of a new and promising employee or rather stay with tried and tested methods. A link can be drawn between believing humanity is good and trusting stakeholders who present new ideas. Conversely, those in Cases B and C who found human nature to be good take a more flexible view.

3.3 THE NATURE OF REALITY AND TRUTH

The ‘nature of reality and truth’ looks at how cultures decide what is true; whether that be reliance on wisdom, social consensus or a pragmatic test. In analysing this, the SA construction industry was looked at in terms of how final agreements are made in negotiations over project matters. Across the three cases, there was a range of responses,

with some trends emerging. By looking at this through a negotiation lens, we can draw links between this Basic Cultural Assumption and find possible reasons for negotiation habits. Subjects from Case A identified most closely with pragmatic testing as the way that reality and truth is defined. Respondent D said at Q3, *“Generally it’s fact and technical. In construction, it generally has a black and white answer”* (CA, RD). This shows a reliance on technical and contractual facts, consistent with pragmatic testing, and this shows an inclination toward keeping decision making processes consistent. Differing from Case A, Case B were more closely aligned with ‘social consensus’ as the nature of reality and truth. This is normally based on careful consideration of opinions and agreement of both parties. Respondent L encouraged input to reach a consensus among parties, quoting, *“we’re open for anyone to bring an idea to the table”* (CB, RL). This lends the belief that interviewees on Case B would be more inclined to take on different perspectives rather than just the letter of the law written in the contract. The respondents from Case C had very similar responses to their colleagues in Case A. The ‘pragmatic test’ approach was favoured for reasons akin to those illustrated above. The majority finding from a viewpoint encompassing all three cases is that the nature of reality and truth is pragmatic testing. This primarily deals with technical and contractual facts. *“You’re more likely to go with something that’s dependable and proven”* (CC, RA). Interestingly these two cases also indicated that they would prefer to utilise negotiation personnel that have consistent views and understanding when selecting their negotiation team. Contrastingly, Case B opted for social consensus and, rather than consistent views and understanding, would prefer negotiation personnel to have diversity and differing perspectives. This is a logical trend as ‘social consensus’ involves input from several parties and could encourage this kind of decision making, whereas pragmatic test is ‘black and white’ and therefore more consistent.

3.4 THE NATURE OF HUMAN ACTIVITY

To identify contractor and consultant beliefs toward the nature of human activity, attention was given to respondents’ impressions of the attitudes of people they have negotiated with- whether harmonizing, passive or dominating. Being another basic cultural assumption relating to human-to-human interactions, this could also be relevant for drawing conclusions regarding negotiations. The predominant trend to emerge from Case A was in favour of the nature of human activity being ‘harmonizing’. This would indicate that subjects from Case A are willing to look for negotiated solutions rather than trying to force their own way or accepting unfavourably one-sided positions. Respondent D described their experience negotiating in the industry as *“They’ll hear what you have to say and provide feedback”* (CA, RD). Those interviewed from Case B returned a mix of responses, including both dominant and fatalistic. Respondent I said that in past dealings, they would “maybe try to dominate sub-contractors”. Another subject said that they had found parties to often be passive (CB, RK). This report that parties are often passive could be a result of the respondent being overly dominant, like Respondent I, or this could simply show a range of human activities varying from person to person. Much like Case A, Case C respondents found the nature of human activity to be harmonizing. Reiterating the position of Case A, Respondent C said: *“during the tender phase [people are] definitely trying to harmonise with the other party”* (CA, RC). This response emerged as the most popular among the three cases. Cases A and C both found the nature of human activity to be ‘harmonizing’, with Case B identifying dominant and passive behaviours are sometimes present. In a negotiation, a trade-off is a tactic that refers to

giving up an item of low interest to gain an item that is worth more to you. This can be useful when parties have different levels of interest in different negotiation tactics (or contract terms). During the interviews, Cases A and C both indicated that they found trade-offs to be useful in negotiations. Contrastingly, Case B, who had a mix of responses including dominant and fatalistic, unanimously said that they did not use trade-offs in negotiation. This could be because they are dominant or passive in these conversations and not keen to give-and-take to explore mutually beneficial outcomes.

3.5 THE ORGANISATION'S RELATIONSHIP TO ITS ENVIRONMENT

The aim of the basic assumption, the organisation's relationship to its environment, is to try and relate the construction project or company to its situation (Samaraweera, et al., 2018). For this research, a multiple-choice question was asked to the respondents, with four possible answers being: dominant, submissive, harmonising and searching out a niche. The question was asked from the point of view of why the company tendered for the project work. The results of the interviews in Case A were split between contractors answering dominant and consultants searching out a niche. Contractor respondent E said, *"that would be their bread and butter"* (CA, RE), suggesting that this type of work is in their core duties and dominant in. Although consultant respondent G said, *"we tendered for that role on the project because it is in our niche primarily"* (CA, RG), which proposes that their role in the project fits into a specialised line of work. Results for Case B were exactly the same as Case A, with a split between contractors answering dominant and consultants searching out a niche. Respondent D, who is a contractor, said that their company asks the question when looking for work *"are we dominant enough and is this our kind of project?"* (CB, RD). This leads to the idea that the company has a set criterion of work that they are industry leaders in. In terms of the consultants on Case B, participant J said, *"in the context of us, it's probably because it's in our niche"* (CA, RJ). Regarding case 3, the results were very similar to Case A and Case B, but with one of the consultants answering, they are dominant in the industry. Respondent K, who was a consultant, said, *"I think we are dominant in this space"* (CC, RK) as opposed to the other consultant, respondent L, who said, *"we are now up to our fifth potentially our sixth Alliance in South Australia... It's really our niche"* (CC, RL). Both of the contractors answered the question as being dominant. It became clear that for these types of projects, the contractors and consultants were usually either dominant in the industry or searching out a niche. Furthermore, the findings also showed that the contractors working on these projects were dominant, with all of the contractor respondents choosing dominant as the answer to this question. All but one consultant selected searching for a niche. The link to negotiation for basic assumption, the organisation's relationship to its environment, found that consultants that are searching out a niche are highly likely to use multi-issue offers and are willing to openly discuss them. The reason for this is that the consultant wants to gain information for themselves on the niche work. *"If you're completely closed off, it is highly unlikely to have a productive discussion"* (CA, RG). In the case of contractors, there are situations of personnel not wanting to disclose information. The reason for this is to not release any information that may jeopardise their dominance on the market. Contractor respondent E said, *"I don't disclose people's information"* (CA, RE). In summary, a consultant who is searching out a niche is highly likely to be open to multi-issue offers and to discuss them openly to endeavour to develop their niche work, and a contractor that is dominant may hold back information as to not jeopardise their dominance on the market.

4. DISCUSSION

The contractors and consultants in the South Australian construction industry realise the nature of human relationships as collaborative and therefore view negotiations as a partnership and negotiate openly to reach win-win outcomes. This finding was consistent with a study conducted by Russo (1992), who analyses how cultures can effectively engage in trade. Although Russo looks at the Lummi people, a Native American tribe that traded in retail liquor and deep-sea fishing, their need to relate successfully to their consumer base was found to be similar in this study. Russo notes that the Lummi people were able to trade successfully with distributors and suppliers of raw materials by making themselves aware of the similarities and differences of those with whom they were negotiating. Further, negotiators in the South Australian construction industry believe being cooperative lead them to work together and look for 'win-win' situations in negotiations that are mutually beneficial with any party, which is consistent with Russo's study. South Australian construction industry negotiators view the nature of human nature to be good and, therefore, more trusting and more open to creative new ideas in negotiation planning. As noted by Brett (2017), trust can be a very sought-after value to a lot of parties and cultures when attempting to negotiate. As trust and creative ideas are important values in the SA construction industry, Brett's research would agree with these findings. Another study by Meyerson, et al., (1996) raises the term swift trust, which is when you trust another party until one party betrays the trust. This research agrees with the view of the South Australian construction industry but is limited to the initial trusting view because this research did not touch on the betrayal of the trust. South Australian construction industry consultants usually search out a niche and are open to multi-issue offers to develop their niche work. Lytle, et al., (1999) describe approaching a negotiation in a certain way can have a range of different results, being positive, negative or somewhere in between. They nominate three main negotiation approaches: power, rights and interests. The findings of this research project confirm consultants would be consistent with the interest-based approach as described by Lytle, et al., (2009). They note that by focusing on both parties' interests, you get an opportunity to understand the other party. Consultants of the South Australian construction industry consider each party's underlying needs, concerns and desires to further develop their niche work with the project client.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research analyses cultural basic assumptions of consultants and contractors and their effect on the components of negotiation among them. Both contractors and consultants in the South Australian construction industry believe that the nature of human relations is more cooperative. Both parties show an inclination to wanting to be more cooperative with the contracting parties and work together. Therefore, they look for 'win-win' situations in negotiations that are mutually beneficial. Further, they view the nature of human nature to be good are therefore more trusting and more open to creative new ideas in negotiation planning. Both contractors and consultants find pragmatic testing to be the nature of reality and truth. This correlates with their tendencies to utilise negotiation team members with consistent views, compared with their colleagues, who opted for social consensus and preferred diverse negotiation team members. Further, both contractors and consultants mostly believe the nature of human activity to be harmonizing, and they are more likely to use trade-offs in reaching mutually beneficial negotiation outcomes.

Consultants are mostly searching out a niche and are open to multi-issue offers to develop their niche work, while contractor respondents are dominant and may hold back information as to not jeopardise their dominancy on the market.

This research builds on existing knowledge of the cultural basic assumptions to interpret its version of the South Australian construction industry and develops it in relation to how it affects different components of negotiation. A deeper understanding of cultural basic assumptions and impact on negotiation along with the carefully inferred recommendations could assist in negotiating in the South Australian construction industry to realise joint gains, reach agreement quicker, create a civil negotiation process and ultimately, provide a better negotiation outcome with contractors and consultants. This research has developed a set of recommendations that deliberately support such assumptions and leverage these to create benefit in negotiation. Such recommendations include: place value on trust; utilise a direct, collaborative, interest-based approach to maximise joint gains and utilise trade-offs during negotiation. For example, as the finding that contractors and consultants hold the basic assumption that the nature of human relationships is cooperative, there is an indication that they are willing to collaborate and work together. Therefore, the recommendation that an interest-based approach, focussing on sharing interests to maximise joint gains without detriment to either party, could be implemented to achieve the best possible outcome. Further research arising out of this research include repeating the same research to understand the basic assumptions of sub-contractors about negotiations, as trades people as sub-contractors play a major role in the Australian construction industry.

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