**A NEW PROFESSIONALISM IN CONSTRUCTION: IMPORTANCE OF TRUST**

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The features of the construction industry, the construction process, the construction project and constructed items include: the high cost and invisibility of the built items; the long period of gestation of projects; the large number of participants in a project; possible impact of the project and product on the health and safety of the workers, occupants and the community; and wide extent of governments’ involvement in the process. These characteristics make trust important in construction. There is a need for trust in the industry, among the organisations and practitioners involved in projects; between the industry and its clients; within the project value chain; and between the industry and other stakeholders. The extent of trust at each of these levels, how professionalism among construction practitioners helps to build this trust, and what should be done to engender trust in construction are addressed. The study is based on an analysis of recent studies on professionalism in the UK construction industry which are compared with mainstream conceptions, and national aspirations and strategies for the industry. It is suggested that action should be taken to build trust at all the levels outlined above. It is argued that the construction industry needs a new professionalism, based on the features of the construction industry.

*Keyword*s: characteristics of construction, professionalism, development, trust.

### INTRODUCTION

Many studies have highlighted the need for trust within the construction industry. The seminal work, *Interdependence and Uncertainty* (Crichton, 1966), outlined how the output of one group in a project becomes the input for the tasks of the next group, and thus, how important it is for this subsequent group to be sure of the efficacy of the input. Research also highlights the need for greater collaboration among, and integration of, the project team and the need for the client and the whole project value chain to be involved in it, suggesting appropriate delivery methods such as partnering which have *trust* as a major factor (Latham, 1994, Egan, 1998). The lack of integration, exacerbated by the high extent of adversarialism, is blamed for many of the ills of the UK construction industry. The *Construction 2025* strategy (HM Government, 2013) sees team integration to be key to the industry being able to deliver on the vision and targets for 2025. The strategy has these targets: 33 percent reduction in the cost of construction and whole life cost of assets; 50 percent reduction in the time taken from inception to completion of new building work; 50 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in the built environment; and 50 percent reduction in the trade gap in construction products and materials. The industry will have to improve its professionalism and *trust* to attain these ambitious targets.

The UK government and industry have recently outlined even more demanding aspirations of performance. The ambition of the *Construction Sector Deal* (which builds on the *Construction 2025* strategy) is to deliver: better-performing buildings built more quickly and at lower cost; lower energy use in homes and workplaces; better jobs, including apprenticeships; better value from the construction pipeline; and a globally competitive sector that exports more (HM Government, 2018).

*Trust* is a valuable currency in construction. There should also be trust between the client and the industry; between construction firms and the rest of the value chain; and between the construction industry and its stakeholders, including the users/occupants and beneficiaries of its products who should trust the construction project team about their physical safety in the built items. The members of the community should have trust that the activities of the industry will not have an adverse impact on their health, safety, livelihoods or wellbeing.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this study is to investigate the need for incorporating trust among the features and manifestations of professionalism. The objectives are to: (1) consider the issues of professionalism and trust and explore their importance in construction; (2) determine what builds trust in the construction industry; and (3) propose possible courses of action to enhance the level of trust in construction.

**A PROFESSION AND PROFESSIONALISM**

**What is a profession? What is professionalism?**

The professions have been studied in the social sciences since the early 20th century. Over time, the definition and conceptualisation have changed. To Freidson (1994), a ‘profession’ is an occupation that controls its own work, organised by a special set of institutions sustained in part by a particular ideology of expertise and service. Evans (2008) considered this to be an example of old, traditional conceptions of a profession, and suggested that the concept is going through major changes; in many fields, new ‘professionalisms’ have emerged, sweeping clear conceptions based on professionals’ autonomy and control. There is also a shift of power; accountability has replaced autonomy in an era of greater management and market orientation; thus, some refer to a process of ‘de-professionalisation’.

Reviewing works on professionalism, Evans (2008) notes a lack of consensus on its meaning; it changes and is redefined, often to serve different interests. Hoyle (1975, p. 315) explained it as “those strategies and rhetorics employed by members of an occupation in seeking to improve status, salary and conditions”. Recent works perceive professionalism, even in a particular field, not as absolute, but as “a socially constructed, contextually variable and contested concept” (Troman, 1996, p. 476).

Evans (2008) notes that, while many authors focus on professionalism as being an externally imposed, articulated perception of what constitutes a profession’s functions and responsibilities, Boyt *et al*., (2001, p. 322) emphasise the importance of the professional; they note: “Professionalism consists of the attitudes and behavior one possesses toward one’s profession”. Professionalism goes beyond professional culture (shared ideologies, values, and ways of and attitudes to working) by mapping out the content of the work done by the profession, as reflected in roles, responsibilities, key functions, required skills and knowledge, work practices and procedures, ways of perceiving problems and solutions, and of dealing with clients (Evans, 2008). Concluding the review, Evans (2008) defines professionalism as: professionality-influenced practice consistent with consensual delineations of a specific profession and that both contributes to and reflects perceptions of the profession’s purpose and status and the specific nature, range and levels of service provided by, and expertise prevalent within, the profession, and the ethical code underpinning this practice.

**HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Professionalism and socio-political structure**

Early studies highlighted the role of the professions in the social structure, in influencing the stability and civility of social systems. For example, to Tawney (1921), professionalism could subject individualism to the needs of the community. Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) considered it as a force for stability and freedom against the threat of bureaucracies. Marshall (1950) highlighted altruism or the ‘service’ orientation of professionalism. Parsons (1951) made the best known effort to set out the features of professionalism and its normative values. He showed how the capitalist economy, rational-legal social order, and the professions were inter-related, acting together to maintain and stabilise the social order. For Hughes (1958), professions and occupations presume to tell the rest of society what is good for it.

**Traits of the professional, including trust**

In the 1950s and 1960s, Parsons’s work held sway, and analyses focused on a profession as a kind of occupation, with special characteristics. For example, Greenwood (1957) and Wilensky (1964) argued that professional work required a long education and training to acquire the necessary knowledge and expertise; professionals were autonomous and performed a public service; were guided in decision-making by a professional ethic or code of conduct; they were in special relations of trust with clients, were altruistic and motivated by universalistic values. The work of Parsons, in particular on features of professionalism, is criticised because of its links with functionalism (the ‘trait’ approach) (Dingwall and Lewis, 1983).

In the 1970s and 1980s the concept of professionalism as value system was discredited; attempts to define special features of professions were largely abandoned. The focus moved to analysis of professionalisation or “the professional project” (Larson, 1977), the processes through which an occupation closed the market (to the untrained and unqualified) thereby promoting a privileged income level and status to practitioners. The successful professional project would result in a “monopoly of competence legitimised by official sanctioned ‘expertise’, and a monopoly of credibility with the public” (Larson, 1977, p. 38). This resulted in scepticism about professions and the idea of professionalism as a normative value. They were seen as elite conspiracies of occupations; privileged, self-interested monopolies competing for status, upward social mobility and income (Johnson, 1972). Abbott (1988) examined the carving out and maintenance of a jurisdiction through competition and the work needed to establish the legitimacy of the monopoly practice. They could ‘capture’ states and negotiate “regulative bargains” (Cooper *et al*., 1988). Larson’s work is still often cited (MacDonald, 1995) but her interpretation is challenged. Freidson (1982) preferred market ‘shelters’ to monopolies in provision of professions’ services.

In the 1990s, researchers partly returned to the concept of professionalism as a normative value system but with new directions. They began to reassess the significance of professionalism and its contributions for customers, clients and social systems. To Freidson (1994, 2001), professionalism is a unique form of occupational control of work which has advantages over market or organisational and bureaucratic forms of control. The new paradigm examines professionalism as a discourse of occupational change and control. ‘Professionalism’ is now used in many occupations and workplaces; in organisations’ mission statements, aims and objectives to motivate employees and in policy procedures and manuals. ‘Professionalism’ is also claimed by both sides in disputes and political and policy arguments (Crompton, 1990).

**STUDIES ON PROFESSIONS AND PROFESSIONALISM IN CONSTRUCTION**

Works on the professions in construction usually mention the typology of Lord Benson (1992) which uses the old model of a profession. The relevant criteria in this study are: (a) The profession must be controlled by a governing body, which sets standards of education and training as a condition of entry and continued membership; (b) The governing body must set the ethical rules and professional standards to be observed by members; (c) The rules and standards should be designed for the benefit of the public and not for the advantage of the members; (d) The governing body must take disciplinary action, should the rules and standards not be observed; (e) Work is often reserved to a profession by statute because of the protection of the public; (f) The governing body must satisfy itself that there is fair and open competition in the practice so that the public are not at risk of being exploited; (g) The profession’s members must be independent in thought and outlook; and (h) In its field, a profession must give leadership to the public it serves. It is worth noting that most of the criteria relate to the public’s interest. The “leadership to the public” criterion is enlightening.

Spada (2008) suggests that the professions have played a big role in the development of meritocracy in the UK because of their emphasis on knowledge-based skills rather than social class; the professions are a potential source of ethical role models.

**Professionalism and trust, and the built environment**

Evetts (2003) suggests that professionalism in occupations and professions implies the importance of trust in economic relations in societies with an advanced division of labour; lay people must place their trust in professional workers. Professionalism requires professionals to be merit the trust, to maintain confidentiality and conceal any guilty knowledge they have developed by not exploiting it for evil purposes. In return, professionals receive authority, rewards and higher status; later analyses attributed higher rewards to occupational powers rather than professionalism in some fields.

On the built environment, Spada (2008) notes that people rely on the ethical integrity of professionals because a professional provides intangible services which purchasers have to take on trust. Individuals and society as a whole have become increasingly dependent on professionals. Thus, trust, measured by how it fits the socially accepted standards of repute and respectability, is also important (MacDonald, 1995).

**Professionalism and the public interest**

Morrell (2015) outlines how Lord Benson’s criteria are operationalised by noting that, in the UK, for every professional institution to obtain a charter, it needs to convince the Privy Council that it passes a public interest test as it seeks; and it can highlight provisions including: (a) setting educational, training and other entry requirements, and obligations for continuing professional development, so that the public can be sure of a level of competence of members; (b) regulating members’ conduct to ensure compliance with codes of conduct; (c) advising (or speaking out) on matters of public interest where the profession’s expertise should be regarded as authoritative.

Morrell (2015) notes that some professional institutions require members to consider the rights of others, including: (a) Respecting the relevant rights and interests of others (RIBA); (b) Having full regard for the public interest, particularly the well-being of future generations (ICE); (c) Having regard to the interests of those who may be reasonably expected to use the products of their work (LI); (d) Having regard to the public interest in fulfilling professional responsibilities and duties (CIOB); and (e) Promoting the usefulness of the profession for public advantage (RICS).

The “fundamental principles” of the code of ethics of the American Society of Civil Engineers’ (ASCE) (2017) include: Engineers uphold and advance the integrity, honour and dignity of the profession by: (1) using their knowledge and skill for the enhancement of human welfare and the environment; (2) being honest and impartial and serving with fidelity the public, their employers and clients; and (3) striving to increase the profession’s competence and prestige. The relevant canons in the code of ethics include: (1) Engineers shall hold paramount the safety, health and welfare of the public and shall strive to comply with the principles of sustainable development; (2) Engineers shall perform services only in areas of their competence; (3) Engineers shall issue public statements only in an objective and truthful manner; (4) Engineers shall build their professional reputation on the merit of their services; and (7) Engineers shall, in all matters related to their profession, treat all persons fairly.

**Call for change**

Morell (2015) noted that built environment professions face a threat; their standing and perceived value is challenged; observers note a trend towards protectionism, resistance to change, existence of silos and hierarchies. The institutions are perceived as losing control of quality and oversight of educational standards, a code of ethics, a duty to serve the public interest, and leadership on key issues of the built environment. Spada (2008) notes that professions have gained societal importance in the information age, but have experienced a decline in public esteem. The perceived self-interest of the professions has brought about changes in regulations. Spada (2008) notes that the professions are under attack from government, which often fails to consider professional expertise in relevant policy areas; and the public, which view professionals with suspicion in an era of falling deference to authority.

Morrell (2015) considered these drivers for change: (a) Loss of trust by the public (leading to loss of automatic authority by professionals); (b) A prevailing mood against regulation and protectionism of a knowledgeable and aware citizenry armed with a right and ability to choose; (c) Client impatience with poor delivery and lack of accountability; (d) The impact of new technologies and applications; (e) Pressure on the ‘business model’ of the institutions (potentially leading to reduction in entry qualifications and standards, reduced investment in developing knowledge and so on); (f) The need to serve many members prevents setting of one view on matters of great public interest such as climate change and housing supply. Morrell (2015) notes that occupations considered outside the traditional professions have developed codes of conduct and claim the qualities possessed by the professions with a longer history.

**TRUST IN CONSTRUCTION**

Cerić (2016) notes that *trust* between parties to contracts and their agents is a major factor in assessing and managing risk. There is an asymmetry of communication and understanding among project participants. This leads to an imbalance of knowledge which results in inequalities of understanding and a possible increase in risk for one or more of the parties involved. Construction projects have become larger, more technically and managerially complex, involving more organisations and practitioners. Participants fulfil inter-dependent tasks, connected by a web of relationships. They should also relate to many other stakeholders external to the project. Cerić (2016) used the Principal-agent Theory to analyse the relationships among the project owner, contractor, and their project managers; this is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Principal-agent theory framework for construction projects showing key relationships between project parties, where PO: Project owner, C: Contractor, PMpo: Project owner’s project manager, PMc: Contractor’s project manager (Cerić, 2016:102)

In typical construction projects, the inter-firm relationship applies to the project owner and contractor; the intra-firm relationship to both project owner and contractor and their project managers; and the inter-personal relationship applies to the two project managers. Communication risk differs across these relationships. One can appreciate the importance of trust in the context of these relationships. Each type of trust can increase, decrease, or vary in complex ways from project initiation to completion.

Cerić (2016) notes that, in English, trust is associated with veracity, integrity, and other virtues including fidelity, faithfulness, and belief. Also, *trost* in German stands for comfort or consolation. In Latin, *fides* stands for trust, as well as faith, belief, confidence, loyalty, and promise of protection. She notes that in communication in Latin, risk or *periculum* also means danger, peril, trial, insecurity, jeopardy, attempt, and hazard. The Latin words for trust and risk are often opposites of each other. Cerić (2016) notes that the central epistemological question about trust is whether or not to trust someone or something. An important criterion for trust is the acceptance of risk or vulnerability (Becker, 1996); this risk can be reduced through communication. Thus, trust enhances co-operation (Cook *et al.,* 2005). Co-operation involving trust becomes less cumbersome and less costly once the incentive to check up on other parties declines. As Williams (2001) notes, inter-personal trust is an important social resource that facilitates co-operation and enables co-ordinated social interaction.

All projects requiring persons to associate in various activities over a period contain seeds of social dilemmas. It is each individual’s responsibility to build relationships on the basis of trust and reciprocity (Ostrom, 2003:62). Cerić (2016) shows that trust has become one of an important subject, because it is increasingly clear that external authority is insufficient to guarantee successful completion of construction projects. So far, the mainstream research encompasses trust between persons, within firms or other organisations, and between firms or other organisations. Project managers in Cerić’s (2016) study agreed that it is not easy to develop trust between project parties, but that it can easily come apart, after which it is even more difficult to build it again.

Much of the research on trust in Construction Management is concerned with inter-firm relationships (as in partnerships and alliances); intra-firm and inter-personal trust are neglected in the literature. Research on trust in the relationships among parties in construction projects needs to develop in three inter-related directions outlined by the Principal-Agent Theory framework: on inter-firm, intra-firm, and inter-personal trust.

**FEATURES OF CONSTRUCTION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALISM AND TRUST**

**Features of construction, professionalism and trust**

The features of the construction industry, construction process and construction product are highlighted by various authors; construction is considered to be unique. Hillebrandt (2000) presented these features: high cost; long period of gestation; many participants; large sector of the economy, with complex linkage effects; and role of the government. World Economic Forum and Boston Consulting Group (2015) traced the construction industry’s practices to what clients desire from the industry (Table 1).

Table 1 Relationship between construction industry’s features and clients’ practices

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Construction industry’s features** | **Practices of construction clients** |
| Many stakeholders with diverse interests and needs | Immature project definition and technical assessment |
| Project business and on-site construction | Over-preference for the lowest price bid |
| High industry fragmentation – the US has 710,000 engineering and construction firms, only 2% have over 100 workers, 80% have 10 or fewer | Insufficient or incremental funding – delays in payments of contractors for work done |
| Low profitability and capitalization | Conservative clients |
| Highly cyclical and volatile business | Increased risk transfer to contractors |
| Unstable workforce | Complexity of contracts and dispute resolution |

The UK construction industry exhibits the features in Table 1. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013) found that the UK construction and construction products sector is highly fragmented (of its 280,000 businesses, which employ 2.9 million people, less than 300 firms employ over 250 people). Construction firms are considered to be of higher risk due to low levels of fixed capital, smaller firm size and low profit. Late payment or partial payment is the most important issue affecting construction firms (only 5 percent of specialist contractors are paid in full within 30 days). Tier 2 firms are net providers of trade credit, while Tier 1 firms are net receivers of credit (from suppliers including Tier 2 firms) than they offer to clients. Profit margins in the largest 10 construction companies (excluding house builders) are less than 1 percent of turnover. It described the UK construction industry as: Fragmented – 99 percent are small and medium-sized firms; and (ii) Highly disaggregated - supply chains average 70 packages over four to five tiers.

It is evident from Table 1 and the UK industry that the client-industry relationship is generally based on mutual suspicion and “risk-passing”. Construction Leadership Council (2018) notes that the UK government has introduced many measures over the last ten years to improve the situation for construction firms but, as shown in the same report, the measures have not made any dent in the industry’s problems and features.

Figure 1 shows the features of the construction industry, construction process and constructed product, and implications for professionalism and the importance of trust.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| *Feature of construction* | *Implications for professionals* | *Importance of trust* |
| **Location specificity**\* Each constructed item is fixed in its location. Thus, the required resources should be deployed in that location. \* Local construction businesses can be competitive against ‘outsiders’, owing to the bulkiness of the material inputs.\* Many construction workers might live in the local community during the project.  | \* The requirements of each profession in the regions might differ owing to differences in climate, resources, culture and regulations.\* The community must be safeguarded but the industry’s health and safety practices have an internal orientation only.  | \* A range of construction skills should be available throughout the country. \* Local capability in development and building control is required.\* The community are project stakeholders; they must have trust in the team. |
| **Implications of health and safety**\* Construction involves possible danger to the workers owing to bulkiness of material inputs, work done at a height, and frequent need for work to be expedited. \* Construction work can also pose danger, and noise, dust and visual pollution to persons in the locality.\* Constructed items can pose danger to the health and safety of occupants, from poor indoor environmental quality to possible collapse of the building.  | \* In many countries, construction has a poor safety and health record. This has a negative impact on its social image. \* Governments, in many countries have increasingly stringent health and safety regulations, and demanding targets for safety performance. | \* Continuous awareness building and sensitisation of workers, and education, training and professional development are necessary.\* Community relationships should be a key component of stakeholder management. |
| **Role of government**\* Government is a major client of the construction industry. \* Government is a regulator of construction, given its health, safety, and environmental implications.\* Government is responsible for managing the development of the industry.  | \* Government can use investment in construction to stimulate the economy.\* With its bargaining power, government can influence how projects are designed and built.\* Government can determine quality of professionals by registering them.  | \* Professionals should include in their activities, a role of sound relationships with government to contribute to policy development.  |
| **High cost and indivisibility**\* Constructed items are expensive in their own rights and when compared with the turnover of the firms involved in it; and the income of the end purchasers. \* The uncompleted building or infrastructure item cannot be used well, or often, not at all.\* The construction industry mostly responds to demand; it has little control over its market, in terms of what it will build, the inputs and technologies which will be involved, and the location of the items.  | \* The low-bid focus in the industry leads to low profit margins.\* An appropriate definition of 'cost'. “Value for money” is a topical issue in many countries. UK Construction Leadership Council’s (2018) report. proposes a whole-life approach. \* Other cost-related project parameters such as ‘affordability’ should be considered.  | \* The industry should be able to develop the capability to respond to changes in its operational requirements. \* An industry with trust as a feature of its professionals would have a more favourable pricing approach.  |
| **Long period of gestation**\* Constructed items take a long period to complete. During this period, workers on the project relate to the community.  | \* Each construction project is a temporary task; it can provide jobs for reasonably long periods.  | \* Training to enhance skills helps increase productivity of the workers and minimise possible delays to projects. |
| **Involvement of many participants**\* Each construction project involves several companies and individuals with different expertise and specialisations, undertaking specific tasks at its various stages. | \* Professionalism at both corporate and individual levels is of paramount importance. | \* Trust among the companies and practitioners is key, as their tasks are interdependent. |
| **Environmental implications**\* Construction has potential negative implications for the environment. They include: taking of the land on which the built item stands; extraction, processing and transportation of materials; construction work on site including energy use and waste production; operating built items including use of energy and water; and demolition of the built item; and disposal of the waste.  | \* The effort to make the built item sustainable can also result in the creation of additional jobs. | \* Education and training programmes should cover the sustainability impacts of construction and how they are to be avoided or addressed. \* New skills necessary for sustainable construction needs to be created. |

Figure 1 Features of the construction industry, construction process and constructed product and implications for professionalism and trust

**Features of construction as the basis for a new professionalism: Further work**

Whereas there have been changes relating to the professions and professionalism in construction, the features of construction, which make trust necessary, have remained the same. Trust is an important aspect of professionalism; it should be evident in the relationships. More work is needed on criteria for a profession and professionalism, especially in the built environment, to explore how the importance of trust within the profession, and between its members and those outside it can be reflected. There should also be more work on trust, and its many levels in the built environment. Stakeholder Management on projects should be further developed, using trust.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

‘Professional’ should not be what one calls oneself; it must be merited, and accorded by one’s technical and business partners, and society. This should be part of the criteria for a profession, especially in the built environment. Each 'professional' should feel a responsibility to ensure the relationships of the person are based on trust. Trust has relevance in all the functions on the project: between the project team and the client, between these two groups and the end purchaser and users of the built item, between the project team and the companies' business partners, and between all involved in the project and the government and society should also be highlighted.

A new concept of professionalism is required which is based on the features of construction, and considers the element of trust. In this era, if the construction industry is to be able to meet the high aspirations set for it in terms of the nature and quality of its output and its performance, the professionals should be technologically sophisticated, autonomous, self-regulating, and sensitive to local needs and cultures. Trust should be their watchword; they should exhibit it to, and merit it from, all partners and stakeholders. The industry can regain the lost trust if it takes deliberate, systematic action by providing a service and products, and demonstrating attitudes worthy of such trust. On each project, team-building effort should be given attention on all projects; emphasis should be on intra-team trust. Good corporate citizenship and individual responsibility are necessary.

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