

## Article

# Improving Negotiation Practices in Construction

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## Abstract

Conflicts in construction projects are common and costly, often arising from unclear contracts, poor communication, and adversarial behaviors. In the Norwegian construction industry, negotiation remains the primary method for resolving such disputes, yet it is frequently practiced informally and without strategic structure. This study explores current negotiation practices through twelve semi-structured interviews with contractors, clients, consultants, and legal advisors. Findings reveal that negotiations are heavily influenced by trust, competence, authority, emotional intelligence, and the role of legal advisors. Despite its significance, negotiation is not widely recognized as a professional discipline, and there is little formal training or post-negotiation evaluation. To address these gaps, the study proposes the CIRC-Neg framework, a continuous improvement cycle for structured negotiation. Recommendations include promoting negotiation as a core competence, integrating it into professional education, and implementing systematic reflection practices. By advancing negotiation culture and capacity, the industry can reduce conflict intensity, enhance collaboration, and improve project outcomes.

**Keywords:** conflicts; contracts; negotiation practices

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Disputes are relatively prevalent in the Norwegian construction sector, and they present challenges to industry stakeholders [1]. Disputes are likely to occur as a result of various factors such as unclear contractual terms, differences in interpretation, or unusual project conditions [2]. Disputes snowball when not resolved, having adverse effects on the progress of the project and stakeholder relationships [3]. Such disputes directly lead to high economic costs, project schedule delays, increased legal costs, and strained interpersonal relationships among the project participants, eventually impacting the productivity and overall success of construction projects [4].

### 1.2. Significance of Negotiation

Successful negotiation techniques are essential in avoiding and solving conflicts in construction projects [5]. In contrast to arbitration or litigation, negotiation provides a faster, cheaper, and more adaptive way of settling disputes [6,7]. In addition, negotiation encourages improved communication and maintains professional relationships, allowing stakeholders to work together more successfully during the project's course [8]. Therefore, negotiating skills mastery is a key strategic benefit for organizations, having a direct im-

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pact on improved project results, lower levels of conflict, and maintaining long-term relationships [9].

### *1.3. Current Challenges in Negotiation*

Despite its obvious relevance, negotiation in the Norwegian construction sector is often informal, unstructured, and marked by uneven practices [2]. Professionals within the sector may not have formal training or systematic approaches to conducting negotiations. Moreover, there is limited awareness about essential factors in negotiation and best practices, resulting in inefficient processes and poor outcomes [7,10]. The lack of explicitly formulated guidelines and professional standards aggravates these problems, making negotiation an underestimated competency in project management.

### *1.4. Research Objective and Questions*

The article seeks to analyze Norwegian construction project negotiation practices and suggest pragmatic enhancements. To accomplish this purpose, the article responds to the following research questions:

**RQ1.** *How are negotiations currently carried out in the Norwegian construction industry?*

**RQ2.** *What are the most important factors driving negotiation outcomes?*

**RQ3.** *How can negotiation practices be effectively improved?*

These research questions lead the study structure and serve as the premise for both the empirical research and the proposed framework development. Through investigation of existing practices, recognition of influencing factors, and unearthing areas of improvement, the research aims to deliver both theoretical and practical insights that can be used to maximize negotiation outcomes in the construction industry. The goal is not merely to chart current challenges but also to underpin a move towards more formalized, reflective, and competence-based negotiation practices throughout the industry.

### *1.5. Contribution of the Study*

This study contributes to the literature and practice of construction negotiation in four ways. First, it provides empirical insight into how negotiation is currently practiced in the Norwegian construction industry, based on twelve semi-structured interviews with contractors, clients, consultants, and legal advisors. Second, it adds contextual knowledge by examining negotiation within a Norwegian construction setting, where project-level negotiation, standard contracts, stakeholder roles, and escalation practices shape how disagreements are handled. Third, it contributes practically by identifying concrete improvement areas, including clearer mandates, stronger preparation, more systematic evaluation, careful use of legal advisors, and greater recognition of negotiation as a professional competence. Fourth, the study proposes the CIRC-Neg framework as a practice-oriented conceptual model for supporting preparation, negotiation conduct, outcomes, reflection, and continuous improvement.

The contribution of the study is not that factors such as trust, preparation, authority, or emotional intelligence are new in negotiation research. Rather, the contribution lies in showing how these factors appear together in everyday Norwegian construction negotiation practice, and how they can be organized into a practical framework for improving negotiation processes before conflicts escalate into formal disputes.

## 2. Background and Theory

### 2.1. Conflicts in the Construction Industry

Conflicts are an endemic and chronic feature of construction projects because the work is complex, numerous stakeholders are involved, and the financial stakes are high. Construction conflicts in general may be broadly classified into three categories: task-related, process-related, and relationship-related [11]. Task conflicts occur due to disputes regarding technical matters or specifications of the project. Process conflicts arise due to ambiguity in procedures, resource distribution, or decision-making power. Relationship conflicts are interpersonal tensions or distrust within people or teams [11,12].

The Norwegian construction context is relevant because disputes are shaped not only by general negotiation behavior, but also by national contractual practices, project organization, and escalation routines. Norwegian construction projects commonly rely on standard contracts such as NS 8405 and NS 8407, which regulate responsibilities, changes, claims, and dispute handling between clients and contractors. These contracts provide a formal framework for cooperation, but disagreements may still arise when parties interpret contract obligations, change orders, time consequences, or cost responsibility differently. In practice, many disagreements are first handled through project-level discussions and negotiations before they are escalated to senior management, legal advisors, mediation, arbitration, or court proceedings. This makes the Norwegian setting relevant for studying negotiation as an early-stage form of conflict management.

In the Norwegian construction industry, common causes of conflict include ambiguous or poorly drafted contract terms, unforeseen ground conditions, design changes, unrealistic schedules, unclear tender specifications, contract misunderstandings, frequent change orders, concerns over work quality, and administrative difficulties [1,2]. Similar issues have also been reported internationally, where delays, poorly handled contracts, and ineffective communication are often identified as important causes of conflict [13–16].

In addition, ineffective conflict resolution mechanisms or adversarial orientations between stakeholders can ignite petty issues into full-scale controversies, undermining cooperation and extended project performance [16,17].

### 2.2. Consequences of Unresolved Conflicts

When conflicts remain unresolved or escalate, they can have significant consequences for projects and stakeholders alike. Economically, disputes lead to increased costs due to delays, legal fees, and additional administrative burden [6,13]. Conflicts often result in delayed project delivery, resource inefficiencies, and workflow disruptions [17,18].

Furthermore, prolonged disputes negatively affect collaboration and trust between the parties. Persistent adversarial relationships can damage long-term business opportunities and reduce the willingness to engage in future projects [11,12]. As trust erodes, communication suffers, which further fuels misunderstandings and inefficiencies [17]. Emotional factors like reactive devaluation (automatically dismiss or devalue an offer) and poor conflict framing (interpreting disputes in adversarial or personal terms) may also contribute to escalating tensions [19].

### 2.3. Negotiation as a Conflict Resolution Method

Negotiation is a fundamental method of conflict resolution in construction. It enables parties to cooperatively reach agreement without the need for third-party adjudicators [20]. In construction's dynamic and high-pressure environment, quick and flexible resolution through negotiation is often essential [16,18].

Compared to methods such as mediation, arbitration, or litigation, negotiation is typically more cost-efficient, timely, and preserves relationships [14,21,22]. It allows stake-

holders to retain control over outcomes and tailor agreements to the unique aspects of their project [16,23]. Negotiation also offers psychological benefits by promoting autonomy, trust, and goodwill, factors linked to sustainable dispute resolution [16]

#### *2.4. Negotiation Practices in Construction*

Despite its advantages, negotiation in construction is often informal, inconsistent, and reactive rather than structured and strategic negotiation [12,24,25]. Many construction professionals lack formal training, resulting in ad hoc decisions and missed opportunities for early conflict prevention [16,26].

Though, different best practices have been found by research, like detailed preparation, defined mandates, early stakeholder involvement, and the application of integrative (win-win) strategies [16,17]. The implementation of behavioral primers and framing interventions may also enhance negotiation performance through cooperation and lower emotional escalation [19,26,27]. Establishing trust, promoting openness, and maintaining communication across project phases are needed for developing a cooperative negotiation climate [17,28,29].

#### *2.5. Factors Influencing Negotiation Outcomes*

Several categories of factors influence the success or failure of negotiations in construction.

First, human factors such as trust, empathy, communication skills, personal biases, and emotional intelligence play a major role. When trust is present, parties are more open and solutions are easier to reach [11,16]. Biases, such as reactive devaluation, overconfidence, or framing effects, and emotional responses may derail discussions and escalate tension [12,19,26]. Mindfulness and self-regulation have also been shown to improve negotiation performance by reducing emotional reactivity and enhancing focus [26].

Second, structural and organizational factors include the clarity of roles, the number of participants, and the authority (or mandate) each negotiator holds. When negotiators lack clear authority to make binding decisions, talks may stall or revert to positional bargaining [18]. Similarly, involving too many people can dilute accountability and lead to fragmented communication [17]. Proper delegation, early stakeholder engagement, and streamlined communication channels are essential to avoiding confusion and inefficiencies [14,16,30].

Third, legal and contractual factors influence how negotiations unfold. Standard contracts such as NS 8405 and NS 8407 in Norway emphasize amicable dispute resolution mechanisms, but these are often underused in practice. While the inclusion of legal advisors may help clarify obligations and entitlements, it can also introduce a confrontational tone, especially if legal framing overshadows interest-based approaches [14,31]. Therefore, legal frameworks and contracts should support collaborative negotiation structures that foster flexibility, fairness, and timely resolution [22,32].

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Research Design*

The research follows a qualitative design in investigating the manner in which negotiation practices are conducted and can be enhanced within the Norwegian construction sector. The adoption of the qualitative approach follows the understanding that negotiation is a socially embedded practice, characterized by intricate human interaction, subjective feelings, and organizational complexity. Such in-depth and context-specific knowledge is better reflected in qualitative research than in the use of standardized measurement tools [33,34].

In contrast to quantitative methods that aim for hypothesis testing and generalizability, qualitative inquiry values the understanding of meaning in context, especially where variables are not readily quantifiable or isolatable [35]. It is therefore particularly suited to underresearched topics, Norwegian construction negotiations, for example, where the research aim is not to test predetermined theories but to allow new insights to emerge from participants' perceptions [36,37].

As Holliday has suggested, perhaps the most important strength of qualitative design lies in its capacity to depict human meaning-making and professional language in their richness, especially in organizational settings where formal processes are entangled with informal norms and social bonds [34]. For this research, this method allowed the means to follow sites of emerging themes and adjust the inquiry according to participants' own framing and description of negotiation.

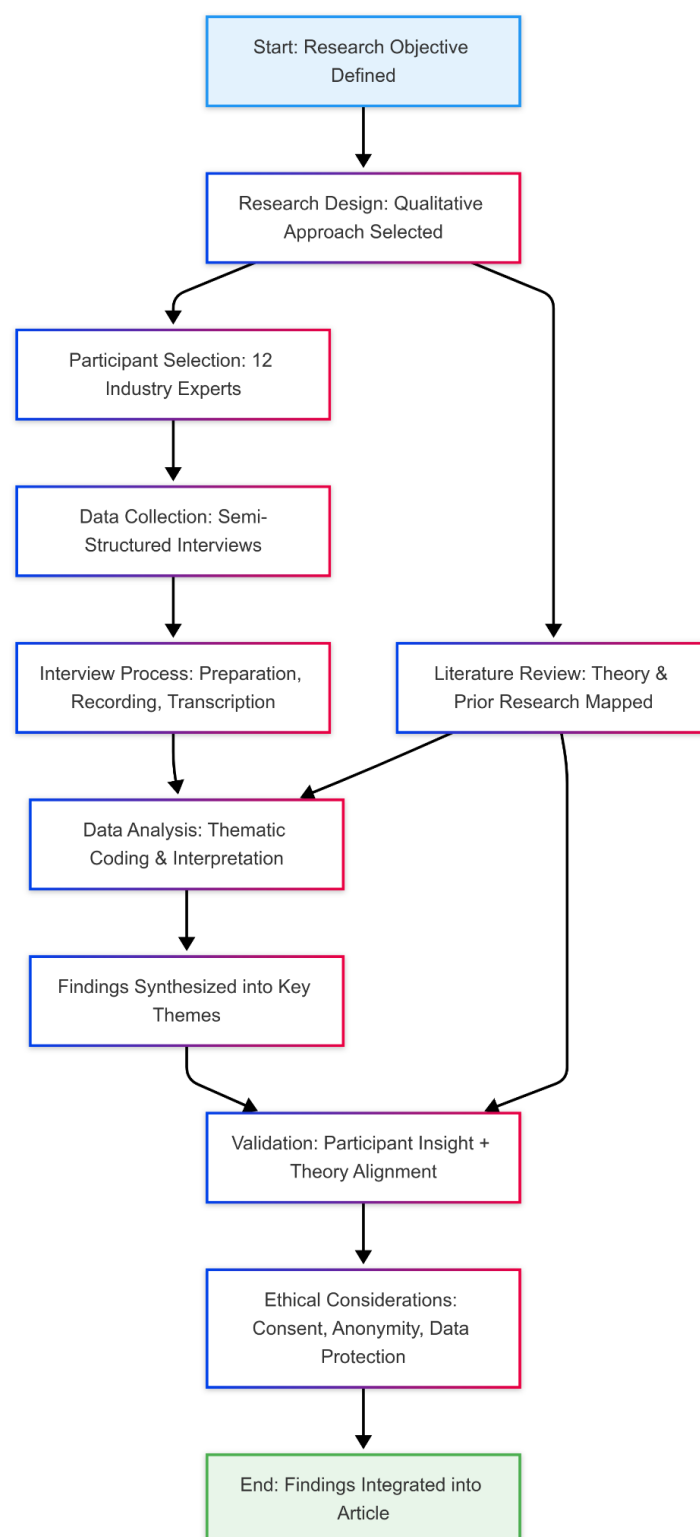
The methodological process, articulated in Figure 1, commenced with the establishment of a focused research aim and choice of an appropriate design. In parallel with participant recruitment, a review of the literature was undertaken that served to narrow the focus of investigation and inform the semi-structured interview schedule [38]. This iterative process aligns with Yin's guidance that case-based qualitative research should incorporate methodological responsiveness [36].

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, selected for their potential to strike a balance between structure and openness, allowing participants freedom to contribute relevant views but consistency between interviews [39]. All interviews were transcribed and underwent thematic analysis according to the commonly accepted framework of Braun and Clarke [40]. It enables researchers to identify patterns between accounts without sacrificing sensitivity to context, a key necessity for social constructionist research [40].

Credibility of findings was maintained through numerous strategies, including triangulation with literature, ensuring consistency of participants' responses and taking researcher bias into account while analyzing. As Anney argues, such measures are essential in qualitative research as they enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability, which are their qualitative equivalents for validity and reliability [41].

Finally, all the practices carried out conformed to ethical requirements, for instance, getting informed consent, anonymizing, and ensuring data protection while carrying out the project. These align with ethical standards set by Bryman and "Somekh and Lewin" who advocate for protecting the autonomy and dignity of participants in social research [33,37].

Figure 1 gives a pictorial overview of the research approach adopted in this study. It marks out the concurrent paths of literature review and data collection, flowing into thematic analysis and synthesis of findings. The figure further indicates how literature guided both analysis and validation phases and how ethical issues were incorporated at various stages.



**Figure 1.** Research flowchart to demonstrate methodology flow, illustrating major phases such as literature review, data gathering, analysis, validation, and ethical processes in qualitative research.

### 3.2. Data Collection

Data for this research were gathered during twelve intensive, semi-structured interviews with members of the Norwegian construction industry. Participants were strategically sampled for having considerable experience with negotiation and conflict resolution as contractors, clients, consultants, and legal advisors. This purposeful sampling technique facilitated the inclusion of diverse stakeholder views, which forms a central tenet in

qualitative research where diversity of context-rich information trumps statistical representativeness [33,36].

Their use was informed by their open but structured nature, which enabled comparison across cases and the formation of emergent participant-led conclusions [34,39]. It facilitated responses by the interviewees on matters of negotiation experiences without constraint while keeping the discussions on the study's leading thematic questions.

### 3.3. Participant Profile

To provide greater transparency about the empirical basis of the study, Table 1 presents an anonymized overview of the interview participants. The participants were selected because they had practical experience with negotiation, conflict management, or dispute resolution in Norwegian construction projects. They represented different stakeholder perspectives, including contractors, clients, consultants, and legal advisors. This variation was important because negotiation practices may be experienced differently depending on the participant's role in the project and their position in relation to contractual responsibility, claims, and dispute handling.

**Table 1.** Participant profile showing anonymized stakeholder group, role category, Norwegian project exposure, and relevant professional experience.

| Participant | Stakeholder Group              | Role Category                            | Region/Project Exposure | Experience |
|-------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| P1          | Legal advisor                  | Lawyer                                   | Norway                  | 25+ years  |
| P2          | Contractor                     | Contractor representative                | Norway                  | 15+ years  |
| P3          | Consultant                     | Consultant                               | Norway                  | 20+ years  |
| P4          | Contractor                     | Contractor representative                | Norway                  | 15+ years  |
| P5          | Legal advisor                  | Lawyer for contractor                    | Norway                  | 20+ years  |
| P6          | Legal advisor                  | Lawyer                                   | Norway                  | 15+ years  |
| P7          | Client                         | Client representative                    | Norway                  | 25+ years  |
| P8          | Legal advisor                  | Lawyer for client                        | Norway                  | 20+ years  |
| P9          | Client/mixed background        | Client, former contractor and consultant | Norway                  | 20+ years  |
| P10         | Legal advisor/mixed background | Lawyer, former consultant                | Norway                  | 25+ years  |
| P11         | Legal advisor                  | Lawyer                                   | Norway                  | 20+ years  |
| P12         | Legal advisor                  | Lawyer for contractor                    | Norway                  | 25+ years  |

As shown in Table 1, the sample included participants from both technical/project-based roles and legal advisory roles. This combination provided insight into negotiation from several perspectives, including project execution, client–contractor interaction, contractual interpretation, and legal escalation. The relatively high share of legal advisors reflects the study's focus on negotiation in situations where disagreements may develop into disputes. At the same time, the inclusion of contractors, a consultant, and client representatives made it possible to capture how negotiation is handled before, during, and after formal escalation.

The experience level is presented in broad categories to preserve participant anonymity. Exact years of experience are not reported because doing so could make some participants easier to identify, especially in specialized roles within the Norwegian construction sector. However, all participants had substantial relevant experience, which supported the exploratory aim of the study.

### 3.4. Interview Process

The semi-structured interviews took place between 14 and 29 March 2023. In total, twelve interviews were conducted, and each interview lasted an average of about 55 min. The total recorded interview material amounted to just over 11 h. A written information sheet was sent to participants prior to their interview, explaining the study purpose, the topics to be discussed, and the data handling practices. Nine of the twelve participants reported that they had read the information sheet before the interview. Although interviews were scheduled to take 30 to 60 min, some took longer, indicating that several participants provided rich and detailed reflections [38].

For reasons of precision and consistency, all interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent. After each interview, detailed paraphrased summaries were prepared manually, supported by automated transcription software. Full verbatim transcription was not used. Rather, the focus was on the substantive meaning of participants' experiences, examples, and professional judgments. This was a pragmatic decision in line with time-effective approaches to thematic analysis when the interpretive meaning, rather than detailed linguistic form, is the main focus [33,40]. To reduce the risk of misinterpretation, the recordings and paraphrased summaries were reviewed carefully during the analysis process. However, the use of paraphrased summaries rather than full verbatim transcripts is acknowledged as a methodological limitation, since some nuance in wording, tone, or emphasis may have been lost.

Ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from every participant, and all individual data were anonymized to maintain confidentiality. The study was officially registered with Sikt, formerly NSD, as required by Norwegian guidelines for research on personal data. This supported the implementation of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) principles and ethical standards in qualitative research [33,37].

### 3.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis involved thematic analysis, an approach that is especially useful for exploratory research seeking to establish patterns of meaning within participant accounts [40]. The paraphrased transcripts were read multiple times, and initial codes were inductively developed so that insights could emerge organically from the data instead of being imposed by prior theoretical knowledge [36,42].

The coding process followed several steps. First, the recordings and paraphrased summaries were reviewed to become familiar with the interview material. Second, initial codes were developed from recurring issues in the interviews, including trust, mandate, preparation, lawyer involvement, evaluation, competence development, emotional involvement, role balance, and intention to settle. Third, related codes were grouped into broader themes. For example, codes related to case knowledge, contractual understanding, preparation routines, and negotiation training were grouped under competence and preparation. Codes related to decision-making power, internal approval, and escalation were grouped under mandate and authority.

Coding themes involved notions of trust, mandate, structure, lawyer presence, and style of negotiation. These were developed and elaborated through a process of ongoing comparison between interviews that facilitated identification of both shared themes and differing perspectives, a process integral to qualitative rigor and pattern identification [33,41]. The themes were then connected to the three research questions and compared with relevant literature to support interpretation. This iterative process allowed construction of a coherent story regarding contemporary negotiation practice and scope for improvement within the sector.

Because the analysis was based mainly on detailed paraphrased interview material rather than full verbatim transcripts, some linguistic nuance, tone, or emphasis may have been lost. This is acknowledged as a methodological limitation. However, the repeated review of the material, comparison across interviews, and focus on recurring themes helped reduce the risk of isolated or unsupported interpretations.

### *3.6. Methodological Limitations and Saturation*

While this research provides useful insight into negotiation behavior, some methodological limitations must be recognized. First, the relatively small sample size ( $n = 12$ ) restricts the generalizability of the results. In qualitative research, however, richness and depth of information can be more important than numerical representativeness, particularly when the aim is exploratory understanding rather than statistical inference [35,43].

The study does not claim statistical representativeness. However, thematic saturation was approached in the sense that later interviews repeated several core themes, especially trust, preparation, mandate, lawyer involvement, and evaluation practices. These repeated themes suggested that the interview material was sufficient for the exploratory purpose of the study. At the same time, additional interviews, especially with more contractors, clients, and consultants, could have provided further nuance and strengthened the transferability of the findings.

Second, participant self-selection could have introduced bias, since participants may have been more likely to volunteer if they had strong opinions about negotiation or a particular interest in conflict resolution. This represents a commonly acknowledged limitation in interview-based research [39].

Interpretation bias is also a risk, given the inherent subjectivity of qualitative analysis. To address this, the researcher applied transparent coding procedures and careful paraphrasing of participant comments in an attempt to reduce personal influence [41]. As emphasized by Holliday, qualitative rigor is maximized not through elimination of subjectivity, but through acknowledgment and careful handling of it [34].

Finally, the analysis was based on detailed paraphrased summaries rather than full verbatim transcripts. This may have reduced some nuance in wording, tone, or emphasis. However, repeated review of the material, comparison across interviews, and the identification of recurring themes helped reduce the risk of isolated or unsupported interpretations.

While these limitations apply, the inclusion of professionals from different stakeholder groups and project contexts strengthens the contextual relevance of the findings. The study should therefore be understood as exploratory evidence from the Norwegian construction industry, rather than as a statistically representative account of the industry as a whole.

## **4. Findings**

### *4.1. Current Negotiation Practices*

Practices of negotiation in the Norwegian construction sector are highly variable and informal. It is predominantly unstructured, depending mostly on experience and improvisation by individuals. Even as some practitioners demonstrate well-developed intuitive skills, there is minimal application of standard models or guidelines to facilitate consistent and effective negotiation processes.

The interviews uncovered that negotiation is not well accepted as a professional discipline within the industry. Most people charged with negotiation tasks do not have formal training or a conceptual framework to direct their practice. Therefore, the outcomes

of negotiation often rely on the individuals' personalities and the improvised methods they use more than on deliberate preparation and application.

The interviews also indicated that negotiation practices vary between organizations and project roles. Some participants described negotiation as part of normal project management, while others described it as a reactive process used mainly when disagreements had already become difficult. Formal post-negotiation evaluation was rarely mentioned, suggesting that lessons from negotiations are often retained as individual experience rather than transformed into organizational learning.

#### *4.2. Key Influencing Factors*

Across the interviews, several recurring factors were identified as important for negotiation outcomes. These factors did not operate in isolation, but often interacted during the negotiation process. For example, weak preparation could reduce trust, unclear mandate could delay settlement, and lawyer involvement could either clarify legal issues or change the tone of the negotiation. The following themes summarize the main factors identified across the interview material.

##### *4.2.1. Trust and Relationships*

Trust was always put forward as the most important facilitator of effective negotiation. Interviewees pointed out that where parties have trust, there is greater openness, less necessity for defensive positioning, and more readiness to generate mutually advantageous solutions. Trust is usually established in the long term, through frequent working together and performance of dependability, competence, and justice. On the other hand, in the lack of trust, parties will refrain from sharing information, project the worst on the other side's motives, and take more hardline and protective bargaining stances. Some respondents stated that even a temporary existing working relationship, if positive, could significantly facilitate the negotiation process. Moreover, trust is not just about honesty but also about competence; being seen as competent could generate trust in itself.

##### *4.2.2. Competence and Preparation*

Good domain experience and adequate preparation were considered critical for effective negotiation. Attendees pointed out that negotiators having good technical, contractual, and project-related knowledge are better able to interact constructively, criticize proposals, and analyze the implications of making concessions. Preparation also involves defining clear objectives, knowing the interests of the other party, anticipating issues, and getting aligned internally prior to negotiations. Lack of preparation, conversely, correlated with ambiguity, reactive action, and lost opportunities. Throughout a series of interviews, reactionaries gave instances of fallen-through negotiations or negotiations significantly delayed because one or both sides were poorly prepared or less than well-versed in the matters at hand.

##### *4.2.3. Mandate and Authority*

Most contributors complained about the lack of defined authority to make decisions in the negotiation room. In various instances, the negotiations were slowed down because representatives of a party lacked authority to sign off compromises or make final decisions. This usually resulted in constant postponement since decisions had to be escalated or renegotiated within. These circumstances also eroded the perceived legitimacy of the process and even frustrated or induced suspicion in the other side. Interviewees emphasized the importance of making sure that the negotiators are given a proper mandate prior to the initiation of negotiations. Where there is uncertainty, some suggested having pre-agreed ceilings or positions in order to facilitate quicker resolution.

#### 4.2.4. Personal Investment and Emotions

Negotiation can also become personal, especially when there are personal interests at stake or someone feels that their judgment, work, or authority is being challenged. Interview respondents mentioned pride, ego, and fear of “losing face” as reasons why people refused to concede despite it being in the best interest of the project. Emotional involvement also leads parties to take things personally, divert attention from the problem in question, or oppose compromise for symbolic and not practical reasons. Some respondents proposed elevating the level of negotiation to an individual who was less emotionally attached to the quarrel in order to de-escalate tension and bring back objectivity. Emotional intelligence and self-awareness were both emphasized as being key skills for preventing escalation and keeping on track with the problem and not personalities.

#### 4.2.5. Roles and Group Composition

Team size and membership determined an important influence on the process. Small teams were most preferred because they facilitated more serious and effective discussions. Large teams, especially those with overlapping or duplicative roles, were viewed negatively, as they increased risk of miscommunication, watered down responsibility, and had the tendency to start side talk or opposing positions. Making sure that everyone knows their role and function in the negotiation, and that the team has the requisite competence and authority, was identified as a best practice. Parity in terms of similar numbers and similar roles on both sides was stressed by some interviewees to ensure that there are not perceptions of imbalance or power asymmetry.

#### 4.2.6. Intentions and Attitudes

The underlying attitude with which parties negotiate has a strong impact on both tone and outcome. Negotiations where each side entered with firm intent to reach agreement, typically expressed as ‘a willingness to be a little flexible,’ proceeded most efficiently and constructively. Conversely, when one or both sides of the negotiation entered into it as a competition to be won or as a way to exercise dominance, negotiations would stall or collapse. Some of the respondents commended the distinction between interest-based and position-based negotiation, with the interest-based one being more favorable for sustained project success. Fostering a spirit of shared problem-solving instead of combative bargaining was viewed as one area of improvement for the industry.

#### 4.2.7. Lawyer Involvement

The availability of lawyers during negotiation was one of the contentious variables with the respondents. While lawyers were being praised for their ability to enlighten on rights, highlight contractual conditions, and enable agreements to be documented, their presence was also being seen as a sign of escalation. A “declaration of war” was what one respondent said. Such an impression can potentially alter the mood in the blink of an eye from collaborative to confrontational. Interviewees cautioned against involving lawyers in an advisory or background role rather than directly involving them within the negotiating room. Should lawyers be involved, their functions must be clarified and presented as facilitation-oriented and not confrontational. Purpose should be crystal clear, and involving lawyers in terms of spirit of fairness, rather than surprise, was emphasized.

Some differences between stakeholder groups were also observed. Legal advisors tended to describe lawyer involvement as useful for clarifying rights, obligations, and possible settlement options. However, several project-based participants described lawyer involvement as a possible signal of escalation, especially if lawyers entered the negotiation room without a clearly explained role. Contractors and clients both emphasized the importance of mandate and decision-making authority, but delays were experienced

differently depending on whether approval was needed internally or from the other party. Participants with mixed professional backgrounds also emphasized the value of practical project understanding, balanced roles, and early clarification of disagreements.

The interviews revealed a trend of recurring factors influencing construction contract negotiations that contribute significantly to their success. These factors operate at varying levels, i.e., interpersonal, organizational, and legal, and interact to facilitate or impede meaningful discussion. For reference purposes, Table 2 encapsulates the prevailing influencing factors, their general influence on negotiations, and common observations from among the interviewees.

**Table 2.** Key Factors Influencing Negotiation Outcomes in Norwegian Construction Projects.

| Factor                           | Description/Influence                                                                      | Illustrative Observations                                                                    |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Trust and Relationships          | Trust builds openness and collaboration; lack of trust leads to guarded, adversarial talks | “When there’s trust, things move faster, we don’t question every word.”                      |
| Competence and Preparation       | Better-prepared negotiators present stronger positions and avoid misunderstandings         | “Some come to the table not knowing the contract at all. That kills the discussion quickly.” |
| Mandate and Authority            | Lack of decision-making power delays outcomes and reduces credibility                      | “It’s frustrating when they say, ‘I have to check with someone else.’ It slows everything.”  |
| Personal Investment and Emotions | Pride or fear of being wrong can block compromise                                          | “Sometimes people won’t back down even when they’re wrong, just to save face.”               |
| Roles and Group Composition      | Too many participants or unclear roles cause confusion                                     | “When there are six people from their side, it’s hard to know who really speaks for them.”   |
| Intentions and Attitudes         | A cooperative mindset enables solutions; rigid positions lead to deadlock                  | “You can sense if someone came to solve or to argue. That sets the tone from the start.”     |
| Lawyer Involvement               | Legal presence can clarify rights but may escalate tension if perceived as hostile         | “As soon as a lawyer joins, people get nervous. It often changes the whole atmosphere.”      |

Note: The illustrative observations are translated and lightly edited for readability. Where exact wording was not available, they are presented as paraphrased interview observations rather than verbatim quotations.

As shown by Table 2, the factors with the greatest impact have been put into three columns: the first identifies the factor itself, the second offers a brief explanation of its overall effect on negotiation outcomes based on themes emerging from the interviews, and the third holds exemplary observations, paraphrased or direct quotes from the interviewees that enliven the results in their own words. This format was selected in order to provide both analytical precision and the richness of lived experience culled from the field.

All elements presented in the table presented themselves multiple times in the qualitative analysis, either as explicit answers to questions in the interviews or as a prominent theme identified throughout interviews. The element of “Trust and Relationships,” for instance, was mentioned in nearly every interview, not as theoretical but as something that really determined the level of openness and cooperation in the negotiating room. Likewise, “Mandate and Authority” was a structural issue reported by several participants who had witnessed deadlocked negotiations solely because the other party did not have decision making authority.

The second column encapsulates the aggregated understanding of how each factor plays out in practice and its emergent impacts on the process, tone, and outcomes of negotiations. These are based on interview data but through thematic coding transferred across cases. The third column provides richness to this by including vivid, concrete examples, providing more tangible and meaningful data. These quotes or paraphrased sentences provide hints regarding what professionals themselves sense and say regarding the impact of these variables.

In general, Table 2 makes clear that effective negotiation rests on a rich dynamic of individual dispositions, interpersonally, and organizational structure. Technical competence and contractual clarity are always necessary, but much of what succeeds happens in the “human space” of the parties, where trust is created or broken, authority is exercised, and motives are revealed. This multidimensional understanding lends a solid basis for further interpretation of the findings in the discussion and for the identification of specific areas for practice improvement.

#### *4.3. Evaluation and Learning Practices*

The findings indicate that evaluation of negotiation performance is rare. Most organizations do not engage in formal reflection or feedback after negotiations are concluded. This lack of systematic learning inhibits improvement and leads to repeated mistakes. Only a few respondents mentioned structured internal reviews or team debriefs.

This suggests that negotiation knowledge is often treated as individual experience rather than organizational learning. As a result, lessons from successful or unsuccessful negotiations may remain with the individuals involved instead of being captured, shared, and used to improve future project practice.

#### *4.4. Use of Competence Development*

There is scant usage of systematic training or professional development courses in negotiation. Practitioners most frequently use learning-by-doing, often by trial and error. While some large organizations do have in-house training programs, there is not widespread usage. There is a widespread agreement among the respondents that negotiation must be addressed more formally within education and professional development courses, particularly for roles with frequent negotiations.

Several participants therefore emphasized the need to treat negotiation as a professional competence, particularly for project managers, contract managers, site managers, client representatives, and legal advisors. This competence should include not only negotiation tactics, but also preparation, mandate clarification, communication, emotional awareness, and reflection after completed negotiations.

#### *4.5. Perceived Barriers and Improvement Needs*

Respondents identified a variety of challenges facing greater practice in negotiation. These include an industry culture that prioritizes “winning” over collaboration, lack of time and resources allocated to preparation, and the general devaluation of negotiation ability. Moreover, demands of short-term project commitments often rule out reflection and learning.

While these obstacles must be overcome, interview participants were optimistic that progress could be made. Pinned particularly on heightened awareness, systematic reflection, and targeted training, most cited these as feasible and effective action steps. There was near-consensus that approaching negotiation as a professional practice would enhance project results and lower levels of conflict throughout the industry.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. *Interpreting Current Practices (RQ1)*

The findings of this study confirm that Norwegian construction sector negotiation process is largely informal, ad hoc, and unplanned. Rather than being supported by formal models or prepared frameworks, negotiation is largely dealt with based on the person's intuition and past experience. This finding is consistent with foreign studies that comment on the fact that negotiation in the construction industry is usually non-standardized and based on project-specific norms and interpersonal relationships [18,24].

One of the most striking interview trends was the lack of formal negotiation training. The majority of the respondents were not formally trained in negotiation, nor did they receive specialized professional development. This is in line with Cheung et al. [24], who show that construction dispute negotiations are influenced by negotiation styles and behavioral factors, particularly when negotiation is treated as a reactive activity rather than a strategic process.

The absence of a systematic process for competence building is consistent with a general conceptualization of negotiation as an interpersonal skillset and not a professional core discipline. Cheung and Pang also document this issue, as they found that without a systematic base, negotiation is highly inconsistent and highly personality-driven and not strategy-driven [29]. Consequently, negotiation in the industry is overwhelmingly reactive, with little preparation and infrequent post-negotiation evaluation, a weakness that is damaging both to performance and learning.

Also common was the lack of post-negotiation review processes. Interviewees reported that consequences are not often systematically reviewed, and little feedback is gathered to determine what aided or injured. This observation is consistent with Cheung and Pang, who contend that in the absence of well-structured learning processes, many of the same mistakes and inefficiencies keep repeating themselves from one project to another [29]. The lack of evaluation not only limits the potential for organizational learning, but also continues to embed inconsistencies within conflict resolution at earlier stages.

Against foreign literature, these findings lend weight to concerns that negotiation remains an undervalued and underprioritized competency in the construction sector [17]. As the rest of the world has been concentrating on the likes of formal dispute resolution procedures such as mediation or arbitration, the present research prioritizes a paramount gap in the management of informal, project-level negotiations, the run-of-the-mill discussions engaged in months before the initiation of legal disputes. These early-stage talks, although occasionally less observed, are vital to shaping results and minimizing conflict escalation [16].

### 5.2. *The Role of Key Influencing Factors (RQ2)*

#### 5.2.1. Trust and Relationship Dynamics

Trust emerged as a critical factor influencing the tone and outcome of negotiations. It acts as both a preventative and enabling element, fostering openness, solution-seeking, and reduced adversarial behavior. In contrast, a lack of trust often leads to guarded communication and positional bargaining.

This finding aligns with literature emphasizing trust as foundational for collaborative negotiation. For example, Charoenngam and Mahavarakorn [17] link trust to collaborative behaviors in Thai construction projects, while Lu et al. [44] show that trust affects negotiation strategies in subcontracting. Cheung et al. [24] also find that trust-oriented negotiation styles are associated with better outcomes.

From a psychological perspective, Cheung et al. [19] discuss how low trust can trigger reactive devaluation, while Lin and Cheung [45] highlight that reducing psychological

distance, which is closely linked to trust, can improve settlement chances. Norwegian findings by Sabri and Torp [1] also emphasize the preventive value of trust-based communication.

Overall, trust emerges not only as a soft skill but also as a strategic asset in construction dispute negotiation.

#### 5.2.2. Competence, Preparation, and Authority

Another critical set of factors relates to the competence of negotiators and the authority they hold. Respondents emphasized that preparation, both technical and strategic, is often insufficient. When negotiators lack understanding of the issue or are poorly prepared, they struggle to represent their interests effectively or reach viable agreements.

Authority is equally important. Negotiations are frequently delayed or weakened when participants lack the mandate to make decisions. This is supported by Lu and Liu, who found that negotiation outcomes are significantly influenced by the alignment of authority with preparation and performance expectations [27,46]. Cheung et al. [18] also highlight the importance of using appropriate negotiation tactics, which requires both skill and sufficient decision-making authority.

Additionally, Ren et al. [47] point to the need for well-defined roles in construction claims negotiation, while Sabri et al. [48] emphasize that conflict resolution efforts may fail when unqualified individuals represent key parties. Ensuring that competent individuals with proper mandates are present is therefore fundamental to effective dispute negotiation [46].

#### 5.2.3. Human Factors and Emotions

Emotions, pride, and fear of losing face were seen consistently as disruptive forces within negotiation. These are the human factors that tend to provoke defensiveness, refusal to compromise, or the personalization of conflicts. To control emotional reaction and detect emotional signals in other people is thus a matter of prime importance.

These findings are consistent with previous research on the human side of negotiation. Cheung [9] emphasizes that psychological and emotional factors can strongly influence construction dispute negotiations. Pérez-Yus et al. [26] show that mindfulness may support better emotional control and interpersonal awareness during negotiation. Yiu and Lee [49] further show that perceptions of fairness can influence settlement preferences and negotiation outcomes. Together, these studies support the view that emotional control, empathy, and fairness perceptions are important in high-pressure construction negotiations.

These studies support the argument that emotional intelligence is a fundamental competence in construction negotiation, particularly in high-risk or emotionally charged conflicts [50].

#### 5.2.4. Structural and Legal Considerations

The involvement and role of legal counsel during negotiations were viewed with caution by the respondents. Legal counsel may be needed to clarify contractual terms, rights, and obligations, but many respondents considered early lawyer involvement as a sign of escalation rather than cooperation. This aligns with observations by El-Sayegh et al. [51], which indicate that legal advice, while useful, can change the tone of negotiation from problem-solving to positional defense. Kisi et al. [52] also observes that premature legal intervention in international road construction contracts can hinder open communication by introducing a more combative attitude.

These types of standard contracts like NS 8405 and NS 8407 provide for amicable settlement but these are seldom invoked. Okudan and Çevikbaş suggest that there is an

important role for resolving disputes by established procedures, such as legal advisers, in preventing premature escalation [32]. The study suggests the need for clearer guidance on when and how legal advice should be incorporated, so it assists but does not detract from constructive negotiation.

In order to merge the results and describe how the various components of bargaining interact dynamically with each other with the progression of time, this paper proposes a conceptual framework to understand negotiation as an inherent, circular process. Instead of segregating negotiation as a separate activity, the model keeps its dynamic state in project-specific settings, especially in the construction industry. The model, which is dubbed CIRC-Neg (Continuous Improvement Cycle for Negotiation), integrates contextual circumstances, personal abilities, concurrent negotiation processes, and learning following negotiations. It draws attention to how each step flows from the last and contributes to the next, highlighting that negotiation is both a talent and a process that can be tested, polished, and perfected in the long term. The model further captures the findings from the interviews that emphasize the significance of preparation, trust, emotional intelligence, and guided reflection. Figure 2 illustrates this model in a visual style.

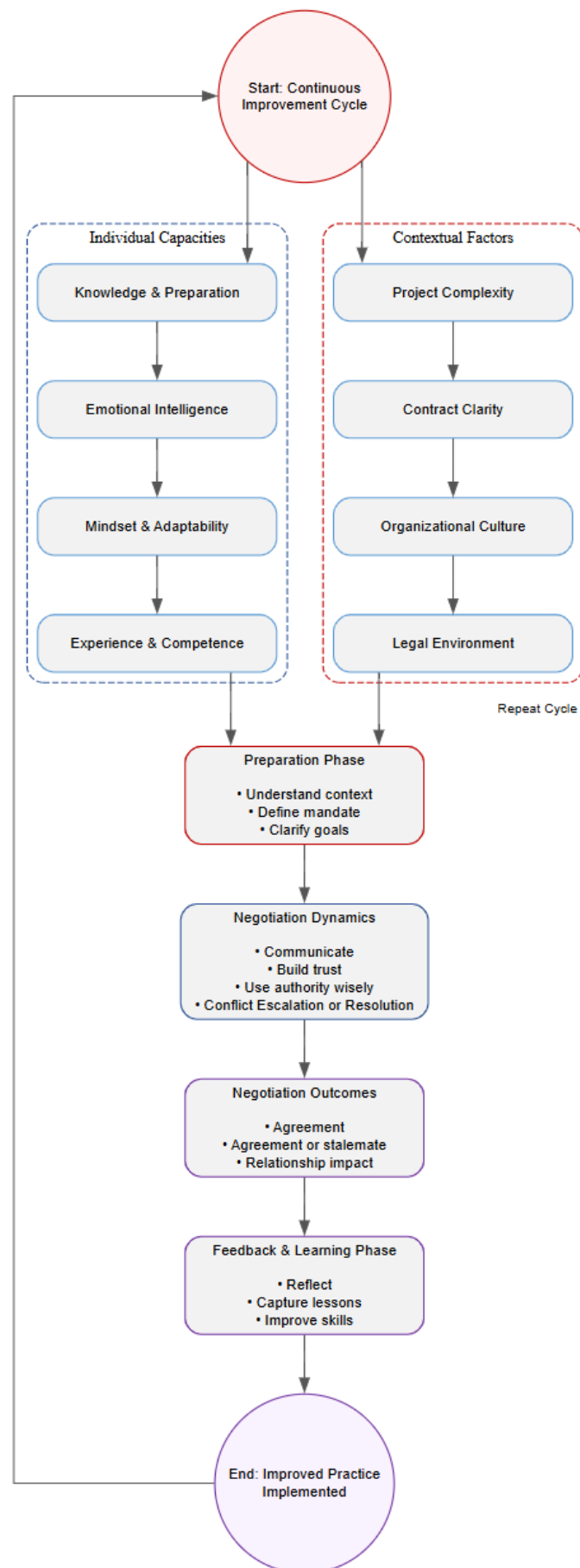
Before presenting the framework, it is important to clarify its status and purpose. CIRC-Neg is proposed as a conceptual practice framework rather than as a validated intervention model. Its purpose is to organize the empirical findings into a practical structure that can support more systematic negotiation preparation, conduct, evaluation, and learning in construction projects. While the framework builds on general ideas from continuous improvement and reflective practice, its construction-specific value lies in connecting these ideas to issues that emerged from the interviews, including contract interpretation, mandate and authority, stakeholder roles, trust, lawyer involvement, and escalation prevention. The framework should therefore be understood as a structured way of translating the study's findings into practice, not as a fully tested model.

The CIRC-Neg model in Figure 2 conceptualizes negotiation in construction projects as a continuous improvement process consisting of four linked phases: preparation, action, outcome, and reflection. The model incorporates empirical evidence from the interviews and includes the dynamic interaction between contextual conditions, individual capacities, negotiation conduct, and learning processes.

The cycle begins with the Preparation Phase, which has two primary components: Contextual Factors and Individual Capacities. Contextual factors such as project complexity, contract design, organizational culture, and the legal environment condition the conditions under which negotiations take place. These structural factors either enable or constrain the climate for negotiations through effects on expectations, risk perception, and authority arrangements. For instance, ambiguous contract terms or competitive organizational cultures tend to generate defensive and rigid negotiation behavior, as noted in several participant accounts.

At the same time, personal capabilities encompass the knowledge, emotional intelligence, flexibility, mindset, and experience that negotiators have at their disposal. Interview results highlighted that technically competent but emotionally intelligent, well-trained, and enthusiastic participants were best performers in negotiation. These personal attributes are most necessary for the creation of constructive communication, building trust, and preventing escalation.

After setting up the preparation elements, the model then advances to the Negotiation Dynamics phase, where there is interaction in real-time. This includes establishment of trust, communication style, assertion of mandate and authority, and ability to de-escalate or escalate conflict. As highlighted by the study, this is where interpersonal competencies are most evident and effective. Results of negotiation, whether contracts are signed, put off, or utterly fail, depend significantly on what happens in this field.



**Figure 2.** CIRC-Neg Framework: A Continuous Improvement Cycle for Negotiation in Construction Projects.

The next step records Negotiation Outcomes, both substantive ones (outcomes or remaining issues) and relational ones (improved or eroded trust). These are not considered to be an end-point but a doorway into the Feedback and Learning step. This last step involves post-negotiation analysis, internal review, organizational learning, and competence building. It is where lessons learned can be institutionalized so that these are converted into better practice in later negotiations.

Lastly, the model cycles back to the beginning, indicating that every negotiation leads into the next. In so doing, Figure 2 perpetuates the notion that negotiation is not an isolated or static event, but a repeated and dynamic process. This cyclical design concurs with the interviewees' perspectives that long-term learning and systematic reflection are lacking in industry practice today. In this way, the CIRC-Neg framework offers a diagnostic and developmental instrument, enabling practitioners and organizations to advance toward more intentional, thoughtful, and effective negotiation habits in the long term.

### *5.3. Pathways for Improvement (RQ3)*

The findings of this study point to several actionable strategies for improving negotiation practices in the Norwegian construction industry. These strategies correspond closely with the phases and principles represented in the CIRC-Neg framework (Figure 2), particularly with regard to preparation, competence development, and post-negotiation reflection.

#### *5.3.1. Raising Awareness*

There is a pressing need to elevate negotiation from an informal, experience-based activity to a recognized and strategic project skill. Interviewees consistently noted that negotiation is often underprioritized, despite its clear influence on contract interpretation, conflict prevention, and relationship management.

Raising awareness means reshaping industry perceptions, viewing negotiation not as a reactive interpersonal exchange but as a structured process that contributes to cost, time, and quality outcomes. Awwad, Barakat, and Menassa highlight that in many regions, negotiation remains poorly institutionalized, with limited emphasis on formal training or planning [53]. Similarly, Tsao et al. emphasize the need to integrate negotiation into project management education, particularly in multicultural and complex environments where miscommunication and assumptions often escalate conflicts [54].

Recognizing negotiation as a core competency, on par with technical or planning skills, requires the active involvement of both leadership and project teams. Promoting awareness at all organizational levels can help establish negotiation as a proactive tool for project success, rather than a fallback in moments of dispute.

#### *5.3.2. Formal Training and Education*

To build individual capacities (as described in Phase 1 of the framework), negotiation should be formally integrated into the education and professional development of construction professionals. Higher education programs in engineering, construction management, and project leadership should incorporate negotiation theory, practical role-playing, and interdisciplinary perspectives. At the organizational level, targeted training should be offered to project managers, contract advisors, site managers, and client representatives. Such training should focus not only on tactics but also on ethics, emotional regulation, authority handling, and collaborative strategies [7]. Illankoon et al. [55] emphasize that dispute resolution training must address both technical and human factors, while Sabri et al. [48] highlights the need for structured conflict management education in

the construction sector. This approach reflects best practices in other industries where negotiation is treated as a core competency.

#### 5.3.3. Structured Evaluation and Learning

A recurring theme in the findings was the lack of post-negotiation evaluation and institutionalized learning routines. Most negotiation processes are closed without any formal review, meaning valuable insights are lost. Organizations should implement structured debriefs (especially after complex or high-stakes negotiations) to assess what worked, what failed, and how future practices can improve. This learning process, depicted in the final phase of the CIRC-Neg loop, supports both individual reflection and organizational learning. Over time, it can foster a culture of continuous improvement, where negotiation knowledge becomes a shared asset rather than an individual experience.

These suggestions are in line with international developments in project management and procurement, where increasing attention is being paid to the role of collaboration, early stakeholder engagement, and conflict prevention through soft-skill development. Baduge and Jayasena emphasize the importance of win-win approaches grounded in reflective practice and continuous learning [56]. Hietanen-Kunwald and Haapio advocate for proactive contract design that incorporates feedback loops and knowledge reuse [57]. Similarly, Yates highlights the need for post-negotiation evaluation in construction disputes to avoid repeat mistakes [58]. Liu et al. also present experience mining and case-based learning as effective tools for improving dispute resolution strategies over time [59].

A structured approach to negotiating processes and capacity development could sharply lower the frequency and intensity of disputes that reach formal resolution. More importantly, it would produce improved working relationships, more stable results, and enhanced project productivity; objectives that are common to both private and public construction interests.

#### 5.3.4. Timing of Negotiation and Escalation

Negotiation should preferably be initiated early, before disagreements become personalized or formally legal in nature. In project practice, this means that unresolved issues should first be addressed through regular project meetings or direct discussions between the relevant contractor and client representatives. If the issue cannot be resolved at project level, or if personal involvement and fixed positions prevent progress, the negotiation may need to be lifted to a higher organizational level with clearer decision-making authority. Legal advisors can support this process in the background when contractual clarification is needed, but direct legal involvement should be considered carefully to avoid unnecessary escalation.

#### 5.3.5. Practical Implementation Guidance

To make these recommendations more actionable, the findings can be translated into three practical routines. First, organizations can use a short pre-negotiation checklist before important negotiation meetings. This checklist should clarify the issue being negotiated, the interests of both parties, the available documentation, the negotiator's mandate, possible settlement limits, and whether legal advice is needed before the meeting.

Second, organizations can introduce a brief post-negotiation evaluation after major negotiations. Such evaluation does not need to be extensive, but should address questions such as: Was the issue resolved? Was the mandate clear? Were the right people present? What helped the negotiation? What created delay or escalation? Did legal involvement clarify the issue or increase tension? What should be done differently in future negotiations? These reflections should be documented and shared internally so that negotiation

knowledge becomes part of organizational learning rather than remaining only with individuals.

Third, the use of lawyers should be clarified before negotiations begin. Legal advisors may be used in a background role to assess legal risk and prepare the negotiation team. They may participate directly when contractual issues are complex or when their presence can help document a fair settlement. However, if lawyers enter the negotiation without a clearly explained role, their involvement may be interpreted as escalation. Therefore, the purpose of legal involvement should be communicated clearly, and the lawyer's role should support problem solving rather than positional conflict.

#### *5.4. Cultural and Industry-Wide Challenges*

And yet, amidst the possibility of transformation, there are a number of cultural and structural impediments. One of the first is a endemic industry culture that characterizes success at the bargaining table as "winning" and not good and sustainable bargains. This zero-sum mentality does not allow for compromise and derails long-term cooperation. Cheung et al. [24] observed that adversarial styles continue to dominate construction dispute negotiations, often limiting the potential for integrative solutions. Lu et al. [44] also indicate that a lack of trust, combined with an overreliance on formal agreements, can perpetuate defensive bargaining tendencies.

Further, time constraints (i.e., preparation or thinking time) do not allow professionals to be actively involved in negotiations. The need to keep projects going fast tends to cause reactive or rushed attitudes. Wang et al. [15] explain how organizational pressure and communication breakdown can create reactive conflict management, particularly in large infrastructure projects.

Resistance to change, especially in the more conservative sectors of the industry, is also a challenge. Overcoming such resistance will demand cultural change at the levels of organizations and the industry as a whole. This means appreciating fairness and cooperation, investing in soft skills development, and rewarding constructive conflict management as much as technical ability. As Tsao et al. stress, adopting emotional and cultural intelligence is vital in changing negotiation habits within different and complex construction settings [54].

#### *5.5. Contribution to Research and Practice*

This research provides a novel contribution by illuminating a comparatively under-researched theme: the day-to-day, internal negotiating habits performed by stakeholders within construction projects, prior to conflict becoming active through formal disputes. Through exploring this initial stage, the research emphasizes the scope for preventative conflict management.

The contribution is fourfold. Empirically, the study provides interview-based evidence on how negotiation is practiced by experienced actors in the Norwegian construction industry. Contextually, it highlights how project-level negotiation is shaped by Norwegian construction practice, including stakeholder roles, standard contracts, mandate structures, and escalation routines. Conceptually, it proposes CIRC-Neg as a practice-oriented framework for organizing preparation, negotiation dynamics, outcomes, and learning. Practically, it translates the findings into improvement areas such as clearer mandates, stronger preparation, structured post-negotiation evaluation, careful lawyer involvement, and formal competence development.

In practice, the research offers construction practitioners, clients, and contractors' concrete advice on how negotiations can better be structured, planned for, and led. For policy-makers and educators, the research indicates that negotiation needs to be regarded

as a fundamental professional skill, one that can profoundly influence project success and productivity in the industry.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper has examined how negotiation is practiced in the Norwegian construction industry and how it may be improved. Based on twelve semi-structured interviews with experienced professionals, the findings suggest that negotiation in the studied context is often handled informally, with limited preparation, limited formal training, and little systematic follow-up after negotiations.

Several factors were found to influence negotiation outcomes, including trust, competence, decision-making authority, emotional control, role balance, intention to settle, and the strategic use of legal advisors. The findings indicate that negotiation success depends not only on technical and contractual expertise, but also on interpersonal skills, preparation, mandate clarity, and organizational support.

To address these challenges, the article proposes that negotiation should be treated more clearly as a professional competence in construction project management. This includes formal training, stronger preparation routines, clearer mandates, structured post-negotiation evaluation, and more careful use of legal advisors. The proposed CIRC-Neg framework should be understood as a conceptual practice framework developed from exploratory interview findings. It offers a structured way to connect preparation, negotiation dynamics, outcomes, reflection, and learning, but it has not yet been empirically tested as an intervention model.

The study provides exploratory evidence from the Norwegian construction context and should not be interpreted as statistically representative of the construction industry as a whole. Future research could test the CIRC-Neg framework in real projects, examine negotiation practices across different contract regimes and countries, and use surveys or case studies to assess whether the patterns identified here are found in broader samples.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study involved interviews with adult professionals about their work in public projects. No sensitive personal data were collected. Verbal informed consent was obtained, and the study was registered with Sikt (formerly NSD—Norwegian Centre for Research Data), which confirmed that written consent or full ethics review was not needed for this qualitative research.

**Informed Consent Statement:** This study involved human participants in the form of recorded interviews. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants after they had been provided with information about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the intended use of the data. Verbal consent was used because the study involved adult professionals discussing work-related experiences in public projects, and no sensitive personal data were collected. The research was registered with Sikt, formerly NSD, Norwegian Centre for Research Data, and according to the applicable guidelines, written consent was not required for this type of qualitative research.

**Data Availability Statement:** The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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