

THE STRENGTH OF STRONG TIES: CAREER NETWORKS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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Abstract

The role of networks in the international development project sector has been identified from the perspective of seller-buyer/client relationships. In this paper, we extend the exploration of such networks to include what we term as a career network in which external specialist consultants – independent of the supplier or client – have the power to exert considerable influence over international project outcomes and interaction between the various parties involved in the project, through their own professional expertise and personal connections. Based on an exploratory interview study of IDP external consultants, we draw on career and networks literature to explain how these key individuals forge strong actor bonds with each other with key actors in other parts of the IDP network that bind them together. The career network in which they are embedded is a valued – even vital – shared resource on which they livelihoods depend. Resource ties therefore reinforce the actor bonds to build and maintain a strong career network. Our data suggests that IDP career networks may prove to be more stable and more enduring than those between organizations thus demonstrating the strength of strong ties.

Key words: international development projects, career networks, external contractors, strong ties.

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Introduction

The role of networks in international projects is well established, as the existence of a dedicated community of scholars - *International Network on Project Marketing* (INPM) - alongside the IMP Group attests. Within this body of literature, the interaction between supplier firms and their clients in B2B and B2G international projects has been examined (see Cova and Salle, 2007 for a review). Also, the discontinuous, uncertain and complex (D-U-C) features of projects have also been examined through the prism of networks (Hadjikhani, 1996; Welch, Benito and Petersen, 2007). The focus in the literature has tended to be on what Jansson (1985: 4) referred to as “the upper whole organization level”. For example, Davies and Hobday (2005, p.52) point out: “The shaping and reshaping of supplier-user networks depends on previous company performance in specific projects”. Likewise, the concept of rituals is proffered by Cova, Ghauri and Salle (2002: 120) as a potential relational tool for supplier firms to “support the development of inter-personal links in order to fight the economic discontinuity in the supplier/client relationship”. As Owusu and Welch (2007: 147) argue, weighting has tended to be given to project sellers and that “an understanding of international project business is incomplete without further analysis of project buyers”. In this paper, we extend that argument and contend that a concentration on the organization-to-organization network level risks obscuring a fuller understanding of what happens at the so-called “lower level network” – that is, relationships and linkages between individuals-as-actors, and the interactions that may help or hinder the connections between all parties in the international project network and its various milieu.

For project-intensive firms operating in the construction, engineering and consulting sectors, firm outputs are often delivered in the form of bespoke solutions for clients. In these situations, the external client frequently has a substantial input into the composition of key project team composition. Project-intensive firms are thus heavily reliant on their ability to marshal competent teams to deliver services on time and to budget. This is a significant constraint, particularly for supplier firms involved in the aid and development project sector, where funding agencies place considerable weighting on the skills and expertise of key team members named in the bidding documentation to determine the awarding of contracts. Due to the nature of international development project (IDP) work, supplier firms tend to rely on a large proportion of independent specialists who are contracted to provide expert consultancy input. Likewise, IDP buyers – effectively funding agencies and local government bodies in the project recipient country – may use external consultants in an advisory and/or evaluative capacity.

Our study, reported in this paper, reveals how key individuals - independent of buyer/client and supplier firms - have the power to exert considerable influence over international project outcomes and interaction between the various parties involved in the project, through their own professional expertise and personal connections. We found the loosely coupled employment relationship, along with the temporary nature of international project work, were a prime motivator for these actors to develop strong ties between themselves and others in the international development project business sector. Self preservation contributed to ‘career network behaviour’ that may be viewed by others, particularly supplier firms, as part of what has been called ‘the darker side of networks’: the constraints placed upon individual firms in the network (Kinnie, Swart and Purcell, 2005). However, repeated ties, reputational concerns and the development of trust with other network actors can be countering, positive factors. Thus, examining the connections between these key individuals provides an ideal research setting for a fuller understanding of international project networks at the organization and the individual network levels, and how they may influence the IDP process.

The paper is organized as follows: first, we explain the qualitative methodology used. We then briefly outline the research context: international development projects (IDPs) and the key players in the project network. Based on our data analysis, we then demonstrate how individual specialist consultants developed and used their own career network of connections and relationships with the multiple parties involved in IDPs. Indeed, our data suggests that the utility of tie strength in the career network may prove to be more enduring than inter-organisational connections. We conclude with some suggestions for further research into the role of networks in international project work.

Methodology

Interest in the topic arose from a study aimed at understanding the internationalisation of Australian firms that deliver international development projects for multilateral institutions (for further details about this study see Welch 2005a and 2005b). Organizations included in the study were from the public as well as private sector and ranged from small (under 20 employees) to large (over 3,000). Managers from a total of 26 Australian-based organisations were interviewed. Their degree of experience of international development projects varied – from those with over 30 years through to new entrants. While the firms were all consulting providers, they represented a range of sectors – engineering, health, education and public sector reform – although most provided consulting expertise across a range of sectors. A consistent theme that emerged from the study was the critical role of staffing in the successful delivery of international development projects, particularly the management of a high proportion of independent specialist consultants who were not permanent employees (see Welch, Welch and Tahvanainen, 2008).

The initial study provided a picture from the perspective of the supplier firm. However, in order to fully appreciate the role of independent specialist consultants, it was deemed necessary to obtain their perspectives. To this end, a second round of interviews was conducted. Individuals who had experience in international development work were contacted, using a snowballing technique. Initial approaches were made to consultants who had worked with some of the firms in the initial study. These persons became key informants, providing data and assisting in gaining access to others through their personal and work-related networks. They also acted as data verifiers in terms of critiquing interview questions, commenting on a report of the initial study, and offering additional insights post interview (Miles and Huberman, 1992)

Sixteen persons agreed to participate in the follow-up study. They came from a range of backgrounds, but were skewed towards senior positions and age, due to the nature of development work. As one interviewee explained, the clients (usually the World Bank and aid agencies) placed emphasis on experience as a criterion for winning the bid and this has resulted in a dearth of younger people being available as they do not have a chance to develop the requisite track record. Interviewees as a consequence had a wealth of experience upon which to draw, as careers spanned several decades on average, and a range of different positions in connection with development projects: from bid writer, team leader, technical adviser, project director through to official evaluator. Interviewees were permanent staff members, senior managers or independent consultants – with most having even been two, or even all three, during the course of their careers.

Interviews took place either in the person's office or via telephone hook-up. They ranged from half to one hour in duration, based on semi-structured questions. Interviews were recorded (with the interviewee's permission) using a digital voice recorder. These were transcribed and checked for accuracy. Given the small sample size, the data was analyzed manually, using the following research questions as a general organizing template:

- What attracts individuals to work as external, independent specialist consultants?
- How important are personal networks in securing project work?

- What effect did external consultants have on connections and relationships between the parties involved in IDPs?

The interview data was also compared with data from the initial study of project suppliers, and we draw upon this to explain how supplier firms viewed their relationships with individual consultants. Before presenting the findings, we first provide a brief overview of the parties generally involved in international development projects.

International development projects

The international development project sector covers a very wide range of technical services, ranging from engineering and construction to health and community development; however, their objective is similar to the extent that all have the mission of improving national economic and social welfare. They also have similar institutional contexts, in that they are delivered to external clients; are all financed through aid or concessional loans administered by government or multilateral institutions, which have standardized rules and procedures; and are implemented in the often harsh, even dangerous, conditions of less developed countries (such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Colombia, and Nigeria). In recent years, there has been a shift in funding emphasis away from the provision of ‘hard infrastructure’, such as roads and dams, to ‘soft’ infrastructure such as community development and governance. While the project cycle in this industry is very much shaped by funding rules and specific client demands, it nevertheless exhibits what have been identified as the key features of project business: temporary organizations, discontinuity in terms of client demand, a high degree of uncertainty over project timelines and technical complexity (Davies and Hobday, 2005). Supplier firms, regardless of size, encounter difficulties in staffing international projects with permanent hires given the highly specialised technical qualifications and prior international experience demanded by funding agencies. As a result, they tend to rely more heavily on a high proportion of temporary employees. Hence a common (although slightly pejorative) descriptor within the international development sector of such a firm is “body shop”. While not all supplier firms are so-called body shops, they share a common characteristic of being heavily dependent on attracting sufficient numbers of skilled external contractors in often highly competitive circumstances

Figure 1: The IDP context

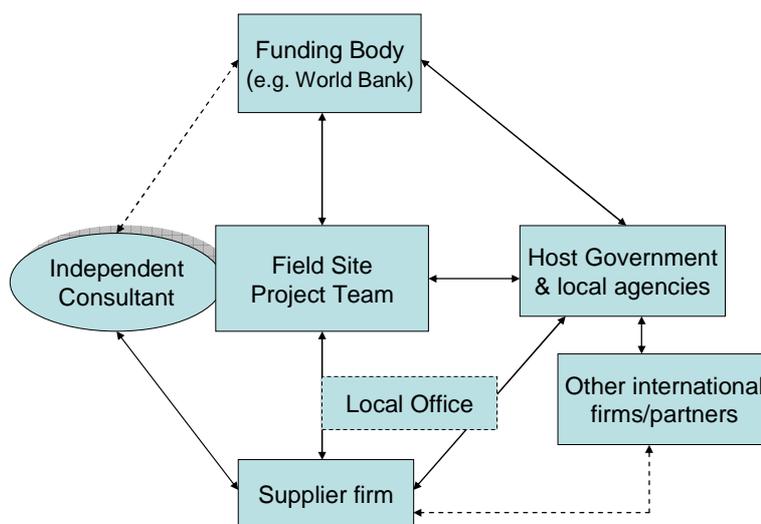


Figure 1 depicts the typical IDP setting and the parties that featured strongly in interviewees' accounts. Apart from supplier firms, perhaps the organisation most often referred to is the funding agency – and often was described as the “client” due to the funding agency's role in the tender process. Another key player is the recipient government (i.e. the government receiving the loan or aid) and its related local agencies, that may provide project staff (termed counterparts) to complement those provided by the supplier firm. Building solid relationships with government officials was seen as critical to the project's success, but often an elusive goal to achieve for project sellers. The supplier firm may be part of an alliance or consortium that will also have input into project team composition, including their own independent consultants and/or permanent staff. A local office may be established near the field site. The supplier firm will also likely be partnered with a local consulting firm, as funding agencies have policies to encourage such partnerships. This means that the project team will involve international consultants working alongside local colleagues.

Independent specialist consultants (whom we will refer to as *independents* for convenience) actively seek international project work – it is essential to their livelihood. Asked what type of people are attracted to such work, an interviewee remarked that they could be divided into three groups – what he referred to as the “3 Ms: missionaries, mercenaries and misfits”, though he then added a fourth category: that of “escapee”. The interviewee explained that he would see himself as mercenary, though not driven solely by chasing money but rather enjoying the short-term challenges international projects posed, and the fact that “on-shore” (i.e. domestic) work did not lend itself to the same level of variety and buzz: “Like in Nigeria, I've been on a US\$55 million micro-enterprise program. Here in Australia, how often do you do that?” There was some consensus from our sample of *independents* about this categorisation. Missionaries were regarded as people who placed emphasis on “what they could put in” rather than “what they could get from” IDP work.

There were intangible aspects that contributed to why IDP work was seen as attractive: the degree of autonomy and independence that it offers; combined with the sense of adventure, a way to gain valuable work experience, or as a convenient way to experience a particular country or culture. However, the uncertainty of development projects and future job prospects had an impact – moving people from the missionary end of the spectrum to that of mercenary: “you have to find work ... you have to eat” and therefore project workers generally “follow the work, not the company” and “are loyal to themselves”.

As a supplier firm manager explained, development projects have a focus more on inputs, whereas commercial projects are more output driven. The focus on inputs means that key people are critical to the success in winning IDP projects, especially for so-called “body shops”. While Figure 1 places the independent consultant in a seemingly peripheral position in the network milieu, our data suggests the consultant has a more central role due to their strong ties to various parties in the IDP network which they use to further their own specific career goals. In the following section, we draw on the careers literature to explain how self preservation and concern for reputation and standing influence what we describe as career network behaviour, and the effect this had on IDP outcomes.

The Internal Career, Career Identity and Career Networks

The term ‘career’ generally refers to the sequence or pattern of jobs (and the associated attitudes and behaviours) a person holds over his or her life span. The relevant literature separates a career into two parts: the internal and the external (see for example, Schein, 1978). The internal career is said to reflect an individual's own subjective idea or map about work life over which the individual is seen to have some directional control. The external career takes an objective, organizational view and refers to the social structure, such as career paths and occupational streams. Keegan and Turner (2003) describe the external project career as resembling a spiral staircase, an image that they consider captures the breadth of expertise and knowledge, across multiple sites and appointments, that is required in the multidisciplinary project environment, as opposed to the traditional corporate ladder where one progresses up a more functional, specialist silo.

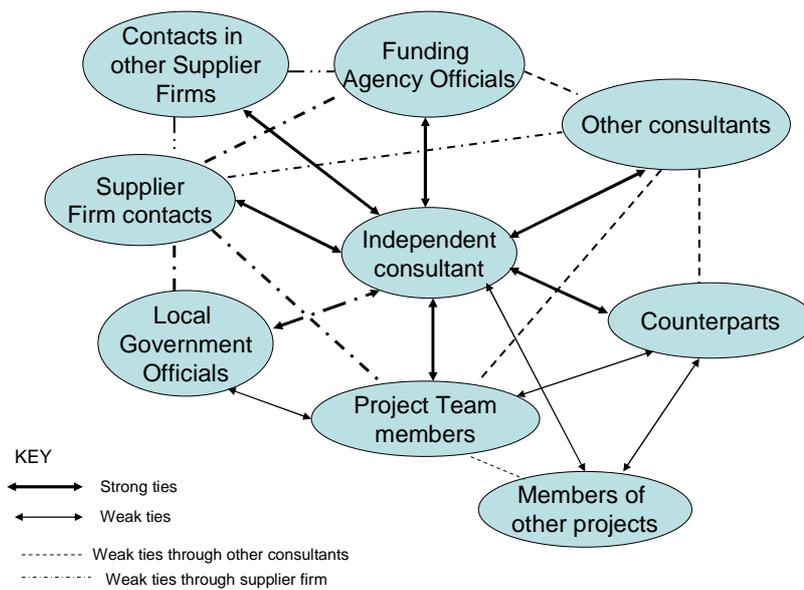
While we could identify elements of a spiral staircase career pattern (the external career), it was not surprising to find *independents* actively managing their own careers given the discontinuous and uncertain nature of IDP work and the fact that, as contract non-permanent staff, they operated outside the organizational setting of the firm. Key components of the concept of an internal career include career anchors and identity, psychological life stages and career resilience (Schein, 1978). Career anchors reflect an individual's aspirations, motives and skills. Reinforced by experience and learning over time, these anchors coalesce into career identity that shapes how a person evaluates promotional opportunities and recognition, and makes sacrifices to further career ends (Noe, Noe and Bachhuber, 1990). Managing one's own internal career in the discontinuous, uncertain environment of the IDP context accentuates 'loyalty to oneself'. This reinforces the individualism that managers in supplier firms commented upon, using terms such as "solo players" or "free traders" to describe *independents*. Likewise, 'concern for reputation and standing' - a critical consideration in terms of career identity - along with self-reliance, was very much part of their professional image.

Combined with career identity, self-preservation was an explanatory factor in how *independents* operated in the IDP setting broader project network. The connection between networking and career success has been well-researched. For instance, Granovetter (1973) developed the concept of weak ties from his investigation into the use of personal contacts or networks in job seeking, though his conclusions have been somewhat questioned in other studies (Brown and Konrad, 2001). In their review, Seibert, Kraimer and Liden (2001, p.219) consider weak tie theory, structural hole theory and social resource theory have a common focus on "network properties as representations of social capital" and how information, resources, and sponsorship are "key explanatory variables for the effect of social capital on career mobility". Our sample of *independents* used their strong and weak ties to others in the IDP network to access information about forthcoming work, such as contacts inside supplier firms, particularly with those responsible for business development. Their connections were a valuable resource, as one interviewee explained:

We never burn our bridges because you don't know who you're going to associate with tomorrow to win a project. So that has huge impacts on how we operate in the network here.

To fully appreciate the value and utility of the career network, we now discuss the relationships between *independents* and others. Figure 2 is a simplified depiction of these various linkages.

Figure 2: Career Network



Independents and Supplier Firm Relationships.

As shown by the bold double-headed lines in Figure 2, *independents* can draw on strong career links with actors directly involved in the IDP network to influence employment decisions. Given that the formal employment contact is between the supplier firm and the external consultant, the relationship between these two parties provided considerable data. This centred on interdependent nature of the relationship and data analysis revealed power, resource dependence, vulnerability, and loyalty as key factors. At the IDP bidding stage, the bargaining power exhibited by *independents* stems from three bases: the ability to control a resource, technical power, and expert power derived from their specialist skill and knowledge. As Mintzberg (1983) explains, to serve as a basis of power, the resource, skill and knowledge must satisfy the following conditions: be essential to the supplier firm, in short supply, and nonsubstitutable. Those *independents* who have gained good reputations have strong resource power: they can provide or withhold their names to the supplier firm's bid. Specialist knowledge and technical skills that are in short supply enhance the independent's bargaining power as they are sought after by competing supplier firms. Senior, very experienced *independents* will have built up a strong reputation with the funding agency, or local client (often a host government agency) or both, through repeated ties, from a long spanning career in IDP project activity. In some cases, their specific participation is a prerequisite to the supplier firm being awarded the tender – that is, nonsubstitutability is formalised. A strong bargaining position means some are free to pick and choose project work, with a 'take it or leave it' approach, and the supplier firms are placed in a bidding 'war' for these key individuals:

I have a network of about 12 different people who email me to do work and basically ... all my work now comes from email ... I don't play the game. I just say, this is my price (*independent consultant*).

These are individual, independent specialists. They're not just on your bid, they're on several other jobs; they've got several other commitments (*supplier firm manager*).

Consequently, these individuals are in a strong position when negotiating the terms of their fees with supplier firms and often are able to dictate terms and conditions even after the commencement of the project.

While the bidding process may tilt bargaining power in favour of at least the ‘inner circle’ of experienced consultants, it also exposes them to considerable uncertainty. The bidding system was likened to a ‘lottery’ by one industry veteran: in a competitive bidding process most bids will fail since only one can win, and even then the project may not go ahead on schedule. Due to this uncertainty, *independents* will often simultaneously have their names associated with bids from numerous supplier firms, usually for different projects. As two experienced interviewees explained:

[The project] timing keeps moving. So you keep saying yes to more people than you could ever hope to do work for. That juggling becomes a big issue and it can lead to difficulties with the client in that you’ve said I’ll be there to do it but you haven’t finished [the current one] ... it is the nature of the work.

[I]n this competitive work you’ve always got to be in three or four bids at any time if you’re going to keep working ...

While some *independents* may have a degree of commitment to a particular supplier firm, the necessity to ensure a continuous stream of work can lead them to feel mixed loyalties, having worked with different supplier firms “and been satisfied with both”, but are forced to place concern for self above other considerations.

Not all *independents* have the same level of bargaining power as they lack the requisite conditions required to influence the situation. They lack expertise, and/or their specific skills or knowledge are not in such demand, so their power base is comparatively restricted, perhaps pushing them to seek connections with more senior, experienced colleagues. Those permanently employed in supplier firms may have established at least weak ties with more experienced consultants and thus be part of the career network. Linkages between permanent supplier firm staff and *independents* may be further strengthened when *independents* decide to join supplier firms as permanent staff, even becoming top managers in such firms. For example, one such interviewee explained: “I keep relationships with all my former bosses [from project work].

Supplier firms can be said to be resource dependent upon *independents*, thus extending the concept of client dependency to consultants as well as to buyer/client firms. This degree of vulnerability necessitates relationship management strategies to lock in those *independents* who are deemed critical to current and future work. For example, a supplier firm manager considered it important to have “the network to get those people that the client wants onside”. Many firms did go to considerable effort to reuse talent on subsequent projects so that these repeated ties strengthened firm-consultant connections. Constant contact was another tactic, as one former consultant now a top manager in a supplier firm related:

There’s a core group of key people out there that I know. I talk to them on a regular basis because I know that if it [the bidding process] gets competitive, I will probably get them exclusively. But if I can’t get them exclusively, I’ll definitely get them in my team.

The challenge of work continuity is met by firms putting considerable effort into market intelligence, so that they can ensure a steady pipeline of projects that fit the skills sets of existing staff, and obtain sufficient early warning to contact desirable *independents* ahead of the competition. As part of the networking activities undertaken in this discontinuous environment, firms build and maintain a database of *independents*. This database does not just consist of CVs, but also the unwritten, tacit knowledge about which consultants are reliable team members, with interviewees unwilling to rely on an independent consultant they did not already know. Data bases (or data banks) may also be shared professional data bases which supplier firms in the network can access.

Relationship with other consultants

The senior, more experienced consultants described above form an inner circle of *independents* who are a tight-knit group with strong relationships that have been developed over, in some cases, decades. As one interviewee described it:

We are ... a small group of people that do it [IDP consulting]...we are incestuous mates, enemies, highly competitive, strategic... All the guys that we compete with in this area, all the key people, we know personally... we've known each other for 20 years.

In interviews, they would produce Palm Pilots or notebooks with names and contact details of their "colleagues" and were open about their strong ties that were strengthened through social activities – or social episodes - outside the IDP context. Mateship was a way of ensuring support or project work when required. The emphasis was on network maintenance, but it was also a way of keeping tabs on what others were doing.

When in a position to influence project team composition, the personal knowledge of the abilities of other consultants could be drawn upon, even when these may be outside the close knit inner circle of 'mates', as the following comment by an *independent* interviewee reveals:

I knew of a Dutch consultant who specializes in small business enterprise stuff – really good operator –I chose him because I knew he was a nice bloke.

Likewise, a decision to join a project team would be influenced by knowledge of those whose names were already associated with the bid. For example:

I think I know who the Team Leader will be so I said, "well you can put my name up" but there is no guarantee that I'll get the work. And it doesn't worry me.

The use of the network was associated with the need to ensure project delivery success so that the *independent's* reputation was preserved. Self-preservation was the driving force, yet network activity was underpinned by non-utilitarian behaviour (Cova, Ghauri and Salle, 2002) so that strong connections with critical actors in the consultant network were maintained.

Relationship with Funding Agency

From the supplier's perspective, *independents* are key to commercial success, given that the funding agency and/or client rates the bid on the basis of the consulting expertise that is put forward, as the following comments indicate:

You have to have people who have got CVs [that] will be approved [by the funding agency]. Quite often now on projects, in evaluating bids, the team will be upwards of 700 points out of 1,000 ... so you have to had really good people with really good CVs that can be marked highly.

[I]n some cases, some people are just favoured by [funding agency] to be the person they want to do [the project] through connections or whatever.

Sparrowe et al (2001) found power and influence due to network centrality was associated with positive or negative job performance. The strength of the connection between an *independent* and the funding agency could be such that it protected the consultant from job loss due to perceived poor performance by the supplier firm, as one former director of a 'body shop' explained:

One of our greatest difficulties was where we thought people hadn't proved to be up to scratch, but they'd developed a very good relationship with [funding agency] or the World

Bank officer or, to some extent, the in-country people. When you wanted to get rid of them, it was almost impossible.

As one interviewee explained, connections with funding agencies may result in work as an official evaluator of a particular agency's projects. This extends contacts inside funding agencies that may be useful when the role of evaluator ceases – through increased reputation and standing, and extended connections to others in the IDP network due to evaluation work at various project sites. These additional contacts strengthen ties with the career network.

Relationship with the Project Team and Counterparts

Given the emphasis that *independents* place on their professional reputations, it is not surprising that project team composition was an important factor.

The reason I like to lead teams ...if you don't lead the team, you end up working for someone who's an idiot and you can't control your own destiny. As Team Leader you can have some control over it.

Repeated project work with particular supply firms also links *independents* to other projects and these contacts can be used in current team composition or to replace project members who withdraw. The fluid nature of team composition means that *independents* may move between projects, thus extending strong and weak ties to other consultants, as well as other parties as indicated in Figure 2

As mentioned earlier, a local consulting firm is often part of the project milieu due to funding agency requirements. The local firm is involved in recruiting local consultants: as one interviewee explained 'we try to use local knowledge to hire local consultants'. Interviewees agreed that the quality of local consultants was often very high, but obviously were being paid a fraction of the rates of an international consultant.

the local staff are comparable to, you know, where you've got counterparts, or project staff, the local staff are usually as good but being paid probably 10-20 percent of what the Australians are being paid.

In this situation, international consultants are expected to be transferring expertise to their local colleagues. This can be a double-edged sword: the consultant shares the knowledge but in so doing may forego a distinct competitive advantage that may influence bargaining power in later project negotiations. However, the trade-off is interaction that may lead to a strengthening of ties with particular local organisations and government agencies through such personal contact. Even as weak links in the career network, they can prove valuable to individuals as they proved information about future projects, enhance reputation and standing and thus add to bargaining influence.

Conclusion

While we apply the usual caveats about making generalisations from a small exploratory study, the career network built by individuals has been a useful explanatory tool to understand how IDP networks are built, maintained and used in ways which influence, in positive or negative ways, interaction between members and upon project outcomes. The fact that project supplier-client relationships and their social networks survive long after the project is completed (Hadjikhani, 1996), and the temporary organization "melts into air" (Welch, 2005a), has been previously discussed. However, what our data analysis suggests is that career networks may prove to be more stable and more enduring than those between project supplier and client. Firstly, in the IDP setting, as we have indicated, individual external consultants forge strong actor bonds with each other that last literally a career lifetime, does bind them together into a lasting career network, regardless of being simultaneously competitors for IDP work, and contracted to rival supplier firms. As one experienced

former *independent*, now in a permanent management position with a supplier firm, when asked about IDP networks, commented: “It’s a really complicated process of social interaction behaviour and it’s built on long-term relationships and trust and intricate knowledge of each other”.

Secondly, the career network in which they are embedded is a valued – even vital – shared resource on which they livelihoods depend. Resource ties therefore reinforce the actor bonds to build and maintain a strong career network.

Finally, although it would appear that, at least for the ‘inner circle’ of senior consultants are in a powerful position when negotiating work with supplier firms, they remain in a vulnerable position as external contractors. One of the dilemmas *independents* faced was the potential of disqualifying themselves from work in their home country, with offshore experience in a developing country potentially not rated as relevant. Just as the skills that experts gained in a management position at home did not necessarily qualify them to lead the team on a development project, the skills gained on a development project (such as managing a cross-cultural team) were not always regarded as relevant to the industry context at home. Another dilemma in terms of career outcomes was that being on the ‘international treadmill’ too long potentially would result in them being cut off from cutting edge innovations and changes in their field of expertise – effectively ‘technically redundant’, thus also reducing their effectiveness on international projects. The bargaining power of the international consultant was therefore seen as having a ‘use by’ date, with distinct implications for future career outcomes.

The above reasons may explain the stable and enduring nature of the career network. There are some seemingly contradictory aspects which also explain how a career network may be longer lasting and more pervasive than an organisational network. At an organisational level, the connections appear to be what may be termed loosely-coupled; however, at the interpersonal level, the connections may be particularly strong. Our sample of independent specialists could be said to be ‘playing both sides of the project fence’, moving between being consultants for a supplier firm to being consultants for the client. They also switched from external consultants to being permanent staff, often at the managerial level; or left a supplier firm to become an independent consultant. All these movements, while prompted by individual self preservation, appeared to enhance the value of the career network for its various members. Thus, career networks demonstrate the strength of strong ties.

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