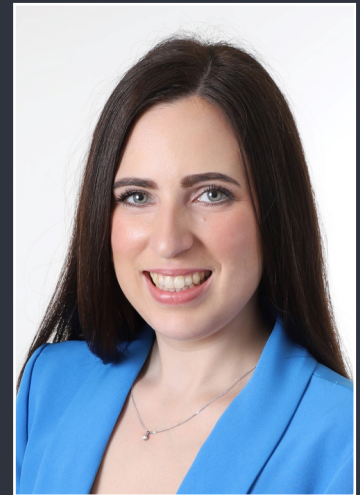


Early integration of contractor expertise in complex construction projects: Client and contractor perspectives.



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Academic literature and industry reports acknowledge the benefits of early contractor involvement (ECI) at the front end of the construction project life cycle. Constructability know-how, informed decision-making, relational links to the supply chain, better solutions, and early risk reduction are among the benefits reported. Despite widespread acknowledgement of the benefits and advocacy for ECI and collaboration by HM Government, the approach has not been widely adopted. Challenges to demonstrate value for money, maintain competition, and balance risk and reward remain barriers to the early integration of contractor expertise in construction projects. Fragmentation has continued to be a recurring theme in academic literature for the past three decades. Whilst the benefits and challenges are acknowledged, perceptions and motivational drivers appear to influence a contractor's early engagement, alongside the situational complexities of multi-party, multi-system interfaces prominent in modern complex construction projects.

The study explores the following research question: How does the interplay of perceptions, motivations and complexities influence how contractor expertise is integrated at the front end of UK construction projects?

A qualitative research design, underpinned by a social constructivist worldview, was chosen to explore interpretations from lived experience as a lens to address a gap in understanding the interplay between themes of perceptions, motivations and complexities. This insight is critical to support how projects are set up from the outset to realise the intended value of ECI. Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with directors and senior leaders across nineteen major client and tier one contractor organisations, with experience spanning thirteen sectors. Interview transcripts were coded and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

The findings showed an inconsistency in how contractor expertise is integrated at the front end, with no one-size-fits-all approach for ECI. It was found that certain project conditions appear to intensify the case for early contractor inputs. Important enablers to integration were identified, including shared incentives, cultural alignment, process clarity and trusted relationships. Behavioural interactions were found to play a key role in the interplay of perceptions, motivations and complexities influencing the early integration of contractor expertise. Reflexive empathy was seen from consideration of the other party's perspective, suggesting a mindset position which contrasts with traditional industry stereotypes.

A distinctive strength of the study is the richness of qualitative data, which is grounded in lived experience and synthesised with literature. Practical implications of the study contribute to a deeper understanding of how clients and contractors can position themselves effectively at the front end to integrate contractor expertise at a suitable time aligned with value objectives and project complexities. Overall, the study highlights a systems-thinking maturity and a shared drive towards collaboration, long-term relationships, fairness in risk-sharing and best-for-project outcomes at the front end.