

The Sequence Effect and its Impact on Cooperation, Conflicts, and Conflict Management in IT Freelancer-Client Relationships

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Abstract

Since conflict is a ubiquitous phenomenon in inter- but also intra-organizational work, conflict management behavior (CMB) is a preconditioning factor for successful cooperations. Prior research shows that CMB can be individualistic or collectivistic in orientation and highlights the episodic nature of CMB. However, in focusing on analyzing specific conflicts and conflict dynamics in collaborative contexts, research paid less attention to how conflict and CMB are influenced by structural patterns and thus might overstate the role of individual agency compared to the role of the general structure of the cooperation. We address this issue by investigating the inter-organizational cooperation of IT-freelancers and their client organizations. Based on 18 semi-structured problem-centered and expert interviews with IT-freelancers, representatives of client organizations and agencies, we show that the CMB orientation depends on the institutionalized sequential stages of the cooperation. While individualistic CMBs dominate the pre-contract sequence, in which recruitment processes and negotiations take place, the parties switch to collectivistic CMB in the contract sequence, in which the actual cooperation is carried out. The post-contract sequence serves for reflections on the cooperation and thus influences the willingness to engage in future cooperations and, in turn, affects future pre-contract sequences. With a focus on the IT industry, the paper addresses research gaps related to the specific temporality and temporal structuring of contingent work. It introduces a sequence-oriented framework and analysis of conflict and conflict management in inter-organizational projects, complementing related episodic perspectives on conflict, and psychological contracts with a more chronological and structural perspective.

Introduction

Conflict is a ubiquitous phenomenon in social interactions, including cooperation in organizational work settings (Coleman et al., 2010; Desivilya et al., 2010; Dimas & Lourenço, 2015, Kugler & Brodbeck, 2014; Standifer & Wall, 2010). As a broad construct, conflict has been studied by different disciplines in recent years with a focus on various forms of social interaction. In organizational research, the study of intragroup conflict received considerable attention (e.g., Caputo et al., 2019; Greer & Dannals, 2017; Rahim & Katz, 2019). According to Pondy (1989), conflict should not be understood as a temporary disruption of the otherwise cooperative relationships among organizational members, but as the normal state: “what needs to be explained is not the presence of conflict but the presence of cooperation” (Pondy, 1989, p. 97).

This highlights the relevance of conflict management behavior (CMB), i.e. the behavior of individuals in dealing with a given conflict (e.g., Ayoko, 2016; DeChurch et al., 2013; Speakman & Ryals, 2010). CMBs can be categorized into more collectivistic ones (e.g., openness, cooperation), which are oriented towards shared goals, or individualistic ones (e.g., avoiding, competing), which aim at achieving one's own goals (Greer & Dannals, 2017). However, the literature emphasizes disagreement about the adoption of CMB and, consequently, to date three different approaches have evolved: (1) the “one best way”-approach claims that while individuals have a preferred style to deal with conflict, cooperation is seen as the objectively most effective CMB (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984); (2) the “contingency approach”, stating the CMB to be contingent on the specific situation (Thomas, 1992); (3) the “complexity approach” claiming conflicts to be dynamic and episodic and the CMB to be varying during or between these episodes (Medina et al., 2004; Nicotera, 1993).

Even if the complexity approach is the only one that emphasizes the episodic nature of conflict and CMB, scholars have paid less attention to how conflict and CMB might be influenced by structural patterns, especially by the basic sequentiality of interaction (Speakman & Ryals, 2010). We address this gap by developing a sequential contingency perspective on cooperation in work contexts, distinguishing between three sequences of interaction: the actual cooperation, its precedent initiation, and its subsequent evaluation. We argue that (a) each sequence has its own potential for conflict, (b) the nature and extent as well as the absence of conflict within sequences are strongly rooted in preceding sequences or the quality of the post-hire socialization, and (c) the CMB, and especially its individualistic or collectivistic character, depends on and changes with the respective sequence in which it takes place, what we call the sequence effect. In sum, we show that this sequential perspective can explain not only the presence of cooperation, but also – with reference to Pondy (1989) – the absence of conflict in cooperation. To elaborate on this, we formulate the following research question:

RQ. *How do interaction sequences affect the nature and extent of conflict and CMB in work cooperations?*

We focus on inter-organizational projects in which freelancers cooperate with internal and permanent employees. Such arrangements are common in knowledge-intensive industries, such as IT. While studies in conflict research often focus on intra-organizational projects and workgroups (e.g., Anicich et al., 2016; Carton & Tewfik, 2016; Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Hinds & Mortensen, 2005), the dynamics in inter-organizational projects received little consideration. They are characterized by different dependency relationships in which the negotiation power can vary significantly during the cooperation phase (e.g., Jang et al., 2018; Simosi et al., 2021; Standifer & Wall,

2010) and thus help to draw lines between the sequences outlined above. The derivation of a sequential approach receives additional support by research on the importance and interdependence of experiences at different stages of the negotiation process in determining the nature of psychological contracts (e.g., Jang et al., 2018; Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Rousseau, 2001). Against this background and with reference to Pondy (1989), crucial conflicts threatening cooperation should be likely to occur, but – according to our data – surprisingly they are not. Based on empirical results we argue that a sequential perspective provides an essential explanation for this.

In sum, the paper makes three main contributions: (a) empirically, it enriches the literature on conflict and cooperation by investigating inter-organizational projects where freelancers work together with internal workers, (b) it links the nature and extent of conflict as well as the respective CMB to the sequence of the work cooperation; (c) it introduces a sequential contingency perspective on conflict and thus extends the complexity approach on CMB.

We substantiate our considerations with a literature review of the research on conflict types, conflict processes, and CMB. After pointing out the lack of considerations of the basic sequentiality of interactions in work relationships, we explain our case selection and then develop a sequential perspective on work relationships that will allow us to elaborate on conflicts in and the influence of the specific sequences. Our study is based on 18 interviews with IT freelancers, internals and relevant representatives of IT companies, as well as those of staffing agencies in IT. After presenting our methodology and empirical data, we discuss conflict in the pre-cooperation phase and their influence on conflict and conflict management in the later actual cooperation.

Conceptual Background

Conflict in Cooperation: from Conflict States to Conflict Management Behavior

Korsgaard et al. (2008, p. 1224) define conflict “as the experience between or among parties that their goals or interests are incompatible or in opposition”. Regarding organizational contexts, the widespread assumption has been (or still is) that conflict is the exception, while cooperation is the norm. This is consistent with Pondy’s (1967) seminal work on organizational conflict. In his reflections (Pondy, 1989), however, he switched the perspective by advocating conflict to be the normal state. Thus, cooperation is created and maintained not only in spite of, but also against, perennial conflict.

Subsequent research established conflict as an essential feature of work cooperation in organizational contexts and identified four different types of conflict. While *task conflict* refers to disagreements about the content of the task at hand (e.g., different viewpoints, ideas, understandings), *relationship conflict* typically arises when interpersonal incompatibilities exist (e.g., hostility, stress, nuisance) (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995; Pelled, 1996). *Process conflicts* arise from disagreements about the logistics of task performance (e.g., task and role allocation) (Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Jehn 1997), and *status conflicts* involve the social position and the perceived and recognized status of a person involved and may manifest in competitive negotiation tactics (Anicich et al., 2016; Bendersky & Hays, 2012).

Beyond that, Greer and Dannals (2017) distinguish between collectivistic and individualistic CMBs. Collectivistic CMBs, such as *openness* and *cooperation*, are characterized by a concern for team goals. In contrast to collectivism, they expose behaviors such as *avoiding* and *competing* among individualistic CMBs, where the focus is on achieving individual respectively personal goals. While there is agreement in the literature that outcomes are affected by how conflict episodes are handled (e.g., Amason, 1996), there is disagreement on the adoption of CMBs (Speakman & Ryals, 2010).

Related research applies either a “one best way” (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984), contingency (Munduate et al., 1999; Nicotera, 1993; Thomas, 1992) or complexity approach (Euwema et al., 2003).

From Approaches on Conflict Management Behavior to a Sequential Contingency Perspective

The one-best-way perspective (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984) has two key assumptions: (1) individuals have a preferred style for dealing with conflict and (2) cooperation is considered the most effective conflict management style. However, this approach has been criticized for its lack of consideration of situational aspects and it has inspired the development of the contingency approach (Thomas, 1992), which states that CMB depends less on individual preferences and more on situational conditions, and therefore may vary depending on the situation. Because both perspectives ignore the dynamic and multidimensional nature of conflict in a complex world, several authors call for a complexity perspective that goes beyond the artificially created boundaries of such two-dimensional models (e.g., Speakman & Ryals, 2010; van de Vliert et al., 1997), and suggest to disaggregate CMB: “The complexity perspective argues that any reaction to a conflict episode consists of multiple behavioral components rather than one single conflict management behavior” (Speakman & Ryals, 2010, p. 193).

Previous studies using the complexity approach have shown that a combination of collectivistic and individualistic CMBs contributes to the most effective outcomes (see García et al., 2017 for an overview). Other studies (e.g., Medina et al., 2004) prove that individuals change their interests and behavior during conflict episodes and adapt their CMB to the behavior of the conflict partner. However, even though the complexity approach emphasizes the episodic nature of conflict and CMB, it has so far failed to consider structural patterns, especially regarding the sequentiality of interaction. Therefore, Speakman and Ryals (2010) suggest that future research should extend the complexity approach to a sequential contingency perspective, based on the postulate “that conflict is a constant and inherent condition of the organization” (Speakman & Ryals, 2010, p. 196).

For the conceptualization of a sequential contingency perspective, we relate to research on the psychological contract. The concept refers to the “individual’s belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement” (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123) between an employee and her or his organization (Conway & Briner, 2009, p. 83). While studies find psychological contracts to be decisive for the work relationship, especially when they are broken or violated (e.g., Morrison & Robinson 1997, Robinson & Morrison 2000), Rousseau (2001) points to basic sequential patterns in the formation and development of the psychological contract. In particular, she distinguishes between pre-employment beliefs on the one side and the post-hire socialization on the other (Rousseau, 2001).

Pre-employment beliefs result from the professional norms individuals possess with regard to their occupation and their work, from societal ideologies on what is the value of a specific job occupation and how it should be carried out (Bunderson, 2001; Rousseau, 2001). The recruitment process can also be understood as a source of pre-employment beliefs, since active exchange and negotiation of promises take place between employees and employers while no employment relationship is established (Rousseau, 2001). Post-hire socialization refers to the experiences in the actual cooperation. Herein, most of the psychological contract literature focuses on whether given promises are broken and/or violated (Rousseau, 2001) and highlights resulting disputes, conflict, or even fluctuation (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Rousseau (2001) emphasizes that in this phase promises are not only evaluated but also further developed and readjusted through exchange. Thus, within the actual cooperation the psychological contract is developed and evaluated simultaneously.

Recent studies investigate the connection between the pre-employment beliefs and the post-hire socialization by focusing on the negotiation process, which contains the actual bargaining process, its precedent planning, and the subsequent practical implementation of the bargained agreement (Jang et al., 2018; Simosi et al., 2021). Among other things, planning involves information gathering, the development of tactics and strategies based on personal aspirations and the establishment of aspirations. The bargaining process is about the general and specific application of the tactics and strategies that have been developed previously. Referring to Rousseau (2001), both relate to the pre-employment phase. The implementation phase, crucial for post-hire socialization (Rousseau, 2001), involves translating agreements into concrete actions, which can be challenging due to their inherent incompleteness (Jang et al., 2018). While agreements signify future actions, they are often vague, leaving room for different interpretations (Rousseau, 1990; Aldossari et al., 2023), leading to potential conflicts and re-negotiations (Jang et al., 2018; Simosi et al., 2021), or even a termination of the relationship.

Finally, related scholars (e.g., Rousseau, 2001; Simosi et al., 2021) also point to previous employment experiences as a source of individual beliefs, respectively as an issue in negotiation processes. While Rousseau (2001) relates them to the pre-employment beliefs, it may be more precise to understand them as post-employment evaluations in the first place that inform subsequent pre-employment beliefs and negotiation processes. This analytical distinction becomes more important for considering contingent work arrangements (e.g. Gallagher & Parks, 2001). Contrary to regular employment which tends to be open-ended, contingent contract work usually implies a (sometimes more, sometimes less fixed) termination date of the actual cooperation and thus contributes to the institutionalization of the post-employment phase with its evaluation of the previous cooperation.

As we refer to independent contract work, we elaborate on the extension of the complexity approach by building on the previous consideration of psychological contract research and thus, divide the cooperation into three sequences: the actual cooperation sequence, its preceding initiation sequence and a subsequent sequence in which the cooperation is evaluated and reflected upon by the participants. In line with the psychological contract research, we assume, that (a) each sequence has its own potential for conflict, (b) the nature, extent, and the absence of conflict within the sequences is strongly rooted in the preceding sequences, and (c) the CMB, and especially its individualistic or collectivistic character, depends on and changes with the respective sequence in which it takes place, what we call the *sequence effect*. In the next section, we translate this idea into a framework for the empirical investigation of independent contract work in IT.

Toward a Sequential Contingency Perspective on Cooperation with IT Freelancers

While independent contract work is often associated with the risk of legal, material and social precariousness, there are also qualified and highly qualified contract workers who are able to negotiate advantageous working conditions in areas with high demand (Spreitzer et al., 2017). The latter is to be observed within the field of IT experts: As the use of digital technologies increases in everyday life, in the workplace, and as part of the public infrastructure, so does the demand for workers to develop and implement these technologies. Due to their scarce high-end expertise, IT freelancers may have more control over the decisions about their working conditions, which also changes the power relations (e.g., Coleman et al., 2010; Lu et al., 2020; Standifer & Wall, 2010; White et al., 2007) vis-à-vis companies that compete for their expertise not only during contract negotiations (e.g., Brett & Thompson, 2016), but probably also during and after the (successful) completion of the project.

Being in such a powerful position might influence IT freelancers' CMB toward individualistic strategies. Euwema et al. (2003), for instance, found that a higher hierarchical status led to the dominance of procedures which give advantage to the individual in the better position. In contrast, the analyses by Süß and Kleiner (2010) show that IT freelancers place particular value on a social and cooperative working atmosphere. The adoption of independent contracting or freelance work is associated with different structural conditions and motivations, which in turn affect organizational and individual outcomes (e.g., Wu et al., 2018). Related studies have therefore examined not only whether the deployment of freelancers achieves the economic benefits expected by the companies (e.g., Barlage et al., 2019; Flinchbaugh et al., 2020; Pinto et al., 2009), but also the psychological effects on the individuals involved.

While the study of differences in psychological outcomes such as job satisfaction (e.g., Davis-Blake et al., 2003) and organizational commitment (e.g., Süß & Kleiner, 2010) dominates the research on IT workers, conflict states and processes (e.g., CMB) have received little attention. Research on conflict and CMB has mainly focused on intra-organizational cooperation, e.g., project teams composed of internal employees, while inter-organizational investigations, especially in the sense of freelancers cooperating with internals of the hiring company, are rare. However, the investigation of cooperation with freelancers referring to conflict and CMB from a sequential perspective has further advantages: (a) compared to cooperation among permanent employees, pre- and post-cooperation sequences are simply more common and much easier to distinguish in cooperation with freelancers than in cooperation with internal employees; (b) the shortage of qualified IT workers provides freelancers with better working conditions in terms of remuneration, flexibility and autonomy than internal employees, while the work content often does not differ; (c) this also provides IT freelancers with a great deal of authority to enforce their own will and goals, which is why they might be expected to show a more individualistic CMB in cooperation.

Thus, the deployment of IT freelancers is accompanied by faultlines, such as the inequality in working conditions, which may provide a breeding ground for conflictual relations between internals and freelancers (e.g., Adair et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is strongly structured in sequences that we differentiate in terms of the contractual relationship of the IT freelancers to the hiring company as follows: (1) the pre-contract sequence, in which recruitment processes and negotiations take place, (2) the contract sequence, which is about the actual cooperation between freelancers and internals, and (3) the post-contract sequence, in which evaluation processes are made. In addition, we take into account that individuals can change their interests and behavior even during a conflict episode or sequence and adapt their CMB to the behavior of the conflict partner, as has been suggested by the complexity approach in CMB (Speakman & Ryals, 2010). Thus, we also relate the sequential structure and the management of conflict in different stages to the actors and relationships involved.

Data and Methods

Our analysis is based on two qualitative studies on highly qualified freelance workers in the IT, medicine and film industry in Germany. In both studies, we conducted pilot-tested semi-structured problem-centered interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) with external workers, such as freelancers and temporary employment workers, and expert interviews (Meuser & Nagel, 2009) with representatives of the strategic level of hiring companies as well as with intermediaries, such as trade unions, professional associations, staffing agencies, and cooperatives. For enabling an informed consent to the participation in the studies, upon first contact (usually via email), the participants were informed about the aim of the study and research goals and about the data protection provisions. All interviews were held only once and between the interviewee and up to two of the authors of this study via phone,

or on site; any interviewee refused to participate or dropped out. The first study (Study 1)¹ conducted in 2015 focused in particular on formal and informal differences between externals and internals, such as of contract status, conditions, arrangements, duration of engagements, but also on the sources of recruitment of externals and the role of intermediary actors in this regard. The second study (Study 2)² conducted between 2019 and 2020 aimed to deepen these findings by focusing on the interaction between externals and internals in terms of their differences. We asked the interviewees about certain types and patterns of conflict between externals and internals and their management, but also about cooperation and knowledge transfer processes that may exist even despite all the differences. However, questions also focused on recruitment processes and negotiations and thus on the pre-contract-sequence as well as on processes like evaluations that take place after a cooperation. With respect to our research questions, both studies together provide well informed insights into conflict and CMB, especially with respect to a sequential perspective that considers not only the contract sequence where the actual cooperation between externals and internals takes place, but also the pre- and post-contract-sequences as breeding ground for conflict in the actual cooperation.

In this paper, we focus on those 18 interviews from both studies that are related to the IT-Sector (see Table 1) which resulted from purposeful sampling (e.g., Patton, 2015) until the primary criterion of data saturation was reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, 7 interviews with IT freelancers, 5 with company representatives of the strategic level as well as 6 with temporary employment and staffing agencies were analyzed for this article. The selected interviews lasted between 38 and 130 minutes with an average of 62 minutes and were audio-recorded and fully transcribed with the permission of the interviewees.

The analysis is based on the qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2014) using MAXQDA software. The category system was developed and applied by the two lead-authors both deductively and inductively. For consensual validation, the category system was regularly discussed and aligned, first on a bilateral level between the lead authors and second in further consultation with the whole project team. We have furthermore discussed our findings externally (e.g., on workshops and scientific conferences, such as the ILPC 2024 in Goettingen) to ensure the trustworthiness of our data (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

First, we subdivided our sample into three different levels: the employee/freelancer level refers to the interviews with permanent employees and freelancers (see Table 1: interviewees #01-#09). The two permanently employed interviewees (see Table 1: #08, #09) started as permanent employees who used to work as regular members of project teams in their firm. Despite them acquiring leading positions as project managers, they are sometimes still active as team members in project teams needed. The organizational or strategic level refers to interviewees who are responsible for the strategic development of the organization, also with respect to the engagement of freelancers. Specifically, this level involves an interview with a head of human resources and disposition, a strategic

¹ The first study was conducted by Maximiliane Wilkesmann, Caroline Ruiner and Birgit Apitzsch. All of them are sociologists by training and hold a PhD. At the time of the study, Maximiliane Wilkesmann worked as junior professor and Caroline Ruiner as a research assistant at TU Dortmund University and Birgit Apitzsch worked as a research assistant at the University of Duisburg-Essen.

² The second study was conducted by Maximiliane Wilkesmann, Caroline Ruiner, Birgit Apitzsch, Lena Schulz and Ronny Ehlen. All are sociologists by training. At the time of the study, Maximiliane Wilkesmann worked as interim professor at the TU Dortmund University, Caroline Ruiner as full professor at the University of Hohenheim and Birgit Apitzsch as senior researcher at the SOFI Goettingen. Lena Schulz worked as research assistant at the SOFI Goettingen and Ronny Ehlen as research assistant at the University of Hohenheim. Both hold a M.A. in sociology.

Table 1
Overview of Interviewees

#	Interviewee Label	Study No.
01	Freelancer 1	Study 1
02	Freelancer 2	Study 1
03	Freelancer 3	Study 1
04	Freelancer 4	Study 2
05	Freelancer 5	Study 2
06	Freelancer 6	Study 2
07	Freelancer 7	Study 2
08	Permanently Employed Project Leader 1	Study 2
09	Permanently Employed Project Leader 2	Study 2
10	Permanently Employed Project Architect and Leader	Study 2
11	Strategic Purchasing Officer	Study 2
12	Head of Human Resources and Disposition	Study 2
13	Agency Representative 1	Study 1
14	Agency Representative 2	Study 1
15	Agency Representative 3	Study 1
16	Agency Representative 4	Study 2
17	Agency Representative 5	Study 2
18	Agency Representative 6	Study 2

purchasing officer and a permanently employed full-time project architect and leader (see Table 1: #10-#12). Finally, the intermediary level involves interviews with six agency representatives that mediate between freelancers and IT companies (see Table 1: #13-#18). Within these levels and according to our theoretical framework, our category system is divided into the three sequences (pre-contract, contract, post-contract). For each sequence, we drew on the established conflict literature, deductively derived corresponding codes on the different conflict types (in concrete *task conflict*, *relationship conflict*, *process conflict*, *status conflict* and *conflict management*), and relate them to the conflicts in our data. According to our theoretical focus, we furthermore coded the CMB in each sequence. However, due to the wide range of different behavior in our data, we coded CMB inductively. Across all sequences and levels, we detected ten different types of CMB, which we coded as follows: *avoidance*, *empathy*, *role consciousness*, *transparency*, *abandonment/work according to regulations*, *escalation*, *exit*, *networking*, *moderation*, and *organization*. In some cases, two of the aforementioned CMBs were also combined, which is why we double coded them also as *hybrids* (what, however, turns out to be not a decisive fact for our analysis). A table presenting the entire category system as well as the frequency with which the respective codes were assigned by sequence and level can be found here: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/KJVIRP>.

In the following section, we present our findings in light of our research question. After presenting contextual information from our interviews, the presentation is structured according to the consecutive sequences in our framework.

Findings

Initial Situation of the Deployment of Freelancers in IT

There are two main reasons for using freelancers: First, digital technologies have become so prevalent in recent years that firms can no longer handle them all with their own staff and must instead hire specifically qualified freelancers. Second, the German IT sector is facing a massive shortage of qualified workers. IT companies may therefore not have enough staff, so hiring freelancers is a quick solution to shortages. This situation provides a comfortable position for IT freelancers, who generally enjoy better working conditions than the internals, especially in terms of remuneration, flexibility and autonomy. At the same time, freelancers in the IT sector are exposed to the market risk of a lack of demand, but in practice, this risk is minimized by the structural lack of qualified labor. The following quote from an interview with a project manager, who is also works council member, illustrates these points:

Well, I've seen colleagues who switched from internal to external employment. ... So they quit ... and then switched to the same job ... as a freelancer, doubling their remuneration. ... They also benefited from having a more flexible work arrangement. ... And as a freelancer you are not subject to all the working hours regulations. ... As a project manager, you're happy to accept that because project stress is always there ... Of course, they have to live with the risk that if there is overcapacity, they will be the first to lose orders. But that happens very rarely. (Permanently Employed Project Leader 1)

However, the use of freelancers is also characterized by the role of intermediary actors, such as staffing and temporary employment agencies (Apitzsch et al., 2022; Ruiner et al., 2020). Hiring a freelancer through or from an intermediary actor is a way to avoid the risk of bogus self-employment, i.e. the suspicion that the freelancer is in fact to be considered as a dependent employee rather than a legally independent contractor. This is crucial for hiring companies (and freelancers), since in this case hiring companies have the obligations of regular employers including additional payments for the respective workforce's social insurance. The judgement of bogus self-employment is often based on circumstantial evidence, whereby the involvement of an intermediary is considered a strong counter-indication in this respect (Apitzsch et al., 2022; Ruiner et al., 2020). Furthermore, agencies claim to offer a better matching of supply and demand than both sides could do on their own and thus to reduce transaction costs, e.g., in terms of searching and pre-filtering, initiating contact and negotiation processes.

In sum, the initial situation in IT is favorable for freelancers: they are confronted with an almost riskless market situation, enjoy better working conditions than their permanently employed colleagues and have greater opportunities to assert their will and to negotiate favourable working conditions. While one might expect that this initial situation would lead to the outbreak of conflict, our interviewees suggest the opposite. However, we will show that a sequential view of cooperation provides reasons for this.

Pre-contract Sequence

IT companies cooperate with freelancers due to a quantitative or qualitative need. Search and recruitment processes have to be initiated and negotiations have to be conducted in terms of planning

and bargaining (Jang et al, 2018). This takes place in the *pre-contract sequence*. Since mismatches, misunderstandings and divergent interpretations provide a crucial breeding ground for conflict, finding a good fit between the capabilities, demands, and expectations of the freelancers with those of the hiring company is decisive. Our empirical data shows that a good fit has at least four dimensions.

The first one is the *technical fit*. There are two sides to technical skills, as the tools used must also meet the freelancer's preferences in this regard, as the following quote from a project manager illustrates:

There were even colleagues here at [Company 1] who said that the tools we use to develop software, 'those don't suit to me in this area. I don't like them, I go to the other [company]'.
(Permanently Employed Project Leader 2)

It may not only be due to the market situation even the personal preference to work with a specific tool becomes a decision criterion. It may also be strategic for freelancers to carefully choose the tools they work with, especially when it comes to mediation by intermediaries and agencies. While the matching of the freelancers' and the IT companies' demands is often described as being at the core of what agencies do, especially freelancers describe this as source of mismatch, e.g. when the agents are unfamiliar with the technologies in question. Therefore, a good fit of skill supply and demand depends more on the self-assessment and honesty of the freelancer when being asked by the agent than on the intermediary actor involved. In turn, when the intermediary actor is not familiar with the competencies required by the IT companies, the use of agencies can lead to a series of mismatches that will become a conflict in the later contract phase, even if there still is a personal talk between the freelancer and the hiring company.

The second dimension is the *social fit*. Both sides describe this dimension as more important the longer the project duration is. However, ensuring a social fit seems to be the main reason, why IT companies usually try to fall back on freelancers they already know from previous projects. In fact, intermediaries even urge the hiring companies to put less emphasis on the social factor due to the shortage of qualified workers in the labor market:

The shortage of qualified workers has also changed external staffing, so that today we say: Dear client, now please don't focus so much on the nose factor, you don't have to marry him. So please ask about the technical aspects, and these classic HR questions, such as: 'What motivates you to work here with us?', leave out this question. (Agency Representative 6)

Thus, the statements in our sample indicate that conflict arising from social mismatches are more likely to occur in the cooperation sequence. This seems to be particularly the case, when intermediary actors are involved in the recruitment process, which is usually the case.

Third, the *contractual conditions* must fit. This refers foremost to monetary aspects, such as the price per hour, but also payment terms, which can become an issue of conflict in later sequences of the cooperation. Herein, our interviews relate to existing literature (e.g., Ruiner et al., 2020) that agencies can be helpful in this respect, since they level and intermediate between the expectations of freelancers on the one side, and those of the hiring IT companies on the other. The following quote gives an example of this:

[W]e had a customer who was willing to pay 20 Euros less than adequate to the market, it was in my opinion not possible to find people at that point. We looked over it briefly and then said:

We are out. ... Then that's the company's decision, whether they want it or not. (Agency Representative 3)

There are even cases in which agencies reduce their own share to establish a contractual relation.

The fourth and last dimension can be labeled as the *fit of individual/personal expectations*. Since freelancers are solo self-employed workers, they cannot be contractually obliged to work within the hiring companies' offices or to specific working times, as well as they are not obliged to follow instructions. For IT freelancers, it is also a decisive part of their self-perception, to freely choose where and when to work. Herein, our interviews support the psychological contract research of Rousseau (2001) and Bunderson (2001) on professional norms as sources of individual pre-employment beliefs. Anyway, there might be certain critical stages in the progression of the project, but also basic informal demands from hiring companies that violate those aspects, such as the will of a company to specify a certain share between remote and office working time. The following quote on an enquiry of an IT company points to this fact:

The agent's contact person in the IT company establishes contact with his project manager, who gives me the customer requirement: "I need someone who knows Oracle version eleven as a developer, ideally with a banking background. He has to start in October for twelve months. I have a budget of 100 Euros. We expect him to be on site four days a week. One day he can work remotely." So the classic, I call them, general parameters we discuss so that I have as good a picture as possible of what is being looked for. (Agency Representative 5)

Obviously, the inquiry is problematic in the light of bogus self-employment in particular due to the requested working time-shares. Nevertheless, as the quote already indicates, this level of specificity is commonplace for an enquiry, as also other interview partners reported to us. Thus, mismatches regarding those individual expectations might lead to serious conflict in the later cooperation in terms of broken psychological contracts as well as in terms of issues regarding bogus self-employment.

Taking into account these four dimensions, it becomes clear how presuppositional it is to find a good fit. Here, the presence of intermediaries plays an ambiguous role – while they may contribute to a better fit especially in contractual aspects, their involvement is a potential source of mismatch in social and technical aspects. Thus, it is important to point out how freelancers and IT companies behave when they perceive mismatches in this early sequence of interaction. In fact, the usual behavior in this respect is an avoiding one, i.e. no contractual agreement is established. The following quote may serve as an example of how freelancers draw red lines regarding their individual expectations, even if it means not getting a project:

I say straight out what I expect. And if they don't meet it, then I just say, no, then it doesn't fit. So my standard is to start at six o'clock, because I don't have the projects on my doorstep. I have to drive and I accept an hour. But then I also have to be able to decide when I drive. ... And if then – it has already happened to me that I didn't get two or three projects because they really said, no, we want the people to start at eight o'clock – then I say no. (Freelancer 5)

While it would be intuitive to assume that this strict behavior is also due to the privileged market situation of freelancers, also in the other dimensions of fit our interviews point to that individualistic behavior in the pre-contract sequence. Therefore, the room for bargaining seems to be limited in

terms of prices as well as in social or technical aspects. This also holds for the other party of the cooperation, the IT companies. Only in special circumstances, some of them report to offer training to freelancers, if the technical fit is not given, or to support freelancers with finding on-site accommodations. Yet such cases are rather exceptions than the rule. Overall, the interviews suggest that the expectations of both sides regarding the arrangement along the four dimensions of fit form fairly clear red lines.

Contract Sequence

When both sides, the freelancer as well as the hiring company, agree, the interaction moves forward from the pre-contract-sequence to the contract sequence. Herein, the actual working cooperation takes place. Interestingly, we recognize a change in the statements in our data, when we were talking with the interviewees not about conflict in recruitment and negotiation processes anymore, but about those in cooperation processes. Compared with the rather individualistic behavior in the pre-contract-sequence, herein both sides show an overall greater will to compromise and emphasize the need to do so. The following quote from a project manager gives a good example of this:

Every now and then [in the team] I have an expert dispute. And usually, everyone is trained to keep things objective, to let everyone have their say. ... But at some point, a decision has to be made. Either the participants do it themselves. In many cases, and this is what we do when things don't work out on their own ... we have the decision drafted. And then you bring in the opponents, who of course argue objectively, variant A against B. One is the father, the other is the mother of a solution. Everyone loves their baby, of course. And then you have to make a decision as objectively as possible, so that the arguments are weighed against each other. You always look at the cost, the benefit to the customer, and so on. And then you arrive at objective decision criteria, where you say that this is the right solution. And then you communicate that this is not about people. You just go different ways and the person ... is not the winner. We shouldn't really be working with winners and losers at this point. Instead, we are all struggling to find the best solution. (Permanently Employed Project Architect and Leader)

In line with this, the outbreak of unmanageable conflicts in contract sequences is the very exception – all of our interviewees describe the actual cooperation of IT freelancers and their hiring company as being mainly harmonious. However, as the quotes above show, this is also due to the CMB in the contract sequence. As outlined above, both sides are generally reported to act empathetically and strive to understand the needs and necessities of the other party. In this respect, transparency on both sides is crucial. For example, even if the freelancers' specialized knowledge is a critical asset, they are willing not only to contribute it to a specific project, but also to teach it to the internals if necessary. Our interviewees indicate that this is rooted in their self-image as freelancers, but also part of a code of conduct common in IT. When there is withholding of knowledge, it also can be understood as kind of empathy. The interviewed freelancers do this in cases where they feel that providing additional information might simply overburden the internals or otherwise hinder the achievement of the overall project goal. The following response to the question about withholding own knowledge underlines these points:

Not at all, maybe if I think I'm overdoing it because they don't want to hear it or they're really scared. But not as a rule. ... In the past, people thought that a software company had to sell its

products and know-how and always keep them secret. And that changed about 30 years ago and there is much more open source. So, you publish your algorithms and so on. Because what is somebody else is going to copy and sell? The know-how, the ability to use it or develop it further, is the essential part of it, and that's why you can publish your software openly. ... [Also] many companies publish their software and hope for orders, because the customers know: OK, they not only have the software, they also have the knowledge about how to use it optimally or how to develop it. (Freelancer 6)

The IT companies not only confirm this behavior, but also willingly provide freelancers with the same information as their permanent employees.

Against the background of the freelancers' employment status and the generally better working conditions, a context-dependent creation and dissolution of boundaries between internals and freelancers seems to be another decisive element of CMB. In order to promote the everyday cooperation between freelancers and internals, given boundaries to the freelancer's employment status or working conditions tend to be made invisible – instead, commonalities such as a passion for technology are emphasized. Conversely, when conflicts erupt in the cooperation between internals and freelancers, boundaries are (re-)established by project managers in particular in order to justify the need for and deployment of freelancers by pointing to the lack of knowledge and the workload that would exist without them, as the following quote illustrates:

Most of the time, it helps, when someone complains about an external, [to say]: 'OK, listen. You've convinced me, I'll kick him out. But the project tasks don't change. Can you guys absorb that?' [Then they say:] 'OK, we want to keep him.' (laughs). (Permanently Employed Project Leader 1)

Remaining conflicts in the contractual sequence are largely managed through by escalation. Thus, if conflicts cannot be resolved among the project members or by the respective project managers themselves, the conflict is escalated by successively involving actors from higher hierarchical levels. Each level represents a new possibility to mediate between the conflicting parties and to find an adequate conflict resolution. Thus, usually several attempts are made by different actors on different levels to manage the remaining conflicts. Consequently, it only rarely comes to a total exit of the freelancer. Possible stages of conflict escalation can be best shown with an example of conflict that could not be solved and ended with the freelancer's exit. The following quote gives an overview of the exemplary development of a conflict and how the respective actors and stages get involved. Moreover, the quote points to the simultaneous existence of *task*, *relationship*, *process*, and *status conflicts* and particularly to the interrelatedness of these types. The quote is a response of a freelancer to our question about the causes of conflict in cooperation:

[Most conflicts are based] completely in the human realm, of course. ... You have to think of it like this: an IT manager is asked by his management: 'We want to implement this project.' Well, the IT manager knows, it can't be done with our internal people. We have neither the know-how nor the manpower. So, he is forced to hire external personnel. From a personal point of view, however, he has a fundamental reluctance to work with external personnel, because he might think: 'Oh damn, he earns three times as much as I do, and now I have to work with him.' ... So, there are already various prejudices and that, of course, is not so nice. ... As a rule, I take a moment to look at this and of course try to refute it, and then I always say things like: 'You can assume that I will use all my know-how here in the interests of your company. And that I will try

to satisfy you with a high level of quality. And if that should fail because of a personal attitude here, then you should tell me that straight out, and then we would have to just end the cooperation.' So, I always deal with this quite proactively. And sometimes that works, and sometimes it doesn't. ... Of course, I will then go to the IT leader, to the person in charge. And I tell him exactly the same thing. And if he wants to have a consultation or something like that, I tell the respective person straight out. ... The agency then also tries to interfere. So, I go to the agency first and foremost. And I say, 'Look, there is a problem in the project. It is set up in such a way, and I will now react in such a way.' And then they usually ask: 'Listen, give me a day, I'll try to contact the customer myself because they don't want to lose their order.' And they don't want to lose their reputation according to the motto: 'What kind of consultant have you sent me here? We can't get along with him at all.' And they want to try to save it somehow. And then they approach the people, the client, with a lot of empathy and try to manage it somehow. Of course, they also approach me again and try to convince me once more. And, yes, I then decide afterwards simply from my gut and don't let myself be forced into something where I feel uncomfortable. (Freelancer 6)

As outlined above, the quote points to several aspects: (a) It gives an example of how task and process conflicts can be based on underlying status and relationship conflicts, which in turn are difficult to distinguish from each other in practice. (b) It testifies to the initially more collectivist response behavior already mentioned, which is evident in the contract sequence in all of our interviews. (c) It shows different ways of resolving a conflict are combined. These range from horizontal, such as arguing with the respective person at the same level, to vertical, escalating the conflict hierarchically. This also marks the turning point in this example, where the CMB turns into a rather individualistic behavior. (d) The quote also points to the role of intermediaries. These usually get involved in this sequence as an instance that tries to promote collectivistic CMB attempts. (e) The last sentence of the quote highlights that the final decision to continue a cooperation in the contractual sequence is by no means one that follows clear red lines, as it is largely the case in the pre-contract-sequence – instead it is described as a gut decision.

Cases that end in the termination of the cooperation are usually due to mismatches in the previous phases of search and recruitment that cannot be resolved afterwards. In most cases, the cooperation is maintained even in the case of unresolved problems. A crucial criterion in this respect is the remaining duration of an ongoing project – the longer it is, the less likely it is that the cooperation will be maintained.

In this light, the uncompromising behavior in the pre-contract sequence may be seen less as a problem and more as functional. It serves as a filter that allows only those cooperations in which disagreements between freelancers and internals are kept to a generally manageable level. Accordingly, the dominant CMB switches between the sequences from a more individualistic to a more collectivistic one. Thus, the dominant CMB strongly depends on the particular sequence of interaction.

Post-contract Sequence

Once the actual cooperation is over, the interaction shifts to the post-contract sequence. Here, mismatches regarding the contractual conditions in the pre-contract sequence, such as payment conditions, can be particularly problematic for the freelancers. However, as the following quote from a freelancer illustrates, this also depends on the respective industry:

Payment terms are sometimes a problem I actually have to pre-finance 2 months of travel expenses always until I get the first fee via the intermediary. If I'm not there through the intermediary, the payment target is often shorter. ... In some cases, I have already received the fee after one week. ... Some intermediaries then offer a discount arrangement. ... Instead of 30 days, 10 days, then costs 2% or 3% gross. In practice, a relatively high interest rate, so as long as I have financial reserves, this is rarely used. ... So for IT for financial services 30 days is quite good, but in other industries [there are] even payment terms of three months. And it's difficult when I have to pre-finance for 4 months. And then, as has happened before, company x goes bankrupt and you have to chase a number of monthly fees, so some have come very close to personal bankruptcy. (Freelancer 1)

In the case of long payment periods, the involvement of intermediaries can mitigate their impact on the financial situation of freelancers. In fact, the financial situation of the freelancer in relation to the payment conditions (and especially the payment terms) can determine whether a further contract with the same client is financially affordable for a freelancer. It thus influences the constellation of actors involved (if there is a need for an intermediary or not) or even the likelihood of further contracts between the respective freelancers and IT companies in general.

In addition to payment issues, evaluation processes are carried out in the post-contract sequence with regard to the previous cooperation. Experienced conflicts and perceived CMBs are sensitive to evaluation processes. In fact, these evaluation processes can be roughly divided into cognitive and institutional ones. Cognitive evaluations are those in which the persons who were actively involved in the cooperation reflect on its pros and cons in order to decide whether they are willing to cooperate with the respective persons or organizations in the future. However, the possibility of further cooperation always depends on the existence of alternatives as the following quote shows. The freelancer was asked whether it would influence his decision about future cooperation with an IT company if it did not pay attention to his advice:

I would say yes. But then it always depends on the situation. If you have three other projects available, then you say, no you're not going to do that again. If you don't have one available, you say OK, that's the way it is. It depends on the situation. (Freelancer 5)

Institutionalized evaluation processes are particularly present when intermediary actors are involved. As a standard procedure, many of them give the freelancers as well as the hiring company the opportunity to evaluate their cooperation as well as that with the intermediary actor. This can be formalized or even personal.

The answers may influence future search and recruitment processes. In the future, if possible, intermediaries will only recommend freelancers to client companies that do not have the same criteria that led to conflicts in the past. However, the networks and social relationships established in the contract sequence, which are maintained or even deepened in the post-contract sequence, seem to be even more decisive for future matching processes. Since the freelancers already have the contact to the responsible persons in the IT companies, they can get in touch with them directly. Thus, networking is a source of future independence for freelancers from gatekeeping intermediaries. In fact, freelancers hired through intermediaries usually have contractual clauses that undermine such direct agreements exclusively between the hiring company and the freelancer for a certain period. As a result, it is more common for freelancers to recommend other members of their personal network to the hiring company. When asked if they network to avoid intermediaries, one freelancer said:

Definitely, because it helps both the client, you work for and the external freelancer, because you don't have the one in between, who brings nothing (laughs)... But you prefer to go through such well-known contacts ... because you have more knowledge. So the person who's recommending you can assess [you] and say: 'Yes, he's good, he fits, he's a team player' and so on. (Freelancer 6)

In fact, recommendations become an asset for the respective actor regarding the appropriate issues in the pre-contract sequence again, so as the cognitive and institutionalized evaluations of the cooperation as well as the financial situation of freelancers in relation to the payment conditions affect the likelihood of future cooperations between the same actors.

Discussion

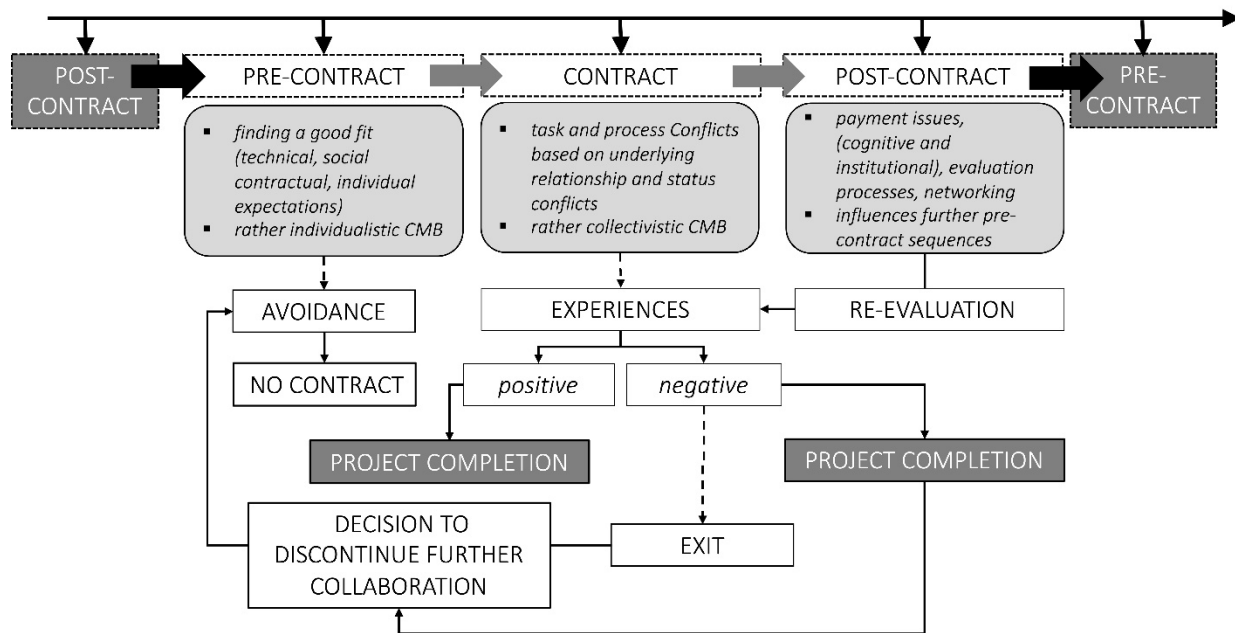
A Sequential Approach on and the Sequence Effect in Cooperations with IT Freelancers

To understand conflict as a normal state of interaction, Pondy (1989) raises serious questions about how to explain the presence of cooperation in work contexts, such as IT companies' cooperation with freelancers. Research has highlighted the role of CMB in mitigating the effects of conflict (DeChurch et al., 2013; Dimas & Lourenço, 2015; Speakman & Ryals, 2010). The CMB can be more individualistic or collectivistic (Greer & Dannals, 2017). Contrary to previous approaches that claim that the CMB is entirely based on individual preferences (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984) or depends on the respective situation (Thomas, 1992), the complexity approach introduces the idea that conflicts usually have several episodes during which the actors can change their CMB-style according to the behavior of the conflict partner (Speakman & Ryals, 2010).

However, the CMB also changes according to the overall structure and respective sequence of a cooperation. We call this the "sequence effect". With reference to the literature on the formation and development of psychological contracts (Bunderson, 2001; Gallagher & Parks, 2001; Rousseau, 2001) and on the negotiation process (Jang et al., 2018; Simosi et al., 2021), we differentiated the cooperation of freelancers with IT companies into three sequences (see Figure 1).

First, there is the pre-contract sequence in which recruitment processes and negotiations take place. In this sequence, both parties try to find a good fit in terms of technical and social aspects, contractual terms, and individual expectations of the cooperation. The individual expectations are in particular based on pre-employment beliefs, such as the duties and rights of a specific occupation that are anchored in professional norms and societal ideologies (Bunderson, 2001; Rousseau, 2001). While Rousseau (2001) and Bunderson (2001) point to physicians, our interviews especially highlight the professional norms of IT freelancers. In the interviews, their professional norms become visible not only in the willingness to share information with internal IT workers, but also in clear expectations on the organization of their work: They expect to freely choose where and when they work, showing an unwillingness to negotiate on these terms. These norms become fixed components of their psychological contracts, established before negotiations begin. This challenges the idea that the psychological contract forms solely through bargaining (e.g., Jang et al., 2018), as some elements are pre-existing. Both freelancers and hiring companies set boundaries and react if these are not met, highlighting individualistic CMB. In tight labor markets, understanding workers' psychological contracts is crucial for HR managers to attract experts.

Figure 1
Towards a sequential approach to the analysis of CMB.



Second, there is a contract sequence. This is the sequence in which the actual cooperation takes place. It is characterized by the presence of tasks and process conflicts, which in our cases were based on underlying relationship and status conflicts. This is partly in line with De Wit et al. (2012) who have already found that task conflicts are highly dependent on the presence of relationship conflicts. It also suggests that conflicts are indeed causally related (Korsgaard et al., 2008) and that one type of conflict (e.g., relationship conflict) that is not, or not adequately treated can cause further conflicts of a different conflict type (Carton & Tewfik, 2016). In contrast to the pre-contract sequence, however, we found that the conflict parties exhibited a more collectivistic CMB. Specifically, both stressed the need to act empathetically and to try to understand the needs and necessities of the other party. They show a great willingness to be transparent with each other, to share knowledge and to find compromises, if necessary also by escalating a conflict. Thus, while Jang et al. (2018) referred to the escalation of conflicts to higher hierarchical levels as an expression of a problem, an intentional escalation can also be a measure of pro-active CMB. However, choosing the individualistic CMB of contract termination is a legitimate option for the parties only when a wide range of collectivistic attempts to deal with the conflict have failed. While this seems to contradict large parts of the psychological contract literature that point to a regularly fair amount of perceived broken contracts (Robinson & Rousseau 1994, Morrison & Robinson 1997, Robinson & Morrison 2000), we argue that this fundamental change in the CMB over the sequences originates from the CMB in the pre-contract sequence. Because the CMB is individualistic in nature there, it only allows cooperation that are likely to have a good fit along four dimensions: the technical fit, the social fit, the fit of contractual conditions, and the fit of individual respectively personal expectations. However, this does not undermine the emergence of conflict in the contract sequence based on mismatches, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations of the always incomplete agreements made in the previous bargaining phase (Jang et al., 2018), but they usually tend to stay within manageable limits. As a result, they are unlikely to lead to either a “full-

blown dispute” (Jang et al., 2018, p. 338) or the termination of the employment relationship. Rather, mutual clarifications and re-negotiations in terms of what each party is obligated to deliver or to bear – especially beyond the contractual terms – are more characteristic of the contract sequence. This is also reflected in the patience of both parties to make several attempts at different levels to resolve the conflict. The rare cases where conflict resolution was not possible can be attributed to larger mismatches in the pre-contract sequence, or a suboptimal implementation process. As argued by Jang et al. (2018) and Simosi et al. (2021), there are three big challenges to agreement implementation: Incompleteness due to unforeseen contingencies or a lack of specificity in terms of the agreement, perceptions of (in-)justice and (un-)fairness, and spoilers (in terms of parties that are somehow threatened by the agreement). Indeed, there is a possibility of a lack of specificity in technological terms. Especially when agencies are involved, incompleteness can be an issue, even if there is still a personal correspondence between the freelancer and the hiring company. Also perceptions of (in-)justice and (un-)fairness can emerge, even though our interviews point to several proactive measurements by the project managers to deal with them, for example in terms of intentionally making boundaries (in-)visible, depending on the respective need in a given situation. Spoilers, instead, were no crucial element. For sure, this is partly due to the pro-social behavior based on professional norms but also due to the fact that the industry is simultaneously characterized by widespread digital technologies and a lack of qualified labor supply. As a result, the hiring of a freelancer is rather a gain than a threat for all parties involved in the relationship. However, the extent to which both parties’ collectivistic CMB in the contract sequence is able to lead to a mitigation of a given conflict appears to be directly connected with the individualistic CMB shown in the pre-contract sequence: As a rule, it can be stated that the more the parties examine an individualistic CMB in the pre-contract sequence, the more likely it becomes that the upcoming conflicts can be managed in the contract sequence by their collectivistic CMB.

Third, we found the post-contract sequence to be largely functional in informing further pre-contract sequences. Cognitive and institutional evaluation processes as well as networks may increase the likelihood of a better fit in the future. Thereby, they might reduce potential issues due to the incompleteness of agreements and, as a further consequence, also reduce the need for time-intensive “re-negotiation-loops” (Jang et al., 2018, p. 337). Also personal networks that inform actors about the social skills of the other party, may be particularly functional in reducing future conflict in cooperation, since, as discussed above, conflict is often based on social mismatches. It should be noted that the distinction between a pre- and a post-contractual sequence is an analytical rather than an empirical one. From the actors’ perspective, the two sequences can overlap largely and are difficult to distinguish from each other clearly. However, our findings underline the argument of Rousseau (2001), Jang et al. (2018), and Simosi et al. (2021) that pre-employment beliefs are also derived from previous employment experiences, and thus speak directly to the need for a holistic approach to analyzing negotiation processes (e.g., Jang et al., 2018; Simosi et al., 2021) in contingent work arrangements. Figure 1 provides an overview of the key findings, highlighting the importance of experiences during the contract phase in determining the potential for cooperation to reoccur in the future.

Is the Sequence Effect Contextual? Reflections on the Role of Labor Market Conditions

The German IT sector is characterized by a lack of qualified workforce supply. Since this initial situation gives the freelancers great opportunities in terms of project offers and negotiations, the question arises as to whether the sequence effect can be justified under these specific circumstances. In addition, in industries and market segments where the relationship between supply and demand of labor is the opposite of that in IT, hiring companies are in a superior position. Consequently, it

should be expected that freelancers in these industries and market segments are less likely to exhibit an individualistic CMB in the pre-contract sequence compared to IT freelancers. In turn, the hiring company should be even more likely to exhibit an individualistic CMB in the pre-contract sequence in these industries and market segments than in IT. This underscores the importance of bargaining power in relation to the choice of CMB as found in other studies (e.g., Lu et al., 2020; Standifer & Wall, 2010).

In the contract sequence, the influence of labor market conditions is not expected to vary as much as for freelancers. Despite their privileged labor market position, IT freelancers show a high degree of collectivistic CMB. Of course, they still have to take care of their reputation, which is why project performance is crucial regardless of labor market conditions. However, this applies even more to freelancers in industries and market segments that are characterized by unfavourable labour market conditions, which is why they should have an collectivist CMB as well. In turn, the hiring company might be more likely to show an individualistic CMB in the contract sequence under reversed labor market conditions, but also have to take care for their reputation. Thus, it is an empirical question, if the sequence effect also holds for cooperations between freelancers and hiring company in industries and market segments characterized by a lack of labor demand. We will have to leave this to future studies.

On the Role of Agencies from a Sequential Perspective

The role of agencies is interesting, especially in relation to our sequential framework of a cooperation between freelancers and their client companies. They are like a bracket, i.e. they are present in the pre- and post-, but less in the contract sequence.

In the pre-contract sequence, their role is ambivalent. They might improve the fit of contractual conditions and, perhaps more importantly, they could protect the parties from inadvertently exposing themselves to the risk of entering into an agreement that could be construed as bogus self-employment. On the contrary, they are described in our interviews as being rather poor at ensuring a good fit in a technical and social sense. In fact, their involvement may even be a source of mismatch in this respect. This also contradicts their self-image as well as the literature that points to their role as information dealers and matchmakers (Bull et al., 1987; Neugart & Storrie, 2006). Instead, their positive contributions are in line with existing literature (Ehlen et al., 2022; Ruiner et al., 2020) that finds agencies to be helpful as they level and intermediate between the income expectations of freelancers and the hiring IT companies. In the contract sequence, however, they become only present as actors of mediation and conflict resolution the parties fall back to in escalation processes. In the post-contract sequence, agencies are decisive again. In particular, they potentially offer solutions for freelancers when questions arise about their financial situation or payment emerge. They also provide institutionalized feedback-loops that could improve future matches. Thus, agencies' poor ability to provide technical and social fit gradually diminishes as they continue to work with these specific clients and freelancers (or the clients and freelancers with the specific agency). This is in line with the findings of previous research, which suggest that long-term relationships between agencies and client companies are a favorable strategy for the latter, especially in highly qualified working fields characterized by a lack of labor supply (Ehlen et al., 2022).

However, our interviews with IT freelancers also reveal some strategic attempts on their part to avoid the involvement of agencies. Personal networks with hiring companies, but also with other freelancers seem to be useful in this respect. This behavior relates to new forms of solidarity among highly qualified freelance workers, called labor market collectivism (Apitzsch et al., 2022). This offers

a broader perspective on the dynamics in inter-organizational projects, as the inclusion of labor market conditions and actors is relatively new in related research.

On Episodes, Sequences and Actor Constellations

Within the complexity approach, the episodic perspective already points to temporal aspects in understanding the development of conflict and CMB (Speakman & Ryals, 2010). However, this perspective has some analytical implications. Because of its conflict-centered perspective, each conflict is necessarily recognized to be idiosyncratic due to the unique constellation of conflict causes, conflict participants, and CMB. Thus, while this perspective is fruitful for detailing how individual actions influence the development of a conflict (e.g., García et al., 2017; Medina et al., 2004), it may be difficult to derive generalizable patterns. Simply put, the (observed and reported) time-related structure of conflicts in literature to date has largely followed the individual agency of the actors involved.

In contrast, our sequential perspective emphasizes structure over agency. Rather than focusing on a particular conflict, we focus on the institutionalized and temporal-patterns of cooperations between freelancers and client companies and ask for how the causes of the conflict, the conflict participants, and the CMB depend on this broader institutionalized temporal structure. In doing so, we are in line with leading theories of time and temporal structuring, such as Hernes and Schultz (2020), who note that time is not only a resource to be managed (e.g., speed, rhythm or duration of projects), but also “the very medium through which actors address and translate their realities” (p. 4). Transferred to the context of contract work, the respective sequence of interaction defines how IT freelancers behave in the present. Moreover, it has been suggested that changing temporal structures (e.g., limited organizational membership) may influence the expectations about the nature and temporality of activities and behaviors to be initiated (e.g., Gallagher & Parks, 2001; Hernes & Schultz, 2020; Jang et al., 2018).

The sequential perspective leads to the basic assumption that the more repetitions of the sequence loops freelancers and client companies have experienced, the better the established cooperation should become. Previous interactions between parties can significantly enhance social fit and align individual expectations. Positive past experiences, particularly in resolving conflicts, can build trust, a key factor in the resilience of psychological contracts (Robinson, 1996; Atkinson, 2007). These shared experiences, especially of conflict resolution, shape psychological contracts and reduce the likelihood of breaches, even in freelancer-company relationships. This suggests that psychological contracts may exist before formal negotiations, influencing factors like social fit and individual expectations, contrary to Jang et al.’s (2018) assertion that they solely result from agreements.

Thus, cooperation has an iterative concept. This statement may be critical in that it places less emphasis on the role of the particular constellation of actors, their characteristics, and other factors that may affect their relationships and intra-group processes than on mere cooperation within a project. It is easy to imagine that the iterative cooperation process will come to an abrupt halt if the composition of the project team changes (e.g., if the project leader changes), either in the current project or in future cooperations. Conversely, personnel changes could also set the iterative cooperation process in motion in the first place, which would not be possible with a different composition of actors. This suggests a possible complementarity between the sequential perspective, which is good at showing the influence of highly institutionalized patterns on cooperation in the work context, and the episodic perspective, which takes into account the constellation of actors and their internal dynamics. We therefore argue that the two approaches should be seen as complementary rather than antithetical.

Limitations and further research

There are limitations to our empirical study. First, by focusing on IT companies, the study was conducted in a very specific field where power inequalities due to the lack of workforce play a particular role. Although we observe similar relationships in other settings such as medicine, an analysis of the CMB in other contexts is needed to substantiate the findings regarding CMB. Second, the interviews refer to workers in different projects. A comparative perspective of workers in a particular project would be helpful in order to compare perspectives. Third, and following on from this, we call for longitudinal studies to observe the structural patterns of the CMB (e.g., sequentiality of interactions). Fourth and finally, the relationship between sequences and episodes should be further explored both theoretically and empirically.

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