

Professionally Inferred Trust: How Trust Develops in Temporary Professional Teams

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Trust is widely recognised as a critical determinant of team effectiveness, collaboration, and organisational performance. However, most trust research has focused on stable, long-term teams where relationships develop through repeated interaction over time. Far less is known about how trust emerges in temporary professional teams that must perform effectively despite limited opportunities for relationship development. This study explores how trust is established, maintained, and influenced by leadership in temporary project teams of business psychologists compared with permanent operational teams. **Method:** A qualitative comparative design was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants drawn from temporary project teams of business psychologists and permanent operational teams within the same organisational context. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase approach. **Results:** The findings suggest that trust develops through distinct mechanisms across team structures. In temporary teams, trust was established primarily through perceptions of competence, professional credibility, role clarity, and leadership signalling rather than interpersonal familiarity. Trust functioned as a professional working assumption that enabled collaboration despite limited relational history. In permanent teams, trust emerged gradually through repeated interactions, behavioural consistency, and accumulated relational experiences. Leadership played a critical role in both contexts by creating predictability, clarity, and psychological security. However, the specific leadership behaviours required differed according to team temporality. **Novelty:** This study addresses a gap in the trust literature by examining how trust develops within temporary professional teams, a context that has received limited scholarly attention relative to stable, permanent teams. It introduces the concept of professionally inferred trust, whereby professional signals such as expertise, credibility, and role clarity serve as active substitutes for relational history during the early stages of collaboration. This extends Swift Trust Theory by proposing a more deliberate inferential process than passive suspension of uncertainty, and complements McAllister's (1995) cognition-based trust framework by identifying a mechanism that operates prior to behavioural evidence becoming available. The findings have implications for how organisations design, lead, and support temporary project teams in knowledge-intensive environments.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing prevalence of project-based work has transformed the nature of teamwork within contemporary organisations. Across both public and private sectors, organisations increasingly rely on temporary teams assembled to address specific challenges, deliver strategic initiatives, or provide specialist expertise. Such teams often operate under significant time constraints, requiring members to collaborate effectively despite having little or no prior experience working together. While temporary teams offer flexibility, agility, and access to diverse expertise, they also present unique challenges, particularly regarding the development of trust.

Trust has long been recognised as a fundamental component of effective teamwork. Research consistently demonstrates positive relationships between trust and team performance,

knowledge sharing, collaboration, innovation, and employee engagement [1], [2]. Trust enables team members to exchange information openly, coordinate activities effectively, and remain resilient during periods of uncertainty. Within permanent teams, trust typically develops gradually through repeated interactions, behavioural consistency, and accumulated relational experiences [3]. The assumption underpinning much of the existing literature is therefore that trust requires time to emerge and strengthen.

This assumption becomes problematic when applied to temporary teams. Unlike permanent teams, temporary teams often lack the luxury of extended interaction. Members may come together for only a few days or weeks before disbanding upon project completion. Consequently, many of the mechanisms traditionally associated with trust development may be unavailable or significantly compressed. Yet despite these constraints, many temporary teams perform effectively and achieve complex organisational objectives. This raises an important question: how does trust emerge when time for relationship building is limited?

Previous scholars have sought to address this issue through the concept of swift trust [4]. Swift trust suggests that individuals working within temporary systems initially suspend uncertainty and assume trustworthiness in order to enable collaboration. While this perspective has advanced understanding of trust within temporary groups, existing research has focused predominantly on virtual teams, project management contexts, and military or emergency-response environments. Relatively little is known about how trust develops within temporary professional teams whose members possess specialised expertise and frequently operate as independent experts.

This gap is particularly evident within the field of business psychology. Business psychologists frequently work within temporary project teams assembled to deliver assessment centres, leadership development programmes, organisational change initiatives, and consulting interventions. Such projects often require rapid collaboration between professionals who possess diverse expertise and varying levels of prior familiarity. Despite the growing importance of these project structures, limited research has examined how trust develops within these environments or how leadership influences trust-building processes.

The present study addresses this gap by comparing trust development in temporary project teams of business psychologists and permanent operational teams. Rather than treating trust as a static construct, this research examines trust as a dynamic social process shaped by team temporality, leadership behaviours, and professional context. By comparing temporary and permanent teams operating within the same organisational environment, the study provides insight into how different team structures influence trust formation and maintenance.

The study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it refines understanding of how trust develops within specialist project environments by demonstrating that temporary professional teams may rely on professionally inferred trust, an active inferential process grounded in professional credibility, rather than the mechanisms described by Swift Trust Theory alone. Second, it extends McAllister's distinction between cognition-based and affect-based trust by illustrating how these trust forms align with different team structures, with temporary teams relying predominantly on cognition-based trust and permanent teams on affect-based trust [3]. Third, it contributes to leadership theory by demonstrating that leadership fulfils different trust-building functions depending on team temporality, accelerating trust formation in temporary teams and sustaining established trust relationships in permanent ones.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How does trust develop within temporary project teams of business psychologists compared with permanent operational teams?
2. How do leadership behaviours influence trust development and maintenance across different team structures?
3. How does trust influence collaboration within temporary and permanent teams?
4. What challenges do temporary teams encounter when attempting to establish and sustain trust?

Literature Review

Trust as a Foundation of Team Effectiveness

Trust is widely recognised as one of the most important determinants of team effectiveness. Across organisational settings, trust facilitates cooperation, information sharing, collaboration, and coordinated action [1], [2]. Teams characterised by higher levels of trust demonstrate greater resilience, stronger knowledge exchange, and improved performance outcomes compared with teams where trust is absent or fragile.

Within organisational research, trust has frequently been conceptualised as a willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations regarding the intentions and behaviours of others [5]. McAllister further distinguished between cognition-based trust, which derives from perceptions of competence and reliability, and affect-based trust, which develops through emotional bonds and interpersonal care [3]. This distinction has become particularly influential within team research because it highlights that trust may emerge through different mechanisms depending on context.

Research consistently demonstrates positive associations between trust and team outcomes. Trust encourages individuals to share knowledge openly, coordinate activities effectively, and engage in constructive risk-taking behaviours that support innovation and problem solving [6]. At the team level, trust has been linked to greater cohesion, stronger commitment, and enhanced performance across a range of organisational settings [1], [2].

Despite broad agreement regarding the value of trust, much of the literature has been developed within relatively stable organisational environments where team members interact repeatedly over extended periods. Consequently, many existing assumptions regarding trust development are grounded in contexts where individuals have sufficient time to build relationships and accumulate interpersonal experiences. Less attention has been devoted to understanding how trust develops when such conditions are absent.

Trust in Temporary Teams

The growth of project-based work has increased organisational reliance on temporary teams. Unlike permanent teams, temporary teams are assembled for specific objectives and typically disband following project completion. Their defining characteristics include limited duration, fluid membership, and compressed opportunities for relationship development [7], [8].

These characteristics create a significant challenge for trust development. Traditional theories often assume that trust emerges gradually through repeated interactions, demonstrated reliability, and accumulated relational experiences [9]. Temporary teams frequently lack the time necessary for such processes to unfold. Members may have little prior familiarity with one another and may work together only briefly before the team dissolves.

To explain how cooperation remains possible under these conditions, Meyerson et al. introduced the concept of swift trust. Swift trust describes a form of trust that emerges rapidly within temporary systems, allowing members to suspend uncertainty and collaborate despite limited interpersonal knowledge [4]. Rather than relying on established relationships, team

members make assumptions regarding competence, professionalism, and role fulfilment in order to facilitate collective action.

Subsequent research has expanded understanding of swift trust in virtual teams, project environments, and geographically dispersed work settings [10], [11]. These studies suggest that trust may initially be based on professional roles, expertise, credentials, and institutional structures rather than interpersonal familiarity. However, scholars have also noted that swift trust remains fragile and requires ongoing reinforcement through reliable behaviour, effective communication, and successful task execution.

Although temporary teams have attracted increasing scholarly attention, several limitations remain within the literature. First, many studies focus on technology-enabled or virtual teams, leaving other forms of temporary professional collaboration comparatively underexplored. Second, limited research has examined temporary teams composed of highly specialised professionals whose expertise itself may function as a basis for trust. Finally, while trust is frequently acknowledged as important within temporary teams, less is known about the leadership behaviours that facilitate trust formation under conditions of limited time and uncertainty.

Leadership and Trust Development

Leadership has consistently emerged as a critical antecedent of trust within organisations. Trust in leadership influences employee attitudes, commitment, performance, and willingness to engage in collaborative behaviours [12]. Leaders play an important role in reducing uncertainty by providing direction, communicating expectations, and creating predictable environments within which team members can operate effectively.

Research suggests that leadership behaviours such as integrity, consistency, competence, and transparency are particularly influential in fostering trust [13]. Leaders who communicate openly, demonstrate reliability, and follow through on commitments create conditions that encourage trust among team members. Similarly, transformational leadership has been associated with higher levels of trust through its emphasis on inspiration, vision, and individual consideration [14].

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between leadership and trust. LMX theory proposes that trust develops through high-quality exchanges between leaders and followers characterised by mutual respect, support, and obligation [15]. Higher-quality relationships are associated with stronger trust, improved communication, and enhanced performance outcomes.

However, the majority of leadership and trust research has been conducted within relatively stable teams. Consequently, many established theories implicitly assume that leaders have sufficient time to develop relationships with team members. Temporary teams challenge this assumption. Leaders operating within temporary environments must often establish credibility, coordinate activities, and foster trust within compressed timescales. The specific leadership behaviours that facilitate trust under such conditions remain insufficiently understood.

Research Gap and Study Contribution

Existing literature provides strong evidence that trust is fundamental to team effectiveness and that leadership plays an important role in fostering trust. Research has also established that temporary teams rely on alternative trust mechanisms because opportunities for relationship development are constrained. However, significant gaps remain regarding how trust develops within temporary professional teams and how leadership influences these processes.

In particular, little is known about trust formation within temporary teams of business psychologists, whose work depends heavily on professional expertise, interpersonal judgement, and collaboration under time constraints. Furthermore, few studies have directly compared trust development in temporary professional teams and permanent operational teams operating within the same organisational environment.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining how trust develops, is maintained, and is influenced by leadership across temporary project teams of business psychologists and permanent operational teams. By comparing these contrasting team structures, the study seeks to advance understanding of how team temporality shapes trust formation processes and leadership requirements.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative comparative design to explore how trust develops and is maintained within temporary project teams of business psychologists and permanent operational teams. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' subjective experiences, interpretations, and meanings associated with trust and leadership rather than measure predefined variables. Trust is a socially constructed phenomenon that emerges through interpersonal interactions and organisational contexts. Consequently, an exploratory qualitative design enabled a richer understanding of how trust is experienced across different team structures.

The study employed a comparative approach because temporary and permanent teams differ fundamentally in terms of duration, membership stability, and opportunities for relationship development. Comparing these team forms provided insight into whether trust emerges through similar or distinct mechanisms across organisational contexts.

Philosophical Position

The study was informed by a constructivist epistemology. Constructivism assumes that reality is socially constructed through human interaction and interpretation rather than existing as a single objective truth. From this perspective, trust is not viewed as a fixed organisational property but as a phenomenon that is continuously negotiated through social relationships, leadership behaviours, and shared experiences.

This philosophical stance aligned with the study's objective of understanding how participants make sense of trust within their respective team environments. Rather than seeking universal laws governing trust development, the research aimed to explore the multiple realities experienced by participants working within temporary and permanent teams.

Research Context

The study was conducted within the context of a specialist professional services organisation operating in the United Kingdom. Particular attention was given to temporary project teams assembled to deliver client-facing professional interventions. These teams typically consisted of independent specialist practitioners, project leaders,

administrative personnel, and client representatives who collaborated for specific projects before disbanding.

The temporary teams operated alongside permanent operational teams responsible for functions such as administration, project coordination, resourcing, and client support. This organisational arrangement provided an opportunity to compare trust dynamics across two contrasting team structures within the same broader organisational setting. In accordance with a confidentiality agreement governing access to research participants, further details of the organisational context are withheld to protect the identity of the participating organisation.

The interview dataset used in this study has also informed a separate publication examining leadership legitimacy in recurring temporary expert teams. While both studies draw upon the same underlying dataset, they address distinct research questions and make different theoretical contributions. The present article focuses specifically on trust development, trust formation, and trust maintenance across temporary and permanent team structures, whereas the companion study examined the construction of leadership legitimacy.

The dataset was originally collected as part of an MSc dissertation completed at the University of Leeds. The analysis reported here was conducted independently following completion of the MSc and involved a fresh reflexive thematic analysis focused on trust-related experiences and processes. Ethical approval for the original data collection was granted through the University of Leeds ethical review process.

Participants

Nine participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was selected because it enabled the recruitment of individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Participants were selected on the basis that they had worked within either temporary project teams or permanent operational teams and could provide detailed accounts of trust and leadership experiences.

The final sample comprised five participants from temporary project teams and four participants from permanent operational teams. Participants occupied a range of professional roles including project leadership, coaching, assessment, operational coordination, resourcing, and financial administration. Professional experience ranged from approximately three to more than thirty years. Table 1 provides an overview of participant characteristics.

Table 1. Participant Overview.

Participant	Team Type	Role	Years' Experience (approx.)
P1	Temporary	Lead Coach	7+
P2	Temporary	Assessor	10+
P3	Temporary	Assessor / Business Psychologist	10+
P4	Temporary	Coach / Business Psychologist	3+
P5	Temporary	Coach / Business Psychologist	2+

P6	Permanent	Director	10+
P7	Permanent	Manager	10+
P8	Permanent	Manager	10+
P9	Permanent	Manager	10+

Although the sample size may appear modest, qualitative research prioritises depth of understanding rather than statistical representation. Data collection continued until sufficient informational richness had been achieved and thematic sufficiency was reached, with no substantially new themes emerging from subsequent interviews [16].

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provide a balance between consistency across participants and flexibility to explore emerging areas of interest. This approach enabled participants to describe their experiences in their own words while ensuring alignment with the study's research questions.

Interviews lasted between 60 minutes and were audio recorded with participants' consent. The interview schedule explored four broad areas:

1. Experiences of trust within current teams.
2. Leadership behaviours that influenced trust.
3. Challenges associated with trust development.
4. Interactions between temporary and permanent teams.

Questions were intentionally open-ended to encourage reflection and detailed narrative responses. Examples included:

- "Can you recall an incident where trust was established within your team?"
- "How did leadership influence trust during that situation?"
- "Can you describe a time when trust was challenged?"

The interview process allowed participants to introduce issues that were meaningful within their specific contexts, generating rich and detailed accounts of trust and leadership experiences.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's approach [16]. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because of its flexibility and compatibility with a constructivist research paradigm.

Analysis proceeded through six iterative stages:

1. Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts.
2. Generation of initial codes.
3. Development of candidate themes.
4. Review and refinement of themes across the full dataset.
5. Definition and naming of themes.
6. Production of the final thematic narrative.

Rather than viewing themes as emerging objectively from the data, the analysis recognised the active role of the researcher in interpreting participants' accounts and constructing meaningful patterns. Coding was therefore understood as an interpretive

process rather than a purely descriptive exercise. Candidate themes were developed from the full range of participant accounts, and each theme was reviewed against the complete dataset to assess its coherence and coverage before being finalised.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher occupied an informed insider position in relation to the business psychology profession. This positionality provided valuable contextual understanding of project-based work, consulting environments, and the professional norms shaping trust development within temporary teams.

At the same time, awareness was maintained regarding the potential influence of prior assumptions on data interpretation. Reflexive notetaking was used throughout data collection and analysis to encourage critical reflection and minimise the risk of imposing preconceived explanations onto participants' accounts.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. Credibility was strengthened through the use of rich participant accounts drawn from across the full sample and extensive engagement with the data during analysis. Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of coding decisions and analytical development. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive practice and ongoing consideration of alternative interpretations. Transferability was facilitated through detailed descriptions of participant characteristics, team structures, and the research process. It should be noted that the confidentiality agreement governing the participating organisation necessarily limits the level of organisational context available to readers; transferability therefore rests primarily on the richness of participant and team-level description rather than organisational detail.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted through the host institution's ethical review process. Participants received information sheets outlining the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of participant identifiers (P1–P9) and the removal of identifying information from transcripts. Data were stored securely in accordance with institutional guidelines and relevant data protection requirements. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis revealed four interconnected themes that explain how trust developed and was maintained across temporary project teams and permanent operational teams. While trust was regarded as essential in both contexts, participants described distinct pathways through which trust emerged. In temporary teams, trust was initially grounded in professional credibility and assumptions of competence. In permanent teams, trust was more strongly associated with relational familiarity and accumulated

interpersonal experience. Leadership played a critical role in both contexts by providing predictability, clarity, and reassurance.

Theme 1: Trust as Professional Credibility

A defining characteristic of temporary teams was the tendency for participants to trust colleagues before meaningful relationships had developed. Participants frequently described making rapid judgements regarding trustworthiness based on observable indicators of competence, expertise, and professionalism.

Rather than relying on established interpersonal relationships, participants reported drawing inferences from professional qualifications, previous experience, communication style, and visible preparation. Several participants described entering projects with little prior familiarity with other team members yet feeling confident in their ability to work together because of shared professional standards.

The lead coach on the temporary team articulated this clearly, describing how trust within the team was grounded not only in confidence that colleagues would fulfil their responsibilities, but in a shared understanding of professional standards:

"We can rely on each other to do what we say we're going to do and to do it at a high standard. We also have similar judgement and values in terms of how we deal with unusual situations that arise during the course of the project." (P1, Temporary Team)

Other temporary team members similarly described entering projects with a presumption of competence rooted in the professional context. One assessor reflected that trust was not something that had to be actively earned at the outset, but rather was inferred from the track record and structure of the project itself:

"Knowing that they have the experience, knowing that they've done this event before, so when I joined the project, it's a project that's been run many, many times before and it's been done well. From that regard, I know that the team are able to achieve what they need to achieve." (P5, Temporary Team)

Another temporary team member emphasised that this initial trust also extended to the organisational context itself, noting that professional credibility and institutional reputation served as early anchors for trust before any personal relationship had developed:

"I have trust in terms of the quality of their work and having everything that I need generally to be able to do a job, that's already there." (P2, Temporary Team)

In contrast, participants from permanent teams rarely referred to professional credentials when discussing trust. Instead, trust was described as something developed gradually through repeated interaction and observation over time. One permanent team member reflected:

"Establishing trust with new team members can be tough. It takes time and consistent effort to really feel that everyone is on the same page." (P7, Permanent Team)

Another permanent team member, whose role involved close financial coordination with colleagues across the organisation, described trust as something that had built steadily through working proximity and demonstrated dependability rather than through any initial assessment of expertise:

"You get to know people over time, how they work, whether they follow through. That's when you really start to trust someone." (P9, Permanent Team)

These findings indicate that temporary and permanent teams appear to rely upon distinct foundations for trust. In temporary teams, trust appears to emerge through professional credibility, expertise, and assumptions regarding competence. In permanent teams, trust develops through repeated interaction, familiarity, and accumulated relational experiences. Rather than representing different levels of trust, these findings suggest distinct pathways through which trust is established across team structures.

Theme 2: Leadership as a Trust Accelerator

Across both team contexts, leadership emerged as a significant influence on trust development. However, leadership appeared particularly important within temporary teams, where opportunities for natural relationship development were limited.

Participants consistently described leaders as creating the conditions necessary for trust to emerge. Effective leaders were characterised by clear communication, responsiveness, role clarification, and consistent decision-making.

The lead coach of the temporary team highlighted transparency and proactive information sharing as central to her approach:

"Whenever I learn something or receive an update that is relevant to the group, I feel it is my responsibility to share that information as quickly and accurately as possible. I also try to be a supportive and reliable presence." (P1, Temporary Team)

She further reflected on how reliability and anticipating team members' needs contributed to a climate of trust:

"I'd like to think that by being reliable and thinking proactively about people's needs, that engenders trust as well." (P1, Temporary Team)

Team members in the temporary group confirmed that the leader's behaviour directly shaped their experience of trust. This peer corroboration, a team member's account of the leader's conduct rather than the leader's own self-report, strengthens the evidential basis for the theme. One assessor described the project lead's transparent communication and approachable manner as fundamental to the team's confidence, the lead kept people informed, was easy to work with, and maintained a consistently reliable presence (P3, Temporary Team).

The project director on the permanent side similarly described leadership responsibility in terms of information flow and coordination across the team:

"I've got responsibility for making sure that everybody knows what they need to be doing." (P6, Permanent Team)

Participants consistently described leadership behaviours such as transparency, responsiveness, and proactive communication as important contributors to trust development. Leaders were valued not because of formal authority, but because they reduced uncertainty and ensured that team members had the information necessary to perform effectively.

Within temporary teams, leaders appeared to function as trust accelerators. By establishing expectations, clarifying responsibilities, and maintaining communication,

leaders reduced uncertainty and enabled team members to focus on project delivery. Participants frequently associated strong leadership with confidence in project outcomes. In situations where leadership was absent or inconsistent, participants described greater uncertainty and reduced trust in both colleagues and project processes.

Permanent team participants also emphasised the importance of leadership. Several noted that trust was strongly influenced by leadership predictability, transparency, and consistency, and that leaders who followed through on commitments created a stronger foundation for trust. However, for the permanent team, leadership was more often discussed in relation to *maintaining* trust rather than establishing it. Leaders were expected to reinforce existing relationships, support team cohesion, and sustain a positive working environment.

Theme 3: Trust as a Continually Tested Assumption

Although trust developed rapidly within temporary teams, participants emphasised that it remained conditional rather than guaranteed. Initial assumptions of competence and professionalism required ongoing validation through behaviour.

Participants described trust as being reinforced when colleagues met deadlines, fulfilled commitments, communicated effectively, and demonstrated reliability throughout project delivery. The project lead described the conditions under which trust remained intact in high-performing temporary contexts:

"Everyone delivers on what they say they are going to deliver. Everyone is there when they say they will be there. Everyone responds when needed and consistently receives positive feedback." (P1, Temporary Team)

Other temporary team members similarly emphasised the importance of structural supports, such as clear briefing materials and organised pre-work, as evidence that trust had been earned and would be maintained:

"The fact that we have these briefing meetings and that people like P8, ahead of the event they will provide all of the materials that we need, and that's done in a really clear, easy-to-interpret way." (P5, Temporary Team)

Trust therefore appeared to be reinforced through repeated demonstrations of reliability and professional competence. Rather than remaining static, trust was continually strengthened through consistent behaviour and the successful fulfilment of commitments.

One assessor reflected that the smoothness of the working process was itself evidence of underlying trust, its absence, had it occurred, would have been conspicuous:

"I mean, I'm struggling because it's just been very easy. The team works well together." (P3, Temporary Team)

Several participants noted that trust could deteriorate rapidly if expectations were not met. Poor communication, missed deadlines, and inconsistent performance were identified as particularly damaging because temporary teams lacked sufficient time to recover from trust violations.

This finding suggests that temporary-team trust is not simply established quickly and then maintained automatically. Instead, it operates as a provisional working

assumption that requires continuous behavioural confirmation throughout the project lifecycle.

While temporary-team participants emphasised the continual validation of trust through project delivery behaviours, participants from permanent teams described trust as more stable once established. One permanent team member articulated this directly, reflecting that the longevity of working relationships had produced a reliable foundation that no longer required active confirmation:

"We always knew that if I needed help, they would say, right, what can we help you with. We trusted each other to be honest." (P8, Permanent Team)

High-trust environments were associated with stronger team cohesion, greater job satisfaction, and more effective collaboration. These findings suggest that trust within permanent teams' functions less as a provisional working assumption and more as a durable relational resource developed through repeated interaction over time, a contrast that reflects the fundamentally different temporal conditions shaping trust across the two team structures.

Theme 4: Structural Threats to Trust: Boundary Conditions and Vulnerabilities

Participants found it difficult to identify examples of trust breakdown within the temporary project team itself. Rather than describing interpersonal conflict, participants more frequently referred to uncertainty, incomplete information, and limited visibility regarding developments occurring outside the immediate team. Trust therefore appeared to be challenged less by individual behaviour and more by ambiguity within the wider project environment.

"When we don't have visibility of what's happening outside our immediate team, that can be challenging because we're trying to deliver effectively without always knowing what is happening elsewhere." (P1, Temporary Team)

This finding suggests that trust within high-performing temporary professional teams may be undermined more by structural uncertainty than by interpersonal failings. The team's strong internal functioning meant that the greatest risks to trust came not from within the team itself, but from the boundaries between the team and the broader project environment.

Another temporary team member reflected that trust had never really been tested in a way that required active repair, which in itself spoke to the robustness of the working relationship:

"I've never been in a situation where I've had to have someone back me up... but if it did happen, I would like to think that they would have my back." (P2, Temporary Team)

Permanent teams identified different challenges. Leadership turnover, organisational restructuring, inconsistent management practices, and difficulties integrating new members were commonly cited as threats to trust. One permanent team member described how repeated changes in leadership had introduced a sense of discontinuity:

"There was a bit of a disconnect within the team because we've had three different bosses since 2021." (P7, Permanent Team)

The same participant also offered a direct definition of what trust meant in the permanent team context, one centred on mutual reliance and reciprocal support rather than professional credibility:

"Trust means I can rely on somebody and that they will support me and that I can support them." (P7, Permanent Team)

Temporary team members similarly acknowledged the potential for trust to be tested, even where it had not been in practice. One coach reflected that while the team had not encountered a situation requiring active support from colleagues, the expectation that such support would be available was itself part of what made trust feel secure:

"I've never needed to ask for backup, but knowing it would be there if I did, that's part of what trust feels like in this team." (P4, Temporary Team)

Importantly, participants suggested that permanent teams possessed greater capacity to recover from trust disruptions because established relationships provided a reservoir of goodwill and understanding. Temporary teams rarely enjoyed this advantage. Overall, the findings indicate that trust vulnerability is shaped by the structural characteristics of the team itself. Temporary teams appear particularly susceptible to information gaps and external ambiguity, whereas permanent teams are more vulnerable to disruptions affecting long-standing relationships and leadership stability.

Discussion

This study explored how trust develops and is maintained within temporary project teams of business psychologists and permanent operational teams, and the role leadership plays in shaping these processes. While trust was considered essential in both team structures, the findings suggest that trust develops through distinct mechanisms depending on team temporality. Temporary teams relied primarily on competence-based assessments, professional credibility, and leadership signalling, whereas permanent teams relied more heavily on relational familiarity, behavioural consistency, and accumulated interpersonal experiences. These findings contribute to existing theories of trust and leadership by demonstrating how team structure influences both the basis and trajectory of trust development.

Turning to the third research question, how trust influences collaboration within temporary and permanent teams, the findings suggest that trust functioned as an enabling condition for collaborative behaviour in both contexts, but through distinct pathways. In temporary teams, professionally inferred trust allowed participants to engage in coordinated action, share information, and fulfil interdependent responsibilities from the outset of the project, without requiring prior relational investment. Collaboration was made possible precisely because trust was extended early and provisionally. In permanent teams, trust shaped collaboration more gradually, underpinning a willingness to seek support, admit uncertainty, and rely on colleagues in ways that depended on accumulated relational experience. The nature of collaborative behaviour therefore reflected the trust mechanism available in each context: inference-

enabled coordination in temporary teams, and relationship-enabled interdependence in permanent teams.

Trust Development in Temporary and Permanent Teams

A central finding of this study is that trust within temporary teams appears to emerge through professional credibility rather than interpersonal familiarity. Participants described making rapid judgements regarding colleagues' trustworthiness based on professional expertise, qualifications, communication style, and visible competence. This contrasts with permanent teams, where trust was described as developing gradually through repeated interactions and shared experiences.

These findings support and extend the concept of swift trust proposed by Meyerson et al. (1996). Swift Trust Theory argues that individuals operating within temporary systems suspend uncertainty and initially assume trustworthiness in order to facilitate collaboration. Consistent with this perspective, participants in temporary teams reported extending trust despite limited relational history. However, the findings suggest a more nuanced process than simple suspension of doubt. Participants did not appear to trust indiscriminately. Instead, trust was inferred from observable indicators of professional competence and credibility, including the track record of the project, the quality of briefing materials, and the perceived expertise of team members.

However, participants also described this trust as potentially fragile. Because trust was initially inferred rather than built through prolonged interaction, uncertainty, information gaps, inconsistent communication, and unmet expectations could quickly undermine confidence in colleagues. Professionally inferred trust therefore enabled rapid collaboration but required continual reinforcement through reliable behaviour and effective communication.

This finding suggests that professionally inferred trust may complement existing explanations provided by Swift Trust Theory by explaining how professional signals are used as substitutes for relational history during the early stages of collaboration. Trust was not granted blindly; rather, it was based on assumptions regarding expertise, credentials, and the expectation that professionals would fulfil their responsibilities competently. This distinction may extend existing trust literature by highlighting the importance of professional identity as a trust mechanism within specialist project environments.

The findings also align with McAllister's distinction between cognition-based and affect-based trust [3]. Temporary teams appeared to rely predominantly on cognition-based trust, where trust was grounded in perceptions of competence, reliability, and professional capability. In contrast, permanent teams demonstrated characteristics more closely associated with affect-based trust, where trust developed through emotional bonds, familiarity, and long-term relational experiences.

The contrast between these team structures suggests that trust is not a uniform phenomenon but is shaped by the temporal characteristics of the team itself. Whereas temporary teams depend upon confidence in competence, permanent teams benefit from trust rooted in interpersonal relationships and social familiarity.

Leadership as a Trust Accelerator

The findings further demonstrate the critical role of leadership in facilitating trust development across both team structures. Participants consistently identified communication, transparency, consistency, and role clarification as key leadership behaviours associated with trust.

Within temporary teams, leadership appeared particularly influential because team members had limited opportunities to develop trust organically through repeated interaction. Leaders therefore functioned as trust accelerators, that is, they compressed the timeline within which trust could form by creating structure, reducing ambiguity, and establishing clear expectations from the outset, enabling trust to emerge at a pace that relational processes alone could not have achieved. Through effective communication and predictable behaviour, leaders enabled team members to focus on project delivery rather than uncertainty surrounding roles and relationships.

These findings support previous research linking leadership behaviours to trust development [12], [13]. However, the present study extends this literature by demonstrating that leadership may serve different trust functions depending on team temporality. In temporary teams, leaders appear to facilitate the initial formation of trust, whereas in permanent teams they play a greater role in maintaining and reinforcing existing trust relationships.

The findings can also be interpreted through the lens of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory [15]. LMX theory proposes that high-quality leader-member relationships are characterised by mutual trust, respect, and support. Consistent with this theory, participants described trusting leaders who demonstrated transparency, reliability, and follow-through. However, the findings suggest that temporary team leaders face unique challenges because high-quality exchanges must be established within compressed timeframes. As a result, leadership effectiveness in temporary contexts may depend less on long-term relationship development and more on rapidly establishing credibility and psychological certainty.

Trust as a Dynamic and Continually Tested Process

A further contribution of this study concerns the dynamic nature of trust within temporary teams. While participants frequently described trusting colleagues at the outset of projects, this trust was not unconditional. Rather, it remained provisional and subject to ongoing evaluation. Participants reported that trust was strengthened when colleagues consistently met commitments, communicated effectively, and demonstrated reliability. Conversely, missed deadlines, poor communication, or inconsistent leadership behaviours could quickly undermine trust.

This finding challenges interpretations of Swift Trust Theory that imply trust remains stable once initially established. Instead, the findings suggest that trust within temporary teams operates as a continuously tested assumption requiring behavioural confirmation throughout the project lifecycle.

Permanent teams appeared more resilient to trust disruptions. Participants described how established relationships provided a reservoir of goodwill that enabled

teams to recover from occasional mistakes or misunderstandings. This finding supports previous research suggesting that long-term relational trust can act as a protective resource during periods of uncertainty and change.

Professionally Inferred Trust as a Distinct Trust Mechanism

One of the most significant findings of this study concerns the basis upon which trust was established within temporary professional teams. Participants described extending trust before meaningful interpersonal relationships had developed. However, this trust did not appear to reflect unconditional confidence nor merely a suspension of uncertainty. Rather, trust was inferred from professional signals such as qualifications, expertise, communication style, role clarity, and assumptions regarding adherence to professional standards.

This finding suggests a trust mechanism that extends and partially distinguishes itself from Swift Trust Theory Meyerson et al., and cognition-based trust [4], [3]. Swift Trust Theory proposes that individuals initially assume trustworthiness in order to facilitate collaboration within temporary systems, a broadly passive, category-level suspension of doubt. The present findings suggest a more active process: participants made deliberate assessments of professional credibility based on observable cues before any meaningful behavioural evidence was available. Trust was not suspended but inferred.

Similarly, although professionally inferred trust shares characteristics with McAllister's cognition-based trust, an important distinction exists [3]. Cognition-based trust typically emerges through observations of demonstrated competence and reliability. Professionally inferred trust, by contrast, appears to emerge *before* substantial behavioural evidence becomes available. Trust is therefore based less on observed competence and more on assumptions regarding professional identity, expertise, and expected standards of conduct. In this respect, professionally inferred trust may also connect with the concept of category-based trust [17], in which individuals draw on perceived group membership and professional identity as cognitive shortcuts when relational history is absent. The present study extends that concept by grounding it specifically in the professional context of expert temporary teams, where shared expertise functions as a particularly powerful trust signal.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three primary theoretical contributions.

First, it contributes to the temporary team literature by demonstrating that trust within temporary professional teams may be inferred from professional credibility and competence rather than emerging solely through the mechanisms described by Swift Trust Theory. The findings therefore refine understanding of how trust develops within specialist project environments.

Second, the study extends McAllister's distinction between cognition-based and affect-based trust by illustrating how these trust forms align with different team structures [3]. Temporary teams appeared to rely predominantly on cognition-based

trust, whereas permanent teams relied more heavily on affect-based trust developed through long-term relationships.

Third, the study contributes to leadership theory by demonstrating that leadership fulfils different trust-building functions depending on team temporality. Leaders within temporary teams appear to accelerate trust formation through structure, communication, and predictability, whereas leaders within permanent teams play a greater role in sustaining established trust relationships.

Together, these contributions suggest that trust should not be conceptualised as a single universal process. Rather, trust appears to emerge through distinct mechanisms depending on the temporal characteristics of the team and the opportunities available for relationship development.

Practical Implications

The findings offer several implications for organisational practice. Organisations increasingly rely on temporary project teams to deliver strategic initiatives, change programmes, and specialist interventions. The findings suggest that leaders responsible for such teams should focus on establishing professional credibility, communicating expectations clearly, and creating structures that reduce uncertainty during project initiation.

For permanent teams, leadership efforts should prioritise maintaining relational trust through consistency, transparency, and long-term relationship development. Organisations should also recognise that leadership transitions may pose particular risks to trust within established teams and should manage such transitions carefully.

More broadly, organisations should avoid assuming that trust develops in the same manner across all team structures. Leadership development programmes should therefore equip leaders with context-specific trust-building strategies appropriate to the nature and duration of the teams they lead.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

Strengths and Limitations

This study possesses several strengths. First, it contributes to a relatively underexplored area of organisational research by examining trust development within temporary professional teams of business psychologists. While previous studies have examined trust in temporary systems, much of the existing literature has focused on virtual teams, project management environments, or emergency-response settings. By focusing on business psychologists operating within project-based teams, the study provides insight into a professional context that has received limited scholarly attention.

Second, the comparative design enabled direct examination of trust dynamics across temporary and permanent team structures within a broadly similar organisational context. This comparison provided a richer understanding of how team temporality shapes trust development and leadership requirements than would have been possible through examination of a single team type alone.

Third, the qualitative methodology facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions. The use of semi-structured interviews

generated detailed accounts of trust development, leadership behaviours, and team dynamics that may not have been captured through quantitative approaches. This depth of understanding allowed the study to identify nuanced differences in the mechanisms through which trust emerged across team structures.

Despite these strengths, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was based on a relatively small sample of nine participants. Although this sample size is appropriate for qualitative inquiry and generated sufficient informational richness to address the research questions, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all temporary or permanent teams.

A related limitation concerns the single-site, single-project design. All participants were drawn from one organisation and one recurring project. While this enabled a controlled comparison of temporary and permanent team structures, it also means that the observed differences in trust dynamics may reflect the specific culture, norms, and relational history of this organisation rather than team temporality per se. Future research drawing on multiple organisations and project types would strengthen the generalisability of the findings.

The research was also conducted within a specific organisational and professional context. The experiences of business psychologists may differ from those of professionals operating in other industries or occupations. Consequently, caution should be exercised when transferring the findings to other organisational settings.

A further limitation relates to the cross-sectional nature of the study. Participants reflected on trust development at a single point in time rather than being observed throughout the lifecycle of a project. As trust is inherently dynamic, a longitudinal design may have provided additional insight into how trust evolves, strengthens, or deteriorates over time.

Finally, as with all qualitative research, the findings reflect an interpretive analysis of participant accounts. Although reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process, the analysis was inevitably influenced by the researcher's interpretations and assumptions. The findings should therefore be understood as one possible interpretation of participants' experiences rather than an objective representation of reality.

Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. First, further investigation is needed to examine whether professionally inferred trust operates similarly in other temporary professional contexts. Future studies could explore project teams within consulting, healthcare, engineering, finance, and other knowledge-intensive professional environments.

Second, longitudinal research could provide greater insight into how trust develops throughout the lifecycle of temporary projects. Such studies could examine whether professionally inferred trust remains primarily cognition-based or gradually transitions into more affective forms of trust as working relationships develop.

Third, future research could explore trust development within hybrid and geographically dispersed temporary teams. As remote and hybrid working arrangements become increasingly common, understanding how professional credibility, communication, and leadership influence trust across physical distance remains an important area for investigation.

Fourth, quantitative research could test the conceptual relationships identified within this study. Future studies may examine the extent to which professional credibility, leadership communication, role clarity, and behavioural consistency predict trust and team effectiveness across different organisational settings.

Finally, future research could explore the role of professional identity in trust formation more explicitly. The present study suggests that shared professional standards and assumptions regarding competence play an important role in facilitating trust within temporary teams. Further investigation may help clarify the conditions under which professional identity serves as a substitute for interpersonal familiarity, and whether this mechanism applies differently across professional communities.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: Trust remains a fundamental component of effective teamwork, collaboration, and organisational performance. However, the findings of this study suggest that trust does not develop through a single universal process. Rather, trust formation appears to be shaped by the temporal characteristics of the team itself. Through a qualitative comparison of temporary project teams of business psychologists and permanent operational teams, this study demonstrated that trust develops through distinct mechanisms across different team structures. Temporary teams relied primarily on professional credibility, competence, and leadership signalling to establish trust rapidly under conditions of limited time and uncertainty. In contrast, permanent teams developed trust gradually through repeated interactions, relational familiarity, and accumulated interpersonal experiences. The findings contribute to existing trust literature by suggesting that trust within temporary professional teams may be understood as professionally inferred trust. While consistent with aspects of Swift Trust Theory, participants appeared to base trust not merely on assumptions of goodwill but on observable indicators of competence, expertise, and professional credibility, a more active inferential process than the passive suspension of uncertainty described in earlier accounts. The findings also support McAllister's distinction between cognition-based and affect-based trust, demonstrating how these trust forms align with different team structures, and extend this framework by connecting professionally inferred trust to the wider concept of category-based trust (Kramer, 1999) operating within professional expert communities. Leadership emerged as a critical trust-building mechanism across both contexts. However, the function of leadership differed according to team temporality. In temporary teams, leaders acted as trust accelerators by reducing uncertainty through communication, structure, and clarity. In permanent teams, leaders played a more significant role in maintaining and reinforcing established trust

relationships. **Implication** : Collectively, the findings address the gap identified at the outset of this study: while trust research has largely focused on stable, permanent teams, the dynamics of trust within temporary professional teams require a distinct analytical lens. As organisations increasingly rely on project-based work and temporary forms of organising, understanding how trust develops under compressed timescales becomes increasingly important. The concept of professionally inferred trust offers one such lens, positioning professional credibility, expertise, and role clarity not merely as contextual factors, but as the primary mechanisms through which collaboration becomes possible when time for relationship development is absent. **Limitation** : A limitation of this study is that it was based on a qualitative comparison of temporary project teams of business psychologists and permanent operational teams, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other professions, industries, and organisational contexts. In addition, the study relied on participants' accounts of their experiences and perceptions of trust, which may be influenced by subjective interpretation and retrospective reflection. **Future Research** : Future research could examine professionally inferred trust across a wider range of professional and organisational settings to determine whether similar trust formation mechanisms operate in different temporary team environments. Further studies may also employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to explore how professionally inferred trust evolves over time and interacts with cognition-based and affect-based trust as team relationships develop. Additionally, future research could investigate specific leadership behaviours that most effectively accelerate trust formation in temporary teams operating under varying levels of uncertainty and complexity.

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