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Strategic Insights from a Brazilian Business Negotiation: A Descriptive Case Study

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ABSTRACT
This article reports a single case study of a real professional negotiation in the Brazilian construction sector. The case concerns negotiations for a job contract between an engineer and a large construction company. The analysis investigates the interplay of bargaining power, trust, preparation, and psychological tactics that occurred and characterizes the variety of contextual, emotional, and organizational pressures that affected the final agreement. Results show that the engineer reached an agreement he accepted, albeit below his target. The results have implications for managers and those planning their careers. The study contributes to the theory concerning negotiations in emerging markets, helpful for negotiators, mediators, decision-makers, and other practitioners.

KeyWords Negotiation, Case Study, Construction Sector, Career Development, Brazil

INTRODUCTION

Negotiation is a common feature of organizational life occurring in many contexts and taking many forms. It may occur at recruitment or following a poor performance. Managers and employees may negotiate over objectives, performance, development, and discipline, including dismissal. At the organizational level, negotiation is a feature of joint ventures, mergers, and acquisitions. While often seen as an informal, ad hoc process, negotiation is not a neutral activity. Power imbalances are inevitable, together with issues of trustworthiness, the appropriate level of preparation, and the impact of external and organizational pressures. Importantly, how negotiation is managed has real consequences for the parties involved in the short term and for individuals, organizations, and the long term. This article reports a descriptive case study of an employment negotiation conducted in the construction sector of Brazil. A young engineer was hired by a mid-sized company. This study aims to offer insights into the negotiation process, showing how strategies, tactics, and conditions interact, furnishing helpful guidelines for effective employment negotiations, and making theoretical contributions.

The paper makes two contributions. Firstly, it provides a real-life insight into the negotiation of terms and conditions of employment. Secondly, the resulting narrative is discussed in the light of established theories on negotiation and current empirical research. The classical works in the negotiation field, Fisher and Ury (1981), Lax and Sebenius (1986), and Raiffa et al. (2002), all provide detailed guidance on appropriate preparation, identifying all parties' interests, and assessing each side's bargaining power. Managers often fall short of their potential by allowing cognitive biases to influence their decisions, according to Bazerman and Moore (1994). The bargaining process, from a management perspective as outlined by Shell (2006), is at least as psychological and relationship-driven as it is legal or economic.

In an ever-globalized world, negotiation has become increasingly relevant, and Brazilian research has addressed the topic from a locally relevant perspective. Since negotiations occur in many contexts and situations. In the context of construction, some studies addressed topics such as building project negotiation (Gadelha & Dias, 2026) and interorganizational collaboration negotiation (Martins & Dias, 2026). In the context of government acquisitions, a research study analyzed the evaluation criteria for proposals (Dias et al., 2022). In the context of civil disputes, the study of Domingues & Dias (2025) proposed a framework for negotiation strategies in civil conflicts. In the business market context, Dias & Panzarini (2025) and Santos & Dias (2024) studied the role of trust in buyer-seller negotiations. Diverging from positive results, this study presents and analyzes a failed employment negotiation. The negotiation failure is an understudied aspect in Brazilian research on negotiation.

The study of the complex and critical phase of hiring highly qualified personnel to manage the complex tasks of a construction project offers interesting elements to understand and analyze the nuances of the negotiations that take place, both in the preliminary stages of the contract for the construction work itself and in those related to the hiring of the workforce. The specific situation studied by the authors had all the characteristics of a difficult negotiation. The need to hire the candidate within a short time frame and his need to find new employment brought the process to a deadlock, generating highly asymmetric pressures and differing psychological tactics. The objectives of this article are threefold: a detailed descriptive analysis of a negotiation, taking into account its context, relations, and psychological aspects. (2) analyze the negotiation process using established acquisition theories, (3) To draw practical implications for management practice, career development, and theory development on expatriates and global leaders emerging from emerging markets. This study employed a single descriptive case study design (Yin, 2018) and collected both qualitative and quantitative data. This introduction provides a foundation for the theoretical and empirical analysis that follows. The introduction situates the case within existing negotiation theory and provides a framework for understanding negotiation in general and professional negotiation in Brazil's construction industry in particular.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Negotiation is a truly interdisciplinary field that draws on psychology, strategic management, and organizational behavior. Some of the most enduring works in the field are those that treated negotiation as both art and science and showed that cooperation and competitive gain are not mutually exclusive. Getting to Yes (Fisher et al., 1981) and The Manager as Negotiator (Lax and Sebenius, 1986) are two of the most influential works in the field.

The study by Bazerman and Moore (1994) on negotiations between buyers and sellers adds little new for managers who negotiate daily. However, it serves as a useful illustration of how certain cognitive biases that affect decision-making in other areas of a manager's job can also affect their negotiation. The study also shows how chains of events can be set off by negotiators as they become anchored by an initial figure, become overly confident that they can achieve better terms, or become locked into a downward spiraling course of action. Shell's (2006) perspective on negotiation supports the bargaining psychology perspective. It points out the importance of individual differences when preparing for an employment contract negotiation as well as other negotiations. Research on negotiation has increased over the past few decades and is no longer confined solely to theoretical aspects. The findings of this research are also applied across various fields (Kissinger, 1969, 1979; Zartman, 1988, 1993, 2003) and are thus highly relevant to practice. Focusing on the outcomes of B2B business negotiations, this paper deals with issue-based selection tactics that allow parties to a negotiation to gain an advantage in the process. In labor negotiations, compensation, employment benefits, and career development are interlinked issues that negotiators have to weigh against each other.

The cultural approach has been a rich field of studies in negotiation, including qualitative studies and case studies conducted by Brazilian researchers. In this sense, this line of research has been strongly developed by Dias (2020, 2026) and collaborators in several studies and empirical analyses on different negotiation contexts such as in construction projects (Gadelha & Dias, 2026; Martins & Dias, 2026), real estate negotiation (Lago & Dias, 2025), civil construction disputes (Smejoff et al., 2025), public government acquisitions (Dias et al., 2022; Dias et al., 2022a), consumer–retailer negotiation (Dias, 2020c), employment negotiation (Dias & Panzarini, 2025; Santos & Dias, 2024), negotiation between employers and employees (Dias et al., 2026), business meetings and conflict management (Dias et al., 2020). This case allows identification of specific characteristics of employment negotiation conducted by construction professionals, taking into account the crisis context, the need for urgent decisions, the difficulty of resource allocation, and the predominantly relational nature of the process. Trust is an essential aspect in negotiation processes. Santos and Dias (2024, 2025) examined the forces of trust in virtual contexts, while Dias and Lopes (2021, 2023) addressed transformative trust in traditional contexts. As negotiation studies have underlined, trust is a fundamental dimension because it can affect openness to information exchange, the perceived fairness, and also the potential for long-term agreements. This is well exemplified in the case, where the relational trust with the company's owner was a potential asset that was underleveraged during the negotiation process.

Along with the previously cited elements, emotions and psychological characteristics are also present during land acquisition negotiations. According to Dias et al. (2026), emotions are either positive or negative. Along these lines, Dias (2021) approached empathetic negotiations within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the case, the seller's negotiator may have been impaired by his own anxiety and fatigue in seeking an appropriate position. Many organizations use various tactics to weaken the other party's position, notably by causing delays and discomfort. As Schatzki and Coffey (1981) point out, psychological pressure is a common technique in negotiation. As with any piece of business research, there are also methodological points worth highlighting. Yin (2018) and Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009) consider the Case Study a viable business research design, particularly when complexity and context are paramount. This paper follows on from that methodology. Dias (2020, 2022, 2023) has utilized case studies and/or role-play simulations on numerous occasions in academic and industry settings. The case study is therefore a descriptive account of how concepts and theories are utilized in the real business world. Despite the considerable volume of research on negotiations, several gaps remain to be addressed. In particular, when it comes to employment negotiations in Brazil – especially within the construction industry – there is relatively little literature compared to other kinds of negotiations, such as contract disputes, government acquisition negotiations, and consumer negotiations. Other aspects, such as trust, emotions, and situational strategies, have also been little explored. One aspect that deserves attention is how professionals negotiate career changes while being affected by internal and external pressures. The case study is an example of an employment negotiation situation and contributes to the theoretical and practical knowledge of the subject.

METHODOLOGY

The study follows a single descriptive case study design. The single case study contains in-depth insights into a real-life negotiation process. A case study is the appropriate research methodology if in one study, it is impossible to investigate all variables. However, a well-designed case study can offer rich insights into a complex social and organizational phenomenon. In reference to Yin (2018), the case study is appropriate when there is a unclear boundary distinction between the phenomenon of interest and the context in which it occurs. The case study is particularly suited to explore process in order to answer the questions how and why. In the context of negotiation, studies of actual, real-life negotiations offer a unique look into the negotiation process as it occurs, providing researchers with insight into the strategic, psychological and contextual forces at play within a particular organization. Saunders et al. (2009) described the advantages of the case study approach. One of the main advantages of this methodology is that the research can provide both descriptive and explanatory insights into a particular phenomenon, using multiple sources of evidence. This research draws heavily on the detailed description of the actual process of negotiation taking place within the case study, using a range of theoretical frameworks to inform the findings. Additionally, reference is made to findings from previous research that are relevant to the current study and are reported within the existing literature.

Although formal employment negotiations are not common practices in the Brazilian construction sector, they do occur and that is why it is worth studying such events. Adopting a single case study is appropriate for this study as it aims to provide a detailed story of how a negotiation took place and how a complex set of contextual, relational and psychological factors influenced the process and outcomes. This type of study is most suitable for research situations in which little prior knowledge is available for the research area.

All data and phenomena that have not been documented and analyzed before should be recorded as accurately and completely as possible. A descriptive case study, according to Saunders et al. (2009), contributes to both theory and practice at the same time. In this study, this type of research contributes to our knowledge on employment negotiations in the construction industry in Brazil, as well as it supplies practical insights to managers, who are engaged in similar kinds of processes. Compliance and ethics were crucial concerns in the study. All individuals in the study have been anonymous and real names have not been used. The name of the company has been used as background information and all other references are to anonymous individuals. As with all case study research, every effort was made to ensure that participants were not placed in any danger during the research process.

CASE DESCRIPTION

This case study presents a real-life professional negotiation scenario rooted in the Brazilian construction industry. The scenario describes the hiring of an engineer by a mid-sized general contractor's company. For ethical and compliance reasons, the real names of the actual individuals involved in this case were not used when developing this study.

Context

Construction was booming in 2011 in Brazil, creating many opportunities for professional engineers. The negotiator had recently been fired from another company and was searching for a new job. A medium-sized construction company, was behind schedule in one of its largest projects to date and was looking to hire an experienced professional engineer at short notice to correctly execute the project and get it back on track. This scenario presented all the typical circumstances for negotiations to occur.

Initial Contact

During his time in the Netherlands, he tried to get in touch with as many people in his network as possible. He got in touch with an old colleague of his he knows for a longer time. Thanks to this he got in touch with the owner of the company, a small company specialized in the Netherlands in the field of bio-mass and bio-energy (also including bio-ethanol). After the first meeting (where he spent 2 hours talking with the CEO) he seems both interested. They were impressed by his experience and he likes the company as an employer. His CEO promised to discuss wages and fringe benefits after some time.

Transition to Negotiation

It was just about a week since the last job application when the Human Resources director of the company called the candidate for a meeting to formalize the employment terms and conditions. At that time, the candidate was in a good position. Although he had financial resources, which made him less urgent to agree with terms and conditions of employment and contracts, he knew the market was in dire need of engineers to carry out projects. He had also developed a very good relation with the owner of the company and he knew that the company needed a senior engineer to manage very important projects. On the other side of the negotiating table there were the company's advantages. The construction company was well-known in São Paulo, had an experienced and skilled team of construction professionals; and the candidate was unemployed for a long time. As such, he was psychologically vulnerable during the negotiations of terms and conditions of employment.

Options and Alternative Available

The negotiator identified four possible courses of action: (a)Accept the initial offer without negotiation. (b) Negotiate for a higher salary. (c) Negotiate for improved benefits. (d) Reject the offer and seek opportunities elsewhere. (e) Negotiate salary within organizational limits. (f) Adjust benefits to attract the candidate. The alternative would be seeking another professional in the market. These possible outcomes set the range for negotiations, how far the parties might actually reach an agreement, and at what point everything might stall.

Negotiation Environment

For the Data Scientist position, the negotiation meeting got very psychological. The negotiator had to wait more than an hour to be called into a tiny, cramped, uncomfortable space to begin the meeting with the hiring manager. After a few minutes of discussion, the Human Resources director then appeared in the room and the conversation quickly turned to compensation. The company's representative spent a lot of time explaining the non-monetary benefits of the position to it, such as prestige and huge potential for career growth, but the numbers were below what the candidate was expecting. Although aware of the opportunity gap, the selected candidate accepted the offer of R$ 15,000, R$ 3,000 less than the minimum target of R$ 18,000 for the challenge. The agreement with the Executive Director did provide for a salary review upon completion of the project.

Immediate Outcome

Of course, all of these factors influenced the seller's decision to accept our offer, including a dash of circumstance and psychology. The seller was eager to get back into the job market, his family was tired of waiting, and he was tired of waiting. From the company's perspective, they gained the services of a very experienced engineer at a lower cost than what he was truly worth continuing to earn on an annual basis. And for the negotiator, he got a job, but it wasn't the one he had hoped for.

Reflection and Learning

The negotiator comes away from the encounter reflecting on a few lessons learned. For starters, he had a stronger hand than he thought. Given the current market, he had a lot of leverage. He also wishes he would have stood his ground better against some of the tactics employed by the other side, such as long periods of inactivity, discomfort filled waiting, and general irritability. He also wishes he had prepared more thoroughly, primarily in learning about the financial situation of the company, current and pending projects, salary ranges for the candidate, and salary ranges for similar individuals with similar experience in the region. What he learned was that his first counter proposal was woefully inadequate given the information he did have.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

This is a complex negotiation involving context, relationships and psychology. Using negotiation theory

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and real-world research, this video looks at the bargaining power, preparation, trust and emotions involved in the negotiation.

Bargaining Power and Context

While the engineer had significant bargaining power based on his experience and the company's need for it, he saw himself as relatively weak in the negotiation. The construction sector was booming in Brazil and there was high demand for engineers. This made the company the he would be working for very eager to sign him up, and the person he was negotiating with was under a lot of pressure to make an offer. In fact, according to Lax and Sebenius (1986), bargaining power is not just a matter of resources, but also of alternatives and the degree of urgency. The company was badly in need of this individual's experience, but he was outmaneuvered by a host of internal and external pressures and by some clever psychological tactics. A chasm exists between the levels of actual power managers possess in negotiation and the degree to which they perceive themselves having power. This divide is shaped by a set of critical cognitive biases which managers employ in their decision-making process.

Preparation and Information

Fisher and Ury (1981) explained the importance of separating the people from the problem, focusing on people's interests rather than on their positions and looking for integrated solutions. In this specific case the negotiator didn't even did basic research on the company's financial situation, on the projects the company had in play, on salary information of other employees with similar responsibilities, etc. This is why he couldn't come up with an effective counter proposal. Dias (2020c) established a difference between the structured approach and the situational approach to negotiation, while the first one is intended to build confidence in one's skills and to enhance preparation for different types of negotiations. The negotiator was working in a situational improvisation mode, and so was not well enough prepared for the negotiations.

Trust and Relational Dynamics

Trust was a distinctive element in this negotiation process, because the negotiator already had a prior relationship with the owner of the company and was trying to negotiate with the director of Human Resources without capitalizing on that trust. Dias and Panzarini (2025) address the topic of trust in civil construction negotiations and show how it can generate value through cooperation between parties and actors. Santos and Dias (2024) identified the forces that affect the construction of trust in virtual negotiations. Interesting.

Psychological Tactics and Emotional Dynamics

To break the negotiator's resistance, the frame in which the negotiation took place was set up so as to put him under pressure. In addition to lack of information, he was kept waiting for hours in a hot, cramped environment and was left physically and mentally exhausted. Schatzki and Coffey (1981) point out that such pressure tactics are used in order to get what you want, given the way people are naturally set up. Like other methods of mediation, these are also typical of business-negotiation practices in Brazil (Dias, 2020d). In the end, he surrendered, accepting an offer of little value.

Strategic Framing and Outcome

Negotiations were managed successfully to achieve the company's goals. The other party was persuaded to focus on prestige, career opportunities and soft factors, and to overlook the market price for a fair and competitive salary. In the end, The Company found a compensation package that was acceptable to both parties. Geiger's (2017) issue-based tactics model for B2B negotiations can be used to analyze how issues were treated and how The Company framed the negotiation in order to gain "success". Unfortunately, the negotiator started the negotiations not well-prepared and therefore lacking the composure to counter The Company's successful framing.

Comparison with Similar Cases

Gadelha and Dias (2026) and Martins and Dias (2026) presented two case studies on negotiations in the construction sector, one based on a built-to-suit and the other on an equipment rental transaction. The findings from these studies have shown that effective preparation and strategic framing lead to beneficial negotiation outcomes. The case also illustrates how market demand "power" is translated into effective negotiation. Even with all the numbers on one's side, this case shows how psychological tactics and simple human vulnerability can overcome all odds. The case has been used in several negotiation training programs and has been discussed in strategic management classes in business schools in Brazil. The case is also a topic of growing interest in Brazilian research (Dias et al., 2026).

DISCUSSION

The interaction of these pressures produces an intriguing case study. Comparing this case with established negotiation theories and research offers insights into negotiation practice and study. Classical negotiation research identifies the importance of preparation and distinguishing between positions and underlying interests (Fisher and Ury, 1981). The negotiator could have profited from a few minutes of Internet research on salaries and working conditions in comparable organizations. Empirical studies of negotiation (Bazerman and Moore, 1994) have found that several biases affect how people perceive their leverage and how they respond to the first offer. This case also illustrates the interplay between rational models of negotiation and the actual behavior of people that negotiation analysis seeks to understand (Raiffa et al., 2002). The parties were left standing in an unseemly cold room, then sold a commodity you can't touch or see. When all the facts are on your side, it is how you set up the negotiation that is critical, and prestige and fatigue become important considerations. In addition to the aforementioned international contributions on the subject, Brazilian researchers also address this issue. Dias (2020c) states that to manage interactions with other parties involved in a negotiation, two approaches can be followed: situational and structured. For the results obtained in that research, having prior, thorough preparation for a negotiation (structured) provides greater confidence and better outcomes for the negotiator than relying solely on situational improvisation. Dias & Panzarini (2025) found that trust in civil construction negotiations enhances interactions and fosters fruitful negotiations. In Dias (2020c), the pre-existing trust between the public administrator and the company owner was not explored effectively in the negotiations with the latter. Another important issue in this work is the emotional dimension, which is also addressed by researchers Dias et al. (2026). The fatigue and anxiety experienced by the negotiator were reflected in her premature abandonment of assertiveness, as reported by Brazilian research on the matter. See Dias (2021) for how the outcomes of crisis negotiation can be altered by empathetic negotiation and for how awareness of emotions becomes a source of strength rather than weakness. To strengthen the generalizability of lessons learned from negotiation processes, this paper compares and contrasts the results with those of similar studies conducted in other Brazilian projects. Delgado and Dias (2025) studied a buyer-seller negotiation in the technology acquisition process, where time pressure and the use of frames were analyzed. Gadelha and Dias (2026) and Martins and Dias (2026) studied construction negotiations, focusing on strategic lessons learned in built-to-suit projects and on negotiations related to the use of equipment rental services for construction, respectively. In the three cases, it was observed that success depends heavily on effective preparation and appropriate framing of the issues.

Challenges to the Existing Knowledge

This case study combines established findings with new empirical insights about negotiation. While the case reinforces Bazerman and Moore's (1994) findings that psychology-based tactics and emotions can be more effective than market conditions in achieving successful negotiation outcomes, it also shows that a favorable market position is not enough to achieve desired results. This case study supports the findings by Bazerman and Moore (1994) and further develops them through a real-world case study (Dias, et al., 2020). Trust in the collaborative process has to be considered, too. As widely stated in the literature, trust can enhance collaborative processes (Santos & Dias, 2024). However, this study shows that the negotiator's trust in the company owner did not result in negotiation power. Therefore, trust must be strategically used in organizational collaboration, and it cannot automatically translate into effective negotiation outcomes. It is relevant to consider the organizational structure and the distribution of negotiation power in the collaborative process.

Extension of Knowledge

This paper addresses a topic that remains underdeveloped in studies of employment negotiation in the Brazilian construction sector. The vast majority of research on negotiation in Brazil is centered on contract disputes, negotiations for the acquisition of public goods and services, and consumer disputes (Dias et al., 2022; Domingues & Dias, 2025; Tanabe & Dias, 2025). This paper examines the employment negotiation process from the perspective of adults who have undergone career transition into a profession in the construction sector and analyzes how negotiation is affected by the interaction of contextual, psychological, and relational factors and their outcomes. The case contains several issues the negotiator must address. For one, it shows the negotiator making some significant trade-offs. He was offered a salary below what he was making at his law firm, but with a number of other "perks," including a guaranteed three-year contract and significant room for advancement. This could be a long-term relationship that the negotiator is developing, and one key aspect to note is the type of outcomes that Salacuse (2006) notes should result from negotiations with organizations over time, in the parties' long-term interests.

Integrative Perspective

The case confirms, challenges, and extends learning on negotiation. It confirms the importance of issues preparation, trust-based relationships, and the way one frames one's agenda in a negotiation. The case also challenges prevailing assumptions about relative power and the drivers of trust in negotiation. Most importantly, the case applies much of this learning to a sector and a country that have not received sufficient attention: construction in Brazil. The case presents a rich, multifaceted, and complex negotiation from a unique vantage point, rendering it difficult to separate out rational models of negotiation, deep-seated psychological needs, and strong contextual pressures.

IMPLICATIONS

This case offers several key lessons for managers at all levels and for individuals at various career stages. The case also provides an opportunity to illustrate relevant theory and research.

Managerial Practice

The way a strategic manager uses psychological strategies and effective framing to get a qualified employee at the Company with low cost, is striking. The delay enabled the company to hire the employee at a lower salary than he would have demanded earlier. As Schatzki and Coffey (1981) noted about negotiations in general, psychological tactics are often used in business settings. The model of issue-based tactics for strategic negotiation (Geiger, 2017) is also applicable to the situation found at the Company. While in the short run, psychological strategies may yield good results for the parties, in the long run, they can lead to breakdowns in trust in negotiations. This is particularly true in the civil construction sector, as argued by Dias and Panzarini (2025).

Career Development

This case is intended to show professionals across a wide variety of settings how to handle difficult and complex negotiations. Shell (2006) also emphasize the importance of psychological or mind games in negotiation. In this case, despite very favorable market conditions the negotiator did not meet his objectives within his targeted range. The lessons learned by the negotiator at the end of the case underscore the impact that lack of preparation and the psychological forces that affect human decision-making can have on achieving one's career development objectives. To be effective in negotiations, managers must have technical training and understand the cognitive and contextual forces that affect decision-making, as identified by Bazerman and Moore (1994).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the favorable conditions were all in place, but the proposed wage offer was lower than expected due to the negotiator’s fatigue and anxiety. The case illustrates the classical negotiation theories (Fisher & Ury, 1981; Lax & Sebenius, 1986; Raiffa et al., 2002) in the Brazilian context (Dias, 2020, 2026; Santos & Dias, 2024). However, issues concerning hiring and firing are relatively under-researched in negotiation. Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct multi-case studies in different sectors of activity. Additionally, studies that test the effects of negotiation training on using effective strategic framing and on emotional resilience would be valuable. Finally, there is a growing number of negotiations that take place in virtual environments, and studies on these topics are also worthy of consideration. We also call for longitudinal research into the long-term career and organizational effects of employment negotiation outcomes, and how professionals make trade-offs to create sustainable organizational relationships.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could investigate the potential of negotiation training to foster career advancement. Dias (2020, 2022, 2023) has shown the effectiveness of role-play in teaching negotiation across several contexts. It would be interesting to study the impact of training in emotional resilience and strategic framing in employment negotiations. Given the growing practice of virtual negotiation (Santos and Dias, 2024), it would also be interesting to analyze the most common psychological tactics and strategies for building trust in online contexts. The volume provides a comprehensive overview of the state of the art of employment negotiation from different perspectives and presents practical, theoretical, and empirical findings. Future research directions could include the longitudinal effects of negotiation outcomes.

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