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Engineering Identity in The Projectified Era

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Background

Engineering has always been synonymous with projects. From bridges and power plants to software systems and smart infrastructure, engineering work unfolds through time-bound, goal-oriented undertakings. Yet in recent decades, the intensification of projectification—the increasing reliance on temporary, cross-functional, and performance-driven projects as the primary mode of organizing work—has reshaped not only how engineering is executed, but how engineers experience their profession (Lundin et al., 2015; Hodgson et al., 2019). While this transformation has delivered flexibility, innovation, and responsiveness to technological complexity, it has also altered the foundations of professional identity, agency, and long-term sustainability in engineering careers. Engineering journals have traditionally focused on technical rigor, methodological advancement, and system performance. However, as projectification becomes the dominant organizing logic across private industry, public infrastructure, and digital ecosystems, it is increasingly clear that the sustainability of engineering outcomes depends not only on materials and methods, but on the identity conditions under which engineers work. If engineering is to meet contemporary challenges—climate adaptation, digital transformation, resilient infrastructure—it must confront a parallel question: How does projectification shape the professional identity, well-being, and agency of engineers?

Projectification and the Fragmented Engineering Career

Projectified environments are characterized by temporariness, fluid roles, overlapping assignments, and strong performance imperatives (Cicmil et al., 2006; Lundin et al., 2015). For engineers, this often means moving rapidly between multidisciplinary teams, clients, and technological domains. While such mobility can enrich competencies and expand professional networks, it also destabilizes traditional identity anchors such as stable job titles, clear career ladders, and long-term team affiliation (Grabher, 2004; Bakker et al., 2016). Research on identity in project-based work suggests that repeated transitions may generate *identity fragmentation*, particularly when engineers struggle to integrate diverse project experiences into a coherent professional narrative (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). In engineering contexts, where professional responsibility and ethical accountability are central, fragmentation is not merely psychological—it can influence decision-making confidence, safety orientation, and commitment to standards. Engineers must therefore engage in continuous *identity work*: constructing narratives that connect past projects to future aspirations, reflecting on lessons learned, and negotiating evolving roles within teams (Brown, 2015). Yet projectified settings often compress time for reflection. Tight milestones and delivery pressures constrain

opportunities for consolidating experience into professional growth (Lindgren et al., 2014). Over time, this acceleration risks producing a workforce that is technically competent but identity-fractured—always delivering, seldom integrating.

Agency, Governance, and the Engineer's Professional Self

Projectification is frequently associated with autonomy. Engineers are granted discretion in problem-solving, technical design, and collaborative coordination. However, critical scholarship reminds us that such autonomy is often conditional and structured by governance frameworks, methodologies, and performance metrics (Clegg et al., 2002). Standardized project management systems, certification regimes, and delivery-focused metrics define what counts as "successful" engineering, shaping not only processes but also acceptable professional identities (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007). In practice, these frameworks may privilege efficiency, cost control, and schedule adherence over relational leadership, mentoring, or ethical deliberation (Cicmil et al., 2009). Engineers may find themselves navigating tensions between professional values—safety, sustainability, technical integrity—and project imperatives centered on speed and profitability. Such tensions illustrate that agency in projectified engineering is not absolute freedom but a negotiated accomplishment within power-laden structures (Söderlund & Tell, 2011). Importantly, engineers are not passive recipients of these constraints. Studies show that project professionals exercise micro-level agency by reframing goals, selectively adapting procedures, and prioritizing relational or ethical considerations within formal structures (Lindgren et al., 2014). These everyday practices are forms of resistance and reinterpretation that help preserve identity coherence and professional meaning (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Hodgson & Briand, 2013). Engineering leadership should recognize and legitimize such practices, not suppress them in the name of procedural uniformity.

Identity, Well-being, and Human Sustainability in Engineering

Engineering sustainability discourse has traditionally focused on environmental impact, resource efficiency, and system longevity. Yet a growing body of research suggests that *human sustainability*—the long-term capacity of professionals to remain healthy, engaged, and employable—must be treated as equally central (Pfeffer, 2010). Projectified engineering environments, with their high intensity and recurring transitions, can erode well-being when identity continuity and recognition are lacking (Bakker et al., 2016; Jacobsson & Jalocha, 2021). Well-being from an identity perspective depends on three interrelated conditions: coherence (a stable sense of professional self), continuity (the ability to link experiences over time), and recognition (validation from peers, clients, and institutions) (Pratt et al., 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). When engineers can integrate project experiences into meaningful narratives and receive acknowledgment for their contributions, project-based work can enhance learning and self-efficacy (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Conversely, persistent role ambiguity, temporal pressure, and weak social ties may lead to emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Hodgson & Briand, 2013; Lindgren et al., 2014). For engineering organizations, the implication is clear: short-term project efficiency must not come at the expense of long-term professional sustainability. Mentoring systems, structured reflection, career planning across projects, and recognition mechanisms are not peripheral human resource initiatives—they are engineering risk mitigation strategies. Burnout, disengagement, and identity erosion carry tangible costs in quality, safety, and innovation capacity.

Toward a Human-Centered Engineering Project Society

Projectification is unlikely to reverse. Engineering will continue to operate through temporary constellations of expertise responding to complex, rapidly evolving challenges. The question is not whether projects will dominate, but how they will be designed and governed. Reframing projectification as both a technical and ethical issue invites a broader conception of engineering responsibility. Governance systems should balance control with discretion, metrics with meaning, and delivery with development (Hodgson et al., 2019; Jacobsson & Jalocha, 2021). Professional bodies and engineering journals can contribute by expanding the conversation beyond tools and techniques to include identity, agency, and sustainability as core elements of engineering excellence. Engineering has long prided itself on solving complex systemic problems. Projectification presents one such systemic challenge—not of structures and materials, but of identity and human resilience. Designing project systems that sustain both performance and personhood is, ultimately, an engineering problem. It requires analytical rigor, ethical awareness, and institutional innovation. If we succeed, we will not only

build resilient infrastructure and intelligent systems; we will cultivate resilient engineers capable of thriving in the projectified societies they help create.

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