

Permanence Privilege: How organisational Structures Protect Embedded Dysfunction at the Expense of Transient Expertise

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ABSTRACT

Organisations routinely protect embedded specialists at the expense of transient expertise, even when the latter are proven technically correct. This paper examines a persistent organisational failure: when system-level integrators conflict with domain specialists, formal mechanisms consistently favour permanent staff regardless of credentials or technical merit.

Drawing on more than 25 years of commissioning practice across water, oil and gas, and infrastructure in the UK and Australia, the analysis identifies a recurring structural pattern. When transient professionals—commissioning engineers, consultants, contractors—exercise integrative judgment that challenges embedded specialists, organisational dispute-resolution systems privilege permanence over competence. Even when integrative judgment is subsequently vindicated, transient professionals absorb organisational penalties while embedded specialists retain complete protection.

The paper introduces five interrelated concepts—Permanence Privilege, Transient Vulnerability, Credential Displacement, Complaint Asymmetry, and The Open Secret—to explain how formally neutral mechanisms reproduce hierarchy, thereby subordinating system-level competence to embedded authority. These concepts reveal that organisational failure at system integration does not stem from a lack of expertise, but from the structural positioning of knowledge that makes correct judgment unsafe to exercise.

The framework contributes to research on expertise and authority, temporary work, and organisational learning by showing why credentials fail to protect transient professionals, why technically correct judgment is penalised, and why collective awareness fails to produce corrective action.

Keywords: organisational authority; Embedded expertise; Transient professionals; Commissioning; Complaint mechanisms; organisational learning; System integration; Permanence Privilege; Temporary work.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Integration Problem

Complex engineering projects depend on professionals who can see across systems (Perrow, 2011). Commissioning professionals, consultants, and project-based specialists bring integrative expertise—understanding how components interact, how decisions cascade through dependencies, and how technical choices constrain feasibility over time (Sydow et al., 2004). Unlike domain specialists who work within a single technical area, integrators must synthesise competing demands, translate between disciplines, and identify system-level risks that emerge at interfaces (Geraldi et al., 2011).

This integrative function is essential, yet organisationally precarious (Grabher, 2002). When system-level judgement conflicts with domain-specific authority, organisations face a choice: defer to the specialist who owns the technical subsystem or trust the integrator who sees the whole (Abbott, 1988). In principle, technical correctness should determine the outcome. In practice, a different organising logic frequently prevails.

What determines outcomes in these situations is not simply whose analysis is correct, but how authority is organisationally allocated when expertise conflicts. In many project environments, formal mechanisms intended to resolve technical disagreement operate in ways that systematically favour embedded authority over transient integrative judgement (Huisig, 2015).

1.2 Methodological Positioning and Reflexivity

This analysis employs practice-based theory building, generating conceptual frameworks from sustained professional observation across 25+ years of commissioning practice in water treatment, oil and gas, and energy infrastructure in the United Kingdom and Australia (Nicolini, 2012). This extended temporal and cross-sectoral exposure enabled pattern recognition across organisational settings that would otherwise appear unrelated (Becker, 2011).

Practice-based theory building does not claim statistical representativeness (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Its validity lies in theoretical resonance: the capacity to render visible dynamics that practitioners consistently recognise but lack language to articulate (Weick, 2010). The constructs developed here are intended for subsequent empirical examination rather than as empirical claims in themselves.

The author's position as a commissioning practitioner with advanced academic training provides epistemic access unavailable to external observers (Collins and Evans, 2007). Commissioning professionals routinely occupy boundary-spanning roles that expose them to organisational interfaces where authority conflicts surface (Bechky, 2003). No individuals or organisations are identified; instances represent composite patterns with identifying details altered to preserve anonymity (Tolich, 2004).

1.3 A Recurring Organisational Pattern

This paper examines what happens when transient professionals—those whose work is project-based, temporary, or externally contracted—exercise integrative judgement that conflicts with embedded technical specialists (Barley and Kunda, 2004). The analysis is grounded in sustained commissioning practice across multiple infrastructure sectors and organisational settings (Sydow and Staber, 2002) .

Across such contexts, a recurring organisational sequence can be observed. A commissioning professional identifies a system-level risk or recommends an integrative decision that conflicts with a domain specialist's preference (Carlile, 2004). The specialist frames the disagreement as a challenge to technical authority and escalates through formal organisational mechanisms such as management intervention, complaint processes, or HR channels (Edelman, 2016). Subsequent analysis demonstrates that the integrative judgement was technically sound; the system would have failed or underperformed had the specialist's preference prevailed. Yet organisational consequences accrue to the transient professional rather than the embedded specialist.

More revealingly, colleagues from the specialist's department may privately acknowledge that the outcome reflects a familiar organisational pattern rather than an isolated incident. Apologies are offered, sympathy is expressed, and recognition is shared—yet no structural response follows. The transient professional departs, often with reputational damage, while the embedded specialist retains complete organisational protection and standing.

This paper does not claim that such sequences occur universally or uniformly across organisations. Instead, it examines how authority is allocated when these conflicts arise, and why technical correctness alone fails to protect transient integrative expertise.

1.4 Why This Matters

The persistence of these dynamics raises fundamental questions about how organisations allocate authority, resolve technical disputes, and learn from experience (Argyris and Schön, 1978). When integrative professionals are repeatedly proven correct yet organisationally penalised, organisations are not merely failing individuals—they are structurally discouraging the exercise of system-level judgement. When challenging embedded authority carries greater organisational risk than allowing system-level failure, technically correct judgement becomes unsafe to exercise (Detert and Edmondson, 2011)

1.5 Research Question and Theoretical Contribution

This paper asks: How do organisational structures allocate authority between domain specialists and system integrators when conflict arises, and why do formal mechanisms consistently protect embedded staff at the expense of transient expertise, even when the latter are technically correct?

To address this question, the paper introduces five interrelated concepts:

- Permanence Privilege — organisational protection granted to embedded staff, independent of credentials or correctness, derived from assumed continuity and retention concern
- Transient Vulnerability — structural exposure of mobile expertise to organisational penalty despite demonstrated competence
- Credential Displacement — the subordination of academic or professional qualifications to role hierarchy in authority allocation
- Complaint Asymmetry — formal processes that appear neutral but systematically advantage permanent staff through positional embeddedness
- The Open Secret — collective awareness of recurring dysfunction that produces sympathy but not a structural response

Analytically, these concepts operate at different levels. Permanence Privilege and Transient Vulnerability describe structural asymmetry; Credential Displacement and Complaint Asymmetry describe procedural mechanisms through which that asymmetry is enacted; The Open Secret captures the cultural accommodation that allows the pattern to persist despite widespread recognition.

Together, these concepts explain why technically competent organisations repeatedly fail at system integration. The failure is not a lack of expertise, but the organisational positioning of knowledge in ways that make correct judgement unsafe to exercise. Figure 1 illustrates how these concepts operate across three analytical levels and reproduce over time.

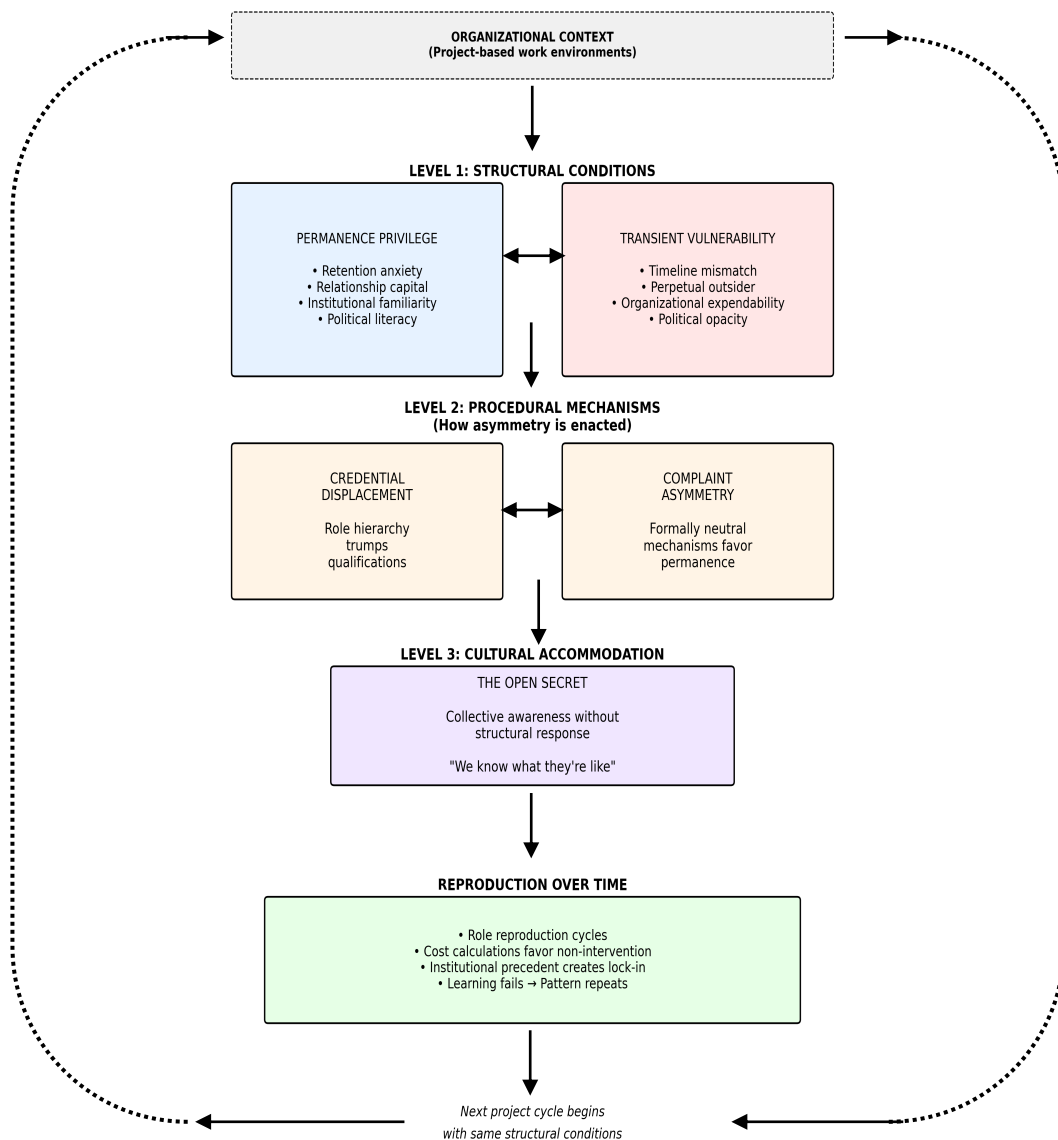


Figure 1 caption: The Permanence Privilege Framework.

This framework operates across three analytical levels: structural conditions create asymmetric positioning between permanent and transient professionals (Level 1); procedural mechanisms enact this asymmetry through credential displacement and complaint processes (Level 2); cultural accommodation normalises dysfunction through collective awareness that produces sympathy but not structural response (Level 3). These levels interact to create self-reinforcing cycles that reproduce authority hierarchies across projects

1.6 Positioning and Scope

This is a conceptual paper, not a case study and not an empirical test of prevalence. It explains the mechanism through which permanence becomes a decisive variable in

authority allocation when integrative and domain expertise conflict. It does not estimate how frequently this mechanism occurs, nor does it claim universality across organisations or sectors.

The contribution lies in making visible a structural logic that operates across contexts when present, rather than in asserting its distribution. By articulating this mechanism, the paper provides conceptual tools for recognising and examining a form of organisational dysfunction that is widely experienced yet rarely theorised.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This analysis draws on four bodies of literature: expertise and authority in professional work; temporary and project-based employment; organisational learning and the persistence of dysfunction; and commissioning as professional practice. Each addresses aspects of the organisational dynamics examined here. None, however, explains how permanence operates as a structuring principle in authority allocation when integrative and domain expertise conflict.

2.1 Expertise and Authority in Professional Work

Research on professional expertise and authority has long examined how technical knowledge confers legitimacy within organisations. Foundational work emphasises jurisdiction, credentialing, and the social organisation of professions, demonstrating how authority is claimed and defended through recognised domains of expertise (Abbott, 1988). Within this literature, formal qualifications and specialised training are typically treated as the basis for legitimate technical judgement.

However, these frameworks struggle to account for situations in which professionals with broader or higher-order qualifications are overridden by less-credentialed specialists when organisational roles conflict (Bechky, 2003). Existing accounts do not adequately explain why integrative professionals—whose expertise spans multiple domains and whose assessments concern system-level performance—lack authority when their judgment challenges embedded domain ownership.

This limitation reveals a gap between epistemic legitimacy and organisational protection. Credentials establish competence, but they do not determine whose judgment is defended when disputes arise (Anteby and Chan, 2018). The concept of Permanence Privilege addresses this gap by distinguishing technical legitimacy from organisational insulation. Authority, in these cases, is shaped not by what a professional knows but by how securely they are positioned within organisational structures.

Specifically, existing expertise literature cannot explain three phenomena observed in commissioning practice: (1) why professionals with demonstrably superior system-level understanding are organisationally subordinated to specialists with narrower technical scope; (2) why subsequent vindication of integrative judgement does not produce organisational learning or protection; and (3) why credentials function as legitimacy markers only until they conflict with embedded authority, at which point they become

organisationally irrelevant (Haas et al., 2020). These observations suggest that authority allocation follows a logic distinct from epistemic merit—a logic this paper identifies as permanence-based rather than competence-based.

Recent work examining commissioning practice has identified how epistemic injustice operates in engineering contexts, showing that technical knowledge is systematically discounted when it comes from professionals who lack organisational standing, regardless of credential superiority or demonstrated competence (Ayres, 2025a). The framework developed here extends this analysis by identifying permanence as the structural mechanism through which such epistemic hierarchies are organizationally enacted.

2.2 Temporary Work, Contracting, and Positional Vulnerability

The literature on temporary, project-based, and contract work documents the structural vulnerabilities associated with non-permanent employment. Research identifies reduced job security, limited advancement opportunities, exclusion from organisational networks, and differential treatment relative to permanent staff. This body of work establishes that employment status shapes organisational experience in systematic ways.

However, much of this literature focuses on economic precarity and career trajectories rather than on the organisational credibility of technical judgement. Temporary workers are treated primarily as labour-market subjects rather than as knowledge actors, offering limited insight into how temporary status affects authority allocation in technical decision-making.

The concept of Transient Vulnerability extends this work by identifying a form of epistemic precarity: the structural exposure of technically correct judgement to organisational penalty due to impermanence. In conflicts with embedded specialists, transient professionals are disadvantaged not because their expertise is weaker, but because their organisational position lacks protection. Existing research acknowledges vulnerability but does not explain how organisations actively reproduce it through ostensibly neutral mechanisms.

The temporary work literature identifies vulnerability but treats it primarily as labour-market positioning rather than epistemic positioning. This leaves unexplained how a technically correct judgement becomes organisationally unsafe to exercise. The framework developed here shows that transient vulnerability operates not only economically (through precarious employment) but epistemically (through structural inability to defend technically sound judgment when it conflicts with embedded authority). Existing research documents that temporary workers experience disadvantage; this paper explains the mechanism through which that disadvantage converts technical correctness into organisational liability.

2.3 Organisational Learning and the Persistence of Dysfunction

Organisational learning scholarship examines why institutions fail to correct known problems. Research on routines, defensive practices, and structural inertia demonstrates that organisations may persist in dysfunctional patterns despite adverse outcomes (Argyris,

1990). These accounts emphasise cognitive limitations, political resistance, or the difficulty of challenging entrenched practices.

While this literature explains why organisations struggle to change, it offers a limited explanation for situations in which dysfunction is openly acknowledged yet remains structurally protected. Colleagues recognise recurring patterns, sympathise with affected individuals, and anticipate repetition—yet no structural intervention occurs.

The concept of The Open Secret extends organisational learning theory by shifting attention from failure to dysfunction, to the inability to act despite recognition. The barrier is not ignorance or denial, but the structural protection of embedded authority that renders intervention costly and accommodation rational (Hood, 1990).

Organisational learning theory has developed sophisticated explanations for why organisations fail to detect problems, misdiagnose causes, or resist changing established routines. However, the dynamic examined here differs fundamentally: the problem is detected, the cause is diagnosed, and the correct judgement is even vindicated—yet no learning occurs. This represents a distinct learning pathology that existing theory does not address: organisations that possess the information necessary for correction yet systematically suppress that information when acting on it would require challenging embedded authority (Levitt and March, 1988). The Open Secret reveals how organisations learn not to learn when learning threatens structural stability.

2.4 Commissioning as Integrative Professional Practice

Commissioning literature documents the technical and coordination challenges involved in bringing complex systems into operation (Winch, 2010). Research emphasises integration across disciplines, management of uncertainty, and the identification of system-level risks. Commissioning professionals are recognised as playing a critical role in ensuring that infrastructure performs as intended.

However, commissioning research treats professional challenges as technical or coordination problems rather than as organisational authority conflicts. The literature does not adequately theorise why integrative roles are structurally subordinated to domain specialists, why system-level judgement is organisationally unsafe to exercise, or why professionals who are technically correct may nonetheless absorb organisational penalties.

By reframing commissioning challenges as authority-allocation problems rather than coordination failures, this paper offers a structural explanation for difficulties that the commissioning literature typically attributes to complexity or communication breakdown.

The commissioning literature assumes that when integrative judgement is technically sound, it will eventually be organisationally recognised and acted upon. This assumption is empirically falsified by the recurring pattern examined here: commissioning professionals are proven correct yet absorb organisational penalties while embedded specialists retain protection (Davies and Mackenzie, 2014). This suggests that commissioning challenges are not primarily technical or communicative, but structural and political. Integrative expertise is formally valued but organisationally unsafe to exercise when it conflicts with domain sovereignty. Commissioning has been characterised as boundary-spanning work that requires integrating across technical domains, managing tacit knowledge, and navigating legitimacy

challenges (Ayres et al., 2025c). However, existing commissioning literature has not adequately theorised why such integrative roles are structurally subordinated when they conflict with domain specialists.

2.5 Synthesis: The Gap This Paper Addresses

The existing literature explains fragments of the organisational dynamics examined here, but does not integrate them into a coherent account of authority allocation when permanence and expertise diverge. Research on knowledge fails to explain legitimacy without accounting for why credentials fail to protect against transient roles. Temporary work scholarship documents vulnerability without explaining how permanence creates privilege (Kalleberg, 2018). Organisational learning theory explains persistence but fails to explain why collective awareness fails to produce a structural response. Commissioning literature describes integrative challenges without theorising their organisational subordination.

This paper bridges these gaps by treating permanence as an independent variable in authority allocation, showing how structural position, procedural mechanisms, and cultural accommodation interact to reproduce authority hierarchy despite recognised technical error.

3. PERMANENCE PRIVILEGE AND TRANSIENT VULNERABILITY: STRUCTURAL ASYMMETRY

When conflicts arise between professionals in complex engineering projects, organisations must decide whose judgement to credit. In principle, such decisions should rest on technical merit. In practice, outcomes are shaped by a different variable: whether the professional in question is expected to remain or to leave (Bidwell, 2011).

This section introduces two paired concepts that explain this asymmetry. Permanence Privilege refers to the structural protection afforded to professionals whose ongoing presence within the organisation is assumed, independent of technical correctness or credential superiority. Transient Vulnerability describes the corresponding exposure of mobile, project-based expertise to organisational penalty despite demonstrated competence. These are not individual attributes or behavioural tendencies; they are positional effects produced by organisational structure.

3.1 Why Permanence Matters

Permanence matters because organisations are structured around continuity. Embedded staff are not merely workers; they are organisational investments (Kang and Snell, 2009). They accumulate relational ties, institutional familiarity, and informal authority over time. Their continued presence is assumed in planning, resourcing, and managerial calculus. By contrast, transient professionals are engaged with the expectation of departure. Their roles are time-bounded, their relationships provisional, and their organisational value framed as instrumental rather than constitutive.

When conflict arises, this asymmetry becomes consequential. Decisions are made not only about technical correctness but also about organisational stability. Protecting embedded staff minimises immediate disruption, preserves working relationships, and avoids retention risk (Allen et al., 2010). Allowing transient professionals to absorb organisational cost appears, from a short-term managerial perspective, comparatively inconsequential.

This logic operates regardless of technical merit. Even when integrative judgement is correct, the organisational costs of challenging permanence outweigh the perceived benefits of defending transience.

3.2 Permanence Privilege

Permanence Privilege arises from organisational dependence on embedded staff and operates independently of competence or correctness. It reflects concern about continuity rather than confidence in specialist judgement. This privilege is sustained through several interrelated mechanisms.

First, retention anxiety biases organisational response when conflict involves permanent staff. Embedded specialists are treated as potential retention risks; dissatisfaction, perceived challenges, or conflicts are managed diplomatically to preserve ongoing employment relationships. Transient professionals, by contrast, are already expected to leave. Their dissatisfaction carries little organisational weight.

Second, permanence enables the accumulation of relationship capital. Embedded staff develop dense relational networks with managers, peers, and support functions that function as informal protection during disputes (Burt, 2005). These relationships shape how complaints are interpreted, whose accounts are trusted, and how outcomes are framed. Transient professionals lack the time required to accumulate comparable capital, regardless of experience or expertise.

Third, permanence confers institutional familiarity, which is frequently treated as authoritative. Knowledge of site history, established practice, and organisational norms is valorised over integrative expertise (Bechky, 2003). This allows embedded specialists to frame challenges as naïve, insufficiently contextual, or disruptive, even when technically correct.

Finally, permanence facilitates political literacy. Embedded professionals understand informal escalation pathways, managerial preferences, and organisational sensitivities. They know when and how to mobilise formal mechanisms strategically. Transient professionals, lacking access to these informal structures, are structurally disadvantaged in conflict situations even when they rely on the same formal processes.

Together, these mechanisms create a protective envelope around embedded staff that operates independently of technical merit.

3.3 Transient Vulnerability

Transient Vulnerability is the mirror condition of permanence privilege. It describes the structural exposure of mobile expertise to organisational penalty arising from the temporal and positional constraints of project-based work.

Transient professionals face a fundamental timeline mismatch (Sydow et al., 2004). The accumulation of relational and political capital requires years; project-based roles operate over months. Each engagement begins at zero, and any protective capital dissipates upon departure. Even highly experienced professionals repeatedly re-enter organisations as organisational novices.

They are also positioned as perpetual outsiders (Tempest and Starkey, 2004). Regardless of expertise or credentials, transient professionals are marked as external and provisional. This status signals expendability and reduces organisational investment in their protection. When conflict arises, organisational bias favours insiders over outsiders, permanence over transience.

Planned impermanence further produces organisational expendability. Because departure is anticipated, defending transient professionals offers little perceived return. Even when integrative judgement is correct, organisational logic favours preserving long-term relationships with permanent staff over protecting short-term expertise.

Finally, transient professionals operate under conditions of political opacity. Lacking access to informal networks, they rely on formal structures that poorly reflect actual decision-making dynamics. Embedded specialists, by contrast, can shape outcomes through informal influence long before disputes become visible.

3.4 The "Procedural Familiarity" Defence

A typical organisational response to the dynamics described here is to argue that transient professionals cause difficulties because they lack familiarity with local procedures, institutional norms, and site-specific practices. From this perspective, privileging embedded specialists does not appear to be a structural bias but rather a rational organisational protection.

This defence warrants examination because it reveals rather than refutes the mechanism at work.

First, the defence conflates two distinct forms of knowledge: procedural familiarity (knowing how this organisation does things) and technical competence (knowing what needs to be done) (Nicolini, 2012). When these conflicts occur—when following established procedures would produce system-level failure—organisations systematically privilege the former. This is precisely what Permanence Privilege describes.

Second, the defence treats unfamiliarity with local procedures as a professional deficit rather than an epistemic resource. Integrative professionals must work across multiple organisational contexts; their value lies partly in not being socialised into any single organisation's assumptions. When local procedures are themselves outdated, inefficient, or technically inadequate, an external perspective becomes essential rather than deficient.

Third, this defence is applied asymmetrically (Edelman, 2016). When embedded specialists make errors, these are attributed to circumstance, complexity, or communication breakdown. When transient professionals challenge established practice, their unfamiliarity with procedures is invoked as an explanation. The same lack of familiarity is treated as disqualifying when transient professionals are correct, yet organisational memory of their vindication dissipates while procedural norms remain unchanged.

Finally, the defence assumes that learning organisational procedures is straightforward, while acquiring system-level integrative expertise is not. The reverse is often true: procedural knowledge is transmissible through documentation and training; integrative judgement develops through sustained cross-organisational practice. Organisations that prioritise the former over the latter are optimising for conformity rather than competence.

The procedural familiarity defence, therefore, does not counter the analysis presented here—it exemplifies it. When organisations treat unfamiliarity with local practice as more problematic than demonstrated system-level expertise, they are enacting Permanence Privilege.

4. CREDENTIAL DISPLACEMENT AND COMPLAINT ASYMMETRY: HOW FORMAL SYSTEMS REPRODUCE HIERARCHY

The structural asymmetry described in Section 3 is not sustained informally alone. It is actively reproduced through formal organisational mechanisms that appear neutral but operate in systematically asymmetric ways. This section introduces two concepts that explain how organisational hierarchy is maintained even when technical merit is demonstrably misaligned with authority: Credential Displacement and Complaint Asymmetry.

Together, these concepts show how organisations transform apparent meritocracy into positional hierarchy. Authority is not withdrawn from transient professionals because their expertise is deficient, but because organisational systems privilege role occupancy and permanence over demonstrated competence when disputes arise.

4.1 When Qualifications Do Not Determine Authority

In professional environments, formal qualifications are widely treated as indicators of competence. Academic credentials, certifications, and specialised training are presumed to confer authority and legitimacy. In principle, disputes should therefore be resolved through technical evaluation: whose training is most relevant, whose experience is most extensive, whose assessment is best supported by evidence.

In practice, credentials often fail to determine outcomes when organisational roles conflict. When transient integrators challenge embedded specialists, authority is allocated according to role hierarchy rather than qualification (Bechky, 2003). This displacement does not reflect a rejection of credentials; credentials remain relevant for hiring, positioning, and external legitimacy. The displacement occurs at the moment of conflict, when organisational stability is perceived to be at stake.

The result is paradoxical: professionals with superior credentials and demonstrated competence are subordinated to those with inferior qualifications but superior organisational positioning.

4.2 Credential Displacement

Credential Displacement refers to the organisational process by which role titles and positional hierarchy override academic or professional qualifications in authority allocation and dispute resolution (Abbott, 1988).

This displacement operates independently of technical merit. It is evident when:

- professionals with broader or higher-order training are subordinated to those with narrower formal preparation due to organisational role positioning
- Specialist certifications are treated as less consequential than job titles
- cross-sector or cross-project expertise is discounted in favour of site-specific tenure
- demonstrated competence is overridden by assumptions attached to institutional roles

Credential Displacement does not imply that credentials are meaningless. Instead, it reveals that credentials are organisationally fragile: they confer legitimacy only until they conflict with embedded authority. At that point, organisational hierarchy supersedes epistemic hierarchy. This dynamic exemplifies what Ayres (2025a) identifies as the 'invisible hands phenomenon': technically correct judgment becomes organizationally invisible when it conflicts with embedded authority, regardless of the credentials or demonstrated expertise of the professional exercising that judgment.

4.3 Role Titles and Institutional Investment

Specific role titles carry authority that exceeds their technical scope (Bechky, 2003). Labels such as scientist, technical authority, or domain specialist function as shorthand for competence, often without reference to actual qualification or demonstrated performance. The title itself becomes evidence of expertise.

This mythology persists because organisations invest materially and symbolically in permanent staff through salaries, training, equipment, and integration into operational routines. The role signals institutional investment, continuity, and domain ownership in ways that external credentials rarely penetrate. Challenging an embedded specialist's judgement, therefore, implies questioning organisational investment itself.

By contrast, commissioning and consulting roles lack comparable mythology. Titles such as commissioning engineer, consultant, or contractor signal service provision rather than authority. Even when such professionals possess advanced qualifications and extensive experience, their roles position them as instrumental rather than authoritative. Their expertise is purchased, not cultivated.

Credential Displacement occurs when organisations treat role titles as proxies for competence, with authority presumed to reside in the role rather than in the individual occupying it. This creates perverse incentives: the more an organisation has invested in an

embedded specialist, the more resistant it becomes to evidence that integrative expertise exceeds local authority. Credential superiority becomes threatening rather than valuable because it exposes misalignment between organisational investment and technical competence.

4.4 Complaint Asymmetry

Complaint Asymmetry describes how formal organisational processes—such as grievance procedures, HR interventions, and escalation protocols—that appear procedurally neutral operate in systematically asymmetric ways when invoked by permanent versus transient staff (Edelman, 2016). These mechanisms are designed to resolve disputes fairly and protect individuals from mistreatment. However, when activated in conflicts between embedded specialists and transient professionals, they function as instruments through which permanence privilege is enacted and transient vulnerability amplified.

4.5 Complaint Asymmetry in Practice

Procedural neutrality assumes that identical processes produce equivalent outcomes regardless of who invokes them. In reality, identical procedures operate within structurally unequal contexts.

Embedded specialists invoke complaint mechanisms from positions of organisational embeddedness, relationship capital, and retention concern (Burt, 2005). When they file complaints, the signal is interpreted as a potential retention risk. The managerial response is oriented toward relationship preservation rather than technical adjudication, with managers seeking a resolution that maintains stability and continuity.

Transient professionals invoke the same mechanisms from positions of organisational marginality and anticipated departure. Their complaints attract less urgency, less managerial attention, and less institutional protection, regardless of technical merit. Departure is already anticipated; organisational investment is minimal.

Embedded specialists also possess political literacy that transient professionals cannot readily acquire. They understand informal escalation pathways, managerial preferences, and which framings trigger intervention. Complaints are strategically framed not as technical disagreements but as behavioural or relational violations, triggering HR involvement and shifting disputes away from technical evaluation.

Transient professionals, by contrast, often engage complaint mechanisms naively, assuming procedural neutrality and expecting evidence to determine outcomes. They underestimate the role of informal organisational infrastructure. This asymmetry operates independently of complaint validity. Even when a transient professional's judgement is subsequently validated, the organisational response remains oriented toward preserving embedded authority. Technical correctness does not protect against political disadvantage.

4.6 Vindication Without Protection

The most revealing feature of Complaint Asymmetry occurs when transient professionals are subsequently proven correct. Post-project analysis confirms that the integrative

judgement was sound and that specialist preference would have led to system failure or underperformance.

In organisations that prioritised technical merit, such vindication would trigger correction. In practice, vindication produces no protection (Vaughan, 2016). Reputational damage persists, penalties remain in place, and no consequences accrue to the embedded specialist. Organisational learning does not occur.

The organisational lesson is clear: technical correctness does not confer safety. Challenging embedded authority carries organisational risk regardless of merit.

5. THE OPEN SECRET: COLLECTIVE AWARENESS WITHOUT STRUCTURAL RESPONSE

The structural and procedural mechanisms described in Sections 3 and 4 explain how authority is allocated when conflict arises between embedded specialists and transient integrators. They do not, however, explain why these outcomes persist despite widespread recognition of their dysfunction. That persistence is addressed here through the concept of The Open Secret.

The Open Secret describes organisational dynamics in which patterns of dysfunction are collectively known, informally acknowledged, and individually accommodated, yet fail to trigger structural intervention or systemic correction (Berstler, 2025). It is not ignorance. It is not denial. It is not silent. Instead, it is collective awareness without organisational response.

5.1 Definition and Scope

The Open Secret refers to situations in which organisational actors recognise a recurring pattern of behaviour or outcome as dysfunctional, anticipate its repetition, and privately acknowledge its existence, yet remain structurally unable or unwilling to intervene (Berstler, 2025). This concept does not centre on individual misconduct. Instead, it captures how organisations normalise structurally protected patterns of error by treating them as known but unchangeable features of the organisational landscape. Dysfunction becomes something to be managed, endured, or worked around rather than addressed.

The Open Secret operates at the cultural level. It is sustained through shared understanding, informal conversation, and tacit agreement about what can and cannot be challenged. Its defining feature is not lack of awareness, but the routinisation of inaction.

5.2 “We Know What They’re Like”: Recognition Without Response

The Open Secret is most clearly visible in moments of informal acknowledgement following organisational conflict. Colleagues privately validate the experience of the transient professional, acknowledging that the outcome reflects a familiar organisational pattern rather than an isolated incident (Hussain et al., 2019). Such recognition often takes the form of apologetic remarks, expressions of sympathy, or statements indicating prior knowledge of the embedded specialist’s behaviour.

These acknowledgements perform multiple functions simultaneously. They confirm that the transient professional's experience is not idiosyncratic, establish that the pattern is collectively recognised, and signal that the organisation is unlikely to act. By framing the behaviour as characteristic—"that's just how they are"—dysfunction is individualised and naturalised rather than treated as structurally produced.

In this way, recognition substitutes for response. Awareness becomes a form of accommodation rather than a trigger for intervention.

5.3 Why Awareness Does Not Produce Action

Several structural conditions convert collective awareness into organisational inaction.

First, the cost of intervention exceeds the cost of accommodation (Hussain et al., 2019). Challenging embedded authority risks retention loss, workflow disruption, managerial effort, and political fallout. Accommodation, by contrast, carries diffuse and deferred costs. The transient professional absorbs the penalty and departs as anticipated. From an organisational perspective, inaction is locally rational even when dysfunction is recognised.

Second, responsibility for intervention is distributed rather than owned (Hussain et al., 2019). No single organisational actor bears responsibility for addressing the pattern. Managers can express sympathy, colleagues can apologise, HR can follow procedure, yet none are positioned to enact structural change without incurring personal or professional risk. Collective recognition, therefore, produces individual resignation rather than coordinated response.

Third, role mythology protects embedded authority (Berstler, 2025). The organisational legitimacy attached to specialist roles appears inappropriate or excessive. Challenging behaviour becomes conflated with challenging expertise, institutional investment, or professional identity. As a result, even recognised dysfunction remains protected.

5.3.1 What Makes Recognition Structurally Inert

The Open Secret reveals a paradox: collective awareness of dysfunction coexists with structural inaction. This requires explanation.

First, acknowledgement substitutes for intervention. When colleagues express sympathy—"we know what they're like"—this recognition performs social work that dissipates pressure for structural change (Berstler, 2025). The transient professional receives validation, reducing the likelihood of a formal complaint or escalation. Embedded specialists' behaviour is framed as a personality issue rather than an organisational problem, placing it outside the scope of institutional response. The apologetic acknowledgement thus functions as a release valve, converting structural dysfunction into interpersonal tolerance.

Second, awareness distributes responsibility until no one owns it (Hussain et al., 2019). When knowledge is collective, no individual bears an obligation to act. The engineer who apologises for a colleague's behaviour implicitly signals: "I see the problem but cannot address it." The manager who acknowledges the pattern equally signals: "This exceeds my

authority to correct.” Collective knowledge paradoxically enables collective inaction—everyone recognises the dysfunction; therefore, no one must respond to it.

Third, repetition normalises rather than escalates concern (Berstler, 2025). The first instance of embedded specialists challenging transient expertise might prompt questions about authority allocation. The tenth instance becomes “how things work here.” Each repetition shifts the phenomenon from an aberration to an institutional characteristic. What was once surprising becomes expected. Organisations learn to accommodate dysfunction rather than address it.

Fourth, sympathy performs boundary work that protects existing structures. Colleagues who apologise for embedded specialists’ behaviour position themselves as organisationally constrained rather than complicit. This framing preserves relationships while maintaining the structural status quo. The transient professional departs with validation but without remedy; embedded specialists remain protected; sympathetic colleagues demonstrate awareness without accepting accountability. The Open Secret thus functions not despite organisational inaction but through it.

Finally, The Open Secret reveals how organisations distinguish between knowledge that demands response and expertise that can be acknowledged without consequence. Technical errors require correction; interpersonal conflict requires mediation; safety violations require investigation. But structural patterns that privilege permanence over competence fall into a category that permits recognition without response. Organisations develop sophisticated awareness of dynamics they cannot or will not address.

This explains why The Open Secret persists across organisations and sectors. It is not that individual actors lack awareness or concern. It is that organisational structures provide no mechanism for translating collective recognition into institutional response when the dysfunction serves the role of stability.

5.4 The Function of Apology

Apologies play a crucial role in sustaining the Open Secret. They acknowledge harm without requiring correction, validate experience without triggering consequence, and preserve interpersonal relationships without disrupting organisational structure (Berstler, 2025). The apologising colleague occupies a revealing position: embedded enough to recognise the pattern, peripheral enough to avoid penalty for acknowledging it, yet structurally constrained from acting. Their apology confirms that awareness exists while simultaneously reinforcing that intervention will not occur.

In this way, apology functions as an organisational safety valve. It releases interpersonal tension while leaving structural arrangements intact.

5.5 Why the Pattern Repeats

The Open Secret ensures pattern repetition through a predictable organisational cycle. New transient professionals enter the organisation, encounter conflict with embedded authority, experience asymmetric resolution, receive informal acknowledgement, and depart. Organisational structures remain unchanged, and the subsequent transient professional encounters identical conditions.

Because transient professionals leave, institutional memory of their contributions dissipates. Embedded specialists, by contrast, retain organisational standing regardless of technical outcome. Each cycle reinforces precedent, deepens accommodation as the default response, and further normalises the subordination of integrative expertise.

Over time, the organisation learns the wrong lesson: that protecting embedded authority is safer than correcting system-level error (Berstler, 2025). The Open Secret thus converts awareness into stability rather than learning.

6. SUSTAINING MECHANISMS: HOW ORGANISATIONS REPRODUCE PERMANENCE PRIVILEGED OVER TIME

The preceding sections describe how authority is allocated in moments of conflict and how collective awareness fails to produce intervention. This section examines how these outcomes become self-reinforcing over time through organisational mechanisms that embed asymmetry into routines, memory, and decision-making structures, ensuring similar conflicts are resolved in similar ways regardless of technical outcome.

6.1 Role Reproduction Cycles

Organisations reproduce authority hierarchies through recurring role cycles that reset with each project. Transient professionals are engaged to provide integrative expertise, encounter conflict with embedded authority, absorb organisational penalty, and depart. Embedded specialists remain, retaining organisational standing regardless of technical outcome.

This asymmetry has profound implications for organisational memory. The contributions of transient professionals dissipate with their departure. Correct judgments leave no institutional trace if they challenge embedded authority. Embedded specialists, by contrast, remain associated with continuity rather than with technical outcomes. Over time, organisations remember roles, not performance.

The next project begins with identical assumptions, reproducing the same authority allocation despite previous failure.

6.2 Cost Calculations and Temporal Bias

Organisations continually weigh the costs of intervention against the costs of non-intervention. This calculation is structurally biased by time horizon.

The costs of intervention are immediate and visible: potential retention loss, disruption to established working relationships, managerial effort, escalation risk, and political fallout. The expenses of non-intervention are diffuse and deferred: degraded system integration, recurring inefficiencies, loss of transient expertise, and long-term performance risk.

Because organisational incentives privilege short-term stability over long-term learning, non-intervention appears locally rational. Aggregated over time, however, this logic

produces systemic irrationality. Organisations repeatedly sacrifice system competence to preserve role stability, even as the cumulative cost exceeds that of intervention.

6.3 Institutional Precedent and Structural Lock-In

Each instance of non-intervention generates precedent. When embedded specialists challenge integrative expertise and receive protection, precedent establishes that such challenges are organisationally legitimate. When transient professionals are proven correct yet penalised, precedent establishes that technical merit does not override positional hierarchy.

These precedents accumulate into a structural lock-in. Over time, changing course requires acknowledging that prior organisational decisions were systematically misaligned with technical outcomes. The longer the pattern persists, the greater the institutional investment in maintaining it. Intervention becomes increasingly costly not because the problem is unclear, but because correcting it would expose accumulated organisational error.

Structural lock-in thus transforms contingency into inevitability. What began as locally rational non-intervention becomes organisational destiny.

6.4 Why Learning Fails

The sustaining mechanisms described here explain why organisational learning does not occur despite repeated exposure to failure. This represents a specific learning pathology: organisations possess the information necessary for correction yet systematically fail to act on it.

Traditional organisational learning theory posits that organisations learn through feedback loops—detecting errors, diagnosing causes, and adjusting behaviour accordingly. Single-loop learning corrects errors within existing frameworks; double-loop learning questions the frameworks themselves (Argyris, 1990). Both assume that recognised dysfunction triggers a corrective response.

Permanence Privilege disrupts this assumption. The feedback loop operates, but the signal is suppressed before correction can occur. Organisations detect the error (a transient professional's proven correctness), diagnose the cause (an embedded specialist's flawed judgement), yet the correction mechanism fails. Not because the organisation lacks information, but because acting on that information threatens stability.

This creates a paradox: organisations learn not to learn. Each instance of non-intervention following vindication teaches that challenging embedded authority is organisationally unsafe regardless of technical merit. This lesson is absorbed by the remaining staff and transmitted to incoming transient professionals. The organisation develops sophisticated knowledge about which truths can be acknowledged and which must remain unacted upon.

Existing organisational learning theory struggles to explain this dynamic because it assumes learning serves organisational effectiveness (Levitt and March, 1988). When learning threatens embedded authority, however, organisations prioritise stability over effectiveness. Learning becomes selective: organisations absorb lessons that reinforce existing hierarchies while suppressing lessons that would require structural change.

Three specific learning failures emerge:

First, temporal discounting prevents pattern recognition. Each conflict is treated as an isolated incident rather than an instantiation of a pattern. Because transient professionals depart, organisational memory fragments. The pattern is recognised informally (The Open Secret) but not formally encoded. Without formal encoding, organisational learning mechanisms cannot engage.

Second, attribution errors protect embedded authority. When embedded specialists are proven wrong, organisations attribute the failure to circumstances, communication breakdowns, or interpersonal conflict rather than to misallocated authority. This protects the legitimacy of role-based hierarchy while preventing learning about when integrative expertise should override domain authority.

Third, learning would require organisations to question the legitimacy of their own investment decisions. Acknowledging that transient professionals are systematically correct when challenging embedded specialists means acknowledging that organisational investment in permanent roles has been misaligned with technical competence requirements. The longer this pattern persists, the greater the institutional investment in maintaining it. Intervention becomes increasingly costly not because the problem is unclear, but because correcting it would expose accumulated organisational error.

As a result, organisations learn to tolerate dysfunction rather than correct it. Awareness is absorbed into routine, precedent replaces evaluation, and stability is mistaken for effectiveness. Permanence Privilege becomes normalised rather than contested. The organisation develops what might be called strategic ignorance—the capacity to know something collectively while ensuring that knowledge remains structurally inert.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The analysis developed in this paper has implications for organisations that rely on integrative expertise, for professionals who occupy transient roles, and for research on authority, learning, and organisational dysfunction. These implications are diagnostic rather than prescriptive. The framework does not propose immediate solutions; it explains why existing arrangements repeatedly produce the same outcomes.

7.1 Implications for Organisations

For organisations, the analysis reveals that formal mechanisms commonly assumed to support fairness and learning—complaint procedures, escalation pathways, and managerial intervention—often function instead to reproduce structural hierarchy. When permanence operates as a proxy for authority, these mechanisms prioritise continuity and stability over technical adjudication.

This has consequences for system performance. Integrative expertise is formally valued yet organisationally unsafe to exercise. When challenging embedded authority carries greater organisational risk than allowing system-level error, organisations implicitly incentivise deference over correctness. Over time, this undermines the very capabilities required to manage complex, interdependent systems.

The framework allows organisations to recognise that repeated conflict outcomes are not isolated failures of collaboration or communication, but predictable consequences of how authority is structurally allocated.

7.2 Implications for Transient Professionals

For transient professionals, the framework provides language for experiences that are widely shared yet rarely legitimised. Penalties arising from conflict with embedded authority are often interpreted as personal failure or interpersonal breakdown. This analysis reframes those experiences as structurally produced rather than individually caused.

At an organisational level, the framework helps explain why learning fails even when problems are openly recognised. Awareness alone does not produce change when authority is structurally protected (Levitt and March, 1988). Learning that threatens embedded authority is deferred in favour of stability, even when long-term costs are acknowledged.

7.2.1 Gender

Empirical evidence suggests that commissioning roles may be disproportionately occupied by women relative to permanent specialist positions in water and infrastructure sectors (Ayres et al., 2025b), though comprehensive workforce data remains limited. If this pattern holds, Permanence Privilege functions as a gendered mechanism: women's integrative expertise is systematically subordinated not through explicit discrimination, but through organizationally neutral structures that favour embedded authority over transient competence. This aligns with broader analyses of how epistemic injustice operates to devalue women's technical knowledge in engineering practice (Ayres, 2025a).

7.3 Implications for Research

The concepts introduced in this paper invite empirical investigation. Future research could examine how dispute outcomes differ between permanent and transient professionals, how complaint mechanisms operate across organisational contexts, and under what conditions organisations intervene despite permanence privilege.

The framework may also have relevance beyond commissioning. Similar dynamics may operate wherever transient expertise intersects with embedded authority, such as in consultancy, healthcare locum work, academic adjunct labour, or interim management. By treating permanence as an analytical variable rather than a background condition, researchers can examine authority allocation in new ways.

Rather than proposing open-ended research directions, the framework generates specific testable propositions:

Proposition 1: Dispute outcomes correlate with employment status independent of technical correctness. When technical disagreements arise between permanent and transient professionals, organisations resolve disputes in favour of permanent staff at rates significantly higher than what technical merit alone would predict. This can be tested through comparative analysis of complaint outcomes, escalation resolutions, and post-

project evaluations, controlling for credentials, experience, and subsequent technical validation.

Proposition 2: Organisational intervention rates decline as embedded specialist tenure increases. The longer an embedded specialist has occupied their role, the lower the probability that organisations will intervene when conflicts arise with transient professionals, even when controlling for technical performance. This suggests that permanence privilege strengthens over time through accumulated relationship capital and institutional investment.

Proposition 3: Collective awareness exists without formal documentation. Organisations will demonstrate high levels of informal recognition of recurring dysfunction (as evidenced by interviews, private communications, and exit debriefs). At the same time, formal organisational records (performance reviews, incident reports, learning documents) contain no corresponding acknowledgement. This would empirically verify The Open Secret as an organisational phenomenon distinct from simple learning failure.

Proposition 4: Vindication does not produce organisational learning. When transient professionals are subsequently proven correct after organisational penalty, organisations will not revise dispute resolution practices, adjust authority allocation, or provide remediation at rates that would indicate learning has occurred. This can be examined through longitudinal case studies that track whether organisations change their practices after repeated instances of embedded specialist error.

Proposition 5: Credential advantage inverts under conflict conditions. While higher credentials typically predict greater organisational authority in routine operations, during disputes with embedded specialists, transient professionals with superior credentials will experience worse outcomes than those with equivalent credentials, suggesting that credential superiority becomes threatening rather than protective when it challenges embedded authority.

These propositions enable empirical research that can test, refine, or refute the framework developed here. They also suggest specific methodological approaches: comparative case analysis of dispute outcomes; longitudinal tracking of organisational responses to repeated patterns; network analysis of how relationship capital affects conflict resolution; and discourse analysis examining how organisational learning documents selectively encode or suppress particular types of knowledge.

Beyond commissioning, the framework invites investigation of whether similar dynamics operate in other contexts where transient expertise intersects with embedded authority: consultancy engagements, healthcare locum arrangements, academic adjunct labour, interim management, and expert witness testimony. By treating permanence as an analytical variable rather than a background condition, researchers can examine authority allocation mechanisms that existing frameworks overlook.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how organisations allocate authority when integrative and domain expertise conflict. Through five interrelated concepts—Permanence Privilege, Transient Vulnerability, Credential Displacement, Complaint Asymmetry, and The Open Secret—it has shown how formally neutral organisational mechanisms reproduce hierarchy in ways that subordinate system-level competence to embedded authority.

The apologetic acknowledgement—“we know what they’re like”—captures the paradox at the heart of this dynamic. Collective awareness exists, yet structural response does not. Until organisations recognise how permanence shapes authority allocation, integrative expertise will remain undervalued within organisations despite its acknowledged importance.

The next transient professional will make the correct call, will be challenged by embedded authority, will be proven right, and will still absorb the organisational penalty. Not because the system lacks expertise—but because it protects roles rather than competence.

Until organisations recognise that permanence operates as an independent variable in authority allocation—distinct from competence, credentials, or correctness—they will continue to sacrifice system-level performance to preserve embedded hierarchies. The framework developed here makes that mechanism visible. What organisations choose to do with that visibility determines whether integrative expertise can be safely exercised or remains structurally subordinated to domain sovereignty.

Author Note

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