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Chapter 4: Not so I-Deal: A Critical Review of Idiosyncratic-Deals Theory and Research

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Abstract We put i-deals under the microscope and critically review its definition, theory and empirical evidence with the aim of provoking debate about this intriguing idea. We scrutinize definitions of i-deals, highlighting confusing aspects and critique its features. We assess the offered theoretical mechanisms linking i-deals to putative outcomes, and consider whether i-deals provide a novel lens to understanding the employee-organization relationship. We consider how i-deals research findings could – rather than showing the benefits of i-deals – be interpreted as reflecting how i-deals may damage employment relations and unit-level productivity. Finally, we identify problems with the ways i-deals have been measured and raise concerns about the research designs employed in empirical studies.

Introduction

The notion that some employees cut special deals with their employers in order to advance their own interests will strike a chord with most people. We may know of occasions when we have made such arrangements; more likely, we may suspect others in our workplace have such arrangements. Furthermore, i-deals fit with some evidence and management discourse about the increasing individualization of the employment relationship and proliferation of different types of employment contracts (Bidwell et al., 2013).

We put i-deals under the microscope and critically review its definition, theory and empirical evidence with the motivation of provoking debate about this intriguing idea. We begin by briefly reviewing the current state of i-deals research and then gauge the extent to which it has captured researchers' interest. We highlight confusing aspects of the i-deals definition and critique its features. Following this, we assess the offered theoretical mechanisms linking i-deals to putative outcomes and consider whether i-deals offer a novel lens to understand the employee-organization relationship. Finally, we identify problems with the ways i-deals have been measured and raise issues about the research designs used in empirical studies.

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Current state of i-deals research

“I-deals refer to voluntary, personalized agreements of a nonstandard nature negotiated between individual employees and their employers regarding terms that benefit each party” (Rousseau, Ho & Greenberg, 2006, p. 978). The distinguishing features of i-deals are that they are individually negotiated by either the employer or the employee, heterogeneous in that some of the terms are differentiated from what other comparable employees receive, mutually beneficial so that both the interests of the employee and employer are served, and vary in scope from a single idiosyncratic element to an entirely different deal (Rousseau 2005; Rousseau et al., 2006). Researchers argue that organisations use i-deals to recruit, retain and reward high performers; for employees, i-deals can signal their market value or the value an employer places on the individual employee (Rousseau et al, 2005, 2006; Rosen, Slater, Change & Johnson, 2013).

So, what does the empirical evidence reveal? Table 1 provides an overview of the fifteen published empirical articles (a few of the articles contain multiple studies) on i-deals in terms of definition, dimensions, outcomes, moderators, design, findings and sample. A noticeable feature is the variation in definitions of i-deals used by researchers. Definitions commonly include employees negotiating a special employment arrangement (not on offer to other employees) with their employer. Beyond this, the definitions diverge: some for instance focus on the benefit to both the employee and employer (e.g., Lai, Rousseau & Chang, 2009), while others are more employee-focused in highlighting the satisfaction of specific personal preferences and needs of the employee (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2012b).

The definitions also indicate that i-deals can cover a single idiosyncratic element to a completely different ‘deal’ involving many different terms. However, researchers tend to operationalize i-deals as having a small number of dimensions, elements, or terms. Studies differ in terms of the range of dimensions and which dimensions are captured. For example, Anand et al. (2010) focus on one dimension, developmental i-deals; Bal et al. (2012) include developmental and flexibility i-deals; Hornung et al. (2008) capture three dimensions: developmental, flexibility, and workload reduction i-deals; Rosen et al. (2013) capture four dimensions: schedule flexibility, task and work responsibilities, location flexibility, and financial incentives; finally, Ng and Feldman (2010) draw on six elements to capture i-deals.

Most studies consider whether employees’ self-reports of i-deals are associated with self-reported outcomes. I-deals have been linked to a wide range of outcomes, including affective commitment, work-family conflict/balance, work engagement, voice, proactive behaviours, motivation to continue working, working overtime, citizenship behaviours, and employee performance. Five studies consider factors that may moderate associations between i-deals and proposed outcomes (e.g., Bal, De Jong, Jansen & Bakker, 2012).

With such a variety of outcome variables, it is difficult to discern a pattern in the findings. A recent meta-analysis pulls together the findings of 23 published and unpublished studies across Western (i.e., Germany, the United States, and the Netherlands) and Eastern (i.e., China, India, and South Korea) cultures, and suggests some consistency across studies, where i-deals were significantly negatively related to turnover intentions, and positively related to job satisfaction (in Western and Eastern cultures) and affective commitment (in Eastern cultures) (Liao, Wayne & Rousseau, 2014). However, tempering confidence in the positive effects of i-deals, it should be noted that the effect sizes were small (ranging from .09 to .25), based on small numbers of samples (ranging from 2 to 5), and the findings were somewhat inconsistent in that i-deals did not relate significantly to affective commitment in Western cultures (based on aggregated findings from 5 samples).

Research designs used to examine i-deals tend to offer weak forms of evidence. The majority of i-deals studies are cross-sectional or separate the measurement of the independent

and dependent variables. In the minority are longitudinal studies used with repeated measures of the independent and dependent variables (see for example, Ng and Feldman, 2012b; Rosen et al., 2013). In general, the stronger the research design, the weaker the support for the effects of i-deals and therefore findings based on weak methods may exaggerate support for i-deals (note this is based on only a small number of repeated measures studies). For instance, Hornung et al.'s (2011) longitudinal findings are less supportive than other studies based on cross-sectional findings (cf. Hornung et al., 2008) in terms of failing to find lagged associations between i-deals and expected outcomes (a non-significant lagged association between flexibility i-deals and work-family conflict), and also finding lagged associations that question the assumed direction of causality between i-deals and outcomes (significant reciprocal associations between developmental i-deals and work engagement). Elsewhere, longitudinal findings indicate changes to i-deals vary alongside changes in the outcomes of social networking and organizational trust (Ng & Feldman, 2012b), providing stronger evidence of covariation than cross-sectional designs but not provide insight into the direction of causality.

In summary, the empirical studies offer some support for associations between i-deals and outcomes; however, the effects of i-deals are small and somewhat mixed. Against this backdrop, we now begin our critical review, considering first whether i-deals have energised research activity.

Researcher interest in i-deals

I-deals researchers typically claim that it is an area of great interest and attention, being a “topic of considerable research” (Anand et al., 2010, p. 970), and one that has received “considerable attention as a means of building organizational commitment” (Ng & Feldman, 2012b, p. 1). However, the level of interest is belied by the small number of available empirical articles (as Table 1 indicates), and indeed researchers acknowledge that there have been “few empirical studies” (Ng & Feldman, 2012b, p. 2).

To gain some indication of the extent of i-deals research activity since its introduction we searched for i-deals journal articles in *Business Source Complete*, a popular and comprehensive database of scholarly business journals. We took Rousseau's 2005 book on – deals as introducing the i-deals concept, although we note Rousseau's 2001 article in *Organizational Dynamics* and some precursor studies cited by i-deals researchers (such as Lawler & Finegold, 2000; Miner, 1987). Since 2005 and over the last 9 years, only 21 articles include the term “i-deals” or “idiosyncratic deals” in the abstract of scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles (as of 17 November, 2014). Furthermore, and as Table 1 reveals, Rousseau and her collaborators author seven of these 21 articles.

To place this level of research activity in context, we compared it to research activity on the psychological contract during the 9-year period after Rousseau's 1989 reconceptualization of the psychological contract, which was widely regarded as reinvigorating psychological contract research (Conway & Briner, 2005). Comparing i-deals with the psychological contract makes some sense, as both concepts and related theories were generated by Rousseau, both are often portrayed as rooted in social exchange, and both were presented as examples of a trend in the individualization of the employment relationship. During the 9-year period between 1989 and 1998, a search in *Business Source Complete* shows 63 articles include the term “psychological contract” in the abstract of scholarly journal articles.

From this crude analysis, we conclude that researchers have shown lukewarm interest in i-deals since its introduction, in both absolute and relative terms, and there is little indication as yet of it being an area of current major interest. Indeed, we may well ponder:

why the lack of interest? Potential explanations for the low uptake may be that the idea lacks a precise definition, clear theoretical mechanisms linking it to outcomes, and that the i-deals concept lacks unique value beyond existing ideas. To these matters we now turn.

I-deals definitions lack clarity, precision, and consistency

As we can see from Table 1, i-deals definitions have some common features (Rousseau et al., 2006) and in this section we focus on three features which follow clearly from inspecting the definitions: I-deals are (a) individually explicitly negotiated; (b) beneficial to parties; and (c) non-standard, idiosyncratic bargains that range in scope of content and vary across employees. In this section, we highlight some critical inconsistencies and ambiguities across definitions.

To what extent are i-deals explicitly negotiated?

It is currently unclear whether i-deals result from explicit negotiation with another party or arise from more implicit negotiations. Some i-deals definitions clearly emphasize that they refer to explicit and objective agreements where, for instance, Anand and colleagues state that “i-deals are not individuals’ subjective understandings, as are psychological contracts ... rather, they are objective conditions that employees negotiate with an employer” (Anand et al., 2010, p. 970). Elsewhere in i-deals research, it is defined and referred to in a way that emphasizes more implicit processes. For instance Ng and Feldman (2010, p. 420) refer to employment “arrangements” which are “crafted” to meet the needs of employees; i-deals are likely to be construed as “special gestures” (Anand et al., 2010, p. 972). Furthermore, most i-deals research uses social exchange as the theoretical foundation of i-deals (Rosen et al., 2013), where social exchanges consist of unspecified obligations that can be short or long term and open-ended. This implicit nature is illustrated for example, when researchers argue that following successful negotiation of i-deals, employees are “*likely* to feel obligated to those who granted or enabled their deals” (Anand et al., 2010, p. 972, *italics added*). Therefore, even if the initial i-deals negotiation of what the employee gets tends toward explicitness, what the employee is expected to do in return is assumed to follow a social exchange process, where organizations expect obligations to be discharged, but do not know when or how. In other words, whether employees reciprocate may well be highly implicit.

Related to the explicit or implicit nature of i-deals is whether they are made public or held at a private level. I-deals literature tends to state that it is desirable for i-deals to be made public; however, in most cases this will not be the case: “Coworkers may view i-deals positively if their visibility or public nature makes them appear normative. In most firms, i-deals are not public, instead taking the form of informal, private arrangements” (Lai et al., 2009, p. 553). The language of informal, private arrangements is much closer to an implicitly negotiated deal than one that is explicitly objective, and such i-deals will certainly be viewed as implicit by third party coworkers who may speculate about the fairness of employees receiving i-deals and be concerned that favouritism is taking place.

In summary, the implicit aspects of i-deals are unclear. The extent to which i-deals are explicitly or implicitly negotiated is important because if it is implicit, then i-deals become indiscriminate to psychological contracts and i-deals should therefore be viewed as much more subjectively understood by employees. If i-deals are highly subjective, then individuals may have a sense of receiving a beneficial deal, but cannot be sure of its benefits because it is implicit and they will be unaware of other employees’ implicit i-deals. As an implicit phenomenon, perhaps i-deals will not satisfy ‘star’ employees who seek demonstrable, objective indicators of their value to the organization that clearly distinguishes them apart

from their peers. From an organization's perspective, if i-deals are a highly implicit phenomenon then it will not benefit organizations that wish to use i-deals as a means of communicating or signalling an equity-based culture where the most valued employees are duly rewarded. To conclude, the extent to which i-deals are implicit is unclear; if they are highly implicit, then the concept of i-deals risks being indistinct to psychological contracts, and its value to organizations as a signalling mechanism is greatly reduced.

Do i-deals benefit one or both parties?

It is currently unclear whether i-deals are mutually beneficial to both employees and the organization, or beneficial to only one party, or indeed involve costs to one or both parties. There is inconsistency between the definitions used by researchers as to whether i-deals are mutually beneficial (or not). On the one hand, the definitions used by Rousseau and colleagues and Bal and colleagues clearly stress that i-deals are intended to benefit both the worker and organization negotiating the i-deal (e.g., in Table 1, see definitions by Anand et al., 2010; Hornung et al., 2011; Lai et al., 2009, etc.). On the other hand, definitions, particularly those arising from Ng and Feldman (2010, 2012a, 2012b) emphasize the benefit to employees but do not emphasize employer benefits (e.g., i-deals are "crafted to meet the specific needs of individual employees", Ng & Feldman, 2010, p. 420). Indeed, Ng and Feldman go further to state that "practically speaking, idiosyncratic deals are costly to organizations" (Ng & Feldman, 2010, p. 219), which is clearly evident when i-deals involve lucrative compensation packages. Even advocates of the mutual benefits of i-deals somewhat understatedly acknowledge the costs to organizations, where "an i-deal granting supervisor may tolerate some inconvenience to promote an i-deal" (Anand et al., 2010, p. 972).

I-deals research is also unclear about when organizations expect to accrue the benefits of i-deals. Are the benefits to organizations clear and objective at the point of negotiating the i-deal or are the benefits more a reference to the hoped-for longer term effects of the i-deal that are assumed to materialize through a social exchange reciprocation process at some unspecified future time point? The i-deals literature tends to assume that the benefits of i-deals from an organization's perspective accrue via social exchange processes, where employees receiving an i-deal feel obliged to reciprocate. However, as we noted above, obligations arising from social exchanges are only likely to be discharged at an unknown future time point (Rosen et al., 2013), and therefore when do organizations become aware of the benefits, if at all? If there are doubts about when the intended benefits to the organization will arise, or if benefits will arise at all, can it still be considered an i-deal?

More clearly establishing who benefits from i-deals is important for several reasons. First, mutual benefits are seen as the key factor differentiating i-deals from favouritism: "I-deals differ from favouritism because they are intended to benefit not only their recipient but also the recipients' organization" (Anand et al., 2010, p. 972). Note, however, that Rousseau et al. (2006, p. 980) acknowledge that the distinction between i-deals and favouritism is a "gray area" in some instances. In other words, the case for the benefits of i-deals can appear to argue for the benefits of favouritism, which is likely to be unpalatable in most workplaces.

Second, the ambiguity about whether i-deals are intended to benefit just the employee or in addition to the organization casts doubt on our ability to identify i-deals. For instance, if an i-deal benefits only one party, is it still an i-deal? If it is beneficial to only one party, how is it to the other party – neutral, or potentially costly? And if we allow i-deals to benefit only one party and are agnostic as to how it affects the other party, then can organizations benefit at the cost to an employee? For instance, i-deals could be interpreted as having a 'dark-side' where organizations single-out and make an example of an under-performing employee. This may benefit the organization, be idiosyncratic, but not to the employee's benefit. Thirdly, the

idea that i-deals are mutually beneficial is a nice fantasy, but such win-win deals are unlikely in real life. Social exchanges entail give and take and even if there are some benefits to each party, there will also be costs. This aspect of i-deals is rarely considered. For example, do parties to an i-deal benefit on each and every term of the arrangement, or on some terms but not others?

Clarifying the contents and recipients of the non-standard, idiosyncratic bargain in i-deals

Two interconnected issues about clarifying the scope of the contents of i-deals (i.e., the terms) and scope of recipients (i.e., who is eligible for i-deals) are troubling. Regarding the scope of i-deals, the contents are acknowledged as very wide-ranging, for example: “I-deals vary in content and scope from a single feature to the entire set of conditions composing the employment relationship, ranging from minor adjustments in hours or duties to highly customized” (Hornung et al., 2008, p. 656). I-deals, therefore, can be about anything and everything.

Turning to who are the likely recipients of i-deals, the literature is unclear as to how widely available they are to employees. Some i-deals literature suggests they are reserved for ‘stars’ and “highly valued employees” (Rosen et al., 2013, p. 710), who will be “particularly excited about being the only one (or one of a few) to receive rare and valued resources” (Ng & Feldman, 2010, p. 420). However, other literature presents the offering of i-deals as a much more routine and widespread happening (such as Anand et al., 2010), and indeed the fact that i-deals can range so widely across terms of an employment relationship suggests they are in theory widely available.

The routine and widespread contents of i-deals is concerning for several important reasons. First, if i-deals can refer to negotiated arrangements about relatively minor terms of the employment relationship, then they are likely too trivial, widespread and mundanely available to be described as idiosyncratic or valuable. For example, flexibility i-deals (Bal et al., 2012; Hornung et al., 2008) do not seem noteworthy of a major shift in employment terms and may simply reflect institutionally available options such as working part-time, which in some countries (e.g., the UK) employees have a legal entitlement to request part-time work. Similarly task i-deals (e.g., Hornung et al., 2011; Rosen et al., 2013) may reflect the routine managerial activity of dividing work across team members. Such i-deals are therefore readily distributed and unlikely to signal special treatment to employees or instil obligations to reciprocate.

In conclusion, the above set of interconnected concerns about the three defining features of i-deals amount to a considerable lack of clarity. These concerns are important because without a clear definition we cannot make clear theoretical predictions, we cannot consistently operationalize i-deals, and practitioners will not know how to enact i-deals in workplaces and the benefits of doing so (or not).

Theoretical mechanisms linking i-deals to employment relationship outcomes

In this section we argue that there is no novel and unique theoretical mechanism linking i-deals to outcomes. Furthermore, the two general theoretical mechanisms (needs, and in particular social exchange) linking i-deals to outcomes offer ambiguous predictions. Finally, research has insufficiently considered how i-deals may damage employment relations and unit-level productivity.

What is the theoretical mechanism that links i-deals to outcomes? Researchers hypothesize that i-deals will be associated with employee attitudes, behaviour, and

performance, but do not specify in any precise way what evaluative feature of i-deals explains outcomes. What is it about i-deals that relates to outcomes? We can again make a useful contrast here with psychological contract research. In psychological contract research, the main construct linking the psychological contract to outcomes was not psychological contracts per se, but the specific construct of psychological contract breach (i.e., when employees perceive the organization to fail to fulfil promised obligations, Conway & Briner, 2005). For i-deals, the research suggests that having an i-deal leads to outcomes, but we have already noted above that the definition of i-deals encapsulates multiple features. So which feature drives outcomes? The definitions of i-deals make reference to an employee the organization values, successful negotiation of benefits, the receipt of benefits themselves, and fulfilling employee needs. These distinct components could all feasibly affect employee attitudes and behaviours, raising questions about what specifically it is about i-deals that affect outcomes. For example, are the positive attitudes associated with i-deals a result of the actual negotiation process or the benefits resulting from the i-deal?

Researchers commonly refer to the two general mechanisms of social exchange and fulfilling employee needs when making i-deals predictions. Dealing first with needs, while needs are often referred to in the definitions and texts, the references are brief, general and often taken to be read as self-evident in benefitting parties. There is therefore very little substantial material to get our teeth into here, other than to say that the needs mechanism is under-specified and under-problematized. For instance, if i-deals have benefits through satisfying needs, then which needs precisely as there are many needs and indeed typologies of needs (Maslow, McClelland, etc.). It is also worth noting that the theoretical value of needs and need theories have well-documented limitations, such as vaguely defined concepts, being impossible to refute and appearing to explain all behaviour, yet offering no clear basis for predicting any behaviour (see, for example, Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977; Wahba & Bridwell, 1976).

Turning to social exchange as a general mechanism, it is commonly deployed when explaining the effects of i-deals on employee attitudes and behaviour. Is its application to i-deals compelling? The argument in part rests on whether i-deals are beneficial in creating obligations in the recipient to reciprocate (Anand et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2013; Ng & Feldman, 2012b). However, as previously mentioned, it is unclear whether i-deals are governed by mutual benefit or more driven by organizations' attempting to satisfy the needs of employees. As Liu et al. (2013, p. 833) note "the willingness of employers to cater to individual employees needs signals to employees that they are special and worthy of employers' special treatment". This resembles what has been referred to as a communal relationship (Clark & Mills, 1979), in which the giving of benefits is driven by the desire to meet the needs of the other party and without the expectation that these benefits will be reciprocated. If so, then the assumption that i-deals instil obligations in recipients to reciprocate may well be erroneous. Furthermore, if i-deals are viewed by employees as a reward for past contributions then the recipient may feel entitled to any additional benefits received with little felt obligation to reciprocate.

Finally, we note that the potentially damaging effects of i-deals at the individual and unit level have been insufficiently considered. At the individual level, the positive correlation identified in some empirical studies between i-deals and employee attitudes and behaviours has been interpreted by researchers as reflecting how the recipients of i-deals report more positive attitudes and behaviours; however, an equally plausible alternative interpretation is that the positive correlation found reflects the majority of employees who do not receive i-deals in the work unit reporting lowered morale as a result of making unfavourable social comparisons to recipients of i-deals. Employees consciously and unconsciously make social comparisons to others they work closely with and these processes profoundly shape employee

attitudes and behaviour (Adams, 1965; Festinger, 1954; Goodman, 1977; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). I-deals researchers draw on processes of favourable social comparisons to explain why the small number of recipients of i-deals report more positive attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013); by the same token, the majority of employees will not receive i-deals and will presumably be making unfavourable and likely demoralizing social comparisons, resulting in less positive attitudes and behaviours. There are many compelling theoretical reasons for suspecting that offering i-deals to a select few may negatively affect the majority of employees who *do not* receive the i-deal, such as believing an injustice has taken place and/or psychological contract violation. This in turn would damage their motivation and behaviours towards the organization and their peers, perhaps especially helping behaviours towards those employees who indeed receive i-deals.

There is some evidence to support this view. Broschack and Davis-Blake's (2006) study of two large, multinational financial organizations in the United States found that the degree of heterogeneity of employment arrangements in a work group (mixing standard and non-standard workers in the same work group) had significant negative effects on employee-to-supervisor relations, co-worker relations, helping behaviours, and a positive effect on the intention to leave. The authors concluded that "nonstandard work arrangements designed to retain valued employees may negatively affect work group relations... creating an idiosyncratic deal in order to keep an individual involved in an ongoing work group may in fact cause intragroup relations to deteriorate" (Broschack & Davis-Blake, 2006, p. 389). This suggests that while some lucky workers benefit from their individual i-deals, individuals in the wider group or unit may experience losses, which could lead to a negative overall effect for the unit's productivity. The unit as an aggregate is perhaps particularly likely to suffer, as co-worker relations and helping behaviours take a hit, and the social and psychological climate suffers.

It is odd that justice perceptions have not yet been empirically examined alongside i-deals. The awareness that an employee has obtained an i-deal is likely to raise justice concerns amongst his/her colleagues as we note above and has been noted elsewhere (Greenberg, et al., 2004). We considered distributive justice, however, other researchers note concerns relating to other justice dimensions. For example, Greenberg, Roberge, Ho and Rousseau (2004) argue that to mitigate the potential negative effects, all employees should be treated consistently so that they all have the opportunity to negotiate an i-deal. If making the opportunity for all employees to negotiate i-deals facilitates procedural justice, what is the implication of this for the nature of the deal itself? Rather than being a coveted deal reserved for highly valued employees, it becomes a widespread minor deal on offer to all.

Injustice is but one possible downside to i-deals. To date, the outcomes focus on the positive consequences of i-deals with little consideration of a fuller range of negative outcomes. For example, an employee sensing that a few co-workers are receiving i-deals without knowing the specific terms may feel paranoid, jealous, and envious. For the i-deal recipient, it may encourage individualism, self-interest and a heightened sense of entitlement. Research that considers co-workers' views of those receiving i-deals suggests that i-deals thrive in (and generate?) environments of self-interest. Lai et al. (2009) found that co-workers were more likely to accept their colleague receiving an i-deal when the colleague is a close friend, and when they believe it increases their chance of a comparable future opportunity. The effects of i-deals on organizational outcomes were found to be stronger for people high on individualism (Liu et al., 2013).

In summary, there is a need for better theorizing on the multilevel effects of i-deals, notably the individual-level effects and the group-level effects. I-deals may be associated with benefits for those who receive them, but bring significant losses for those who do not, which, given they constitute the majority of a work group, may lower the overall unit's

performance. Hence co-workers (i.e., the majority of employees not receiving i-deals in the unit), the unit in aggregate, and the organization may lose out.

Concerns about the designs and measures used to empirically research i-deals

Here we first identify concerns about survey measures used to research i-deals and second raise concerns about the broader research designs employed.

Regarding the survey measures, our first observation is that i-deals have not been consistently measured, there is little agreement about how to measure i-deals, and little interest in full measurement validation studies (see Rosen et al., 2013 for an exception). Considerable variation exists as reflected in the following: some measures require respondents to comment on exchange items that are “different from his/her coworkers” (Anand et al., 2010), some require respondents to rate the extent to which they had “asked for and successfully negotiated individual arrangements different from their peers” (Hornung et al., 2008), and others require respondents to rate the extent the organization has “promised a level of [the item, e.g., pay] that most employees in my team/unit do not get” (Ng & Feldman, 2012).

Second, and related to the previous point, none of the measures are true to its definition, which requires i-deals to be individually negotiated, different from peers, and mutually beneficial. I-deals measures variously capture one of these features, but not two or more. The measures have therefore not operationalized crucial defining features of the definition of i-deals.

Third, the range of content of i-deals terms/dimensions varies considerably across studies. In some studies the range of content is very narrow, capturing one or two terms (typically flexibility, development), whereas in other studies up to 6 terms are captured (e.g., pay, advancement opportunities, skill training, career development opportunities, a level of job security, support for personal problems; Ng & Feldman, 2010, 2012a). I-deals are defined as very wide ranging, so why such narrow operationalizations? The measures need to better capture the wide breadth of content of i-deals.

Fourth, the items do not indicate a clear time frame over which the respondent is expected to consider the striking of the i-deal. We do not know therefore whether the respondent is recalling an i-deal negotiation from relatively recently or several years ago. Clearly, the timing of the negotiation is important as to how accurately the event will be recalled and its relevance in predicting employee attitudes and behaviours.

Finally, the incidence / reported levels of i-deals are frequently at improbably high levels given that i-deals are supposed to be ‘special’ and idiosyncratic (e.g., 3.30 on a 7 point Likert type scale², strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), Anand et al., 2010; ranging from 3.83 to 3.90 across 6 measures on a 5 point scale, strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), Ng & Feldman, 2012b). The high levels of reported i-deals do not credibly reflect the idea that they are received by a chosen few, which would dictate a low base rate phenomenon. Are these measures of i-deals therefore really capturing i-deals as a select negotiation, or something much more mundanely available, such as stable perceptions of job characteristics?

These issues are important because they suggest that the studies are measuring different constructs, capturing very different elements of the deal, and fundamentally are not fully consistent with i-deals definitions and therefore not valid proxies for i-deals.

² As an aside, the use of Likert scales is perhaps inappropriate as i-deals are more likely to be experienced as discrete events and should be measured as such, rather than strength of agreement.

We now turn to research designs used to investigate i-deals. Our first concern here is that i-deals studies have typically neglected to collect multi-source data (e.g., information from both employers and employees simultaneously) and therefore cannot assess whether both parties benefit from an i-deal. To assess i-deals and the impact of i-deals, we require research designs that capture employee and employer's perceptions of the i-deal, along with both parties' assessments of the benefits.

Data should also be collected from third party coworkers who make up the wider social group and to explore unit-level effects in addition to individual-level effects. As we noted above, to assess the benefits of i-deals to the organization we need to know how i-deals affect the wider social group within which the person receiving the i-deal belongs. For example, to what extent do i-deals impact such outcomes as unit / group cohesion, collaboration, psychological climate, and productivity? While a small number of employees receiving an i-deal may report benefits, the larger number of employees not receiving an i-deal may report comparatively more negative attitudes as a result of negative social comparisons made with those who receive i-deals, which may tip the unit into experiencing aggregate losses. It is therefore crucial to simultaneously examine the individual effects of i-deals alongside the unit effects. We need to conduct multilevel studies to see whether units showing high variation in i-deals also have higher unit (indicating positive effects of i-deals) or lower unit (consistent with i-deals associating with felt violation of employees not receiving i-deals) performance and other outcomes.

Our second concern is that i-deal measures confound several components of which we consider two here: the negotiation accompanying the i-deal and the actual reward received resulting from the negotiation. It is therefore unclear which of these two components are causing the effects associated with i-deals measures: Are the effects of i-deals found in studies the result of negotiating the i-deal, or a result of what the employee actually gets? For example, if an employee negotiates pay in excess of their peers, the fact that the employee has successfully negotiated an i-deal may lead to feelings of satisfaction, and the increase in pay resulting from the i-deal may also lead to feelings of satisfaction. Therefore, research needs to isolate the effects of the negotiation of the deal per se from what is received. Research designs need to measure the negotiation component and the rewards components when examining i-deals in order to capture the unique effects of each on outcomes.

I-deals research designs need to consider reverse causality issues. Research assumes that i-deals lead to positive outcomes such as employee motivation, commitment and performance; however, these attitudes and behaviours are also the reasons why employees are offered i-deals and are therefore just as likely to be the causes of i-deals. We need to consider these possibilities and the longer-term trajectories of employee attitudes and behaviour. If the award of an i-deal does little to significantly alter the trajectory of employee attitudes and behaviour over time, then the i-deal is having no effect; however, in such cases cross-sectional or limited time-point longitudinal data will likely record spurious associations between i-deals and 'outcomes'.

Last but not least, i-deals research is characterized by cross-sectional, self-report, single source designs. The limitations of such designs are well-documented (e.g., see Conway & Briner [2005] for how such designs are limited for examining social exchange ideas), and are a general concern in management research, so we will not go into any depth here. In brief, such designs are inappropriate for validly measuring many types of phenomena (such as exchange), examining events, processes, and causality.

Conclusions

We have presented a wide range of critical observations. In essence, i-deals are unclearly defined and so we do not know what i-deals are. There are major inconsistencies across i-deal measures and none of the measures capture all its features, and we are unsure as to whether and how i-deals affect parties to the negotiation and third parties. Indeed, there are good reasons for suspecting i-deals to be detrimental to coworkers and organizations, and existing findings used to support the positive effects of i-deals may in fact indicate that i-deals drive down the attitudes of non-recipients via unfavourable social comparisons.

In a similar manner to the way researchers criticized advocates of models of the flexible firm and flexible employment contracts for moving confusingly between description, prediction and prescription (see Pollert, 1988), statements about i-deals flit between describing them as a growing trend in organizations, as a way to explain how to motivate contributions in recipients, and as a prescription to organizations about how to retain valued workers. In any case, at present we think i-deals fall short on all fronts. I-deals are too loosely defined to precisely describe activity, there is no clear theory to link i-deals with employee contributions, and the commonly used social exchange theory suggests – at best – mixed effects on outcomes. Given the failure to describe and predict, we're not in a position to prescribe i-deals to organizations.

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Table 1. An overview of I-Deals Definitions, Methods, and Findings

Study	Definition	Dimensions	Example item	Outcomes	Moderators	Design	Findings	Sample
Hornung, S., Rousseau, D. M., & Glaser, J. (2008)	Idiosyncratic deals (“i-deals”), where individual employees negotiate with an employer to adapt work arrangements to better meet their personal needs (Rousseau, 2005). ...I-deals are a form of customization granting employees special conditions differing from peers doing similar work. Not limited to freelancers (Pink, 2002) or stars (Rosen, 1981), regular employees also seek out and bargain for special employment conditions that satisfy their personal needs and preferences.	2 dimensions: Flexibility and development	Hornung et al (2008) measure: Respondents rated the extent to which they had ‘asked for and successfully negotiated individual arrangements different from their peers in terms of flexibility and development ... ‘flexibility in starting and ending the working day’	Work-family conflict, performance expectations, overtime hours worked, affective commitment	None	Cross-sectional	Work arrangements and personal initiative predicted i-deal negotiation; Developmental i-deals positively related to affective commitment, work-family conflict, performance expectations, and overtime; Flexibility i-deals negatively related to work-family conflict and overtime	887 public sector employees
Hornung, S., Rousseau, D. M., & Glaser, J. (2009)	I-deals are special terms of employment, negotiated by individual workers and authorized by agents of their employers (e.g. supervisors, higher-level managers, human resource representatives; Rousseau, 2001, 2004, 2005).	3 dimensions: Flexibility, development and workload reduction	Adapted from Rousseau and Kim (2006): to what extent have you (the supervisor) authorized special flexibility in working hours?	Supervisors’ rating of change in performance, motivation, and Work-Life balance of employees	None	Cross-sectional	Employee initiative associated with authorization of developmental and flexibility i-deals; unfulfilled obligations positively associated with workload reduction i-deals. Developmental ideals associated with increased performance, changes in employee motivation; flexibility i-deals associated with changes in work-life balance.	Same study as above with 263 supervisors
Lai, L., Rousseau, D. M., & Chang, K. T. T. (2009)	Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals for short) are personalized employment arrangements negotiated between individual workers and employers and intended to benefit them both (Rousseau, 2001).	General item	“the kinds of requests that individual workers make to their employer to obtain atypical or nonstandard employment arrangements. These requests cover a host of issues from working conditions (e.g., schedule, working at home), development opportunities (e.g., special training, assignments) as well as other benefits.” ... “If your coworkers ask for special individual arrangements in the near future, to what extent would you be willing to accept them having arrangements different from your own?”	Acceptance of another's i-deal	None	Cross-sectional network analysis	More likely to accept another's i-deal when the other is a close friend, when you believe a similar deal may be offered to you in the future, when you have a social exchange relationship with your employer, and less likely to be accepting when you have economic exchange.	US high tech firm 65 employees from 20 teams

Rousseau, D.M., Hornung, S., & Kim, T.G (2009)	I-deals are personalized agreements of a non-standard nature individual employees seek out and negotiate with their employer	2 Dimensions: Work hours and Developmental	Extent to which participant had asked for and successfully negotiated a schedule different from coworkers	Social exchange (SE) and economic exchange (EE)	None	Cross sectional T1 and T2 data	Ex post negotiation positive related to SE and negatively related to EE; developmental I-deals positively related to SE; work hour I-deals negatively related to SE; Developmental I-Deals negatively related and work hour I-deals positively related to EE	145 and 120 hospital employees
Anand, S., Vidyarthi, P. R., Liden, R. C., & Rousseau, D. M. (2010)	Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) are individually bargained employment arrangements intended to benefit both worker and organization. I-deals are not individuals' subjective understandings, as are "psychological contracts" (worker beliefs regarding exchange relationships in employment). Rather, they are objective conditions that employees negotiate with an employer to enhance their employment arrangements.	1 dimension: Developmental	"Supervisors were asked if an employee had "training opportunities," "skill development opportunities," "on-the-job activities," and "career development opportunities" that were "different from his/her coworkers""	OCBI, OCBO	LMX, POS	Cross-sectional	I-deals positively related to OCBO and OCBI; Relationship between i-deals and OCBO and OCBI stronger when LMX low; relationship between i-deals and OCBO stronger when TMX low; No moderating effect of POS. I-deals have no effect in high quality relationships, but are effective in low quality relationships	246 matched employee-manager dyads in software industry (only supervisors reported on i-deals)
Hornung, S., Rousseau, D. M., Glaser, J., Angerer, P., & Weigl, M. (2010)	Idiosyncratic deals, in general, are employment terms individuals negotiate for themselves, taking myriad forms from flexible schedules to career development (Rousseau, 2001, 2005).	1 dimension: Task related	Based on Hornung et al. (2008) and Rousseau & Kim (2006): Respondents rated the extent to which they had 'asked for and successfully negotiated personalized conditions in their current job, e.g., special job duties or assignments, work tasks that suit my personal interest'	Task complexity, Task control, Stressors, Work Engagement, Personal Initiative	None	Cross-sectional	LMX associated with task I-deals; task i-deals positively associated with complexity and control and negatively with stressors that in turn associated negatively with work engagement	Employee samples from hospitals in US (N=207) and Germany (N=292)
Ng, T.W.H., & Feldman, D.C (2010)	Idiosyncratic contracts are employment arrangements that are different in nature from those given to other employees and are crafted to meet the specific needs of individual employees. These idiosyncratic contracts offer employees additional resources (e.g., special promotion tracks or flexible scheduling) not readily available to their colleagues (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006)	6 elements: pay, advancement opportunities, training, career development, job security, support with personal problems	This organization provides me with a level of pay that most employees in my team/unit do not get	Affective Commitment	Core self-evaluations (CSE), Age	Cross lagged: IV at T1 and DV at T2	I-contracts positively linked to AC; relationship stronger for low CSE (no support for age as moderator) and strongest relationship between i-contracts and AC for individuals low in CSE and who were older (chronologically and subjectively)	375 US managers across organizations

Hornung, S., Rousseau, D. M., Glaser, J., Angerer, P., & Weigl, M. (2011)	Idiosyncratic deals (called "i-deals" by some authors) are personalized arrangements workers negotiate with their employer to make their jobs more supportive of their individual needs, preferences, and aspirations (Rousseau, 2001, 2005; Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006). ... idiosyncratic deals have been suggested to be mutually beneficial for employees and employers by increasing the fit between the person and the job and thereby providing conditions which support the worker's well-being and sustained performance.	2 dimensions: Flexibility and Developmental	Hornung et al. (2008) measure: Respondents rated the extent to which they had 'negotiated personalized working conditions deviating from applicable standards on a 5-point scale' in terms of flexibility and development ... 'more influence over working hours'	Work-family conflict, Work engagement	None	Cross-lagged	Leader consideration positively related to i-deals; developmental i-deals predicted work engagement; flexibility i-deals negatively predicted work family conflict; mediating effect of i-deals in relationship between leader consideration and work engagement/work-family conflict	159 at T1 and 142 at T2 hospital physicians used in prior study
Lee, C., & Hui, C (2011)	Idiosyncratic deals refer to the special conditions that individual workers bargain for, and that differ from the standards applying to their peers	3 dimensions: personal development, flexibility and reduced workload	Rousseau and Kim (2006)	Psychological contracts: Relational, balanced and transactional	None	Cross lagged (6 weeks): I-deals at T1 and DV at time 2	Individualism positively related to ex ante but not ex post i-deals; social skills positively related to ex ante and ex post i-deals; perceived insider status positively related to ex post i-deals; ex ante i-deals more positively related to transactional psychological contracts than ex post i-deals; ex post i-deals more positively related to relational and balanced psychological contracts than ex ante; personal development i-deals more positively related to relational and balanced psychological contracts; flexibility and workload reduction i-deals relate more positively to transactional psychological contracts	289 telecommunic ations employees in China
Bal, P. M., De Jong, S. B., Jansen, P. G., & Bakker, A. B. (2012)	I-deals are defined as 'voluntary, personalized agreements of a nonstandard nature negotiated between individual employees and their employers regarding terms that benefit each party' (Rousseau et al., 2006, p. 978;	2 dimensions: Flexibility and Developmental	Hornung et al (2008) measure: Respondents rated the extent to which they had 'asked for and successfully negotiated individual arrangements different from their peers' in terms of flexibility and development 'flexibility in starting and ending the working day' and 'training opportunities'	Motivation to continue working after retirement age	Accommodative and development climate	Cross-sectional	Flexibility i-deals but not developmental i-deals positively associated with motivation to continue working. Accommodative climate moderated the relationship between developmental i-deals and motivation to continue working and development climate moderated the relationship between development i-deals and motivation to continue working	Employees in two healthcare organizations; 24 units, N = 1083
Ng, T.W.H., & Feldman, D.C (2012a)	Future i-deals (Rousseau et al., 2006) and contract idiosyncrasy. Difference is "research on i-deals has examined how employees react to i-deals after they have been honored (or not). Contract idiosyncrasy has focused on how employees react to promises of future i-deals before they have been honored"	6 elements: pay, advancement opportunities, training, career development, job security, support with personal problems	This organization promises me a level of pay that most employees in my team/unit do not get	Affective Commitment	Future i-deals, perceived job alternatives	Cross lagged: IV at T1 and DV at T2	Breach of past promises negatively related to AC; no moderating effect of future i-deals on relationship between breach and AC; Negative relationship between breach and AC is strongest when future-ideals promised and few job alternatives. Item level analysis - effect size of three-way interaction strongest for support for personal problems, job security, pay and skill training. Weakest for career development and advancement opportunities	196 across range of industries

Ng, T.W.H., & Feldman, D.C (2012b)	I-deals - special employment arrangements that are tailored to the personal preferences and needs of employees	2 Dimensions: Flexibility and professional development	Hornung et al. (2008) "I asked for and successfully negotiated individual arrangements different from my peers in terms of flexibility in starting and ending the workday"	Constructive voice	None. Mediators: flexible work role orientation, networking behaviour & organizational trust	Longitudinal; IVs and DVs measured on three measurement occasions over 10 months	Flexibility i-deals associated with voice behavior in China but not US sample. Professional development i-deals associated with voice behaviour. Support for mediating role of flexible work orientation in the professional development i-deals and voice relationship in Chinese sample. Networking behaviour mediates i-deals - voice relationship in both samples. Organizational trust mediates relationship between scheduling flexibility i-deals and voice in both samples but found to mediate the relationship between professional development i-deals and voice in Chinese sample only. Stronger mediating role of flexible work role orientation, social networking behaviour and organizational trust found in China than US.	265 US and 201 Chinese Managers
Liu, J., Lee, C., Hui, C., Kwan, H. K., & Wu, L. Z. (2013)	Employees increasingly negotiate idiosyncratic deals ("ideals"), that is, customized work arrangements, with their employers (Rousseau, 2005).	2 Dimensions: Flexibility and developmental	Rousseau and Kim (2006)	OBSE, POS, Proactive Behaviours, Affective Commitment	Individualism	Cross Lagged: IVs at Time 1, mediators Time 2 and DVs at Time 3	POS mediates relationship between i-deals and AC and proactive behaviours; OBSE mediates the relationship between i-deals and AC and proactive behaviours; OBSE's mediation significant for high individualism and mediation of POS significant for low individualism	230 employee and 102 supervisors from 2 Chinese organisations
Rosen, C.C., Slater, D.J., Chang, C-H., Johnson, R.E. (2013)	I-deals: "voluntary, personalized agreements of a nonstandard nature negotiated between individual employers and employees regarding terms that benefit each party"	4 dimensions: Schedule flexibility, task and work responsibilities, location flexibility, financial incentives	Because of my personal circumstances, my supervisor has created a compensation arrangement that is tailored to fit me. 16-item scale capturing 4 dimensions	Organizational Commitment, Job satisfaction	None	Longitudinal (10 weeks): I-deals at T1 and T2, DVs at time 2	Study 3: Task and work responsibility i-deals positively related to JS and all types of OC; Financial incentives i-deals linked to continuance OC and schedule flexibility i-deals linked to job satisfaction	Study 3: 280 employed undergrad students
					None	Longitudinal (5 weeks): I-deals at T1 and T2, DVs at time 2	Study 4: Task and work responsibility i-deals positively related to JS and all types of OC except continuance OC; Schedule flexibility i-deals linked to JS, affective OC and continuance OC; Financial incentives i-deals and location flexibility i-deals not related to job satisfaction and OC	Study 4: 196 working adults
Vidarthi, Chaudhry, A., Anand, S & Liden, B.C (2014)	I-deals defined as personalized employment arrangements negotiated between individual workers and employers intended to benefit both parties	1 dimension: flexibility i-deals	Managers were asked "This employee is given flexibility in starting and ending his/her work day"	POS and Career satisfaction	None	Cross sectional	U-shaped relationship between flexibility i-deals and POS and career satisfaction - high POS and career satisfaction found at low and high levels of flexibility ideals	207 supervisor-subordinate dyads of computer engineers in India