

# Why do Employees Negotiate Idiosyncratic Deals? An Exploration of the Process of I-deal Negotiation

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## Abstract

This study investigated why employees negotiate idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) with their organisations, and interviews with 31 employees who successfully negotiated i-deals showed that three main themes could be identified in the i-deal negotiation process: motives for negotiating (i.e., earned and problem solving), enablers (i.e., relationships and flexibility), and inhibitors (i.e., secrecy, and culture and structure). The study shows that people may have different motives for negotiating i-deals, and subsequently also experience different enabling and inhibiting factors in the process of obtaining i-deals.

## Keywords

Idiosyncratic deals, i-deals, negotiation, motives, qualitative research.

Individualisation is a trend that has increasingly impacted workplaces across the world (Rousseau, 2005). On the one hand, valuable employees seek to negotiate individualised working conditions with their employers beyond the practices that are generally available to employees (Call, Nyberg, & Thatcher, 2015; Rousseau, Ho & Greenberg, 2006). On the other hand, societal trends of individualism (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002), and the declining role of trade unions (Godard, 2014) have caused employees to become more self-reliant in negotiating their work arrangements. Much research has been conducted on the implications of these trends for employees and organisations, and in particular research on idiosyncratic deals has flourished over the last decade (Bal, Van Kleef, & Jansen, 2015; Liao, Wayne, & Rousseau, 2016; Rousseau et al., 2006).

Idiosyncratic deals (i.e., i-deals), are individually negotiated working conditions between the employee and the organisation (Rousseau, 2005; Rousseau et al., 2006). Ample research on i-deals has shown that they may benefit employees, as they are related to lower work-family conflict (Hornung, Rousseau, & Glaser, 2008), more proactive work behaviors (Liu, Lee, Hui, Kwan & Wu, 2013), and higher work motivation (Bal, De Jong, Jansen, & Bakker, 2012). However, a meta-analytic review by Liao et al. (2016) has shown that the relationships of i-deals with employee outcomes tend to be inconsistent, and that there are many unanswered questions regarding the concept of i-deals (*cf.* Bal & Rousseau, 2015). While the majority of studies have focused on the effects of i-deals on outcomes (Liao et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2013), little is known about the context of the negotiation process that leads employees to successfully obtain i-deals. Hence, research has only focused on what happens *after* workers have successfully negotiated an i-deal, without taking into account why employees start negotiating. This is important, as negotiation processes may determine the outcomes (Mislin, Campagna, & Bottom, 2011), and may explain inconsistencies in the impact of i-deals on work outcomes.

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Two central questions guide the paper: first, the study focusses on *why* employees start negotiating, and second, the paper focusses on what employees experience during the negotiation process. What types of barriers and facilitators do they perceive? As these questions pertain to as yet unexplored facets of i-deals, the study takes a qualitative approach. Through interviews with employees across a range of industries who have negotiated i-deals, the research questions are answered providing new and important understandings of i-deal dynamics in the workplace.

The study contributes to i-deals research and the broader literature on individualisation at work (Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012) as well as the negotiation literature (Druckman & Wagner, 2016; Reif & Brodbeck, 2014; Thompson, Wang, & Gunia, 2010). The study provides a better understanding of why i-deals are negotiated in the workplace, and thus how both managers and employees can manage their increasingly individualised relationships. The study will also shed insights into the factors around i-deals negotiation. Not every i-deal will elicit higher motivation and performance, and this study shows the underlying causes. Moreover, the study also adds to the negotiation literature, by showing why people start negotiating individual arrangements at work. While there has been some conceptual research on the initiation of negotiation at work (Reif & Brodbeck, 2014), this study shows the more specific motives that people have and which may affect the negotiation process.

## Literature Review

Due to changes in employment relationships, exchanges between employees and their organisations are increasingly based on individualised negotiation and agreements (Bal et al., 2015). While collective representation seems to be in decline (Godard, 2014), employees are forced nowadays to individually negotiate their work arrangements. In effect, some employees are increasingly focused on negotiation of i-deals. I-deals have been defined by Rousseau (2005; Rousseau et al., 2006: 978), as “voluntary, personalized agreements of a nonstandard nature negotiated between individual employees and their employers regarding terms that benefit each party”. I-deals are individually negotiated, and can be initiated by both employee and organisation (Rousseau, 2005). I-deals are also heterogeneous (Rousseau et al., 2006), such that arrangements are negotiated that differ from the work conditions that other employees have.

Furthermore, i-deals should be beneficial for both employee and organisation. For employees, i-deals fulfill the need for customised work arrangements that may facilitate motivation, productivity or well-being; while, at the same time, i-deals benefit employers because they may attract, retain or motivate valuable employees (Bal & Rousseau, 2015). Finally, i-deals vary in scope, such that some employees may negotiate a single idiosyncratic deal, such as the possibility to vary working times during the workweek, while others may have fully idiosyncratically negotiated positions (Rousseau et al., 2006). I-deals have different dimensions (Rosen, Slater, Chang, & Johnson, 2013; Rousseau, Hornung, & Kim, 2009), and can be negotiated *ex-ante* or *ex-post* (Rousseau et al., 2009). *Ex-ante* i-deals are negotiated prior to when one starts the job, and are normally negotiated during the hiring process. *Ex-post* i-deals are negotiated after entering a job during an ongoing relationship (ibid).

The majority of the studies on i-deals have focused on the effects of i-deals on employee outcomes (Hornung et al., 2008; Liao et al., 2016), such as commitment, motivation, organisational citizenship behavior (OCB), and voice (Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2015; Liao et al., 2016; see also Anand, Vidyarthi, Liden, & Rousseau, 2010; Bal et al., 2012; Hornung et

al. 2008; Ng & Lucianetti, 2016). However, meta-analytic evidence shows that the correlations between i-deals and outcomes are inconsistent and tend to be small (Liao et al., 2016). Research on the predictors of i-deals is scarce (Hornung et al., 2008). The study by Rosen et al. (2013) showed that LMX (Leader-Member Exchange) and political skills were related to some but not all types of i-deals. Moreover, Ng and Lucianetti (2016) showed that people high on achievement and status striving were more successful in obtaining i-deals. These studies show *who* are better in obtaining i-deals, but there is yet little known on *why* workers start negotiating and how they experience the i-deals negotiation process.

It is, therefore, important to assess employees' motivations for negotiation of i-deals (Rousseau, 2005). Previous research has argued that workers start negotiating when they perceive a discrepancy between a current and a desired state (Reif & Brodbeck, 2014). In the context of i-deals, there is actually very little known about these perceived discrepancies which may lead workers to initiate a negotiation. Moreover, it is important to assess what the enabling and hindering factors are that people experience when they requesting i-deals. As these questions tap into undiscovered areas of i-deals research, the research questions are addressed using a qualitative design focused on employees who successfully negotiated an i-deal. In sum, the study aims to investigate two main research questions:

1. What are the motives for employees to start negotiating i-deals?
2. What are the enabling and hindering factors employees perceive when negotiating i-deals?

## Methods

### *Research Design and Sample*

In this study, the aim was to advance understanding of the process of negotiating i-deals. Because of its exploratory design, a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to understand the relatively unexplored phenomenon of i-deal negotiation in organisations. A broad range of employees working for organisations in the Netherlands were contacted and invited for an interview. Moreover, snowballing techniques were also applied to find as many employees who had successfully negotiated an i-deal with their employer, and still worked for the same employer. This was the case for all participants, except for Interviewee #28, who was made redundant from her job just prior to the interview.

A short description was given of what was meant by having successfully negotiated an i-deal (see Rousseau et al., 2006), and provided they had negotiated such an arrangement, they could be interviewed. In total, 31 employees were interviewed. On average, participants were 34 years old (ranging from 22-65 years), 45 per cent were female, 26 per cent had finished vocational training, and 74 per cent had higher vocational training or a university degree. On average, employees had 13 years of work experience (ranging from 1-49 years), and 42 per cent worked in healthcare, 29 per cent in the service sector, and 29 per cent in other sectors, such as education or hospitality. Thirty-five per cent worked in small firms (less than 50 employees), 23 per cent in medium-sized firms (50-250 employees), and 42 per cent in large firms (more than 250 employees). Table 1 presents an overview of all the participants.

**Table 1: Informant Information**

Interviewee no.	Age	Gender	Sector	Size of Organization	I-deal	I-deal Type	Agent	Time of I-deal
1	37	Male	Service	Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay Increase</li> </ul>	Financial	Supervisor	Ex-post
2	25	Male	Service	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course for supermarket management</li> </ul>	Development	Supervisor and branch manager	Ex-post
3	22	Female	Service	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible working times</li> <li>• Additional pay</li> <li>• Larger projects within job</li> </ul>	Flexibility Financial Task	Supervisor	Ex-post
4	22	Female	Health Care and Service	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional bonus and public transport reimbursement</li> <li>• Teleworking</li> <li>• Mystery visits as part of job</li> </ul>	Financial Flexibility Task	Supervisor	Ex-ante (teleworking) Ex-post (bonus and mystery visits)
5	22	Female	Law	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility in starting times</li> <li>• Variety in work tasks</li> </ul>	Flexibility Task	Branch manager	Ex-ante
6	23	Male	Health Care	Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific group of patients allocated to him</li> <li>• Teleworking</li> </ul>	Task Flexibility	Supervisor	Ex-post
7	22	Female	Health Care	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expansion of tasks</li> </ul>	Task	Supervisor	Ex-post
8	48	Female	Health Care	Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expansion of tasks</li> <li>• Paid college degree</li> </ul>	Task Development	Supervisor and management team	Ex-post
9	22	Male	Catering	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teleworking</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Supervisor and mentor	Ex-post
10	22	Female	Education	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility in teaching schedule</li> <li>• Expansion of tasks</li> </ul>	Flexibility Tasks	Supervisor and director	Ex-post
11	49	Female	Health Care	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility in working hours</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Supervisor and HR department	Ex-ante
12	65	Male	Education	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course on leadership</li> </ul>	Development	Management	Ex-post
13	39	Male	Education	Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time to work on PhD</li> </ul>	Development	Supervisor and director	Ex-post
14	56	Male	Education	Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expansion of tasks</li> </ul>	Task	Director	Ex-post
15	28	Male	Education	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers scholarship</li> </ul>	Development	Supervisor and director	Ex-post
16	28	Male	Service	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teleworking</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Supervisor	Ex-post
17	27	Female	Health Care	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility in working hours</li> </ul>	Flexibility Task	Director	Ex-post

18	23	Male	Health Care	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expansion of tasks</li> <li>• Teleworking</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Supervisor	Ex-post
19	51	Female	Health Care	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility in work schedule</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Supervisor	Ex-post
20	37	Female	Health Care	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility in work schedule</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Supervisor	Ex-post
21	28	Female	Health Care	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapted working hours for breast feeding</li> <li>• Individualized pay arrangement</li> </ul>	Flexibility Financial	Supervisor	Ex-post
22	27	Male	Health Care	Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapted working conditions due to injury</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Supervisor and colleagues	Ex-post
23	34	Male	Service	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced working hours</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Supervisor	Ex-post
24	51	Male	Service	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional holidays in quiet periods</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Supervisor	Ex-post
25	24	Male	Service	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lease car for work and private use</li> </ul>	Financial	Supervisor and cluster manager	Ex-post
26	29	Male	Service	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training</li> </ul>	Development	Supervisor	Ex-post
27	27	Male	Catering	Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management training</li> </ul>	Development	Location manager	Ex-post
28	55	Female	Health Care	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced work hours</li> <li>• Course for HR officer</li> </ul>	Flexibility Development	Supervisor	Ex-post
29	40	Female	Health Care	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible working hours</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Director	Ex-post
30	42	Male	Service	Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible working hours</li> </ul>	Flexibility	Supervisor	Ex-post
31	29	Male	Service	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accounting Course</li> </ul>	Development	Mentor, director	Ex-ante

*Note.* Agent refers to the people in the organisation that the i-dealer directly negotiated with. Ex-ante refers to i-deals negotiated prior to hiring or during the hiring process and ex-post refers to i-deals negotiated during tenure (Rousseau et al., 2009).

### *Data Collection*

The interviews took place at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands, or at the participants' workplace. The interviews lasted, on average, between one and one-and-a-half hour. A semi-structured interview was conducted using nine starter questions, which were followed by in-depth questions to gain more understanding of the answers (see Appendix A for the Interview Script). Interviews were recorded digitally, and subsequently converted to transcriptions to analyse the data. All interviews took place in Dutch, and the transcripts were translated into English for subsequent analyses.

Each interview started with an explanation of the purpose of the interview and the guarantee of anonymity. Next, the interviewer explained what i-deals are (Rousseau, 2005). Subsequently, interviewees were asked to describe what kind of i-deals they had negotiated, what their motivation was to negotiate an i-deal, when that happened, who had taken the initiative to negotiate, what the reasons were for the organisation to grant the i-deal, which barriers had to be taken, which reactions they got from their environment, which impact the i-deal had on them, and finally how the i-deal was managed.

### *Data Analysis*

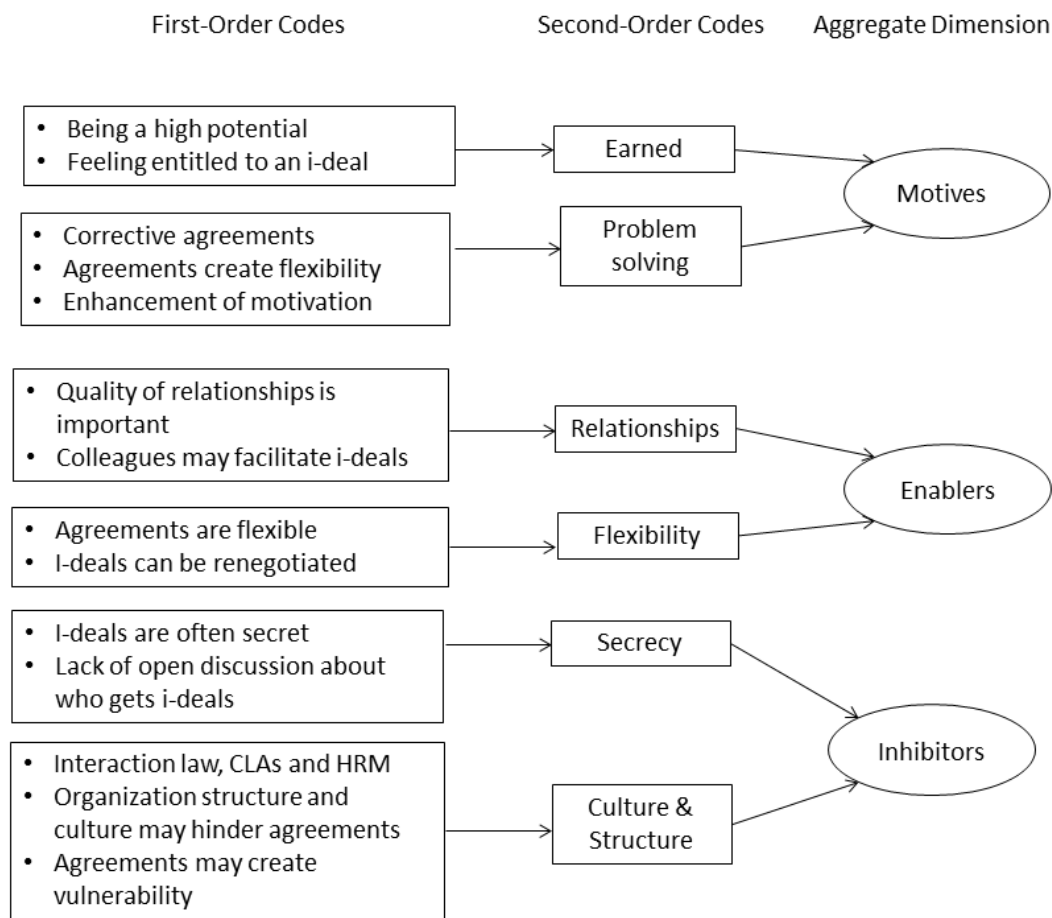
The interview transcripts were analysed based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which meant moving back and forth between the data and codes that were generated. Hence, an iterative process was followed, which meant moving from the data to the codes, and rereading the transcripts to ascertain the validity of the codes. First, open codes were generated from the data, and subsequently, these first-order codes were grouped into categories. The first-order codes resulted directly from the data, and were summaries of what the participants had expressed during the interviews. Examples are "agreements create flexibility", and "quality of relationships is important". The next step was axial coding, in which the first-order codes that were generated were clustered in conceptually similar second-order codes. Finally, these second-order codes were combined in three general themes relevant for i-deal research. After generating these codes and higher-order themes, the transcripts were reread and compared with the codes (King, 2004).

## **Findings**

The interviews produced accounts of 42 different successfully negotiated i-deals among the 31 participants (range 1-3 i-deals per participant). Table 1 shows that almost half concerned flexibility i-deals ( $k = 19$ , 45 per cent), and the others were development ( $k = 9$ , 21 per cent), task ( $k = 9$ , 21 per cent), and financial i-deals ( $k = 5$ , 12 per cent). 24 participants negotiated their i-deals with their direct supervisor (i.e. agent), and in six cases, higher-level managers were directly involved as well. In seven instances, the director of the organisation (or division of large organisations) was involved. Two participants negotiated i-deals with their mentor, and one participant explained that the HR department was directly involved in the negotiation process. Finally, 37 i-deals (88 per cent) were ex-post, and five (12 per cent) were ex-ante i-deals.

Analysis of the data revealed three main themes: motives, enablers, and inhibitors. Each of these dimensions consists of two subdimensions. Figure 1 shows the process of coding the data, producing the higher-order factors. Table 2 shows illustrative quotes.

**Figure 1: Data Structure**



**Table 2: Additional Data Examples**

Themes	Illustrative Quotes (No. of Informant)
<i>Motives</i>	
Earned	<p>Being a high potential: “But the reason why these agreements were made, was because they saw the potential in me, and more than in my peers who had the same type of job as I had” (2).</p> <p>“I was performing well, and people came to me with questions etcetera, so it was a logical step for me to ask for the function of representative.” (10)</p>
	<p>Feeling entitled to an i-deal: “It is about rewards and real appreciation. Why am I still in [pay scale] 12 and they in 13, while we do the same work. Moreover, and I have said this once, I outperform half of the people here who is in 13. Why am I then in 12? It is about appreciation and money, but also about feeling appreciated.” (1)</p> <p>“It is not the case that my motivation substantially increased, because I find it normal to ask for these things and get it. Hence, in that sense, no surprises, and no feeling of ‘wow, how cool is this’. Just go with the flow.” (23)</p>
Problem Solving	<p>Corrective agreements: “When it did not go well, we decided to arrange tasks differently. When I changed functions, we agree that I would do larger national projects instead of smaller regional projects. That was agreed upon when I changed functions.” (3)</p> <p>“Flexible work schedules: that was related to my personal situation. Because my partner came over to study here for five months, and I liked to spent time with him in the evenings, that request was brought forward.” (5)</p> <p>Agreements create flexibility: “For me, it is very important to have a feeling of autonomy in my work.” (17)</p> <p>“Concerning working times, there are opportunities to deal with it in a flexible way. If suddenly, I have to arrange something serious, that is always possible.” (24)</p> <p>“It gives me rest. I do not feel pressure. Of course I do have deadlines, but this way, it is just much nicer.” (3)</p> <p>Agreements enhance motivation and performance: “I got the opportunity to get a promotion. But that had consequences. I had to follow training and had to work more hours.” (3)</p> <p><i>Teleworking</i>: “this was really motivating. I had the idea that I was so much more productive at home. I am really a morning person, while others at the office really have to wake up in the mornings and are mainly chatting, but they are not really working. At home, I really pushed forward, and got a lot of things achieved.” (9)</p>
<i>Enablers</i>	
Relationships	<p>Quality of relationships is important: “A lot is dependent upon the quality of your relationships, and your capabilities to build those relationships. That’s how it works, I think.” (14)</p> <p>“I showed my colleagues what I had done at home, so they could see I did a good job. There was a lot of trust at work, so I got a lot of freedom.” (9)</p> <p>Colleagues may facilitate agreements: “The team is an important factor if you want to arrange something, because if they agree, the supervisor has to come with very good reasons to reject it.” (15)</p> <p><i>Extra tasks</i>: “they reacted, oh that’s nice that you can do that, I would have liked to do that as well. But in a positive way, not in a jealous way. And a lot of</p>



people offered me their help. Some asked me to substitute me when I was not there.” (10)

Flexibility      Agreements are flexible: “We make agreements about the subdivision and that means in practice that we allocate tasks automatically among each other.” (3)  
“The management tasks have changed in content. First, it would be only for a year, and then collecting documents and making minutes, and that has been expanded over time, and has become more focused on content. (...) It does have an organic character and that’s why I have to consult a lot. And it does have an ad hoc character, so new things keep popping up, or there has to be reaction formulated to something. So I consult P. [the director] a lot, but colleagues as well.” (17)

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*Inhibitors*

Secrecy      I-deals are often secret: “They also said to me that it was exclusive, that I could not talk about it with others. It was only for me.” (4)  
“My colleagues do not really know about this, because I do not really cooperate with them. And I have to be aware, because they are careful with these agreements, so I better not speak out loudly about this.” (6)  
“That happens in the office. Then, the door closes, and things get discussed. There is a taboo about this. Especially in health care, I see that people easily adjust to policies. Maybe they accept them too quickly.” (18)

Culture & structure      Interaction with law, CLAs and HR policies: “In the beginning, I found it hard to ask, I felt uncomfortable, I did not want to lose my job. This agreement is not written in black and white, so we had to agree upon it beyond the existing rules.” (3)  
“A CLA is also an easy way for an organization to see it as a barrier, and to say that it could be a problem. (...) Organisational culture and the CLA form a wall that you cannot overcome.” (20)

Organisation structure and culture can hinder agreements: “I sometimes do have the idea that the institute I work for, (...), that the structures are very hierarchical. While we are very used to flat organisational structures in the Netherlands, this is not the case over here.” (17)  
“I think with the daddy-days, the culture of the organisation played a role, as it was not done to work less, and moan about holidays. You live for your work, and the more you do that, the tougher you are. That was the approach.” (23)

Agreements may create vulnerability: “The trees used to grow to the sky, but the crisis has put the people back on their place, and people treated each other less exuberant. People could get fired, and then there is a lot of tension. In such periods, you don’t start about individual agreements.” (25)  
“Just because of these arrangements I made, it was easy for them to kick me out. If you look at it that way, then the special position has become my downfall. My success was my weakness at the same time, to state it this way.” (28)

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## Motives for I-deal Negotiation

The first main theme that emerged was motives for negotiation. Two types of motives were identified: earned and problem solving.

### *Earned i-deal*

Some participants explained that they negotiated an i-deal because they felt they earned it. For instance, employees indicated that their organisation perceived them as a high-potential, or that they themselves felt being a high-potential and, therefore, they should be treated individually. Interviewee #10, being employed on a temporary basis, negotiated a renewed contract with expanded tasks and more flexibility, and explained that she was able to obtain this idiosyncratic position as she was already performing at a higher level, and colleagues were already consulting her on various work-related issues. Hence, employees may feel that they are entitled to receive i-deals because they perceive themselves to be outperforming others. However, entitlement not only arises from the perception that one is better than others, but also because one may perceive that others, for no good reason, are treated better. Interviewee #1, who negotiated a pay raise, felt he conducted his work at the same level as higher-paid employees and, therefore, earned an i-deal (See Table 2).

### *Problem Solving*

In contrast to an earned i-deal, employees indicated that they also negotiated an i-deal to solve a specific problem at work, such as a working schedule that did not fit school times of the children. On the one hand, participants explained that, when something had gone wrong at work, i-deals could be negotiated to resolve the situation. Interviewee #3 negotiated a change of tasks when things did not go well at work, and negotiated an i-deal to conduct larger national projects rather than small projects as stipulated in her job description. On the other hand, i-deals can be negotiated to facilitate employees more flexibility in their work. Interviewee #17 indicated that autonomy at work was very important to her, hence she negotiated an i-deal about flexible hours. She explained that:

I perform less when I am distracted, or when I am not in a creative writing mood. Now I can say I am going home, and when you are more inspired in the evening I can do some work. And that there is nobody looking over your shoulder, because that really impedes my sense of autonomy, and that makes me perform less well.

This shows that flexibility i-deals may solve problems, but for many employees flexibility is also negotiated to prevent problems and, hence, flexibility is no longer a means to achieve something, but also contributes to problem prevention. Accordingly, interviewee #24 indicated that i-deals may provide more leeway in the future to make decisions flexibly, and interviewee #3 explained that her i-deal ensured that she felt less pressure and more flexibility in dealing with her deadlines. Finally, employees may initiate i-deal negotiation to enhance work motivation and productivity, thereby solving a career-related problem, such as low motivation or productivity. For instance, Interviewee #3, who negotiated a particular training and to work more hours, explained that this i-deal was a mean towards an end. The i-deal would help her to become more productive in her job, and to achieve a promotion and career advancement. Interviewee #31 negotiated to follow an accounting course which would benefit both him and the organization. He explained that: “To the director, I told him that I wanted to undertake additional education next to my work, because I want to develop myself and grow along with advancing knowledge.”

Thus, i-deals can serve as a mean to achieve higher motivation in the job. In sum, the first theme shows that the motives people have for negotiating i-deals can be at least two-fold; people can feel they have earned an i-deal, or they start negotiating an i-deal to solve or prevent a problem.

## **Enabling Factors in the Negotiation Process**

The second main theme identified from the data concerned the enabling factors employees perceived to exist in terms getting an i-deal. Two enabling factors were discovered: relationships and flexibility.

### *Relationships*

The quality of relationships was important in whether one can negotiate an i-deal. Interviewee #14, who negotiated to do extra work (i.e., writing educational materials) for additional pay, explained that he was able to obtain this attractive job because of his high-quality relationship with the organisation. Without having these relationships, he admitted that he would not have received the offer. Moreover, Interviewee #15, who had negotiated an individualised career trajectory at his school, explained that because of training he underwent, he had to agree with his colleagues on his teaching schedules such that it would allow him to follow training as well. As he had informed his colleagues prior to negotiating the i-deal he wanted, they were actively facilitating his proposal for the i-deal. There would be no conflicts between his career development plan and his teaching schedule, which was an important requisite for his organisation to grant the i-deal. Hence, colleagues can actively facilitate the negotiation and successful implementation of i-deals.

### *Flexibility*

I-deals are perceived to be flexible in nature. They can be negotiated on a rather abstract level (e.g., the expansion of tasks within a job), but the day-to-day practical implementation of the i-deal often has to be further negotiated. Interviewee #3, who had negotiated an i-deal to do larger projects, explained that this i-deal was somewhat abstract and concerned the general allocation of work. In reality, however, she renegotiated how work was conducted with her manager and coworkers on a daily or weekly basis. Interviewee #17, who negotiated expansion of her tasks, also explained that the i-deal had an organic character, changing over time in content, and the deal was in need of regular renegotiation with her director. Negotiated i-deals, therefore, may serve as a general framework which guide the more day-to-day agreements between employee, coworkers, and management. Hence, i-deals are in themselves flexible, and can be renegotiated over time.

## **Inhibiting Factors in the Negotiation Process**

The third theme that was found pertained to the inhibiting factors towards i-deal negotiation, and consisted of two subdimensions: secrecy, and structure and culture.

*Secrecy* of i-deals refers to whether employees can freely communicate with coworkers about the i-deal they have negotiated. Organisations often ask the employee to keep the deal secret, unless coworkers are directly affected by an i-deal. That is often the case with i-deals on flexible working schedules, as they involve coworkers. Employees may be instructed to keep an i-deal confidential, as senior managers may not want coworkers to know about the i-deal, so that

coworkers do not start negotiating themselves, or to prevent feelings of unfairness among coworkers. Interviewee #18, who worked as a nurse in a large hospital, explained that when someone wanted to negotiate an i-deal, it happened behind closed doors, and it would not be discussed openly. He perceived a taboo on negotiating i-deals, as people in healthcare are more likely to adapt to existing policies. Hence, i-deals are generally not shared publicly, and organisations refrain from freely communicating about which deals are negotiated by whom. Employees are often put under pressure to remain silent about which deals they have negotiated. The effect of secrecy is that i-deals cannot be materialised, as employees cannot openly discuss their i-deals with others.

A second inhibiting factor found was *culture and structure*. Culture (both at organisational and national level) could influence the extent to which people were able to negotiate i-deals as well as the extent to which i-deals interact with existing structures, including law, labour agreements, and HR-policies. Often employees referred to existing rules as a foundation for the exchange relationship between employee and organisation, and they felt they could not ask for more beyond what was already available to them. For instance, Interviewee #3 explained that she felt uncomfortable about asking for i-deals, the more as it could not be formalised on paper. Since an agreement had to be made beyond existing rules, it could not be formalised, and remained an oral agreement. Interviewee #20 explained that collective labour agreements were also used by managers to reject i-deals, as they argued that i-deals would not fit with the existing rules. For many managers, HR-policies and labour agreements shape their negotiation space, as well as the boundaries around it. As i-deals may extend these boundaries, managers may reject i-deal requests as they blur the distinction between what is possible according to the rules and their discretion to make decisions. However, employees also perceive existing rules as limiting their need or potential to negotiate additional deals. Interviewee #12, who had been a supervisor for some years and gave up his position recently, explained:

Most of the things I use at work are written in the CLA (collective labour agreement), such as a seniority day, which means I get additional leave. You can use that when you are at a certain age. (..) Time for time and time for money arrangements are described in detail in the regulations.

In addition, organisation culture may also hinder the potential to negotiate i-deals. Interviewee #17, working for a small health care company, explained that the organisational culture was very hierarchical. Being a young woman in an industry where men dominated in top positions, she felt she lacked the confidence to ask for an i-deal. She explained that:

While we are very used to flat organisational structures in the Netherlands, this is not the case over here. I was the youngest and the lowest at the career ladder. (...) Often they look at you as being the youngest, and that you are not capable yet. I struggled with that in the beginning, because I had a low status, and some others did not manage that well. I do know a lot about some work-related topics, but because you are the most junior, it is a barrier for your confidence.

Interviewee #23, who negotiated reduced working hours to spend time with his family and children, experienced a hindering culture, as the dominant culture in his organisation emphasised the live-to-work mentality which did not fit in with his desire for reduced hours. These findings indicate that structure and culture may hinder both the chances of getting an i-deal, but also effective implementation and transfer of i-deals into the workplace.

Other inhibiting factors appear when i-deals may create vulnerability for employees. As employees negotiate special arrangements that differ from coworkers, a situation may be created where i-deals negatively influence an employee's standing in the organisation. Interviewee #25 explained that after the outburst of the economic crisis, he was less willing to start negotiating an i-deal, as there was a lot of tension within the organisation over potential lay-offs. Hence, in a crisis, employees may refrain from such negotiations. However, it was also found that employees who had negotiated i-deals became more likely to be made redundant during crises. Interviewee #28, who had negotiated a flexible work schedule so that she could pick up her children from school, indicated that because of this arrangement, she had become more vulnerable. As a consequence, in a recent reorganisation, she was made redundant and she felt that this happened because of her special arrangements.

## Discussion

This explorative study on the motives for i-deal negotiation shows that there are at least three main themes relevant to i-deal negotiation. The first main theme pertains to the motives people have to start negotiating. Two main motives were identified; earned i-deals and problem-solving. While i-deal conceptualisation has primarily been developed around the notion of 'superstars' or high-performers in organisations (Guerrero, Bentein, & Lapalme, 2014; Rousseau, 2005; Rousseau et al., 2006), this study clearly shows that it is not only the high-performers who negotiate i-deals. While employees may feel entitled to i-deals, it was also found that i-deals may solve problems employees face at work. In sum, the motives that people have to negotiate i-deals may differ, and determine the outcomes of the i-deal negotiation. In addition to motives, there are two important elements in the negotiation process. First, enabling factors may help to negotiate i-deals and to transfer them successfully into the workplace. Social exchange relationships are important; when one has strong relationships with managers and colleagues, i-deals are more accessible, while poor relationships with coworkers may impede a successful transfer of i-deals to the workplace. Moreover, i-deals are also flexible in nature themselves through which they may create greater flexibility at work, and help a greater fit between a person and the job.

However, i-dealers also experience inhibiting factors towards obtaining an i-deal as well as implementing an i-deal successfully at work. First, organizations can explicitly demand workers to keep their i-deal secret as they do not want to know coworkers about special arrangements being agreed upon. This may hinder employees, as they are not allowed to openly communicate about the agreements they have made. For i-deals theory and research, it is, therefore, important to assess whether i-deals are publicly known in order to understand how they manifest in the workplace and affect work outcomes. Moreover, i-deals interact with law, CLAs and HR-practices. Managers may decline i-deals on the basis of existing regulation, but employees themselves may also feel hindered to negotiate within the existing structures and policies.

### *Theoretical Implications*

The paper has a number of theoretical implications for research on i-deals, as well as the literature on individualisation of work relationships and negotiation at work. Essentially, i-deals are becoming 'normalised' in the workplace and more widely available to employee (Lee, Bachrach, & Rousseau, 2015), and are not solely negotiated by star performers, but by others as well. However, this may also contradict with existing structures, such as managers who want to be 'in control'. Hence, it is not surprising to observe how managers may ask employees

to remain silent on their i-deals, or may even reject i-deal requests on the basis of existing rules. This may be explained on the basis that, while employees have become more self-reliant in an individualised world, not all organisations and managers are actually welcoming of negotiating employees, and reducing control over their workers (Bal & Lub, 2015; Rousseau et al., 2006). Hence, individualisation of work arrangements may also be perceived negatively by organisations, as it indicates differential treatment of employees, reducing control, and more active management of negotiated i-deals.

#### *Motives for I-deals*

Motives for granting i-deals to employees may include made contributions to the organisation, being a high-potential, or because an employee threatens to leave the organisation (Rousseau, 2005). As the findings of the current study showed, managers may be inclined to deny i-deals when they struggle with legitimising i-deals in the workplace, and refer to existing policies and law as the basis for managing the employment relationship. Not granting i-deals at all may be easier for managers to sustain fairness across the organisation (Greenberg, Roberge, Ho, & Rousseau, 2004). An underlying explanation for this may be that managers are rarely educated in and used to negotiating i-deals with individual employees. Therefore, managers may lack the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully negotiate and manage i-deals in the workplace, through which they will be less inclined to grant them. Their reluctance may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the findings show that employees may perceive that i-deals are impossible to obtain, given the existing structures and culture in the organisation. Theory and research on i-deals should, therefore, integrate the boundaries that exist within and across organisations that impede i-deal negotiation to fully understand the context in which i-deals are negotiated and when they are not granted.

Motives for i-deal negotiation have clear theoretical links with the existing literature on i-deals. Problem solving motives fit within a work adjustment perspective (Bal et al., 2012), as preventive or corrective i-deals (primarily flexibility-oriented) are negotiated with the explicit aim to create a better fit between work and family demands. Further integration of the motives for i-deal negotiation with the theoretical perspectives on i-deals will enhance understanding of how i-deals operate in the workplace, and how they affect attitudes and behaviors.

Finally, the findings showed that i-deals interact with law, CLAs and HR policies. Therefore, the study also has implications for the wider literature on strategic HRM (Jiang et al., 2012). Dominant models in the HRM literature primarily depart from a systems-perspective, which postulates that the organisation has to implement HR-practices to increase employee and organisational performance (Messersmith, Patel, Lepak, & Gould-Williams, 2011). This study shows that beyond those HR-practices, employees negotiate individualised agreements which enhance motivation and performance. Hence, strategic HRM does not only entail the management of systems, but even more importantly, the management of people and i-deals. Hence, what is commonly referred to as the 'black box' of HRM (ibid), not only refers to the passive reactions of employees when they receive HR-practices, but also includes the active management of how employees interpret existing practices, and how they complement these with i-deals.

### *Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research*

Despite the novelty of the findings and their implications for i-deals research, there are also some limitations to the study. First, in line with previous studies (Liao et al., 2016), this study focused on employee perceptions of the i-deal negotiation process, rather than organisational agents, including line managers and HR-managers. While i-deals are negotiated between employees and their organisations, the majority of studies have used the employee as the primary informant of how i-deals are established. However, future research would benefit from taking into account organisational perspectives on i-deals as well, and to establish whether there is agreement in the perspectives of employee and management.

Another limitation is that the focus was exclusively on employees who successfully negotiated i-deals. There is insufficient understanding yet of the wider context around i-deals, including perceptions of employees who requested but were not successful in obtaining i-deals (Lee et al., 2015), workers who perceive they lack the bargaining power or confidence to negotiate i-deals, and workers who feel no need for individualised work arrangements. Another concern pertains to the context of the study, as all of the interviewees were Dutch employees. As Rousseau (2005) explained, i-deals will differ substantially across countries and cultures. As norms of equality and negotiation are different across the world, it is not only the extent to which i-deals relate to outcomes that will differ across cultures (Liao et al., 2016), but also the way i-deals are shaped and tolerated within organizations. Therefore, cross-cultural research on i-deals would shed more light on these issues.

### *Practical Implications*

The study has important practical implications as i-deals become more popular in contemporary workplaces. First, the study shows that employees may feel hindered to start negotiating as existing structures and practices are perceived to exclude the possibility of i-deal negotiation. For organisations and managers, the study offers insights into the i-deal negotiation process. As i-deals are now being requested by employees, organisations are advised to educate managers in how to manage i-deal requests and how to grant i-deals. As secrecy of arrangements may potentially increase perceptions of unfairness in the workplace (Greenberg et al., 2004), organisations benefit from a transparent approach towards individualisation of work arrangements. An important aspect is how organisations and managers communicate to employees about the possibilities for i-deal negotiation, as openness about this may enhance fairness and equality in the workplace. Moreover, managers may be aware that employees have different goals when initiating negotiation, and thus the i-deal content should be aligned with the goals of both the employee and the organisation. Finally, managers are advised to be aware that it is, nowadays, not only star performers who negotiate i-deals. As more employees are negotiating, they may have different motives for i-deal negotiation. Depending on these motives, i-deals may have different contents, but also effects on motivation and productivity.

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