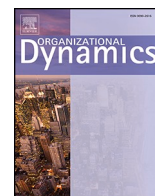


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From negotiation to integration: Mastering the art of idiosyncratic deals

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Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving workplace, the concept of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) has emerged as a compelling illustration of how organizations are moving beyond traditional views of employment to embrace more personalized work arrangements. At its core, i-deals represent a negotiation between an employee and their organization, often facilitated through their managers, to create work conditions that cater to the employee's unique needs while aligning with organizational goals and objectives. This evolution reflects a shift toward recognizing the individual aspirations of employees and integrating these into the fabric of organizational performance.

The allure of i-deals lies in their potential to create a 'win-win' scenario where both the employee and the manager find value in the arrangement. For instance, an employee might negotiate the ability to work remotely to better balance personal and professional life, while another might request additional training opportunities to develop new skills and advance their career. In turn, the organization benefits from the heightened motivation and productivity of these employees, a direct outcome of this flexibility, the enhanced skills brought by such training, and other varied arrangements tailored to individual employee needs. However, the narrative around i-deals is not solely positive. While aiming for this 'win-win,' there can be unforeseen 'win-lose' situations, such as when the arrangements inadvertently isolate the employee who receives i-deals (i-dealer) from team dynamics, the interactions and relationships that facilitate collaboration and productivity within a team or create perceptions of unfairness among colleagues.

This discussion seeks to bridge the gap between the theoretical exploration of these personalized work agreements and their practical

application within organizations. We aim to shed light on both the promising aspects and the potential pitfalls of i-deals, ensuring that managers are equipped with the knowledge to implement these arrangements effectively. We also examine the i-dealer, exploring their willingness to help their peers, avoiding exploiting the arrangement, and commit to colleagues' wellbeing, which is crucial for a successful i-deal. Understanding peer dynamics and gathering insights about others' i-deals in the organization can further guide employees and managers alike.

By dissecting i-deals, we offer insights into how they can be structured to foster environments that are productive, equitable, and deeply satisfying for the focal employee, managers, and coworkers. Lastly, we delve into principles and strategies designed for managers to effectively maximize the benefits of i-deals while mitigating their challenges. Through this, we contribute to a deeper understanding of i-deals within the realms of organizational behavior, underscoring the significance of aligning innovative work practices like i-deals with broader organizational objectives. Ultimately, we illustrate how these personalized arrangements can contribute to organizational dynamics when effectively implemented by practitioners.

The other side of the coin: the hidden costs of I-deals

While offering solutions, i-deals also bring with them a set of challenges that can impact individuals, teams, and the broader organization. These potential pitfalls underline the importance of careful navigation and management of i-deals to fully realize their benefits. Emma's story below serves as a poignant example of these complexities in action.

Emma, a software developer, negotiated an i-deal to work remotely

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three days a week to better balance her personal and professional life due to her lengthy commute. Her manager approved the request, recognizing Emma's dedication and the potential for increased productivity with this flexible arrangement. However, as Emma transitioned to her new remote work schedule, deeper, unforeseen challenges emerged. Her colleagues, observing Emma's new work setup, initially had concerns about the impact on team dynamics and communication. These concerns led to feelings of unfairness and resentment, as they struggled with changes in team interactions and workflow. This sparked envy and negative attitudes towards Emma and their manager. Moreover, Emma's reduced physical presence in the office led to difficulties in real-time collaboration and spontaneous team interactions, which some colleagues felt disrupted the workflow and created misunderstandings. Consequently, these dynamics strained team cohesion and collaboration, creating a hostile environment that affected overall workplace morale. Despite her increased job satisfaction, Emma found herself increasingly isolated and the target of negative behaviors. The impact on her well-being became so pronounced that she started contemplating leaving the organization, a concern she eventually discussed with her manager.

This case highlights the potential pitfalls of i-deals when not managed effectively, particularly the risk of perceptions of unfairness and the resulting negative impact on team dynamics. The story of Emma's i-deal brings to light the broader, intricate challenges that emerge from such personalized work arrangements, challenging the prevalent assumption that only unsuccessful i-deal negotiations lead to dissatisfaction. Even when i-deals like Emma's are successfully negotiated, they can set off a chain reaction of adverse effects that ripple through the individual, team, and organizational levels.

At the organizational level, the negative fallout of Emma's i-deal reveals itself in several ways. While the organization initially benefits from Emma's increased productivity, it faces the potential loss of a valuable employee as she contemplates leaving the organization due to the strained work environment. Furthermore, the discontent among her colleagues, stemming from perceptions of unfairness, fuels counterproductive behaviors that conflict with organizational norms and values, threatening overall workplace harmony. Moreover, the fallout from these arrangements impacts other critical aspects of management work, including decisions regarding promotions, pay raises, and other benefits, highlighting the depth and potential explosiveness of the negative consequences at the organizational level.

The impact at the team level is equally profound. The team's performance begins to wane as Emma's colleagues, concerned about the impact on team dynamics and communication, face challenges in real-time collaboration and spontaneous team interactions. The atmosphere of perceived inequity leads to relational discord and coordination issues, significantly hampering the team's effectiveness. Moreover, the reduced spontaneous interactions and misunderstandings that Emma's colleagues experience strain team cohesion and morale, replacing what could be a collaborative environment with one marked by tension and dissatisfaction.

At the individual level, the consequences are starkly personal. Despite achieving the flexible work arrangement, she sought for a better work-life balance, Emma wrestles with emotional exhaustion and a sense of isolation. The solution meant to improve her professional and personal well-being instead propels her to consider leaving the organization. Her colleagues, too, grapple with the repercussions of the i-deal, as envy and resentment erode their sense of justice and self-worth. This emotional toll is not limited to those who had probably requested similar arrangements and were denied but extends across the team, even affecting those with different needs who seek various types of i-deals beyond flexible work arrangements. This widespread dissatisfaction contributes to a pervasive sense of emotional exhaustion and diminishes the overall workplace well-being.

Emma's experience reveals that the dynamics of i-deals are far more complex than they appear, requiring careful consideration and

management to prevent their potential benefits from being overshadowed by negative consequences. This narrative emphasizes the necessity for practitioners to adopt a holistic approach to i-deals, balancing individual needs with the collective health of the team and organization. Ensuring that personalized work arrangements enhance rather than disrupt the workplace is crucial for their success.

Guiding principles for the effective implementation of I-deals

Implementing and managing i-deals effectively involves adopting guiding principles that reflect the flexible and personalized nature of these arrangements. These principles ensure that i-deals are beneficial for all involved and follow a win-win-win approach for employees, colleagues, and managers, or at least create a no-lose scenario. Drawing on Emma's example, where she negotiated a remote work arrangement that inadvertently stirred team dynamics issues, we underscore the necessity of a principle-based strategy that addresses potential pitfalls while maximizing benefits. This approach aims to guide prospective i-dealers and managers through the complexities of i-deals, ensuring they contribute positively to the workplace. Below are seven guiding principles for the effective implementation of i-deals that managers can adopt in no particular order.

Principle 1: promote mutual benefit

The foundation of effective i-deals lies in ensuring that the arrangements benefit both the employee and the organization. Managers, as members of the organization's community and i-deal granters, should seek to create deals that meet employees' personal needs while also aligning with organizational goals. In Emma's case, her requested flexible work arrangement, one of the varied forms of i-deals, should be designed to meet her specific needs, such as improving her work-life balance and enhancing her job satisfaction, all without negatively impacting team productivity and organizational effectiveness.

To ensure this mutual benefit, managers can emphasize the mutual advantages of such arrangements during their one-on-one negotiations and discussions. Highlighting how the i-deal will not only meet the focal employee's needs but also support organizational objectives can help in aligning individual and organizational goals.

Principle 2: foster open communication

To effectively implement i-deals, managers must encourage a culture of open and honest communication where employees feel safe to express their needs without fear of judgment or bureaucratic hurdles. Informal discussions and trust-building are crucial for understanding the unique needs of employees and addressing potential concerns from their colleagues regarding the i-deals of focal employees. Managers should support open dialogue to establish trust and equity within teams.

Emma's experience highlights the importance of communication in mitigating misunderstandings and resentment among colleagues. If Emma's manager had fostered more open communication, it could have alleviated her colleagues' concerns. Managers can facilitate team meetings or one-on-one conversations to ensure that all team members understand the mutual benefits of i-deals and feel included in the process or, at the very least, be able to air their views and concerns. While maintaining the informal nature of i-deals, it is important to respect employees' privacy. Managers should note that i-deals are personal, and i-dealers should not be required to disclose personal information or the specific reasons behind their i-deals if they prefer not to. This approach helps mitigate misunderstandings and resentment without compromising the informal and personalized nature of i-deals.

Principle 3: ensure fairness and equity

Fairness is crucial in managing i-deals to prevent perceptions of

favoritism and unfair advantage among colleagues and team members. Although i-deals differ from preferential treatment and favoritism, they can still bring up feelings of unfairness among workers, especially colleagues of i-dealers. Moreover, since i-deals are often granted to high-performing employees to retain them in organizations and are not available to all employees as they are not a uniform/general work arrangement, they can thus bring about feelings of envy and unfairness among other employees who do not have or receive i-deals. These employees are more likely to request and benefit from i-deals that address their personal needs when their managers are known for being fair. Therefore, managers should aim to make equitable decisions by applying consistent principles when granting i-deals. It is also important to recognize that the i-dealer and the manager are not the only participants in an i-deal, as these arrangements also affect colleagues and team members. Their responses play a crucial role in determining the outcome of an i-deal, as seen in Emma's case. To eliminate the perception of secretive dealings, managers must establish clear and uniform standards for providing i-deals and gather essential information on equity and deservingness.

To maintain fairness, managers should focus on the principles of mutual benefits for both the employee and the organization and apply these arrangements equitably to all employees under similar circumstances when possible. Although i-deals cannot be uniformly given to all employees, as they are tailored to individual needs, managers should still be transparent in communicating the general principles and rationale behind i-deals without disclosing specific personal details. For example, rather than explaining Emma's specific reasons for her remote work arrangement, her manager could emphasize how the i-deal aligns with improving team productivity and overall organizational objectives. By fostering a climate of procedural fairness, where the principles guiding i-deals are well understood, managers can ensure that i-deals are perceived as equitable and beneficial to the entire team. This helps create an environment where employees feel their individual needs are considered without compromising team cohesion and morale.

Principle 4: encourage collaborative attitudes

Managers should encourage employees who receive i-deals to maintain a collaborative attitude and support their peers. This involves sharing the benefits of their unique arrangements, explaining how these benefits contribute to team productivity, and demonstrating a willingness to help colleagues. Managers can foster a team-oriented environment where the success of one member is seen as beneficial to the whole team. For example, Emma should be encouraged to offer to assist her colleagues even while working remotely and ensure she remains an active, contributing member of the team despite her physical absence. Encouraging team-building activities and fostering a culture of mutual support can further reinforce collaborative attitudes.

Moreover, since managers' decisions regarding focal employees are influenced by how their i-deals are received and perceived by colleagues, it is important to encourage focal employees to engage so as not to damage their good relationships or reputation. Therefore, maintaining a positive and collaborative attitude is crucial for the long-term success and acceptance of i-deals within the team and beyond.

Principle 5: build strong relationships with employees

Developing strong relationships between managers and employees is crucial for the effective implementation of i-deals. Managers should focus on building trust and mutual respect, which can enhance the negotiation and implementation of these personalized arrangements. By fostering high-quality relationships characterized by open communication, support, and understanding, managers can create a positive environment for i-deals. For example, Emma's successful negotiation of her remote work arrangement would have likely been due to her strong relationship with her manager, facilitating open dialogue and mutual

agreement. The case study also shows that Emma discussed her challenges and thoughts of leaving the organization with her manager, demonstrating the depth of their high-quality leader-member relationship, one based not on favoritism but on genuine, supportive connections. A supportive and respectful environment enables more effective i-deal negotiations and implementations, enhancing overall team cohesion and productivity.

Principle 6: train and empower

Managers should be continuously trained and empowered to make informed decisions regarding i-deals. This training should include building high-quality relationships with employees, fostering open communication, and ensuring fairness and equity in all interactions. Providing managers with these skills and knowledge will help them create i-deals that benefit all parties involved. Continuous training and development are essential for managers to adapt to evolving workplace dynamics. For instance, Emma's manager could benefit from training on handling team dynamics and perceptions of fairness when granting i-deals. Empowering managers with decision-making authority within a framework of guiding principles enhances their effectiveness and ensures that i-deals are implemented fairly and beneficially.

Principle 7: adopt a flexible, iterative approach

The process of implementing i-deals should be flexible and iterative, allowing for continuous feedback and adjustments. Since i-deals encompass a variety of arrangements beyond just flexible work options, managers need to be versatile in their approach. Consequently, they should regularly review and refine the principles adopted in implementing i-deals based on informal feedback from employees and observations of team dynamics. This ensures that i-deals remain aligned with both individual and organizational needs over time, which would be facilitated by the ongoing training managers receive and periodic reviews. For instance, in Emma's case, her work arrangement can be informally reviewed to address any emerging issues and make necessary adjustments. Implementing mechanisms for ongoing feedback, such as regular check-ins and anonymous surveys, can help in continuously refining i-deals, especially when there are issues of fairness or concerns from co-workers. This approach ensures that i-deals continue to provide mutual benefits and adapt to changing circumstances.

These approaches, through the guiding seven principles, ensure that i-deals contribute positively to the workplace, balancing individual needs with organizational goals while fostering a supportive and collaborative environment.

Guidelines for focal employees (I-dealers)

Focal employees, or i-dealers, are central to the successful implementation and sustainability of i-deals. While managers play a significant role in granting and overseeing these personalized work arrangements, the responsibility for their effectiveness and seamless integration into team dynamics does not rest solely on their shoulders. I-dealers must actively contribute to ensuring their i-deals are beneficial not only to themselves but also to their colleagues and the organization as a whole. Moreover, how i-dealers handle their arrangements can significantly influence their manager's perception of them, impacting future i-deal approvals, promotions, pay raises, and other benefits. By understanding the importance of their roles and the broader impact of their i-deals, i-dealers can foster a collaborative and supportive environment, mitigate potential conflicts, and enhance the overall success of their personalized work arrangements. Below is some advice for i-dealers like Emma, who have a crucial role in the success of their i-deals:

1. **Communicate Transparently:** I-dealers should do their best to share the reasons for their i-deal with their colleagues to prevent

Table 1
Summary table of guiding principles and advice for effective implementation of I-deals.

	Principle/Advice	Description	Example
1.	Promote Mutual Benefit	Ensure i-deals benefit both the employee and the organization.	Implement a flexible work schedule that meets Emma's needs for work-life balance while also increasing her productivity level, thereby contributing to the organization's goals.
2.	Foster Open Communication	Encourage safe, informal discussions about i-deals.	Emma is able to freely discuss her needs for a remote work arrangement with her manager and address any concerns that arise from the i-deal with her manager.
3.	Ensure Fairness and Equity	Strive for equitable decisions and transparent communication.	The manager explains to the team how i-deals are granted based on clear, fair criteria and mutual benefits, ensuring procedural fairness.
4.	Encourage Collaborative Attitudes	Maintain a team-oriented environment.	Emma is encouraged to offer help and participate in team activities and collaborate with her colleagues as much as possible, even while working remotely.
5.	Build Strong Relationships	Develop high-quality relationships between managers and employees.	The manager spends time understanding each employee's career goals and personal needs, fostering trust and support.
6.	Train and Empower	Equip managers to make informed i-deal decisions.	Managers should continuously attend training on effective i-deal applications and principles, practice what they have learned, and know that there is always room for learning and adjusting the principles based on individual employees and situations.
7.	Adopt a Flexible, Iterative Approach	Continuously refine i-deals based on feedback.	Managers should include continuous and regular feedback and adjustments to i-deals as necessary. For instance, Emma and her manager can review her remote work arrangements periodically to address any emerging issues and make necessary adjustments.
8.	Advice for Focal Employees	Guidelines for employees to ensure i-deal success.	Emma transparently communicates the benefits of her remote work i-deal, supports her team by maintaining regular contact, avoids exploiting the arrangement, commits to team well-being, proactively offers solutions, and shows appreciation and reciprocity.

misunderstandings as much as possible. Although the reason for an i-deal could be very personal and employees might not feel comfortable sharing it at the time, they can still explain how their personalized work arrangement benefits them, meets their current needs, and how it will also benefit their colleagues and the organization. This transparency can help reduce, if not eliminate, feelings of unfairness. In Emma's case, communicating the benefits of her i-deal to her team members could be very helpful.

- 2. Support the Team:** It is important for focal employees to show a willingness to assist and support their colleagues despite having unique arrangements. For instance, Emma could offer assistance to her colleagues even as she works remotely, participating in virtual meetings, and maintaining regular contact with the team. Additionally, as an example, i-dealers who successfully negotiate for reduced travel obligations can use the time saved to mentor junior team members or lead team projects. Another example includes an employee who negotiates for additional professional development opportunities, sharing their newly acquired knowledge and skills with their team. These examples illustrate that i-deals, irrespective of their type, can be leveraged to benefit not just the individual, but the entire team, fostering a collaborative and supportive work environment.
- 3. Avoid Exploiting the Arrangement:** Focal employees should be mindful not to take undue advantage of their i-deal. Maintaining high work quality and productivity while contributing fairly to the team's workload is essential. This demonstrates that the unique work setup does not compromise their contributions to the team.
- 4. Commit to Team Well-being:** Considering the impact of their i-deal on colleagues' well-being is equally vital. I-dealers should strive to foster a positive team environment where everyone feels valued and supported. While it may not be their primary responsibility, they can also seek feedback from colleagues within their capacity to understand their concerns and address any issues arising from the i-deal. This proactive approach helps maintain team cohesion and ensures that the benefits of the i-deal extend to the entire team.
- 5. Be Proactive in Offering Solutions:** Anticipating potential issues that may arise from their i-deal and proactively offering solutions can help mitigate any negative impact. I-dealers can suggest ways to improve team communication and collaboration to managers when they can and when they have valuable insights. This proactive approach demonstrates a commitment to the team's success and helps ensure that the i-deal benefits everyone involved.
- 6. Show Appreciation and Reciprocity:** Recognizing and appreciating the flexibility provided by i-deals is essential, but it is equally crucial for i-dealers to continue being dependable and supportive team members. Maintaining high performance and contributing positively to the team demonstrates that they value the trust placed in them. While expressing gratitude is valuable, it is also essential to show appreciation through continued excellence and support for colleagues, reinforcing the mutual benefits of the i-deal.

By following these guidelines, i-dealers can ensure their unique work arrangements contribute positively to their own well-being, their team's dynamics, and the organization's overall success (Table 1).

Practical implications

This exploration into i-deals has sought to unpack their transformative potential for employee engagement and the critical management practices required to navigate their challenges effectively. The journey through the hidden costs of i-deals, as illuminated in Emma's scenario, has revealed how these personalized arrangements, if not managed with care, can lead to perceptions of unfairness, disrupt team cohesion, and potentially erode the organizational fabric. Moreover, it implies that the responsibility for a successful i-deal lies not only with managers but also with the i-dealers themselves. Focal employees/i-

dealers, like Emma, must be mindful of how their i-deals impact their colleagues and should actively support their peers, ensuring they do not take undue advantage of their unique arrangements.

The guiding principles outlined for the effective implementation of i-deals provide a foundational framework for managers and workers who are generally looking to leverage the advantages of these agreements. These principles emphasize the importance of promoting mutual benefit, fostering open communication, ensuring fairness and equity, encouraging collaborative attitudes, building solid relationships, training and empowering managers, and adopting a flexible, iterative approach. They are designed to equip both managers and focal employees with the strategies needed to ensure that i-deals contribute positively to individual employees, colleagues, and the wider team environment.

Conclusion

The management of i-deals places managers at the forefront of transforming potential challenges into opportunities that enhance the workplace. Effectively handling i-deals requires finding the right balance between meeting employee and organizational needs, which hinges on several key principles. Important takeaways for managers include starting i-deal negotiations with transparent communication, implementing fair and clear criteria for i-deals, and maintaining ongoing conversations and adaptability based on team input. Managers should consider i-deals as a way to cultivate a more adaptable, inclusive work environment that values individual needs while promoting team unity. Focal employees also play a crucial role in considering how their arrangements impact their colleagues and gathering insights about their i-deals to provide valuable feedback to managers. Attention to their peers is equally vital, as how colleagues perceive them influences future reward decisions and the negotiation of additional i-deals. Workers should, therefore, ensure their behavior aligns with both their interests and their team's well-being.

By following the guiding principles and advice laid out, managers can adeptly introduce and manage i-deals within their teams, using them as a mechanism for positive change. Emma's story illustrates that when i-deals are not managed well, they can negatively impact employee experiences and foster an organizational culture lacking flexibility and team support. Thus, the ability of managers and focal employees to collaborate effectively in orchestrating i-deals is crucial as workplaces evolve. By applying these principles, managers can ensure that i-deals fulfill their aim of boosting employee satisfaction and organizational effectiveness, nurturing a productive, fair, and fulfilling work environment for everyone involved.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Yetunde Everard-Igweh: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Ziguang Chen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Qile He:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

We declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this manuscript. This declaration encompasses financial, personal, or professional interests that could be construed to influence the work reported in this paper.

To the best of our knowledge and belief:

- No financial support was received that could have influenced the outcome of this research.
- The manuscript is an original work, has not been published previously, is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, and its submission to *Organizational Dynamics Journal* has been approved by all authors.

This declaration is made in the interest of full transparency and to uphold the integrity of our research and the review process.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.