

## Chapter 2: Individualization of Work Arrangements: A Contextualized Perspective on the Rise and Use of I-deals

P. Matthijs Bal and Xander D. Lub<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** This chapter discusses i-deals within the broader context of changes in society and organizations. Greater focus in contemporary organizations and society is now put on the individual needs and wishes of employees, whilst at the same time employees are expected to be more self-reliant in their work and careers. The ultimate consequence of this process of individualization of work is the disappearance of the meaning of collectivity in the workplace. At the same time, employees who are not proactive enough to negotiate their own benefits, face the risk of losing the competition and left with the marginalized jobs or no jobs at all.

### Introduction

Research on idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) has flourished during the last decade, since the seminal publications of Rousseau have been published (2001, 2005). I-deals are increasingly popular among organizations, and have been found to be related to employee commitment (Hornung, Rousseau, & Glaser, 2008; Liu, Lee, Hui, Kwan, & Wu, 2013), job satisfaction (Rosen, Slater, Chang, & Johnson, 2013), and organizational citizenship behaviors (Anand, Vidyarthi, Liden, & Rousseau, 2010). Hence, the general tenet of i-deal research is that i-deals benefit employees and organizations (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006). This is also reflected in the definition of the concept; when an i-deal does not benefit the organization, it is no longer an i-deal, but preferential treatment by the organization towards an employee, examples being favoritism or cronyism. In the literature, and our own work included (Bal, De Jong, Jansen, & Bakker, 2012; Van der Meij & Bal, 2013), there is a dominance of thinking of the beneficial effects of i-deals in the workplace for employees and organizations, and a bias towards positive effects on work outcomes. Even though there has been some work on negative reactions, such as colleagues who might perceive unfairness regarding distribution of i-deals (Greenberg, Roberge, Ho, & Rousseau, 2004; Lai, Rousseau, & Chang, 2009), we observe a tendency among researchers to be positive about the potential effects of i-deals for both employees and organizations. For instance, the recent study of Liu et al. (2013) concludes that i-deals result in *payoffs* for the organization in terms of commitment and proactive behaviors (italics added). This positive outlook may have resulted from a broader societal trend of individualism (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002), and the resulting positioning of the individual at the center of the employment relationship. A risk of this approach, however, is a negligence of the broader context on the dynamics of i-deals in the workplace. This is related to what has been referred to as the ‘psychologicalization’ of employment relations (Godard, 2014), which is an increasing tendency to focus on employees as individuals negotiating employment with organizations, thereby ignoring the role of the

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<sup>1</sup> P. Matthijs Bal  
University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom

Xander D. Lub  
Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, the Netherlands  
VU University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

collective (e.g., through representation, trade unions, or institutions). Moreover, recent societal trends include a greater stress on self-reliance of employees to take care of their careers and well-being (Olson, 2013). In response to this, the aim of this chapter, is to explore the societal impact on i-deals, and to discuss how contextual factors have impacted the rise and use of i-deals in the workplace. To do so, we discuss the trend of individualization of society, which has ultimately led to individualization of the workplace, providing the necessary ground for i-deals in the workplace.

### **Individualization and I-deals in the Workplace**

Rousseau (2001, 2005; Rousseau et al., 2006) coined the term i-deals to describe the voluntary, personalized agreements between individual employees and their organization. The term i-deals refer to idiosyncratic deals, but it also refers to an i-deal being *ideal* in the sense that they should benefit both parties to the employment exchange: the employee and the organization. I-deals have been found to positively relate to various work outcomes, including commitment, satisfaction, OCBs, and the motivation to continue working beyond retirement (Anand et al., 2010; Bal et al., 2012; Hornung et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2013; Rosen et al., 2013; Van der Meij & Bal, 2013). However, at the same time, many studies have shown that the effects of i-deals are contingent, that is, effects may occur or not occur depending on contextual factors (Bal et al., 2012). For instance, Rosen and colleagues (2013) who developed a four-dimensional scale of the types of i-deals employees may negotiate with their employer, showed that depending on the type of i-deal, relationships with outcomes may be stronger or not present at all. Bal and colleagues (2012) showed that while flexibility i-deals related to higher motivation to continue working, the relations of development i-deals only manifested under conditions of favorable unit climate. In contrast, a study of Hornung and colleagues (2011) showed that while development i-deals related to higher work engagement, flexibility i-deals related to lower work-family conflict (see also Hornung et al., 2008). Hence, it is striking that across studies, researchers tend to find contrasting effects of i-deals, which may not only depend upon the type of i-deal employees negotiate with their organization, but also the context in which the i-deals are negotiated. Previous research on psychological contracts has shown that social referents play an important role in the constitution of psychological contracts employees have (Ho & Levesque, 2005). Hence, it is likely that i-deal negotiation draws upon the same processes, and is equally influenced by social referents, and thus employees use information from the broader context in negotiating i-deals. While employees may be supported or hindered by their direct environment, such as coworkers, managers, and family, we will argue in this chapter that i-deals are both the *result* of societal trends and are *influenced by* societal trends, particularly in the current global economic crisis. To do so, we will first elaborate on the theoretical assumptions underlying the functioning of i-deals in the workplace.

#### *Theory of I-deals*

I-deals theorizing has been primarily based upon social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). The basis of i-deals is established within the exchange relationship between employee and organization, and i-deals serve as a key indicator for the relation between the two parties, and thus they strengthen the relationship over time. When the organization grants an i-deal to the employee, the employee will be likely to return the favorable treatment by the employer through becoming more committed, putting in more effort into the job, and to stay with the company. In line with the norm of reciprocity, employees are expected to return i-deals with higher motivation and performance. I-deals are

important for employees, because they can facilitate a greater correspondence between their work and their selves (Bal et al., 2012; Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999). I-deals can facilitate employees to better balance work and nonwork, obtain more energy to perform, and more rewards from work. Hence, i-deals can fulfill the basic needs that people have, such as the need for autonomy, competence and the need to belong (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Through negotiation of individualized work arrangements, employees are no longer dependent upon the availability of practices within the system, but have the opportunity to negotiate resources that are important to the employee beyond existing regulations, for instance as prescribed by law, collective labor agreements or HR-policies. Hence, i-deals may constitute a beneficial implementation of individualization in the workplace. This emphasis of the positive aspects of individualization at work has been manifested in various research areas, including proactivity (Grant & Parker, 2009), job crafting (Tims & Bakker, 2010), protean careers (Hall, 2004), and job redesign (Hornung, Rousseau, Glaser, Angerer, & Weigl, 2010). The tenet of these research streams is that people can distinguish themselves from other people through standing out, outperforming others, and anticipating changes at work through taking steps before others do. Research has shown that similar to the results obtained by research on i-deals, the effects of these types of behaviors are related to various positive work outcomes, including commitment, performance, and objective career success (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Thomas, Whitman, & Viswesvaran, 2010). However, while researchers stress the fundamental benefits of proactivity and individual approaches at work, there is too little emphasis on the origin of this process, as well as the inherent (negative) side-effects of such an approach to work and job design. Our main point here is therefore to argue that i-deals cannot be separated from its ideological origin, or the individualization of society combined with a dominant economic-political ideology of neoliberalism which currently exists within our societies.

### *Individualization of Societies and its Impact on Work*

Individualization of work arrangements is profoundly influenced by a number of societal trends, which can be traced back to the 1700s and the work of German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant proposed that human beings should be treated as ends in itself and not as means towards an end. According to his philosophy, the dignity of the human being is a categorical imperative, a principle that is intrinsically valid, or good in itself. Hence, an individual human being has a dignity that cannot be merely violated in order to achieve some end. His philosophy combined with an interest in the 1800s for the individual experience of the world, notable for instance in the poetry of Henry David Thoreau, has led to a conceptualization of society as consisting of individual human beings rather than collectives (Oyserman et al., 2002). The rise of psychology as a scientific discipline in the late 1800s also emphasizes the increased attention for the individual. A central idea of this movement is that individuals are not just a part of a larger collective, such as a village or an ethnic group, but that individuals are persons with rights, such as the right to pursue one's self-interests. A collectivistic culture assumes the sacrifice of the individual for the collective, as can be seen in principle in various political ideologies, such as Marxism and social-democracy in the times of Nazi-Germany, and more recently in the sacrifice of suicide-bombers in the Middle East for a greater purpose. The essence of collectivism is that the individual does not have an entitlement above the existence of the collective. However, Kantian philosophy assumes the dignity of the human being, and respect for the fundamental right of each human being towards its dignity. An individualized human being has a psyche that experiences the world uniquely. In combination with the rise of psycho-analysis, psychology has grown dramatically after the 1900s.

But it was not only the rise of individualism in the 1900s that ultimately led to the particular interest in individualization at work. After the Second World War, and in particular in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the US and the UK, and to a certain extent Europe and other parts of the world as well, have been influenced profoundly by the upcoming capitalism under a neoliberal political ideology. In conjunction with the existing economic-political capitalist paradigm, a new order was established in the Western world, which became increasingly dominated by the ideology of neoliberalism (Van Apeldoorn & Overbeek, 2012).

Neoliberalism is an economic-political ideology which central aim is to create economic freedom for people and organizations, and thereby deregulating the economy, whilst it proposes trust in the free market to regulate itself. In this ideology, distribution of resources should not be regulated by government but should be governed by the invisible hand of the free market (Jessop, 2002). This invisible hand of the market is proposed to ensure the economic order. Interference of the government in the economic order is highly unwanted, unless it benefits existing large multinational cooperations (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism aims to deregulate various types of services that traditionally are conducted by the government, such as health care, education, infrastructure, and energy supply. Competition within these markets will, as the ideology prescribes, ensure that customers will benefit from the best quality for the lowest prices. The grounding principle of neoliberalism (and capitalism) is that individuals aspire profit-maximalization; to do so, individuals make rational, strategic choices concerning how they obtain resources. As research has shown, this assumption is false and misleading (Sedlacek, 2011), but nonetheless neoliberalism has infiltrated the economic system throughout the world (Harvey, 2005). This has been particularly notable for instance in the European Union, which is founded based on neoliberal principles of the free market and deregulation of public services. Especially in the current economic crisis, Eurocratic officials stress the need to deregulate public services in suffering countries, such as Greece, Spain and Portugal, risking a similar process that has occurred with competition in the existing open markets. One of the major consequences of an economic system that stresses the human need for profit maximalization and the pursuance of self-interest is the creation of a strong distinction between winners and losers (or haves and have-nots). Winners in this system are those people and organizations who achieve material and financial success, and who are able to show the world a social status based upon the extrinsic success they have. Losers in this system are those people who have no economic success, because of some reason that limits them from achieving this. Reasons may include the inability to achieve success through lack of resources, education or skills, the lack of motivation or bad luck.

One of the consequences of a neoliberal society is hence the intensification of the distinction between winners and losers. As research has shown, the divide between the rich and the poor has increased substantially over the last decades (Global Post, 2013), a process also referred to as the Matthew Effect (Hornung et al., 2011; see also Chapter 5 of Nauta and Van de Ven, and Chapter 6 of Freese et al., in this book). This effect describes the process in which people who are doing well receive better resources to improve than people in poorer situations, who lack those skills and opportunities. For instance, highly employable employees will be better able to negotiate i-deals, as they have many employment alternatives in contrast to employees with low employability. We observe a similar phenomenon on the societal level, with large and successful organizations in the current economy having more power to influence political decision making (Harvey, 2005), and hence to improve their own position through influencing decision making processes that favor themselves over others that consequently find themselves in impoverished circumstances. The winners, hence, are the people and large

organizations who have benefited from the economic crisis as well. This process is also manifested in the social domain, where the emphasis of material success has dominated the decades after the Second World War until the economic crisis that started in 2008. People obtained social status primarily based on their economic success in society and those people who were unsuccessful suffered. The consequence of the individualization of the public sphere has been an increasing emphasis on self-reliance, and responsibility of each individual for his or her own well-being. Individualization has thus decentralized responsibility for material and immaterial success to the individual. For instance, trade unions are having difficulties in sustaining their relevance in contemporary society, because they are representing a smaller portion of the workforce (i.e., primarily the Baby Boomers), and younger workers do not realize the importance of collective representation (Bal, 2014; Godard, 2014). Hence, in an individualized society, every individual human being is responsible for his or her own welfare, but at the same time can no longer rely upon institutions to represent the needs and stakes of workers. Moreover, when governmental institutions are increasingly dominated by large organizations, workers have less control over their own workplace as well as their work conditions. For instance, a company like Apple can produce cheaply in China where poorer working conditions are the norm, and at the same time use tax havens (such as the Netherlands and Ireland) in order to pay as little tax as possible on their profits (Lucas, Kang, & Lee, 2013; Tegenlicht, 2013). It also has been proven to be difficult to change the current system; pressure on the Dutch government to end the tax haven status has been counteracted by the organizations that profit from the current system (Tegenlicht, 2013). Hence, the profits that organizations make are increasingly unfairly distributed. In sum, individualization in combination with a dominant neoliberal ideology has created a society in which unfair distribution is the norm, and we argue that this is reflected in how i-deals currently function within the workplace.

Turning to the employment relationship between the employee and the organization, it can be argued that to be treated as a human being is a crucial element within the employment relationship (Barresi, 2010). In a neoliberalized world, however, where profitability becomes the most important *raison d'être* for an organization, many employees face the risk to be a mere link in the chain in the machinery of organizational functioning, ultimately leading to Marxist alienation from work. From this perspective, there is a neoliberal pressure on standardization and efficiency. Organizations in a neoliberal society are competing against each other through focusing on the highest quality for the lowest prices. To obtain lower consumer prices, labor and production processes are standardized and work is arranged as efficiently as possible (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2012). Hence, neoliberalism causes a trend towards standardization of work, and strong responsibility of the employee for high productivity, while at the same time, the organization has all rights to punish the employee for substandard performance. A notable example of how this in practice unfolds is the Amazon distribution center. While Amazon is able to outperform regular bookshops and record stores, the low prices they offer result from a highly efficient and employee unfriendly and undignified work system (BBC, 2013). This is the ultimate consequence of a neoliberal system where organizations can freely violate the dignity of the employee to outcompete other organizations. The dividing line between winners and losers in a neoliberal society is amplified in the have and have-nots in the workplace. In absence of institutions that offer protection of employees (such as trade unions), employees become highly self-reliant, and hence, dependent upon their abilities, willingness and opportunities to negotiate work arrangements. In other words, as Rousseau (2012) rightfully mentions, employment relationships, or psychological contracts, can only emerge if there is the concept of free will, or the choice of an individual to engage in employment or not. With harsh economic realities

and increasing unemployment, the concept of free will in employment comes under more and more pressure. The question hence is whether people still have a free will when they can only accept inhumane work conditions or have no employment at all.

### **I-deals in the Workplace**

I-deals have been described as the opportunity for personalization or customization of work arrangements that provide people with jobs and careers that are suited within their abilities, needs, and wishes (Hornung et al., 2010; Rousseau, 2005). This positive view on how i-deals function in the workplace can be sustained through reinforcement of the individual dignity of the employee. It can be argued that because the employment relationship is individualized, employees are no longer treated as means to an end, that is, as resources that are employed by organizations in order to fulfill an organizational goal, such as survival or profit making. Hence, employees who negotiate i-deals no longer feel treated as a number, but rather as an individual human being, thereby enhancing their individual human dignity (Barresi, 2010). Human beings differ in their needs, capabilities, wishes, and personalities and when this is recognized by organizations, employees feel that their fundamental human needs are fulfilled (Taskin & Devos, 2005). In this sense, i-deals can indeed promote Kantian dignity: through i-deals people are no longer a nameless resource employed by the organization, but can maintain their dignity as a human being. Respect from the employer for the employee as a person is enhanced through the possibility to negotiate employment arrangements that are personalized to the situation of the employee. In other words, i-deals shape the possibility to add an ideological dimension to the employment relationship, through which employee commitment may be enhanced, and meaning of work is created (Bal & Vink, 2011).

However, a darker perspective on i-deals emerges when the broader context is taken into account, and in particular the neoliberal domination in society. More specifically, in a society that distinguishes between a small group of winners versus an increasing group of losers (see Global Post, 2013), an equal dividing line is created among those employees who are capable to negotiate i-deals, while a large majority of workers do not have the availability to negotiate favorable arrangements with their employer. Individualization at work consequently becomes the privilege of the elite, and i-deals serve to enhance satisfaction and meaningfulness for those who already were thriving within the system. Empirical support for this notion can be found in the consistent positive relationship between quality of relationship between leader and the employee (LMX) and i-deals (Hornung et al., 2010; Rosen et al., 2013). Employees who have better relationships with their managers negotiate more i-deals. While the direction of this relationship is yet to be ascertained, it is important to realize that negotiation of i-deals may be to a great extent dependent upon the willingness of the employer and manager. From a power-perspective, the ability to negotiate i-deals is dependent on the scarcity of the resources that an employee can offer to the organization. Hence, the employees who have stronger relationships, and who are better performers, have more bargaining power (Rousseau, 2005), and will be able to negotiate favorable work arrangements. Power is a crucial determinant of successful i-deal negotiation, because the employees without power will not have enough ability or motivation to successfully negotiate, partly because of the limited alternatives.

In this way, i-deal negotiation and individualization accentuate and represent the differences created by the neoliberal system, and one could argue that individualization, or the breakdown of institutionalized representation, is an inherent part of the neoliberal project (Olson, 2013; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009). When people lack the opportunities to individualize their work arrangements, while others do have ample opportunities, the differences between these

groups are accentuated over time. In sum, a paradox of individualization is created, because as we explained, on the one hand, individualization may facilitate and promote greater dignity of work and the person conducting the work, while on the other hand, individualization enhances the need for each individual to become self-reliant and capable to negotiate work arrangements. The central need for employees in the contemporary workplace is therefore to be proactive; only those who will proactively negotiate, build their careers, and think ahead will survive (Parker, Bindl & Straus, 2010). Often ignored is the position of the less privileged and the non-proactive people in the workplace, since they become dependent upon others, and in a fully neoliberalized society, subject to the employer's whims.

### **I-deals in a Societal Context: Looking Ahead**

Individualization is a societal change process that slowly unfolds over time and places (Inglehart, 1977, 1997). In combination with the dominance of a neoliberal ideology in society, a risk arises that i-deals serve the fortunate in society, those who are proactive and have the power to negotiate. I-deals have been framed as mutually beneficial for both employee and organization (Rosen et al., 2013; Rousseau et al., 2006). However, the basis for benefits is unclear, and even though studies have been conducted on the crucial role of coworker acceptance, there is still very little knowledge on how societal trends in general, and individualization and neoliberal thinking in particular, have an impact on i-deal negotiation. In fact, one of the major consequences of the global economic crisis that started in 2008 has been the enduring insecurity of certainty regarding economic-political models (Jessop, 2002; Peck et al., 2009, 2012). In other words, there is currently a change process unfolding, in which people will have to adapt to new economic realities. On the one hand, the dominant neoliberal paradigm is flourishing, as for instance is notable in the enormous pressure on austerity and deregulation in the European countries in order to respond to the challenges of the crisis. Hence, the neoliberal project is far from over, and is highly present especially in the governmental domain, for example in decision-making and the interweaving of large organizations with governments (Ferguson, 2009). On the other hand, a societal change process is occurring with an increasing number of people who are openly questioning the sustainability of the current neoliberal, capitalist paradigm which operates in most of the countries throughout the world. However, the alternative to capitalism has traditionally been communism or Marxism, which is no real viable alternative according to most scholars (Sedlacek, 2011). Hence, there is a need to formulate sustainable alternatives to neoliberalism, in which people can experience cohesion beyond the individualism of pursuing self-interests only, and a system that provides explicit attention to nonmonetary values which are essentially ignored by neoliberalism. In relation to this, a future of i-deals and individualization at work is dependent upon the position of the individual in the organization. If neoliberalism prevails, there will be the growing dividing line between the rich and the poor, the winners and the loser, and the employees who have access to i-deals and those who have not. However, if a viable alternative is emerging, another future for i-deals is foreseeable.

A strong resentment against the current economic-political system was present in the Occupy Wall Street movement that spread throughout the Western world in September 2011 and showed an increasing disapproval of the current system, and the need for a new paradigm. Especially the unequal distribution of wealth was a major concern, as well as the focus on profit maximalization as the foundation of economic activity. An alternative system which revalues a more equal distribution of resources and other values besides profit-making is slowly emerging. Especially economic models that presume individuals as pursuing only self-

interest put pressure on our sense of cohesion and empathy for those who are not able to obtain economic success (Olson, 2013). Hence, alternatives are emerging in which specific attention is devoted to the role of cohesion among people with a great role for sustainability of new models (Bal, 2014; Bal & Jansen, 2014). First, a new model with a profile distinct from the current one is emerging, and it is based on the principle of human dignity (Killmister, 2010). In this new economic paradigm, each and every economic activity aims to maintain and promote human dignity. Human dignity is defined as the unalienable right of each human being to self-respect and respect from others, to set one's own standards and principles and to live accordingly (Lucas et al., 2013; Sjoukes, 2012). The concept of human dignity has been developed by Kant, and implies a free will of the human being. Human dignity is a fundamental human right, but at the same time, it is a fundamental human duty to behave dignified and not violate the dignity of other people. Hence, when an organization treats its employees in an indecent manner, the employees may feel that their dignity has been violated, while organizations may perceive this violation of human dignity as being permitted within the current neoliberal system. Central to the concept of human dignity is the principle of reciprocity: one not only has the right to be treated with dignity, but also the duty to treat others with dignity, and hence, the treatment of human dignity is the foundation of interpersonal relations. This implies that the outcome of interpersonal relations can be profitable, but that the result of interpersonal contact should not be prioritized above the value of the contact, the relation, itself. Accordingly, the relation between two people, for instance through work where one accepts to work for another party in return for payment, forms a value in itself, rather than a means towards profit. Definitions and scientific work on human dignity have so far been rather problematic and complex (Carozza, 2008; Misztal, 2012). For instance, human dignity has been operationalized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23 (Misztal, 2012), but it has to be acknowledged that this Declaration has been the result of a compromise, and although being the result of historical evolution of the value of the concept, still under-defined and underspecified. Moreover, individual human dignity exists within the experience of a person of perceiving to be treated with or without dignity, and therefore, impossible to be defined in unambiguous terms. A consequence of this is that i-deals by definition cannot be ascertained as being dignified, or taking dignity away from an individual person.

As a general rule, it can be stated that negotiated i-deals between an employee and an organization should not violate the dignity of the parties involved, being employees, employers, and coworkers (Greenberg et al., 2004). When some employees are able to negotiate and obtain valuable resources that are consequently withheld from other workers, it is not only a situation where unfairness arises, but also one where a violation of human dignity could occur (Lai et al., 2009). For instance, in a bank where the CEO is able to obtain huge bonuses while at the same time thousands of employees are laid off, there is no fundamental objection from a neoliberal ideology (instead it would fit a neoliberal ideology), while a system based on human dignity principles can accuse these acts. In such a system, i-deals can be used to promote human dignity instead of creating even stronger differences between winners and losers.

### **Application of I-deals in Organizations**

The question arising from the analysis on the societal context in which i-deals have become popular and used in organizations, is how to sustain i-deals in organizations without theorizing i-deals as being merely a tool for organizations to distinguish between employees on the basis of their potential contribution to sustain current neoliberal practices. In other

words, organizational systems should take into account the dignity of the employee in its functioning. Hence, when strategic decisions are made as to how an organization should function, it no longer suffices to focus only on profitability of the firm, and with it shareholder value, as this might lead to severe violations of human dignity. In a similar vein, organizations that use i-deals to retain, attract, and reward employees, should be aware that i-deals can be used to promote as well as to violate the dignity of employees (Lucas et al., 2013). As a consequence, i-deals form a crucial tool by organizations to either sustain neoliberalism and capitalism, or to promote alternative perspective on the role and importance of employees in organizations. More specifically, i-deals can be used to reward the lucky few, sustaining the Matthew Effect (Hornung et al., 2011), and to provide the winners among the employees the opportunity to extend their career success, obtain both extrinsic and intrinsic outcomes, and thereby leaving the losers behind, who increasingly are left with marginalized, poorly paid jobs (Godard, 2014). Otherwise, i-deals can be used to promote an individualized approach towards management and organizing, whereby individual human beings have the experience of being treated as such, through which meaning of work, fulfillment, and well-being is enhanced. This implies that organizations sometimes have to make choices against profitability and shareholder interests, but which are societally more relevant in the long term. This approach is important in the human resource management context, as the focus has been primarily on universalism, or the idea that organizations should adopt a standardized approach towards human resource management, and with it, the employee (Purcell, 1999). Through offering so-called high-commitment HRM, organizations expect each and every employee to become better performers, despite its risks of increasing fatigue and having adverse effects on employee well-being (Van de Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012). Although only limited evidence exists for this pressure on standardization, many organizations have adopted this idea that employees could be treated all the same. An apparent potential consequence of this approach could not only be a drop in commitment and well-being (Bal, Kooij, & De Jong, 2013; Van de Voorde et al., 2012), but also a greater alienation from work, and the disappearance of the meaning of work for employees. Hence, i-deals should be used carefully by organizations, such that they promote identification with work and organization rather than to accentuate differentiation between the privileged and the marginalized.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have elucidated how i-deals and interest in i-deals research have been inspired and to a great extent caused by societal changes and trends. Due to individualization of society and an increase of interest in the individual experience, there has been the necessary ground in organization to differentiate between individual employees, while the dominance of neoliberalism in contemporary society has stressed the difference between the privileged and the losers (Harvey, 2005). Both trends have profoundly shaped the forms and experiences of i-deals in organizations, and it could be argued that even definition of i-deals has been influenced by these trends. It was already acknowledged in the preface of the seminal book on i-deals (Rousseau, 2005), that the decline of collective bargaining and the reduction of standard benefits have caused the need for workers to seek out the conditions of their employment themselves. However, there has been too little appreciation for how these changes have been accelerated by neoliberalism (Jessop, 2002). Hence, research on i-deals in organizations has implicitly followed this neoliberal paradigm, focusing on the benefits of i-deals for organizations (Hornung et al., 2009), as well as the pseudo-benefits for employees, which should ultimately primarily benefit the organization, such as employee commitment (Hornung et al., 2008), proactive behaviors (Liu et al., 2013), and job satisfaction (Rosen et al., 2013). In other words, investment in the employee through i-deals will pay off for

organizations, because it enhance employee commitment, which in its turn relates to higher performance and lower turnover, and with it, decreased costs of turnover (Harrison, Newman, & Roth, 2006). For future research and application of i-deals in organizations, we thus suggest a number of directions.

First, i-deal definition and conceptualization should incorporate the stakes of various parties in the concept; every act of individualization within organizations cannot be conceptualized without taking the dominant neoliberal paradigm into account. It is therefore necessary to disentangle i-deals from its ideological confound as individualization can not only be used in order to sustain differences between winners and losers in society, but also to create meaning of work, fulfillment, and build cohesion among groups in society. Therefore, a more explicit conceptualization of i-deals (and with it individualization) as an act of meaning making, reconciliation, and recognition of the individual within the collective, can be a significant aid to further understanding of the concept and its functioning in the workplace. Hence, the potential outcomes of i-deals should be expanded beyond the simplistic level of well-known employee attitudes and behaviors, such as satisfaction, commitment, and performance.

Second, a debate is warranted on the role of social justice in i-deals. While there is some research available on the role of individual justice within i-deals (Greenberg et al., 2004; Lai et al., 2009), there is no clarity as to the entitlement of i-deals in organizations. While i-deals have been defined and conceptualized as special deals negotiated by highly valued employees within organizations (see Rousseau, 2005; but also chapter 4 by Coyle-Shapiro & Conway), recent research has also pointed towards more equal distribution of i-deals within organizations (Bal et al., 2012; but also chapter 5 by Nauta). Hence, the question is whether entitlement to i-deals result from special contributions made to an organization, or the right to be treated as an individual human being. If the latter is granted more attention in research, new and important questions will arise, as for instance to distribution of i-deals. If the right to be treated as an individual human being is being conceptualized as the foundation of i-deals, a new stream of research could arise from this renewed conceptualization. Moreover, justice of i-deals will not be (only) framed in terms of coworker acceptance (i.e., perceived fairness of a negotiated i-deal), but also, and perhaps primarily, in terms of the achieved social justice, or the extent to which i-deals enhance an individualized, dignified experience of work, including the rights and integrity of others.

In sum, this chapter has discussed the societal context in which i-deals have arisen and are negotiated. It is important for research and practitioners alike that they understand the context of i-deals, and that i-deals can be used either to accentuate differences between employees, or to resolve issues of social justice, and therefore can be used to create a dignified experience of work, in which the rights and duties of various parties in and around organization are taken into account.

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