

A Diverse Workforce Demands I-deals!

Abstract

This short exercise explores issues associated with managing a multi-generational workforce. Generational diversity leads to a range of employee needs that are unlikely to be satisfied by the organization's one-size-fits-all benefits. It behooves organizations to consider person specific work arrangements, known as idiosyncratic work arrangements or i-deals to fulfill employees' unique needs, goals, and aspirations that lie outside the standard benefit offerings. Prevalent examples of i-deals include developmental training and assignments, flexibility of work schedule and location, task method redesign, and financial rewards.

In today's diverse workplace managers can utilize i-deals to recruit, retain, and motivate desired talent. Through this exercise instructors can introduce this new human resource management device to the students and enhance their management skills.

Organizational behavior (OB) and human resource management (HRM) instructors can use this exercise to explain contemporary employment relationship and diversity management. This exercise can also be used as a role-play.

Keywords: Idiosyncratic deals, i-deals, diversity management.

Introduction. Provide a brief introduction that establishes a need for this type of exercise and identifies the target usage. Include potential course applications and explain for whom the exercise is designed: early undergraduate, late undergraduate, graduate, etc.; traditional, non-traditional, cross-cultural, etc.).

In view of the increasing diversity of contemporary workforce business students need to be trained in effective management of diverse talent. One critical challenge in this area is perceptions of exclusion. In this experiential exercise, I aim to introduce students to the different needs that employees from different age groups or generations may have.

Through role plays and discussions students will learn how to recognize employees' unique needs, goals, and aspirations, and how to address those in a fair manner.

This exercise can be used in courses such as: organizational behavior, human resource management, diversity management, and leadership.

Target student audience: undergraduate/graduate/executive education.

This exercise can be used in both face to face and online classrooms.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications. Briefly specify the relevant background literature that the exercise is based upon and how your session contributes to effective teaching and learning in the field of management.

I-deals are an increasingly common phenomenon in contemporary organizations (Anand, Meuser, Vidyarthi, Liden, Rousseau, & Ekkirala, In press). Employees make these individualized arrangements to take care of their needs that fall outside of the organization's standard policy and procedures (Rousseau, 2005). Organizations grant these deals to recruit, retain, and motivate desired talent (Anand, Vidyarthi, Liden, & Rousseau, 2010; Las Heras, Rofcanin, Bal, & Stollberg, 2017).

Employees commonly negotiate with their immediate supervisors or managers to create these arrangements. An i-deal can also be negotiated with other agents of the organization such as an HR manager or a unit head. Being person specific (e.g., customized schedule or assignments), these deals can create perceptions of unfairness or favoritism in the workgroup (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006; Marescaux, De Winne, & Rofcanin, 2021). It's important for both the deal seeker and the deal grantor to be cognizant of all these potential issues, so the deal can be created and implemented, in a win-win manner for both the employee and the organization.

As the workforce is becoming more diverse (Catalyst, 2021) organizations need to come up with ways to address employee needs that the standard offerings are not equipped to handle (Anand & Mitra, in press). I aim to educate future managers on recognizing workplace trends and learn the multiple ways in which i-deals can be created and managed on a day-to-day basis in a fair manner.

Learning Objectives. Specify the learning objectives for the exercise by articulating the expected changes in knowledge, attitude, or skill that are associated with participation in the activity. What teaching topics are relevant to your session?

- 1) Teach students about diversity management: A diverse workforce comes with a wide range of needs that may not be fulfilled by the standard offerings of an employer/organization. Organizations can utilize i-deals as a human resource management device and help employees fulfill their unique needs, goals, and aspirations.
- 2) Teach students about contemporary employment relationship: Contemporary organizations have an increasingly diverse workforce in terms of age, sex, race, sexual-orientation, and many other factors. To create and maintain a healthy employee-organization relationship it's critical to think about the wide range of needs of employees from diverse backgrounds.
- 3) Teach students about person specific work arrangements known as idiosyncratic deals (i-deals): Introduce students to research findings that attest to benefits of granting person specific work arrangements such as customized work schedule or location, special training and developmental assignments, financial rewards, etc.

Students will learn to navigate and manage the increasingly diverse workforce this way. I have used multigenerational workforce as an example in this exercise, but these ideas can be easily extended to other groups such as LGBT employees.

Exercise Overview. Provide an overview of the activity/exercise, including the logistics of running the exercise (e.g. timing, materials, class size), the flow of the exercise, variations or alternate applications, debriefing guidelines (e.g. questions to ask, how students generally respond). The goal is to give the reviewer enough information so that they understand what the activity is that you plan to present in your session.

The instructor can choose to assign the 6 roles described below to students. They will enact the following scenario:

Alex leads a team of 5 engineers:

- Jack (52-year-old) lives in a multi-generational household and is responsible for his elderly parents.
- John (40-year-old) has a child with major health conditions.
- Jerry (30-year-old) is single and loves to travel.
- Ana (30-year-old) wants to do an MBA but can't afford to quit this job.
- Gina (23-year-old) is a new immigrant to the U.S. She finished her degree last year. English is not her mother tongue, and that does create some communication challenges from time to time.

To stimulate discussion the instructor can start by asking “What can be some of the different needs experienced by these team members?”

The role-playing students may express some unique needs for their characters. The instructor can involve the entire class in this discussion and start writing on blackboard (or whiteboard in case of an online session). At the end of this discussion, there should be 5 sets of needs on the blackboard.

Then, the instructor can ask “Is it possible to take care of all these needs while maintaining fairness?”

At this point some students will feel that some employee needs will have to be given higher priority. Some others may wonder why the employer has to be concerned with all these unique needs. The instructor can point out that employees are more likely to feel included and accepted if their unique needs, goals, and aspirations are fulfilled. Perceptions of inclusion and acceptance will in turn enhance employee commitment to the organization, and boost employee wellbeing and performance.

The instructor can introduce idiosyncratic deals at this point and explain how employers can creatively think about fulfilling employees’ unique needs. It takes significant co-ordination efforts on the manager’s part to create differentiated work arrangements (Anand et al., 2018), but it creates a win-win situation for everyone when executed correctly. By creating different terms of employment for members of the same workgroup i-deals run the risk of creating perceptions of unfairness. Managers need to carefully consider the criteria for granting i-deals, and how one team member’s deal will affect all others.

I expect the entire discussion to take 30-45 minutes. The instructor can choose to extend the discussion to cover other examples of diversity in the workplace. For instance, LGBT employees can benefit from i-deals (Anand & Mitra, 2022). In a graduate HRM seminar half of a class session (75 minutes) can be designed around this exercise. This exercise can also be used in a 75-minute session devoted to diversity management. In an undergraduate organizational behavior class this exercise may be used to stimulate future managers’ thinking about the unique needs of a diverse workforce. In a leadership class, this exercise can be used to illustrate how to create different arrangements for members of the same workgroup or organization in a fair manner.

Session Description. Provide an overview of what you will actually do in the MOBTS conference session. Include a timeline for the session and how participants will be involved. Remember, reviewers are looking for participant engagement in these sessions.

I expect the activity and debriefing session to last about 60 minutes. During this experiential activity participants will be asked to read the exercise and ponder over the associated questions. Then we will discuss appropriate employee and manager behaviors. At the end of the session, participants will walk away with materials they can use in teaching i-deals as a diversity management device in their management classroom.

References:

- Anand, S., Meuser, J. D., Vidyarthi, P. R., Liden, R. C., Rousseau, D. M., & Ekkirala, S. (in press). A multi-level model of i-deals in workgroups: Employee and coworker perceptions of leader fairness, i-deals and group performance. *Journal of Management Studies*.
- Anand, S., & Mitra, A. (In press). No family left behind: Flexibility i-deals for employees with stigmatized family identities. *Human Relations*.
- Anand, S., Vidyarthi, P. R., Liden, R. C., & Rousseau, D. M. (2010). Good citizens in poor-quality relationships: Idiosyncratic deals as a substitute for relationship quality. *Academy of Management Journal*, 53, 970-988.
- Catalyst (2021). Generations - Demographic trends in population and workforce: Quick Take. <https://www.catalyst.org/research/generations-demographic-trends-in-population-and-workforce/> (Accessed May 24, 2021).
- Las Heras, M., Rofcanin, Y., Bal, P., & Strollberg, J. (2017). How do flexibility i-deals relate to work performance? Exploring the roles of family performance and organizational context. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 1-15.
- Marescaux, E., De Winne, S., & Rofcanin, Y. (2021). Co-worker reactions to i-deals through the lens of social comparison: The role of fairness and emotions. *Human Relations*, 74, 329-353.
- Rousseau, D. M. (2005). I-deals: Idiosyncratic deals employees bargain for themselves. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.

Rousseau, D. M., Ho, V. T., & Greenberg, J. (2006). I-deals: Idiosyncratic terms in employment relationships. *Academy of Management Review*, 31, 977-994.

DISCLAIMER

This work has not been presented anywhere, nor is it under review anywhere else.