

# The Future of Employee Involvement in Human Resource Management: Idiosyncratic Deals and the HR Architecture of the Firm

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The aim of this Delphi study is to assess the impact the employment mode has on employee expectations regarding the future number of task, career, flexibility and financial incentive i-deals in order to shed light on the future of employee involvement in HRM.

**Research Method:** After developing hypotheses through a review of extant literature, employees were invited as experts and asked to assess their own human capital and give their expectations regarding the future number of i-deals they expect. For this, the Delphi method, a consensus-based, multi-round forecasting technique was used.

**Findings:** The quantitative data and subsequent statistical analysis shows no significant differences between the individual employment modes regarding leverage from human capital or likelihood for task, career, flexibility or financial i-deals to occur. From the qualitative expectations of the experts, the pattern emerged that some expect to receive i-deals in the future, but standardised practices, structural limitations and proactive HR policies often keep i-deals from occurring for a broader mass.

**Implications:** The experts' remarks made apparent that they consider leverage gained from human capital as an important factor during the individual negotiation. I-deals can interact with, for example job crafting or themselves, since they can further develop human capital in the long run and therefore provide employees with more bargaining power.

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## Keywords

Human Resource Management, employee involvement, idiosyncratic deals, HR architecture, employment modes, Delphi study

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## 1. IDIOSYNCRATIC DEALS AS RESULT OF CHANGING EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIPS

In a business environment where the focus of industries is shifting towards knowledge-intensive work and labour markets are becoming highly competitive, high-performing employees enjoy an increased market power in negotiating employment conditions more suitable to their personal needs and capabilities. On the other side, employers benefit from customised employment terms via increased organisational commitment, a better fit between employee skills and role or developing employee competencies (Hornung, Rousseau, Weigl, Müller & Glaser, 2014). This kind of special treatment is called Idiosyncratic Deal, or i-deal, and refers to “voluntary, personalized agreements of a nonstandard nature negotiated between individual employees and their employers” (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006, p. 978). They distinguish themselves from power-political arrangement in the way that they are mutually beneficial for employee and employer, whereas power-political arrangement benefit just one of the parties (Rousseau et al., 2006). Previously, companies often deployed standardised HR practices among employee groups to maximise efficiency in a “one size fits all” approach. However, the different perceptions every employee has of his or her duties and rights in his psychological contract with the employer demand more flexibility in order to ensure job satisfaction and commitment (Rousseau, 2001). These expectations are inherent in any employment relationship and can be perceived as idiosyncratic to the unique relationship, leading to different expectations among employees.

Idiosyncratic deals are the consequence of the trend that career mobility and self-management have increased considerably, however, the topic only received academic attention in recent years, boasting its first empirical studies assessing the impact of different i-deals on different work outcomes (Hornung, Rousseau, Glaser, Angerer & Weigl, 2010; Hornung et al., 2014). Complementary, contextual antecedents of idiosyncratic deals have been found to include constraints due to the nature of work, an employees’ proactivity and political skills or the quality of the Leader-Member Exchange, or LMX (Hornung, Rousseau & Glaser, 2008, 2009; Hornung et al., 2010).

Despite the advantages, a high degree of HR practice differentiation – a possible consequence of a large number of idiosyncratic deals – may induce feelings of unfair treatment and even outweigh the benefits (Marescaux, De Winne & Sels, 2013). It is nevertheless deemed important to deploy different strategies to maximise valuable employees’ performance. The value of idiosyncratic deals for an organisation can be explained by introducing the concept of employee equity where employees are perceived as internal customers of the HRM function (Cardy, Miller & Ellis, 2007). Because i-deals have been found to increase, for example, occupational self-efficacy (Hornung et al., 2014), they can be linked to higher employee value, brand and retention equity.

The key issue here regarding i-deals is to assess which employee groups are likely to demand and receive an idiosyncratic deal, particularly in the light of the different HR practices a unique deal could be agreed on. Boddy (2008) suggests that creating external fit in the sense of coherence between HRM strategy and business strategy increases performance because of the effective support the HR function would provide to the ability, motivation and opportunities of employees. In this case, idiosyncratic deals can be seen as

practice to fine-tune the performance of employees that contribute to the achievement of strategic goals. One of the most influential frameworks to differentiate between employees was provided by Lepak and Snell in 1999. It allows to categorise employees across the dimensions of uniqueness and value of employees’ human capital (i.e. knowledge and skills) for a firm’s competitiveness (Lepak & Snell, 1999). They indirectly link the employment mode – which can be defined as the allocation of human capital to groups by the employer that require different treatment - of a certain group to idiosyncratic deals by arguing that “as employment modes differ, so too does the nature of the psychological contract” (Lepak & Snell, 1999, p. 32). This implies that each unique employee group has its own expectations about the employment relationship which, combined with their value to the organisation might influence the degree to which HR practices are differentiated via i-deals.

Because idiosyncratic deals have previously been studied in a theoretical or historical empiric context, the question remains how an assumed ongoing shift of employees between employment modes will affect the necessity of granting idiosyncratic deals for managers to retain valuable employees. Furthermore, due to the increasing transition of developed economies towards the knowledge-intensive tertiary and quaternary sectors, more value creation and knowledge becomes embedded in the individual employee. In 2006, according to Eurostat, 53.6% of all employees in the EU aged 25-64 worked in high- or medium-tech industry or knowledge-intensive services (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2006, p. 83). Because the number of people having attained tertiary education has risen from 2001 to 2011 in the EU-21 countries on average from 20% to 29% while levels of lower degrees have stagnated or even declined (OECD, 2013, p.39), this trend is likely to continue. At the same time, outsourcing of basic services and less government regulation on non-regular employment relationships gave rise to temporary and more mobile employment relationships (OECD, 2014, p.142). The continuation of these trends will lead to an increased differentiation of employment relationships that have unique consequences for HR treatment. Researching the link between this differentiation and respective employee expectations regarding i-deals, will allow managers to make decisions about whom to grant i-deals. On the other hand, employees take an increasingly active role in the apparently two-way employee-organisation relationship, but their concerns with this relationship – as suggested by Coyle-Shapiro & Shore (2007) – has been sparsely explored so far in the light of i-deals. The purpose of this paper is to gather qualitative expectations regarding the future development of i-deals by answering the following research question:

*What are the different expectations of employees regarding the number of different types of idiosyncratic deals within the next five years for each employment mode?*

In order to be able to answer this question, it is necessary to establish the theoretical framework based on the relevant concepts of idiosyncratic deals and the HR architecture that builds on the strategic value and uniqueness of a firm’s Human Capital.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 HR Architecture of the Firm

#### 2.1.1 Human Capital Value and Uniqueness

##### *Serve as Basis for Employee Categorisation*

The basic question Lepak & Snell (1999) raised while starting to build the framework of the HR architecture of the firm was whether to ‘make or buy’ employees, referring to the externalization or internalization of employment. Lepak & Snell (1999) found that in reality, a mixture of both was deployed. The premise is that not all employees should work under the same employment mode or receive entirely the same HR practices. Drawing on Transaction Cost Economics (e.g. Williamson, 1989) the Resource-Based View of the firm (e.g. Barney, 1991) and Human Capital Theory (e.g. Flamholtz & Lacey, 1981), it is argued that employees’ human capital (i.e. knowledge and skills) can be distinguished along the dimensions of strategic value, in other words, contribution to the firm’s competitive advantage, and the uniqueness of their skills, which refers to the degree skills can be transferred between parties, employees or organisations.

While organisational knowledge can be embedded in a variety of components such as procedures or technologies, people-embodied knowledge has become a core source of competitive advantage (Argote & Ingram, 2000). The more socially complex, causally ambiguous and tacit, the higher the specificity of this knowledge, increasing both its transaction costs and inimitability (Lepak & Snell, 1999). The transformation from manual labour to more knowledge-intensive work in a company as it would occur during the introduction of advanced manufacturing systems is an example of an increase in Human Capital’s strategic value, since more embedded knowledge is required to maintain the machines and consequently, competitive advantage. If the skills of an employee aid in the implementation of a company’s strategy, for example through enabling cost efficiency or customer benefit, they can be considered strategically valuable to the firm.

Lepak and Snell (1999) joined these two dimensions into a framework with four quadrants: Each bears implications for employment modes and relationships, and respective HR configurations, which are displayed in figure 1 and elaborated on in the following sections.

		Strategic Value	
		Low ( <i>Externalised</i> )	High ( <i>Internalised</i> )
Uniqueness	High ( <i>Relational</i> )	<b>Q4:</b> Alliance & Collaborative-based HR configuration	<b>Q1:</b> Knowledge-based employment & Commitment-based HR configuration
	Low ( <i>Transactional</i> )	<b>Q3:</b> Contractual work arrangements & Compliance-based HR configuration	<b>Q2:</b> Job-based employment & Productivity-based HR configuration

**Figure 1. HR architecture of the firm, including human capital value and uniqueness, employment modes and HR configurations (adapted from Lepak & Snell, 1999; 2002)**

#### 2.1.2 The Four Quadrants of the HR Architecture

Based on into the quadrant employees fit into, four employment modes should be applied to them: Knowledge-based/internal development, Job-based/acquisition, Contractual work and Alliance (Lepak & Snell, 1999; 2002). Each mode provides directions for how to acquire, retain and develop human capital, the first two describing internal modes, and the other two external ones.

Quadrant 1 is characterised by high context-dependency and strategic value of skills implying that such employees are hard to be acquired from the outside market and development of employee skills is likely to yield more returns on productivity than for other quadrants. Such employees form the strategic core of a company and the corresponding employment mode is described as *internal development* (Lepak & Snell, 1999) or *knowledge-based employment* (Lepak & Snell, 2002). The organisation engages in an *organisation-focussed* employment relationship, meaning that long-term investment and participation in and by workforce, respectively, will be utilised to generate employee commitment and learning. Following this rationale, the HR configuration will aim at realising employee potential instead of focussing merely on current performance and on building knowledge idiosyncratic to the firm and employee to reinforce strategic value and uniqueness of skills.

Next, low uniqueness but high strategic value of human capital define the 2<sup>nd</sup> quadrant. Because these critical skills are widely available in the labour market and their transaction costs low, investments in internal development are ill-advised. For this reason, the employment mode is called *acquisition* (Lepak & Snell, 1999) or *job-based employment* (Lepak & Snell, 2002). The focus is on reaping the short-term benefits of acquiring skills developed elsewhere cheaply. Employment will continue as long as it is mutually beneficial for both parties in a *symbiotic* employment relationship because the persons in this quadrant are rather trained in a profession than a firm-specific job. Since employees can move more freely between firms, developing such skills themselves bears higher risk of losing the investment. Selective recruitment and performance management systems that match company requirements reward immediate performance are part of the *market- or productivity-based* HR configuration. Rather than the ‘make’-approach of knowledge-based employment, these employees are ‘bought’.

Following up, Quadrant 3 contains employees who have human capital that is of little strategic value and uniqueness and can actually be externalised through *contractual work agreements* (Lepak & Snell, 2002). In recent years, there has been an increase in actual outsourcing of non-essential internal services or maintenance to external providers, for example catering or even lower-level HR services. This mean while employees provide their work to the company outsourcing, they are formally associated with the provider. Usually this leads to a *transactional* employment relationship, where employees and the firm are concerned with nothing but the economic exchange of work and compensation. Even though the HR configuration is comparable to the one of quadrant 2, there is a major difference: While the market-based configuration focusses on selecting the right people and rewarding for the right work, the *compliance-based* HR configuration aims at enforcing minimum procedural standards. At the same time, the psychological contract of such employees is only of transactional nature and therefore only limited on the economic exchange of work for compensation. Due to the generic nature of employees, they are easy to recruit and must only fulfil the task they were

hired for, with little flexibility. In other words, an emphasis on controlling throughput and output in a compliance-based configuration can be examined as compared to input and output.

The last quadrant is concerned with workers of high skill specificity but also those that offer a limited competitive contribution. Opposing the TCE recommendation of internalising such employees to avoid high transaction cost, Lepak & Snell (1999) argue that because the added value is little, the actual benefits of internalising are low. Within this quadrant, companies have to manage the balancing act between pure contracting and internalisation through *alliances* in order to avoid opportunistic behaviour of partners and low cost-benefit-ratios associated with complete internalising. HR practices aim at creating an idiosyncratic relationships between the firm and its partners that yields relational rents (Dyer & Singh, 1998). In order to build trust essential for long-standing *partnerships*, alliances are based on idiosyncratic assets that are the basis of relational rents and require mutual contribution of the partners. This trust is necessary must be built to counter the fear of inadvertent knowledge transfer to the partner. Consequently, the *collaborative* HR configuration must support the structural partnership arrangements by investing in the idiosyncrasy of the relationship between the partners itself: Team building and process facilitation are commonplace.

Lepak and Snell (1999) suggest that, in the long run, most workforce should, through strategic investment, be turned into quadrant 1 employees where possible because of their higher unique value to the firm. At the same time, employees of high value and uniqueness must be continuously developed in order to avoid decay into a peripheral asset.

## 2.2 Idiosyncratic Deals

### 2.2.1 Definition and Antecedents of I-deals

Idiosyncratic deals can be defined – as previously stated – as “voluntary, personalized agreements of a nonstandard nature negotiated between individual employees and their employers regarding terms that benefit each party” (Rousseau et al., 2006, p. 978). Following this definition, i-deals are characterised as individually negotiated between employer and employee, heterogeneous in a way that the agreement differs from standard HR treatment, mutually beneficial for either party, and variable in scope. These unique features distinguish them from other types of non-standard treatment such as favouritism or cronyism. The emergence of idiosyncratic deals is grounded in several factors and trends. First of all, employees have begun to actively shape the employer-employee relationship, because they hold a stake in the design of HR practices as “consumers” of HR practices (Meijerink, 2014). As internal customers, employees do not only influence the success of practices, for example through participation in performance reviews, but also hold expectations regarding the reciprocal obligations between employer and themselves as part of their psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989). As a result, they may engage in i-deal negotiation to demand the returns they expect from the employment relationship. Following from this logic is that the higher their perceived inputs to the organisation are, the larger the number or scope of i-deals expected. In practice, employees negotiate i-deals to adjust their jobs to better suit their personal circumstances. The negotiation aspect implies that power drawn from human capital can be leveraged at the bargaining table to obtain more or more customised i-deals. In combination with the continuing rise of knowledge-intensive industries in developed economies (e.g. Powell & Snellman,

2004), the individual worker can create a significant amount of value through his or her unique human capital. Because education levels have risen and can be expected to further rise (OECD, 2013, p.39), the unique human capital of a large population has and will equally expand. This favours symmetric bargaining power distribution that Rousseau et al. (2006) see as a condition for i-deal negotiation, in contrast to the traditional asymmetry favouring the employer. As supervisors mostly act as agent for the employer, the Leader-Member Exchange – LMX – is another important antecedent (Rosen, Slater, Chang & Johnson, 2013). An employee that builds trust through consistent performance can utilise this trust to negotiate better conditions over time. On the other hand, according to the OECD Employment Outlook 2014, firms also increasingly started to deploy non-regular employment relationships such as temporary workers or dependent self-employed workers in order to maintain flexibility (OECD, 2014, p.142). Because the maximum duration of fixed-term contracts is limited in most OECD countries, this – in combination of the limited leverage of external workers – can be assumed to have negative impact on the number ex-post i-deals. Even though the latter group on average only constitutes 1.6% of dependent employees in OECD countries, it is particularly characterised through an idiosyncratic employment relationship. In addition, organisational change nowadays occurs more frequently to respond to rapidly changing customer, societal or environmental requirements, bearing consequences for employees’ individual careers. As King (2004) states, “career self-management may be the only way to navigate through a turbulent world” (p. 113). In order to proactively increase own employability, employees may actively seek to negotiate career development options. By offering such options, companies can create retention equity that ties valuable employees to the organisation (Cardy et al., 2007). To conclude this line of thought, the expectations employees have in their psychological contract regarding their employer’s obligations can be seen as a trigger for initiating i-deal negotiations: Guest (2004) notes that psychological contracts can be expressed through more or less explicit deals that “are likely to be re-negotiated or modified over time” (p.545). As a lot of the negotiable employment conditions are not based on financial remuneration but on the job content or career opportunities, especially if i-deals occur post-hiring (Rousseau et al., 2006), companies incur little additional cost other than bureaucratic ones. The issue eventually boils down to whether an employee can contribute as much as to justify granting an idiosyncratic deal from both a cost-benefit, equity (Adams, 1965) and distributive justice perspective, since exclusivity of i-deals may provoke feelings of unfair treatment (Lai, Rousseau & Chang, 2009). For this, the types of i-deals and their consequences have to be explored.

### 2.2.2 I-deals Are Negotiable over Task Content, Career, Job Flexibility and Financial Compensation

Customised HR treatment can basically be negotiated for most of the HR functions a firm has to deploy, from staffing over job design to performance management and compensation. The types most commonly examined are i-deals that offer alterations in job tasks, career development and training options, flexibility in fulfilling the work, and financial incentives (Hornung et al. 2014; Rosen et al., 2013). These domains in which i-deals can be granted will, for the sake of this paper, in the following be categorised into task, career, flexibility, and financial incentive i-deals.

The first category, task i-deals, describes agreements about altering the work characteristics to fit better to the capabilities of the employee while at the same time increasing the intrinsic motivation of tasks. This results in an increased Person-Job fit and higher commitment. The reasons can be found in Hackman & Oldham's (1976) findings that job autonomy, variety of utilised skills, ability to complete a whole piece of work rather than just smaller parts, feedback from the job and significance of the task make jobs more satisfying for an employee. By involving both parties in the process, address the tension between employee self-determination and employer requirements and authority. Hornung et al. (2014) found that task i-deals, mediated by job autonomy, increase the job performance of employees. Additionally, even though Rosen et al. (2013) do combine task and career i-deals in a single category called "task and work responsibility i-deals" (p.8), they found a significant positive impact on all three types of organisational commitment proposed by Allen & Meyer (1990).

Following up, career i-deals may be desired by employees due to proactive career self-management (Parker & Collins, 2010) and by employers as highly involved and sophisticated organisational career management practice (Scholarios, van der Heijden, van der Schoot, Bozionelos, Epitropaki, Jedrzejowicz, Knauth, Marzec, Mikkelsen & van der Heijde, 2008). Instead of focussing on the present job content, the aim is to increase the general employability and internal promotability in the reasonable future (Hornung et al., 2014; Rousseau et al., 2006). Referring to the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), career i-deals, which for example can comprise of special promotion or training opportunities, or developmental assignments, increase the job resources an employee possesses and, mediated by skill acquisition, cause increased occupational self-efficacy and reduced emotional irritation of the employee, (Hornung et al., 2014). Skill acquisition can, for example, be facilitated through dedicated training opportunities, leading to higher job resources, or particular work arrangements that foster challenge demands.

The third type, flexibility i-deals, allow employees to perform their work with a degree of location or schedule flexibility, for example through home office or flexitime agreements (Rosen et al., 2013). Their main effect has been found to reduce work overload stressors (Hornung et al., 2014), for example, work-family conflicts (Hornung et al., 2008). These stressors could, working as hindrance demands in the long run, cause both cognitive and emotional irritation and in turn impede work outcomes itself. Particularly schedule flexibility has been found to raise job satisfaction significantly (Rosen et al., 2013). Flexibility i-deals thus pose a viable response to individual exceptional circumstances that cause conflict between personal and work life.

Even though Rosen et al. (2013) empirically assess the impact of financial I-deals on satisfaction and commitment, they do not provide a proper definition of the concept. Therefore, the general conceptual foundations of i-deals are going to be applied to the HR function of financial compensation; Financial incentive i-deals are thus concerned with the employee negotiating financial terms of his employment, for example performance-related pay, stock options or other benefits like the private use of a company car or pension funds. While adjusting the compensation scheme to suit the employee's unique circumstances does not directly benefit job resources, several authors conclude that it is positively related to continuance organisational commitment because the

economic costs of switching the employer are effectively raised (Mitchell & Lee, 2001; Rosen et al., 2013).

Additionally, Hornung et al. (2014) conclude that there is no significant impact of career and task i-deals on work overload because employees might at the same time acknowledge the benefits they receive when negotiating such deals and increase their effort accordingly. Having established the theoretical foundations, the assumed relationships between the variables will be explained.

### 2.3 Hypotheses

Because the negotiation of i-deals always involves both parties, their motivations and possibilities have to be considered when hypothesising about the potential future number of idiosyncratic deals. The employee motivation to engage in i-deal negotiation is grounded in customising the job to individual circumstances with regards to skills, flexibility, future career and self-fulfilment, for example (Rousseau, 2001). It can be assumed that employees are even more likely to demand an idiosyncratic deal if they perceive their received returns as too low compared to their inputs in order to restore balance. An employer may on the other hand be motivated to grant idiosyncratic deals on the basis of the HR configuration applied to an employee which will be explained for each individual quadrant. Therefore, the psychological contract inherent in each employment mode as well as the utility of each type of i-deal for the employer's intended HR outcomes have to be examined for each quadrant. Additionally, the human capital of employees can be positively related to the opportunities to negotiate i-deals because it gives leverage to broaden the so-called "zone of negotiability" that contains the scope of negotiable work conditions (Rousseau, 2001). For the sake of this paper, it is assumed that information symmetry about value and uniqueness of human capital exists between both parties, so that no party can exploit the other. If an employee is unaware of his or her importance to the employer, he may be less inclined to bargain for higher perceived returns. This is backed by the complementary finding of Hornung et al. (2009) that unfulfilled obligations perceived by an employee serve as i-deal antecedent: They will seek to even the disparity between their inputs and returns.

It is important to consider that i-deal negotiation can occur both at the time of hire, referred to as ex-ante i-deals, and after hire, labelled ex-post i-deals. Because of increased insider knowledge and the possibility of building a better Leader-Member Exchange relationship (Rousseau et al., 2006), ex post i-deals usually are of broader scope and higher quantity (Rousseau et al., 2009). While the main focus of this study is on ex-post i-deals, the impact of negotiation timing as third variable will be considered in the discussion section. Since the independent variable – the employment modes – is conceptualised as a nominal and thus qualitative variable that cannot be ordered on a scale, their impact on the dependent variable – number of i-deals – will be assessed relatively to each other, resulting in a ranking for each type of i-deal.

As previously illustrated, knowledge-based employees are characterised by high strategic value and uniqueness of skills and thus of high importance to a firm (Lepak & Snell, 1999). Even though their skills may be hard to transfer to other companies, their loss would equal a loss in competitive advantage and HR therefore aims at committing the employees to the organisation and realising employee potential. From the employer perspective, career and task idiosyncratic deals can be utilised to better match the employee with firm-specific positions and tasks due to the

requirement of mutual benefit. At the same time, tasks become positively challenging, triggering job challenge demands (Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010) that facilitate growth and individual learning (Hornung et al., 2014). Interestingly, Hornung et al. (2014) found that the controlling variable job level had a statistically significant positive impact on the likelihood of career i-deals. Because employees in higher positions are likely to be among core employees, this further backs the proposition, that quadrant 1 employees are likely to receive such career deals as part of organisational succession planning. At the same time, offering employees long-term compensation options such as stock options can be seen as means to increase continuance organisational commitment (Lepak & Snell, 2002) and in turn lowering the risk of losing these employees through increased switching cost. By granting task i-deals to this employee group, the employer can balance control with employee discretion over work. From the employee perspective, the employee can leverage his or her better bargaining position when negotiating employment conditions (Meijerink, 2014). This position is derived from the important contribution to firm performance with a unique skillset from which logically follows that the threat of leaving the company would incur high costs of redeveloping the required skills. The relational nature of the psychological contract implies that employees do expect a long-term EOR and may utilise their human capital to facilitate the LMX, an important i-deal antecedent. A study conducted by SAP and Oxford Economics found that 21.8% of the respondents – all high performers – were intending to leave their company within the next six months (Willyerd, 2014). Consequently, this can also be assumed to positively influence the number of i-deals. Because knowledge-based employees are the most important human assets of any organisation, they can be expected to receive the most i-deals of all employment modes. Therefore, the following hypothesis is derived.

*Hypothesis 1: Employees in knowledge-based employment will expect to receive the highest number of (a) task, (b) career, (c) flexibility and (d) financial incentive i-deals compared to job-based, contract and alliance employment.*

On the other hand, the focus in contract-based employment lies on the economic side of the relationship (Rousseau, 1995). Usually, the quadrant comprises of externalised labour because of low transaction costs, for example in the form of temporary workers or contractors that fill support jobs in the organisation (Lepak & Snell, 2002; Lepak, Takeuchi & Snell, 2003). As the tasks carried out are not crucial to the organisation, HR practices aim at ensuring compliance with basic procedures and desired outcomes with little employee discretion over work (Lepak & Snell, 1999), for example through initial compliance training activities. Since tasks are rigid and well-defined by the employer, who is only interested in the maintaining a service level, task i-deals can be expected to be found rarely, if at all. Also, because tasks offer little variety or challenge (Lepak & Snell, 2002), there is little need for skill development, even in the short-run, probably negatively impacting the number of career i-deals. Additionally, the bargaining position of employees in this mode is extremely low in comparison with every other mode due to the limited contribution to performance and replaceable nature of prerequisite skills. With nothing on their hands, such employees have little power to negotiate new employment terms. Because of the limited continuity of the employment, it can also be assumed that any modification would be negotiated ex ante and that no further alterations are desired by the employer beyond the point of hiring. This severely

hampers the employee's ability to negotiate i-deals due to of the lack of established trust and insider knowledge (Rousseau, Hornung & Kim, 2009). Additionally, the OECD Employment Outlook 2014 reports that temporary workers have a 14% lower probability to receive training from their employer (OECD, 2014, p.143). Basically, it can be expected that such employees receive the least special attention from HR and therefore form the lower relative end of the ranking. Thus, the following hypothesis is derived.

*Hypothesis 2: Employees in contract-based employment will expect to receive the lowest number of (a) task, (b) career, (c) flexibility and (d) financial incentive i-deals compared to knowledge-based, job-based and alliance employment.*

Continuing, job-based employees fall under a transactional or symbiotic employment relationship. Both parties pursue the relationship as long as it is mutually beneficial. Even though employees contribute significantly to value creation, their skills are easily replaceable and management creates standardised jobs to quickly fill gaps (Lepak & Snell, 2002). This means that task i-deals are less likely to be observed for this group, because expected turnover and customised jobs will decrease the person-job fit of any new incumbent. Because of the generic skillset required to fulfil the job, major adjustments to a given individual would not be required anyway. On the other hand, while it may initially appear counterintuitive to offer career i-deals to employees who may, at short notice, leave the company, companies can utilise such i-deals to turn generic skills into idiosyncratic ones. Through on-the-job experience, highly context-specific skills can be crafted (Dierickx & Cool, 1989), moving the employee to quadrant 1 in the long run. This is congruent with Lepak & Snell's (1999) suggestions that companies should shift employees towards quadrant 1 to sustain and expand competitive advantage. In order to avoid disruptions caused by high turnover, companies may choose to differentiate themselves from the market by offering financial incentive i-deals that trigger continuance commitment. Even though a matching employee is likely to be found, high turnover causes increased bureaucratic and recruitment costs or temporary strain on the remaining staff. If switching the employer will forfeit economic benefits, highly performing employees can be expected to be less inclined to do so. Counter to these points, the employee's bargaining position is lower compared to quadrant 1 employees. However, it still is in management's interest to grant previously mentioned i-deals since the mutual benefits supposedly will outweigh the cost. Because they constitute the rank-and-file employees of a company, they can be expected to be found in between the knowledge-based and contract workers, mediated by the previously mentioned points. Considering all these factors, the following hypothesis is derived.

*Hypothesis 3: Employees in job-based employment will expect...*

*(3a) ...a relatively lower number of task i-deals compared to knowledge-based or alliance employees, but higher than contract workers.*

*(3b) ...a relatively lower number of career i-deals compared to knowledge-based employees, but the same as alliance and higher than contract workers.*

*(3c) ...a relatively lower number of flexibility i-deals compared to knowledge-based employees, but higher than alliance and contract workers.*

(3d) ...a relatively lower number of financial i-deals compared to knowledge-based employees, but the same as alliance and higher than contract workers.

The difference between contract work and the alliance-based employment mode is the intended continuity of the collaborative relationship. By embedding the uniqueness of this quadrant's workers' human capital in the employment relationship itself, workers become effectively attached to the organisation without officially belonging to it. HR can contribute to relationship development and resulting human asset specificity, for example, through co-location of partners and internal employees (Dyer, 1996). This implies that firms will seek to limit the options of partners to conduct the work independently of the firm, resulting in a lower likelihood of flexibility i-deals that could limit the contact between internalised employees and partners. Lepak & Snell (1999) suggest that partners' human capital should in the long run be utilised on a larger basis or reconfigured so that it contributes to the competitive advantage of the firm, justifying internal employment. Further increasing idiosyncrasies in the career planning and the tasks of the partner that shape the employment relationship through career and task i-deals can build stronger ties between employer and employee and thus maintain continuity. Even though alliance partners do not possess the same leverage as internal knowledge-based employees, their rare and inimitable human capital (Lepak & Snell, 1999) gives them more bargaining power than contract workers could possess. Considering these points, the following hypothesis is derived.

*Hypothesis 4: Employees in alliance-based employment will expect...*

(4a) ...a relatively lower number of task i-deals compared to knowledge-based employees, but higher than job-based and contract workers.

(4b) ...a relatively lower number of career i-deals compared to knowledge-based employees, but the same as job-based and higher than contract workers.

(4c) ...a relatively lower number of flexibility i-deals compared to knowledge-based and job-based employees, but more than contract workers.

(4d) ...a relatively lower number of financial i-deals compared to knowledge-based employees, but the same as job-based and higher than contract workers.

In order to aid understanding and to provide an overview of the relative ranking, the following table 1 constitutes a visual representation of the hypothetical conceptual model.

**Table 1. Hypothetical relative ranking of each employment mode for the expected number of task, career, flexibility and financial i-deals**

	Known ge- based	Job- based	Alliance	Contract
<b>Nr. of task i-deals</b>	1. (H1a)	3. (H3a)	2. (H4a)	4. (H2a)
<b>Nr. of career i-deals</b>	1. (H1b)	2. (H3b)	2. (H4b)	4. (H2b)
<b>Nr. of flexibility i-deals</b>	1. (H1c)	2. (H3c)	3. (H4c)	4. (H2c)
<b>Nr. of financial i-deals</b>	1. (H1d)	2. (H3d)	2. (H4d)	4. (H2d)

*Note:* Rank of 1 and 4 indicate highest and lowest relative number of expected i-deals, respectively.

Having established the theoretical concepts of this paper and hypothesised about how they could be related, the underlying methodology, the Delphi method, is going to be introduced.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design: Delphi Method and the Expert Panel

In the Delphi method, a panel of relevant experts is asked to give their opinion independently from each other. The method allows for several rounds to refine the consensus-based result. It builds on the assumption that structured groups give more accurate answers to a question than unstructured ones or individuals. Most commonly, the Delphi method is used to receive tentative forecasts or speculative expectations about an uncertain future development (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004) and is thus suitable to address this thesis' research question. The advantage over one-round questionnaire-based methods is the structured evolution of a consensus; results from previous rounds are fed into the design of subsequent rounds' questionnaires, narrowing down the range of answers (Hasson, Keeney & McKenna, 2000). The purpose of the first round was to assess the independent variable as well as identifying additional potential i-deal topics. Additionally, the reliability and validity of the second round questions is increased through the assessment of the first round.

In this case, respondents qualified not because of their expertise in the academic field, but due to the relevance of their opinions and expectations for the result of this study; employees were asked to respond to the questionnaire, which was chosen as time-saving alternative to in-depth interviews. Another advantage is that the responses are more structured and easier to code. To compensate for the lack of direct supervision while filling-out, questions and remarks could be filed. As employees can more and more be seen as internal 'customers' of HR functions because of HRM's role in enabling and retaining employees (Cardy et al., 2007), their opinion on the treatment can be an important benchmark for the link between HRM and performance in the future (Paauwe & Boselie, 2005).

For the sake of generalisability, the experts have been selected independently of age, profession, position in the company, or the company itself. This was also done to stimulate variance in the independent variable. Therefore, the panel represents a broad range of professions, for example a field sales agent or a supermarket employee, as well as industries, for example wholesale or manufacturing, in order to learn about their differing expectations about the dependent variable. Another important criterion was that the experts were aware of their own contribution to the company as well as capable of assessing the uniqueness of their skills. Additionally, the experts needed to be familiar with the range of HR practices and options in place, which most employees as consumers of HR practices are. Since idiosyncratic deals are still an emerging topic in both the practical and academic field, it could not be expected of the experts to be familiar with the theoretical foundations and delineation of the concept.

#### 3.2 Operationalisation

The Delphi study in this thesis was limited to two rounds of questionnaires, due to time constraints, directed at employees. Quantitative and qualitative data about the determinants of the independent variable, strategic value of human capital and uniqueness of human capital, and the dependent variables number of task, flexibility, career and financial incentive i-deals were collected. Since these determinants have already been established by Lepak & Snell (1999; 2002), a Likert-

scale-based survey is used because it allows for more accurate and comparable pre-coded measurement of the independent variable. In the first round, two sets of questions were asked, the first set regarding the employee self-assessment of the strategic value and uniqueness of skills in order to assess the employment mode. Lepak & Snell (2002) devised 12 and 10 questionnaire items, respectively, for their empirical study of the HR architecture which have been adapted for use in this study. The original items were designed to be filled in by management staff, the only alteration that was made was rephrasing the first part of the questions so that it addresses employees to be able to link their perception of their human capital to their expectations about i-deals. Using an already established scale has the advantage of higher validity and reliability of results. Because these two factors are the determinants of the employment mode, they can be seen taken as lower level concept that enables inferences about the employment mode. A job-based employment mode can, for example, be expected for an employee of high value but low uniqueness of human capital resulting from high average scores on the 12 and 10 respective items. All the experts were categorised into the HR architecture via these averages.

Following up, the second set of questions of round one were devised to gain insights in the types of idiosyncratic deals employees are going to negotiate within a timeframe of five years. In this set, the questions were designed in a more open manner in order to gather qualitative suggestions about task, career, flexibility and financial i-deal options that were consequently fed into the second round. In case they did not expect an i-deal to be negotiated, they were asked to provide reasons why. Idiosyncratic deals are referred to as personalised agreement with the employer that differs from regular work or employment conditions to aid understanding of the term. This closely resembles the established definition of Rousseau, Ho & Greenberg (2006). For the questions itself, the concept was broken down into the categories of i-deals previously identified to cover the whole spectrum, increasing the answers' validity. Further qualitative remarks by the experts beyond the actual questions were considered for the later discussion of the results. One wave of reminders was required to lift the response rate from 43.75% to 94.11%. The complete first questionnaire can be found under '10.1 Appendix 1: Round One Delphi Questionnaire'. The questionnaires were distributed both through online- and paper-based forms in order to increase accessibility for respondents.

Subsequently, the second round questionnaire incorporated the broad list of options identified in the first round, assessing the expectations of employees regarding the likelihood of them receiving a specific i-deal. The results from the first questionnaire were analysed and deductively coded referring to the combined categories defined by Hornung et al. (2014) – task, career and flexibility i-deals – with Rosen et al.'s (2013) financial incentive i-deals, in order to cover a broader range of options. To code the answers of the experts, the open questions' responses were compared to the definition of each category. Answers with similar meaning but converging formulation were combined into subcategories, eventually leading to a total of 22 Likert-scale questions, 4 for task, 7 for career, 5 for flexibility and 6 for financial incentive i-deals. Additionally, experts were asked to indicate the advantage they expect to draw from their human capital at work condition negotiations, providing a general indication of bargaining power derived from human capital. The Likert-scale for the 2<sup>nd</sup> round questions ranged from 1 to 6 asking for the likelihood of i-deals negotiation, because i-deals can either

occur or not, there is no intermediate state. After the answers were coded a second time to check for consistency over time – there were no changes – the coding procedure was reviewed by a peer competent in the topic to an inter-coder reliability of 91.3%, meaning two items were recoded after discussing them. For the purpose of better understanding of the i-deal concept, the four key characteristics Rosen et al. (2013) used to describe i-deals to their respondents were incorporated before asking the questions. The complete second round questionnaire can be found under '10.2 Appendix 2: Round Two Delphi Questionnaire'.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Analysis of the First Round

This section highlights particular findings that were collected during the first round. Of the 16 respondents, 7 indicated knowledge-based employment, 3 job-based, 2 contract-based and 4 alliance-based. This backs up the statistics that show the increase of idiosyncratic knowledge embedded in the individual worker. A comprehensive matrix summarising the results of the first round can be found in the following table 2.

**Table 2. Summary of first round results**

<b>Alliance: 4</b>		<b>Knowledge-based employment: 7</b>	
<b>Task: 1</b> Feedback/Goal-setting: 1	<b>Career: 2</b> Training/coaching options: 2 Early retirement plan (1)*	<b>Task: 2</b> Specialisation of tasks: 1 Renegotiation of job description: 1	<b>Career: 5</b> Training/coaching options: 5 Promotion opportunities (1)
<b>Flexibility: 2</b> Flexitime: 2 Home office: 1	<b>Financial: 1</b> Variable-/Performance-related pay: 1	<b>Flexibility: 3</b> Work scheduling: 2 Flexitime: 1 Home office: 1 (2) Base work hours (1)	<b>Financial: 2</b> Base salary composition: 2 (2) Variable-/Performance-related pay: 1 (1)
<b>Contract-based employment: 2</b>		<b>Job-based employment: 3</b>	
<b>Task: 0</b>	<b>Career: 0</b>	<b>Task: 0</b> Task autonomy (1)	<b>Career: 2</b> Promotion opportunities: 1 (1) Training/coaching options: 1
<b>Flexibility: 0</b>	<b>Financial: 0</b>	<b>Flexibility: 1</b> Flexitime: 1	<b>Financial: 2</b> Base salary composition: 2

*Note:* Numbers in parentheses indicate i-deals not expect, but nevertheless desired by employee

Of the quadrant 1 employees, 2 replied that they expect a task i-deal, 5 career i-deals, 2 financial, and 3 flexibility. The initial pattern that more i-deals are desired than in other quadrants may be tentatively interpreted such that employees may not always be capable of leveraging their human capital. One expert, for example, stated that colleagues were dependent on receiving work outputs, limiting schedule flexibility. For quadrant 2, no experts expect task i-deals, 2 career, 2 financial, and 1 flexibility i-deals. Following, the quadrant 3 employees expect no i-deals at all, supporting H3a through H3d. Finally, of respondents in quadrant 4, 1 expected task, 2 career, 1 financial and 2 flexibility i-deals. Interestingly, one expert confirmed some of the argumentation behind H3a through H3d for contract work; as the expert put it, for example, the training received only served the company and the HR treatment he received was allowed little to no room for negotiation. Several experts from job-based, alliance and contract work indicated that they worked under temporary or limited contracts and thus were not intending to renegotiate conditions. It appeared that no clear quantitative pattern emerged in this round, therefore it is not possible to accept or



reject the ranking established through the other hypotheses in partial or whole.

Overall, the 13 options named by the respondents covered all types of i-deals, ranging from work scheduling over variable pay to the renegotiation of the job description to better resemble the tasks actually carried out. Another type that emerged was the negotiation of an early retirement plan. An interesting point raised by one expert was that he expected to negotiate both training options and in turn a higher salary because of the increased skills. From many of the experts' statements, it became apparent that the bargaining power is an important factor when negotiating job conditions, and since this study is focused on human capital, this will be further assessed as new dependent variable: Leverage gained from human capital. The assumption here is that the more valuable and unique an employee's human capital is, the more bargaining power the employee enjoys. This allows for further understanding of the reasons why there may be differences caused by human capital characteristics. Overall, the results of the first round are of qualitative nature and inconclusive, and have to be further solidified.

## 4.2 Analysis of the Second Round

First of all, it is important to assess the consensus among the experts of each subgroup. While the raw score was used for the expected leverage derived from human capital, the median of the corresponding questionnaire items has been computed for each i-deal category. For calculating consensus, as suggested as common method for central tendency of medians by van der Gracht (2012), the interquartile range was used to assess the degree of agreement. An IQR of  $\leq 1$  means that 50% or more of the opinions fall within 1 point on the scale from the median which several authors suggested for 4 to 7-point scales (e.g. Rayens & Hahn, 2000; Raskin, 1995; De Vet, Brug, De Nooier, Dijkstra & De Vries, 2005). With these reference points, consensus in this study is achieved if the IQR is  $\leq 1$ . For job-based employment and contract work, the range was used because it was not possible to calculate an IQR for them. The following table 3 illustrates the values for each subgroup and variable.

**Table 3. Consensus table for each i-deal type by employment mode based on either IQR or range**

Employment mode		Score for task i-deals	Score for career i-deals	Score for flexibility i-deals	Score for financial i-deals	Leverage from human capital
Knowledge-based (n=7)	Median	4.50	4.00	2.00	2.00	5.00
	IQR	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Job-based (n=3)	Median	3.50	3.00	2.00	1.50	3.00
	Range	1.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	3.00
Contract work (n=2)	Median	2.50	1.00	1.50	1.00	2.00
	Range	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.00
Alliance (n=4)	Median	2.75	3.00	1.00	1.00	3.50
	IQR	2.00	3.00	1.50	1.13	3.25
Total (n=16)	Median	3.5000	3.00	2.00	1.25	4.50
	IQR	1.88	2.00	2.00	1.88	2.75

*Note:* Medians based on a 6-point Likert-scale  
Consensus achieved if IQR or range  $\leq 1$  (Cases highlighted in grey)

Summarising, the knowledge-based and contract work subgroups can be seen as in agreement among the members. The alliance and job-based subgroups, however, are in discord, with the latter subgroup only agreeing on task i-deals.

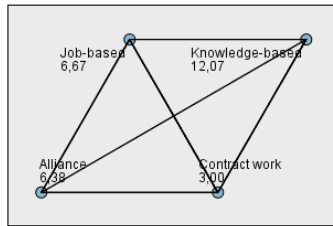
Overall, the disagreement of the entire group across the dependent variables may be interpreted as variance caused by the independent variable, but this requires to be confirmed by further analysis. Comparing the median scores, it can be noted that flexibility and financial i-deals score low across all employment modes with a total median of 2.0 and 1.25, respectively, while the total average of expected human capital leverage is particularly high with 4.5 out of 6. As the assumptions for a parametric ANOVA test are not fulfilled in this case, the central tendencies of the four non-related employment modes of the independent variable were compared via the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis alternative with post-hoc pairwise comparisons for significant distribution differences. The following table 4 represents the results from the initial Kruskal-Wallis test conducted via SPSS 22.

**Table 4. Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis test results including null hypotheses and p-values**

H0/Null hypothesis	Sig.*	Decision
1 Distribution of expected leverage from human capital is the same across all employment modes.	0.039	Reject H0
2 Distribution of median score for task i-deals is the same across all employment modes.	0.044	Reject H0
3 Distribution of median score for career i-deals is the same across all employment modes.	0.184	Retain H0
4 Distribution of median score for flexibility i-deals is the same across all employment modes.	0.243	Retain H0
5 Distribution of median score for financial i-deals is the same across all employment modes.	0.242	Retain H0

*Note:* \*Significance level of 0.05 (Cases with p-value  $< \alpha$  highlighted)

The Kruskal-Wallis test tested for significant differences between the employment modes for the 5 variables at the 0.05  $\alpha$ -level. The null hypotheses that the two-sided test tested against assumed in each case that no differences in distribution across all employment modes exist for each variable. As such, H0<sub>3</sub> (p = 0.184), H0<sub>4</sub> (p = 0.243) and H0<sub>5</sub> (p = 0.242), concerned with the distribution of career, flexibility and financial i-deals across employment modes, respectively, are to be accepted, because the p-values exceed the critical value. This means that there is no significant difference between the employment modes for these three i-deal types. Therefore, alternative hypotheses H1b through H1d, H2b through H2d, and H3b through H3d and H4b through H4d have to be rejected. On the other hand, significant differences between the employment modes for the expected leverage from human capital, H0<sub>1</sub> (p = 0.039), and the median score for task i-deals, H0<sub>2</sub> (p = 0.044). In turn, this means H0<sub>1</sub> and H0<sub>2</sub> are to be rejected. However, the Kruskal-Wallis test only tests if there are unequal distributions across the employment modes at all, but not the actual differences between two distinct modes. In order to gain insight about the ranks of the employment modes for these two variables, the post-hoc pairwise comparisons have to be evaluated. The results are displayed in figures 3 and 4, and elaborated on below.



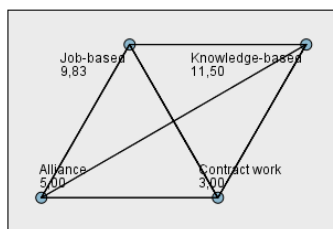
Each node shows the sample average rank of Employment mode.

Sample1-Sample2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj.Sig.
Contract work-Knowledge-based	9,071	3,697	2,453	,014	,085
Alliance-Knowledge-based	5,696	2,890	1,971	,049	,293
Job-based-Knowledge-based	5,405	3,182	1,698	,089	,537
Contract work-Job-based	3,667	4,210	,871	,384	1,000
Contract work-Alliance	-3,375	3,994	-,845	,398	1,000
Alliance-Job-based	,292	3,522	,083	,934	1,000

Each row tests the null hypothesis that the Sample 1 and Sample 2 distributions are the same. Asymptotic significances (2-sided tests) are displayed. The significance level is .05.

**Figure 1. Post-hoc pairwise comparison for the expected leverage from human capital imported from SPSS 22**

As can be seen in the figure above, the post-hoc pairwise comparison compares each employment mode against all others to examine how large the difference between each mode's median score expected leverage is, and if the difference is significant at all. Since the repeated testing can cause statistical type I – false positive – errors, SPSS automatically adjusts to compensate. In order to be able to conclude that unequal distribution exists, the adjusted p-values must be considered. While it appears that knowledge-based employment ranks higher, followed by job-based & alliance, with contract work on the lowest rank, the adjusted significances exceed the significance level. Therefore, the ranking remains qualitative and not quantifiable.



Each node shows the sample average rank of Employment mode.

Sample1-Sample2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj.Sig.
Contract work-Knowledge-based	8,500	3,761	2,260	,024	,143
Alliance-Knowledge-based	6,500	2,940	2,211	,027	,162
Contract work-Job-based	6,833	4,282	1,596	,111	,663
Alliance-Job-based	4,833	3,582	1,349	,177	1,000
Job-based-Knowledge-based	1,667	3,237	,515	,607	1,000
Contract work-Alliance	-2,000	4,062	-,492	,622	1,000

Each row tests the null hypothesis that the Sample 1 and Sample 2 distributions are the same. Asymptotic significances (2-sided tests) are displayed. The significance level is .05.

**Figure 2. Post-hoc pairwise comparison for the median score for task i-deals imported from SPSS Statistics 22**

The second post-hoc comparison, tested if there are significant differences in distribution of the median score for task i-deals across the employment modes. Even though the Kruskal-Wallis test revealed significant differences across all modes, the post-hoc test shows that the differences between any two modes are insignificant, since all adjusted p-values exceed the significance level of 0.05. The ranking, knowledge-based, job-based, alliance and contract work, in this order, again only stands as quantitative pattern, allowing only a rejection of the alternative hypotheses H1a, H2a, H3a and H4a.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The quantitative analysis of the second round data found no support for the hypothesised relationships. This is not say that i-deals were not expected to be negotiated, but there were no significant differences due to employment mode. Additionally, consensus was limited to the knowledge-based and contract work subgroups. In the first round, experts were also asked about the reasons why they would not expect an i-deal to be negotiated. Thus, the qualitative statements by the experts can – besides theory – also be drawn upon to explain these findings. There may be a multitude of factors leading to these findings.

Among the reasons cited by experts were structural job constraints, such as customer contact prescribing schedules and work location or interdependent work structures that narrowed the zone of negotiability (Rousseau, 2001) regarding work flexibility. It appears intuitive that mutual reliance on the output of others as part of the arrangement of the work structure requires more coordination between reciprocally interdependent employees (Thompson, 2003). Unique work conditions for employees in such a structure might have no adverse efficiency consequences up to the point where bureaucratic coordination efforts outweigh the benefits of i-deals, implying an optimum level of differentiation. As examples for financial i-deals, age can be considered as largely important factor regarding financial retirement plans. Then again, stock options can only be granted if the company is indeed publicly traded, or allowances are only necessary if an employee faces business expenses such as business travels. The leverage gained from human capital is in such cases unable to lift such restrictions. The differentiation issue also is the basic premise of the different HR configurations underlying each employment mode of Lepak & Snell (1999) where it boils down to a cost-benefit decision whether to make or buy, influenced by RBV and TCE. At the same time, these examples bear the theoretical implication that the level of analysis influenced the results: Because different i-deals are influenced to differing extents by a multitude of factors including private and work circumstances such as age, children or work structure, i-deals may be viewed upon at the unique i-deal rather than category level. Another direction may be the work relationships among employees that influence the zone of negotiability.

The optimum level of differentiation also becomes apparent when looking at, for example, task and career i-deals for job-based employed: They possess a generic skillset – to a certain extent, because two people rarely possess the exact same skillset – that allows them to leave for an alternative as soon as they stop perceiving the employment to be beneficial, leaving a gap that has to be filled. If task i-deals have previously been negotiated for an employee that leaves, the job itself has become less generic and more adjusted to the previous incumbent, this will therefore lead to an increase in transaction costs searching for a replacement on the market. If the benefit gained from increasing the person-job fit does not

outweigh the increased matching effort, a task i-deal is not viable. This consideration was not included in the theory part because of the focus on ex-post i-deals, including the time dimension as third variable however unlocks this line of thought. For career i-deals, ROI becomes an important metric for decisions regarding unique employee development.

Another relevant point is the application of best practices or High-Performance-Work-Systems, or even so-called cafeteria plans in which employees can pick options that suit them. As one expert pointed out, the training division of the company had a pool of training options that he could book from if he wished so. Such HR configurations cut the ground from under customised dedicated agreements because at least certain employees groups receive have the possibility for customisation from the get-go. Employers may favour such configurations because practice differentiation, particularly in the domain of developmental opportunities, can induce feelings of favouritism that negatively affect organisational affective commitment (Marescaux et al., 2013). At the same time, HR departments differ in responsibilities, size, and strategy and policy sophistication, to name a few, resulting in different approaches to managing human resources. It can be assumed HR departments that attempting to proactively engage employees do not wait until the employee voices his or her desire for better conditions, which is also reflected by the knowledge-based experts' remarks.

However, an interesting remark by an expert implied that i-deals can be working in tandem: Because he expected to specialise and negotiate training in certain tasks of his job, potentially increasing P-J fit and productivity, he also indicated an expected renegotiation of his salary. As Hornung et al. (2014) found that career i-deals indeed positively influence skill acquisition, such developmental options can be expected to raise the human capital of employees who in turn can leverage their capital to secure more and better i-deals, particularly in the remuneration they receive through financial i-deals.

Additionally, a new type of i-deal emerged from the qualitative data: Renegotiation of the job description. This implies that i-deals could actually occur as a consequence of possibly involuntary job crafting. Because employees may consequently feel that the job description – which often serves as a basis for salary negotiations – does not encompass all the tasks carried out, they may seek to eliminate this disparity between perceived inputs and returns. Theoretically, this implies both a connection between the concepts of job crafting and idiosyncratic deals and affirms an equity theory perspective for explaining motivation to negotiate i-deals.

As predicted from the ongoing employment trends, the largest subgroup of the experts was found in knowledge-based employment, 43.75% of all respondents, backing up the assumed ongoing shift towards an increased individual importance of an employee.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, idiosyncratic deals appear as a double-edged sword: Because they can be negotiated for almost all common HR practices, many different corresponding factors and restrictions have to be taken into consideration to keep the optimal balance between HR standardisation and differentiation. This study did not find quantitative support for any of its hypotheses, however, its experts provided many different qualitative observations about the future of i-deals. However, the responses indicated that the experts expect valuable and unique skill to provide them with leverage when negotiating job conditions. To answer the initial research

question qualitatively, some employees expect to negotiate task, career, flexibility and financial i-deals within the next five years, but not necessarily dependent on their respective employment mode. Some however also acknowledge the extended range of standardised options offered the employer as sufficient. The experts considered the bargaining power or leverage gained from human capital as very important for i-deal negotiation. In the future, more employees may receive i-deals, but a future of HR practice mass customisation cannot be expected to dawn from the data at hand.

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study are, due to the research design, only of tentative nature and not highly generalizable. This is because the number and nature of respondents are by design not representative of the general population. While the Delphi method was designed to forecast future developments, it is always subject to a degree of uncertainty due to unforeseeable events. Therefore, a longitudinal study, or even a cohort study, could track and compare the actual developments with the findings of this study. Another factor is potential cognitive bias of the experts because their responses rely solely on their subjective expectations. Even though the experts have been selected with care with regards to their self-assessment and reasoning capability, they could still be subject to bounded rationality due to missing reference frames, lack of perfect information and cognitive limitations. It is therefore suggested that further studies incorporate more holistic performance reviews to assess the uniqueness and value of employees such as supervisors' or peer performance assessment. If this study was to be reproduced as Delphi study, it might be more suitable to conduct it as company case study, because the panel of experts could have been too small to effectively resemble the myriads of possible combinations of HR configurations, employment modes and other factors that shape the EOR. This possibly limits the influence of third variables and makes the results more comparable.

The number of respondents assessing themselves as contract-based employees is particularly low in comparison to the other experts. As previously discussed, some i-deals are subject to restrictions that render them impossible from the start or other factors that may outweigh an individual's leverage. To assess its relative importance, human capital as variable could therefore be included in a multivariate analysis of i-deal antecedents.

Additionally, a distinct feature of i-deals is that they differ in size and scope from each other. While this study focusses on the amount of i-deals per se, it is also possible to argue for a link between the human capital of an employee to the scope – also called zone of negotiability – for i-deals (Rousseau, 2001). Future studies can explore how the value and uniqueness of employees' skills relate to the extent a treatment differs from applied standard HR practices. The duality of an employment relationship, which actually consists of the enactment by both employer and employee, implies that the employer perspective – in form of its agents – is also relevant to explore.

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## 10. APPENDICES

### 10.1 Appendix 1: Round One Delphi Questionnaire

#### 10.1.1 Introduction and Instructions

This Delphi questionnaire represents the first round out of two. Please take your time when reading and filling in the questions. It consists of two parts related to an assessment of your particular skills that you contribute to your work and the existence and types of negotiated customised treatment regarding work conditions, respectively. After processing all the responses, a second round will be prepared and issued to you. It is kindly asked that you fill in the second questionnaire as well. All your information will be handled with care to ensure your anonymity. In case you have any questions, feel free to contact me personally ([s.norris@student.utwente.nl](mailto:s.norris@student.utwente.nl)) and I will address any issues as soon as possible. Thank you very much for your participation in this study.

#### 10.1.2 Part I – Skill self-assessment

In the first part, you are asked to indicate your response to the following small statements on a scale from 1 to 7 (1 = I strongly disagree, 4 = I neither agree nor disagree, 7 = I strongly agree).

For my organisation, my skills...							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...are instrumental for creating innovations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...create customer value.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...help minimize costs of production, service, or delivery.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...enable our firm to provide exceptional customer service.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...contribute to the development of new market/product/service opportunities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...develop products/services that are considered the best in our industry.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...directly affect organizational efficiency and productivity.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...enable our firm to respond to new or changing customer demands.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...allow our firm to offer low prices.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...directly affect customer satisfaction.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...are needed to maintain high quality products/services.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...are instrumental for making process improvements.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...are not widely available in the labour market.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

...would be very difficult to replace.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...are not available to our competitors.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...are widely considered the best in our industry.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...are developed through on the job experiences.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...are difficult for our competitors to buy away from us.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...are unique to our organization.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...are difficult for our competitors to imitate or duplicate.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...are customized to our particular needs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...distinguish us from our competition.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

#### 10.1.3 Part II – Existence and types of irregular employee-employer agreements

In the second part, you are asked to fill in your expectations regarding each sub-question of the questions below. For question 1, if the answer is **yes**, please provide the **options you are expecting to receive**. If the answer is **no**, please provide **reasons why** you do not expect this to be the case.

Question 1 – Within five years from now, do you expect that you negotiate and receive a personalised agreement with your employer that differs from regular work/employment conditions regarding...	
...tasks and responsibilities of your job? (Please also indicate concrete options)	
...personal career development and training options? (Please also indicate concrete options)	
...the flexibility you enjoy in carrying out your job? (Please also indicate concrete options)	
...the monetary and non-financial compensation you	

receive for your work? (Please also indicate concrete options)	
<b>Question 2 – Please provide realistic list of options that you would desire to receive besides the deals you expect to actually negotiate and receive.</b>	

General Information	
Name	
Company	
E-Mail address	

## 10.2 Appendix 2: Round Two Delphi Questionnaire

### 10.2.1 Introduction and Instructions

This Delphi questionnaire represents the second round out of two. Please take your time when reading and filling in the questions. First of all, you are asked to assess the advantage your skills grant when negotiating job conditions. In the next section, please indicate your response to several questions regarding the existence and types of negotiated customised treatment regarding work conditions, which are called idiosyncratic deals or i-deals. All your information will be handled with care to ensure your anonymity. In case you have any questions, feel free to contact me personally ([s.norris@student.utwente.nl](mailto:s.norris@student.utwente.nl)) and I will address any issues as soon as possible. Thank you very much for your participation in this study.

Do you expect that your particular skills provide you with an advantage in negotiating work conditions in your current employment? Please indicate your response on the following scale from 1 to 6 (1 = Low advantage, 6 = High advantage).

1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### 10.2.2 Existence and types of i-deals

Please familiarise yourself with the following features of i-deals before answering the questions:

1. They are individually negotiated after hire.
2. The conditions that are negotiated are usually not available to everyone else that performs a similar job as you.
3. The new arrangement is mutually beneficial for you and your company/organisation, for example a more manageable work schedule, better fitting tasks or higher motivation.
4. The new arrangement is negotiated based on your contributions and preferences.

Please indicate your response the following small statements on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 = Very unlikely, 6 = Very likely).

Within five years from now, I expect to (re)negotiate...	1	2	3	4	5	6
...new responsibilities that take advantage of the skills that I bring to the job.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...specialisation on tasks that I'm proficient in.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...more autonomy in how I perform my tasks.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the goals/outcomes of my work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the job description to better resemble the tasks I actually carry out.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...special training/coaching options.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...on-the-job training/developmental assignments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...promotion opportunities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...reassignment to a same-level position suiting my skills more.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...long-term developmental goals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...additional education.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...different base work hours.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...work scheduling.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...additional time off/holiday.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...to be able to work from home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...to be able to work in locations aside the main office.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...terms and amount of my base salary.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...variable or performance-related-pay.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...stock options.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...retirement benefits in addition to the obligatory ones.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...a take-home company car.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...travel expenses.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

