



Exploring idiosyncratic deal arrangements in a technology-based organisation



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Orientation: This research examines the dynamics of South Africa's technology sector, focussing on how technology professionals navigate idiosyncratic deal (i-deal) arrangements.

Research purpose: The purpose of the study is to explore the nature of i-deals, the factors contributing to successful negotiations and the consequences of these negotiations on employee experiences and organisational relationships.

Motivation for the study: Research on i-deals in the South African context is limited. This study seeks to address this gap by offering insights into how i-deals are negotiated and their effects on workplace outcomes.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative design was employed, using a convenience sample of 12 mid-to-senior level employees from a large information communication and technology organisation in Johannesburg. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and patterns in the data.

Main findings: The study found that successful i-deal negotiations enhance job satisfaction and employee morale, while unsuccessful negotiations can lead to decreased motivation and strained relationships. Factors such as organisational culture, communication and trust were crucial in determining the success of i-deal negotiations.

Practical/managerial implications: Human resource (HR) professionals should facilitate structured and transparent i-deal negotiation processes, provide training for managers and employees, and regularly monitor the impact of i-deals to ensure they benefit both the organisation and its employees.

Contribution/value-add: This study contributes to the limited literature on i-deals in the South African context, offering practical insights for HR professionals to enhance employee retention and satisfaction through effective i-deal negotiations.

Keywords: i-deals; idiosyncratic deals; work arrangements; customised agreements; technology professionals.

Introduction

During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020, the work landscape and labour dynamics underwent significant changes (Dhanpat et al., 2022, 2023; Ranchhod & Daniels, 2021), particularly in the technology sector (Arshad, 2020). In response, organisations implemented mandatory work-from-home policies (Dhanpat et al., 2022, 2023; Pathak et al., 2021). In the post-pandemic era, technology companies in South Africa, like their global counterparts, have established return-to-work policies as physical offices have reopened (Neethling, 2024). Despite the dynamic and innovative nature of the technology sector, organisations are now in favour of standardised return-to-work policies (Shore et al., 2024). While standardisation offers clarity and consistency, it may overlook the diverse and evolving needs of tech professionals in South Africa (Vidhyaa & Ravichandran, 2022). To address these diverse needs, personalised work arrangements have become increasingly important (Björntoft et al., 2020).

Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) play a vital role in shaping personalised employment conditions (Dhanpat & Legoabe, 2022), particularly for employees with high-value competencies (Anand & Rofcanin, 2022a). I-deals involve negotiations between employees and their managers, leading to tailored arrangements that meet specific individual needs and preferences

(Kossek & Kelliher, 2023; Rousseau, 2001). Such arrangements provide unique and highly valued resources, granting select employees privileges and flexibility not available to others in similar roles. However, this exclusivity can sometimes raise concerns about fairness within the workforce (Anand et al., 2010).

While i-deals are similar to the concept of a 'psychological contract', they differ in initiation and nature. The psychological contract represents the expectations employees hold regarding their organisation's treatment and benefits (Dhanpat & Parumasur, 2014). In contrast, i-deals are employee-initiated negotiations for specific employment conditions, such as flexible working hours or remote work options, placing control in the hands of employees (Caliskan & Torun, 2019).

Employees often engage in i-deal negotiations, sometimes even before joining a company, to ensure their unique needs are met. These negotiations help establish mutual understanding and commitment regarding employment elements, such as work arrangements like remote working. While pre-employment i-deals occur, post-employment i-deals are more common in practice (Rousseau et al., 2006). Managers hold the authority to approve or reject i-deals on behalf of their organisations. These deals are essentially custom terms of employment negotiated by individual employees and approved by management (Hornung et al., 2009). Managers often enter i-deal arrangements with highly valued employees to secure their commitment and retain their specialised skills. Flexibility and development-focussed i-deals are frequently associated with increased employee motivation and commitment (Hornung et al., 2008). Managers consider factors such as employee satisfaction with existing benefits and unmet expectations when evaluating i-deal requests (Hornung et al., 2009). Organisations often prefer standardised human resource (HR) policies and practices to ensure equal treatment of employees in similar circumstances (Kroon et al., 2015). However, managing i-deals within a standardised framework requires careful attention to avoid perceptions of unfairness (Hornung et al., 2009), as unique deals for certain employees can trigger social comparisons, potentially undermining the perception of justice within workgroups (Ho, 2005).

Purpose of the study

This research focusses specifically on employees at an information communication and technology (ICT) organisation, which experienced a rapid shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining how technology professionals in this sector negotiate and adapt to i-deals, the study highlights the unique challenges and opportunities faced by ICT employees. The findings aim to provide targeted insights for ICT organisations navigating the balance between standardisation and personalised work arrangements in the post-pandemic era.

Literature review

As workplaces evolve in response to changing dynamics and employee expectations, i-deals emerge as a pivotal transformation in the employment landscape (Lee & Chung, 2019). They represent a departure from traditional one-size-fits-all employment arrangements, allowing individuals to tailor their working conditions to their unique preferences and needs (Varma et al., 2022). These personalised agreements symbolise a paradigm shift in the employment relationship, recognising the importance of individuality within organisations and acknowledging that employees have diverse aspirations and requirements in today's workforce (Rousseau et al., 2016). Literature on i-deals has highlighted the positive aspects and impacts of these arrangements by enhancing employee commitment and morale (Hornung, 2018; Huang et al., 2022). Managers contract on i-deals to win over employees, especially those they deem talented (Van Der Heijden et al., 2021; Rousseau et al., 2006). I-deals offer a compelling alternative to the conventional employment model by empowering employees to negotiate terms that resonate with their circumstances (Anand & Rofcanin, 2022b).

Theoretical underpinnings of i-deals

Social exchange theory

According to Cropanzano et al. (2017), social exchange theory (SET) is a leading framework for understanding workplace behaviour. Employees are often driven to maintain a fair exchange with their organisation, underpinned by the assumption that mutual obligations will develop over time (Blau, 1964). Social exchange theory is also crucial for explaining the psychological contract between employers and employees, which is based on perceived conditions. As SET suggests, i-deals offered by employers enhance employees' perceptions of being valued, leading to increased commitment (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Popoola & Karadas, 2022). Research shows a positive link between i-deals and outcomes like affective commitment. For instance, Ng and Feldman (2010) found that i-deals related to pay, advancement, training and career development boost affective commitment (Rosen et al., 2013). Rousseau and Kim (2006) argue that all employment arrangements involve resource exchanges, which is central to i-deal negotiations. Employees often seek i-deals, believing they deserve personalised treatment because of their contributions (Bal, 2017). These i-deals can serve as rewards, balancing employees' work efforts (Lee et al., 2022).

The nature of i-deals

I-deals are non-standard work arrangements in which individual employees negotiate with employer agents (e.g. supervisors or managers) to obtain personally desirable resources or conditions such as flexibility in scheduling work, special assignments or training opportunities (Hornung, 2018). The ideal objective is to negotiate an arrangement explicitly and intentionally regarding desirable

resources or conditions. Employees often make these unique arrangements to balance their employment with their circumstances, such as parental responsibilities. In addition, literature on i-deals highlights the dual role that they play for employees requesting i-deals and fulfilling the conditions for most employers to satisfy the increasing demand for skilled workers (Hornung et al., 2008). However, little is evident in research regarding the impact of failed i-deal negotiations on employees. This study will focus on that aspect to contribute to the research on i-deals.

I-deals are occupation-specific (Rosen et al., 2013), as some benefits may not always be available for certain jobs, such as location flexibility for frontline staff, but are available for back-office employees who are not customer-facing. I-deals are also used in some bureaucratic organisations where employment practices are usually standardised (Hornung et al., 2008).

An i-deal can enable an employee to secure personalised arrangements beyond the standard offerings available to all staff members, as noted by Bal (2017) and Ngoben and Dhanpat (2022). According to Rousseau et al. (2006), four essential criteria must be met for an i-deal to be recognised as a valid change in an employment term or condition. These considerations are:

- An i-deal must be individually negotiated and authorised. This is a crucial feature for i-deals to be accommodated and allowed by a manager of the employee requesting a specific arrangement. This is because i-deals are linked to employment conditions, making the granting of permission essential (Liao et al., 2014).
- I-deals should benefit both the employee and the employer. They must be varied in scope and distinct in terms of the treatment of employees doing similar jobs. Thus, an employee's psychological contract may influence the pursuit of an i-deal, which states whether the organisation is obligated to provide something in exchange for its efforts (Liao et al., 2014).
- The i-deal will shape the psychological contract. This may strengthen the employment relationship (Bal & Rousseau, 2016) and foster employee engagement.

Negotiation is a critical component underlying i-deal-making (Simosi et al., 2023; Van der Heijden et al., 2021). Involving separate processes of requesting and receiving resources. However, studies have also quantified the i-deals construct as requesting and receiving i-deals, thereby excluding the possibility of employees requesting but not receiving i-deals, and implicitly whether the two occur concurrently (Ho & Tekleab, 2016).

In terms of timing, negotiations for i-deals typically occur during the recruitment phase and are commonly referred to as 'ex-ante i-deals' because they are negotiated before starting employment. These arise in what can be construed as a market transaction, not a relationship, with the employee attributing the benefits brought by the i-deal to their market

value rather than the quality of their relationship with the employer (Rousseau, 2005; Simosi et al., 2023).

On the other hand, 'ex-post i-deals' are observed during employment itself, as indicated by Rousseau (2005). Ex-ante i-deals are likely higher when an employee is highly skilled (Popoola & Karadas, 2022). In contrast, ex-post i-deals tend to occur after the employee has spent some time on the job and established a performance record and rapport with the employer. These post-initiation i-deals come into play when both the employee and management have had the opportunity to become acquainted with each other's interests, resources and capabilities (Lee & Hui, 2011; Popoola & Karadas, 2022).

Types of i-deals

In modern work environments, employees have diverse and evolving needs that can be addressed through various types of i-deals. Understanding these categories and how they align with individual preferences is crucial. This discussion covers task and work responsibilities, scheduling flexibility, development opportunities, financial aspects and location-based i-deals (Anand & Rofcanin, 2022b):

- **Tasks and work responsibilities:** Task i-deals reflect an organisation's recognition of an employee's abilities and can involve job crafting to enhance creativity and performance (Rousseau et al., 2006). These i-deals can make work more challenging and autonomous, thereby improving innovative performance and person-job fit (Bal et al., 2015; Hornung et al., 2010).
- **Schedule flexibility:** Flexibility i-deals involve special arrangements to accommodate personal responsibilities, helping to alleviate role conflict and achieve work-family balance (Huang & Chen, 2021). These i-deals allow employees to set their schedules or work from preferred locations and are often negotiated even in organisations with formal flexibility policies (Latorre et al., 2021; Rousseau et al., 2016). Unlike standard flexibility policies, flexibility i-deals are tailored to individual needs and require successful negotiation (Heras et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2020).
- **Development i-deals:** Development i-deals involve negotiating opportunities for career advancement, such as training or key assignments. They can enhance individual performance, engagement and retention (Rousseau et al., 2016). These i-deals are typically negotiated post-hire and often involve access to resources like coaching or learning opportunities (Rousseau et al., 2006).
- **Financial i-deals:** Financial i-deals provide increased pay or perks without requiring additional contributions from the employee (Ho & Tekleab, 2016). They help attract and retain top talent but may raise issues of fairness among colleagues (Rousseau et al., 2016). Properly managed, financial i-deals can motivate others and be perceived as fair when performance is objectively demonstrated (Guerrero & Bentein, 2015; Marescaux et al., 2019).

- **Location i-deals:** Location i-deals allow employees to choose their work location, including options like remote work or flexible office spaces. These agreements have gained prominence because of technological advances and the COVID-19 pandemic, providing autonomy and reducing commute times (Kelly et al., 2020; Sykes-Bridge et al., 2023). They offer benefits such as increased job satisfaction and access to a wider talent pool (Burrell, 2020).
- **Task i-deal (job-sharing):** Job-sharing has become more common because of its alignment with work-life balance and organisational flexibility. Technological advancements support job-sharing arrangements, which allow employees to split responsibilities and maintain work-life balance while contributing to team support (Adebayo & Ibrahim, 2023; Dizaho et al., 2017).

Managerial considerations for i-deal approval

Managers play a crucial role in the negotiation and approval of i-deals, acting on behalf of the employer (Bal & Py, 2017). Their approval is vital for changes in employment conditions (Fulmer et al., 2021). Understanding the reasons behind both the approval and denial of i-deals is essential.

Employees negotiate i-deals to customise work conditions, such as flexible hours and schedules, which are competitive tools to meet their needs and expectations (Greenberg et al., 2004; Ng & Feldman, 2010; Vidyarthi et al., 2014). Managers may approve i-deals to enhance their leadership reputation or to be perceived as transformational leaders (Hornung et al., 2011). Additionally, i-deals can serve as a strategic tool to encourage employees to reciprocate organisational investments with positive work attitudes and behaviours (Fulmer et al., 2021; Ho & Tekleab, 2016).

Developmental i-deals, for example, can benefit both the employer and employee by leveraging the employee's talents and fostering personal growth (Van Der Heijden et al., 2021). However, these arrangements might be viewed as unfair by co-workers, leading to potential biases and negative sentiments (Candy, 2021). Managers might use i-deals to mitigate team conflicts but should be aware that perceptions of fairness can be affected by comparative views (Kong et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2009).

Managerial considerations for declining i-deals

Understanding why managers decline i-deals is crucial for assessing employee reactions and maintaining commitment. Standardisation in policies is often seen as a basis for fairness (Greenberg et al., 2004). Standard employment arrangements involve fixed schedules and mutual expectations of continued employment (Kalleberg et al., 2000).

Managers may prefer standard policies over individual i-deals to ensure fairness. They might refuse i-deals because of organisational constraints or a preference for consistency. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, flexible work arrangements

were rare and often only granted in exceptional cases. I-deals are typically individualised and can create perceptions of unfairness among employees who do not have similar arrangements.

Research design

Research approach

A generic qualitative research approach was followed to investigate employees' i-deals and workplace arrangements. This approach was considered suitable to explore, discover and describe people's lives as closely as possible to their constructions of social reality (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Braun and Clarke (2006) affirm that qualitative research is a suitable method for understanding social complexities involving individuals and was considered appropriate for achieving the study's objectives.

Research philosophy

An interpretivist research philosophy was employed to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of how employees negotiated customised work arrangements. Ontology, as the philosophical examination of the nature of reality, shapes researchers' beliefs about whether subjects hold objective or subjective characteristics (Lockett & Blackie, 2022). This perspective influences whether i-deals as workplace arrangements are viewed as objective phenomena or socially constructed elements unique to their context. Epistemology, on the other hand, considers how knowledge is acquired and validated, guiding researchers in choosing either subjective or objective approaches to understanding a phenomenon (Barnes, 2012). Together, ontology and epistemology shape researchers' methodological choices, leading to varied interpretations and insights on i-deals.

Population and sample

The sample comprised 12 individuals, primarily mid-senior level employees of a large telecommunications and technology organisation, selected through a non-probability approach using convenience sampling to identify individuals who were readily available, approachable or accessible to the researcher (Scholtz, 2021). Hennink and Kaiser (2022) suggest that data saturation in qualitative studies is often achieved within 9 to 17 interviews, indicating that a sample size of 12 can provide comprehensive insights. This choice was deliberate, as mid-senior level employees tend to have heightened self-awareness, enhancing their understanding of the concepts under examination. Data saturation was reached with the 12th participant during semi-structured interviews, as no new information emerged. Table 1 provides a demographic breakdown of the participants: five males and seven females. Racial representation included seven black employees, three Indian employees and two white employees. Occupation levels varied, comprising three Senior Specialists, four Senior Managers, one Middle Manager, two Specialists, one Manager and one Executive.

TABLE 1: Participants' biographical summary table.

Code name	Race	Gender	Job title	Occupation level
P1	Black person	Male	Senior Specialist: Networks	Senior Specialist
P2	Black person	Female	Assistant Company Secretary	Middle Manager
P3	Black person	Female	Manager: Managed Networks	Senior Manager
P4	Black person	Male	Manager: Managed Networks	Senior Manager
P5	Indian person	Female	HR Business Partner	Specialist
P6	White person	Female	Senior Specialist Procurement	Senior Specialist
P7	Indian person	Female	Senior Manager: BBBEE	Senior Manager
P8	Black person	Female	ESD and CSI Specialist	Specialist
P9	White person	Male	Executive: Network Operations	Executive
P10	Black person	Male	Head: Product	Senior Manager
P11	Black person	Female	Executive Personal Assistant: CEO	Senior Specialist
P12	Black person	Male	Key Accounts Manager	Manager

HR, human resource; BBBEE, Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment; ESD, Enterprise Supplier Development; CSI, Corporate Social Investment; CEO, chief executive officer.

Research instrument and data collection method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, with open-ended questions carefully designed to explore participants' experiences with i-deals. Semi-structured interviews allow for adaptability, using open-ended questions that encourage participants to express their experiences and perceptions. A standardised interview guide was developed, and the questions were based on the study's research objectives and literature on i-deals. To ensure reliability and validity, feedback was sought from HR academics to evaluate the content and relevance of the interview questions. Their insights assisted in refining the questions to ensure they were clear, focussed and covered the necessary aspects of the research topic. Two participants were involved in the pilot and were excluded from the final sample. The pilot assisted in further refining the questions, allowing for testing the interview guide in practice, addressing ambiguities and questions that caused confusion, and making necessary adjustments based on participant feedback. The HR department acted as a gatekeeper, and invitations were sent to the specific business unit to enlist participation. Interviews were conducted on MS Teams to ensure ease and convenience for participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 min, and audio recordings were made using the Microsoft Teams application, which automatically transcribes the recording.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the university, ethical clearance was granted and access to participants from the ICT organisation was sought by the main researcher. The main researcher initially approached the HR department, which served as the gatekeeper. Gatekeepers were further engaged to access additional participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe gatekeepers as the researcher's initial contacts who facilitate connections to other participants essential for achieving the research objective.

Data analysis and interpretation

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phased thematic analysis, a versatile method for identifying

and analysing patterns. The process followed six phases: (1) data familiarisation, which entailed reading the transcripts that were transcribed verbatim; (2) initial code generation, involving the labelling of patterns – through manual coding, codes were inductively generated reflecting on participants' perceptions of i-deals; (3) theme identification, where nine themes aligning with the research objectives were identified; (4) theme review, validating the themes for coherence and alignment which allowed for the naming of each theme to reflect its true essence; (5) theme definition and naming, ensuring each theme was clearly defined and reflects what was captured from the data and (6) reporting, integrating the themes into a structured narrative to provide insights and implications.

Ensuring data quality

To uphold the rigour of the study, the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability outlined by Schwandt et al. (2007) were applied to obtain accurate interpretations of participants' experiences, enhancing credibility and authenticity. The analysis was shared with participants for accuracy, and clear descriptions and interpretations were recorded. The study was designed to ensure relevance beyond its specific context and was audited for dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was ensured by providing participants with a clear understanding of the interview questions, confirming transcriptions and allowing for changes. Dependability was addressed through detailed descriptions of the research process, while confirmability was maintained through impartiality and thorough documentation. Transferability was supported by detailed contextual descriptions.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg's College of Business and Economics (IPPM-2022-710[M]). Strict ethical compliance was ensured through prior consent from business leaders and clear communication of the research process. Participants' autonomy and confidentiality were prioritised, with informed consent, data encryption and secure storage. Data were used exclusively for research,

with no sharing or repurposing, maintaining integrity and trust.

Findings

The purpose of the study was to investigate the negation and the influence of i-deals within the technology organisation, focussing on the dynamics between employees and employers and the consequences of successful and unsuccessful negotiations on employee experiences and organisational relationships. Table 2 presents seven key themes and categorises each theme according to the phase or aspect of the i-deal process it relates to, providing a clear overview of the study's findings.

Theme 1: Nature and types of i-deals negotiated

Participants provided a collective view of the nature of i-deals within organisational contexts, focussing on work flexibility, workload adjustments and salary adjustments.

Work Flexibility emerged as a recurring theme. Participant P4 highlighted this, stating, 'I've seen various i-deals negotiated, but employees commonly request compressed workdays or remote work options to better align their professional and personal lives' (P4).

P6 reinforced this perspective, noting, 'Flexibility in working hours is a prevalent i-deal request. Employees frequently seek variations in start and end times to accommodate their unique commitments' (P6).

Workload Adjustments were also noted. P12 observed, 'In the sales environment, I have seen colleagues negotiate for reduced administrative work by proposing hiring administrators' (P12). Similarly, P3 shared a personal experience, saying, 'My unique arrangement involved transitioning to part-time remote work. It brought about an innovative way of balancing work and personal life' (P3).

Salary Adjustments were highlighted by P1, who stated, 'I had negotiated for a salary adjustment based on my contributions to the organisation' (P1).

Theme 2: Initiation and negotiation of unique work arrangements

The findings respond to recent examples of negotiated i-deals within the organisation. It is evident that the initiation and negotiation of these agreements involve a complex process, with active involvement from employees and their line managers.

P8 recounts a compelling instance where an employee successfully negotiated an i-deal to relocate to another province because of family considerations:

'I witnessed an employee's request to relocate to another province due to family considerations. The organisation allowed this arrangement, acknowledging the employee's need for a better work-life balance. This instance typifies the organisation's responsiveness to unique requests that accommodate employees' individual circumstances.' (P8)

In another example, P1 describes a collaborative negotiation process within a team. The manager proposed a plan allowing each team member to choose a day for remote work. P1 chose to work from home every Monday, illustrating a flexible and cooperative approach to i-deal negotiations:

'... So, each and every one of us had to choose. And then, on my side, I chose a Monday. So, I am working from home every Monday; someone else chooses a different day ... this was given to our team of five individuals who are different from us. Whereas the technology department, you know, it's huge, big, but our five individuals through our line manager got that condition or that negotiated deal.' (P1)

Additionally, P3 highlights the initiation of flexible work arrangement discussions with a line manager, while P12 notes the variability in the negotiation process, which may range from informal verbal agreements to formal written proposals:

'I initiated the conversation with my line manager, expressing my desire for a flexible working arrangement.' (P3)

'The negotiation process largely depends on your relationship with your manager. Some agreements are verbal, while others require written proposals.' (P12)

TABLE 2: Key themes and phases of idiosyncratic deals in organisational contexts.

Theme	High-level description	Phase of i-deal process
Nature and types of i-deals negotiated	This theme covers the various forms of i-deals, such as work flexibility, workload and salary adjustments, reflecting common negotiation points and employee preferences	Negotiation and agreement
Initiation and negotiation of unique work arrangements	This theme explores how employees initiate and negotiate i-deals, including examples of relocation and flexible work arrangements and the roles of managers in these processes	Initiation and negotiation
Factors contributing to successful negotiation	Key factors that influence the success of i-deal negotiations, including modern work norms, policy adaptability, communication, performance and trust	Negotiation success factors
Granted i-deals and impact on job satisfaction, motivation and work-life balance	This theme highlights the positive outcomes of granted i-deals, such as improved job satisfaction, motivation, and work-life balance	Outcomes of i-deals
Denied i-deals arrangements and reasons for refusal	Focuses on the reasons behind denied i-deals, such as budget constraints and policy adherence and the challenges organisations face when refusing requests	Refusal and justification
Refusal and its effects on morale, commitment, retention and the work environment	Examines the negative impacts of denied i-deals on employee morale, commitment and retention, and how these effects can influence the overall work environment	Impact of refusal
Organisational responses and improvements	Discusses how organisations manage and improve their responses to i-deals, including adjustments to policies, feedback mechanisms and overall strategies for handling individualised arrangements	Organisational response and improvement

i-deal, idiosyncratic deal.

Theme 3: Factors contributing to successful negotiation

This theme evaluates the factors contributing to successful negotiations of i-deals within the organisation, including modern working norms, policy adaptability, communication, performance and trust.

Participant P2 noted the impact of modern working norms, stating:

'In our organisation, the advent of modern working norms has necessitated policy adaptations. The pandemic-driven shift towards flexible and agile working arrangements has resulted in policy adjustments to accommodate these evolving preferences seamlessly.' (P2)

Similarly, P8 highlighted that negotiated arrangements often diverge from standard policies, explaining, 'Negotiated arrangements are typically at odds with the organisation's standard employment policies. These arrangements transcend the norm and are established through individualised negotiations' (P8).

The importance of communication was emphasised by P6, who stated:

'These unique arrangements often operate outside the confines of organisational policies. They rely on open and candid discussions between employees and their line managers, primarily grounded in trust and performance.' (P6)

P6 further stressed:

'After a unique arrangement is approved, it is essential to uphold honest communication. If you are working remotely or outside the standard schedule, integrity is crucial. You must report any deviations promptly, ensuring that your manager is informed and your tasks are aligned.' (P6)

P8 also reinforced the value of communication, noting:

'Open and honest communication is key. Employees must maintain their integrity and report any deviations from the agreed arrangement. This fosters trust between the employee and the line manager.' (P8)

P5 added:

'I think communication is very important because we've got to be very transparent with our processes, and also very consistent, so you need to look and see whether any precedents are being set.' (P5)

Performance and trust were highlighted by P10, who remarked, 'Performance metrics and tangible evidence play a critical role in securing favourable i-deals. It is about achieving targets and demonstrating the need for support' (P10).

P11 added:

'Honesty and being a dedicated employee make it easy ... When people can trust you, if you are saying I am going to

move away, and I will be logging on remotely, and there will not be any line manager to supervise you, there needs to be a track record of that already happening ... it makes the discussion extremely easy ... And just the trust issue and doing what you are supposed to do and already being an overachiever in your role.' (P11)

Finally, P7 emphasised the role of managerial understanding, stating:

'I believe that a manager should be understanding and open-minded in considering reasonable requests. It is important to follow a fair and standard process in making these requests.' (P7)

Theme 4: Granted i-deals and impact on job satisfaction, motivation and work-life balance

The approval of i-deals has been observed to significantly enhance employees' job satisfaction, motivation and work-life balance. Participants shared insights into how these personalised agreements contribute positively to their work experiences.

Participant P8 highlighted that:

'I-deals' approval results in improved work-life balance, heightened motivation, and increased job satisfaction. These arrangements empower employees, enabling them to align their personal and professional lives better.' (P8)

This sentiment was echoed by P6, who noted:

'Employees experience a notable improvement in their job satisfaction and motivation when I-deals are granted. They appreciate the organisation's support in achieving a better work-life balance.' (P6)

P10 pointed out the specific benefits of flexible working hours, stating, 'Flexible working hours provided a better work-life balance, enabling employees to allocate more time to personal interests' (P10).

Additionally, P5 commented on the broader implications, observing:

'The approval of an i-deal reflects the organisation's trust in its employees and its willingness to engage in compromises that can significantly enhance job satisfaction and personal development.' (P5)

Theme 5: Denied i-deals arrangements and reasons for refusal

The analysis reveals various reasons for the denial of i-deals within organisations, highlighting challenges related to budget constraints, policy adherence and perceived fairness.

Participant P1 noted that:

'My colleague's request for a salary adjustment was declined due to budget constraints. This refusal is an example of organisations' challenges when navigating i-deal refusals.' (P1)

Similarly, P4 recounted:

'There is a recent incident whereby, within the company myself, I applied for a bursary to pursue my studies. But then my manager disagreed or [*did not*] approve the bursary application ... (P4)

According to P5:

'So, normally, it is an informal one. If there is a formal one ... And therefore, they feel that you should not be granted, you know, that flexibility or that leeway; in that case, they will formalise that kind of engagement.' (P5)

P8 expressed:

'I did that it did feel like you. You really want to take full advantage of me here? You don't want to give anything?' (P8)

Participants also highlighted the role of organisational policies in refusals. P6 observed:

'Organisations frequently employ policies to justify refusing requests from employees, particularly when they fall outside established policy boundaries.' (P6)

P8 further noted:

'I think they hide behind a policy or use policy at that stage when suddenly, there's a policy [*you are*] expected to be in at this time? Or you're expected? I think that's when they will stick to policy.' (P8)

Challenges in maintaining fairness were also noted, with P6 stating:

'Just listen to the reasoning because I could also understand the fact that if you allow it for one person, you have to allow it for the rest, because it will not be fair if I'm the only one in the department that has got that arrangement.' (P6)

Additionally, P5 acknowledged:

'... dependent on the industry that you're in, and the job that you're in, not every role can be considered for the job.' (P5)

Lastly, P11 mentioned:

'I haven't seen one. But for me, I would assume it's just your work ethic. And, you know, we still have some managers who still have favourites. So maybe that could be that, you know, you're not part of the favourites. But I haven't seen one. But clearly, work ethics should be top of the list.' (P11)

Theme 6: Refusal and its effects on morale, commitment, retention and the work environment

The theme of refusal and its impact on employee morale, commitment and the work environment reveals significant consequences when requests for i-deals are denied. Participants highlighted how such refusals can lead to dissatisfaction and negatively affect the overall work atmosphere.

Participant P11 observed:

'They look for other opportunities outside of the organisation. And, you know, the unhappiness then continues, and then it

becomes, you know, it has a rippling effect on other employees also, because they have nothing positive to say about the leadership.' (P11)

Similarly, P4 noted:

'Normally employees, they don't leave because of the company; they leave because of their managers.' (P4)

The shift in working norms because of COVID-19 was also mentioned by P9, who stated:

'COVID-19 has changed how we work. Remote work is now a major drawcard for job seekers. If someone can't work remotely, they may start looking for new opportunities that allow them to do so.' (P9)

This sentiment was reinforced by P9, who further remarked:

'Employees often prioritise their own convenience over the company's needs when their proposals are rejected or department strategies are announced. This can lead to grievances being raised in public forums, creating a negative work environment.' (P9)

P6 described the broader effects of refusals, noting:

'So, I would say in most instances, very negative, not only with the manager but also with the organisation. ... engagement surveys, you will get that people will be negative towards that survey; they take it personally. If I take something very personally, I will be negative against my whole organisation. So it will definitely impact.' (P6)

This effect on commitment was further supported by P4, who stated:

'Refusals have a detrimental effect on employee commitment. This is often accompanied by decreased job satisfaction and lowered motivation. It can influence the overall work environment negatively.' (P4)

P8 described a more disengaged response, stating:

'Yeah, I think then they just do the bare minimum ... And also, in terms of engagement in the team. They will just be disgruntled and not really a part of the team. So literally just do what I'm asked to do. But also, if it's over and above my job description, I might not do it.' (P8)

P12 highlighted the perception of unfairness, noting:

'The refusal to adjust one employee's salary created a perception of favouritism, affecting morale and commitment among other employees.' (P12)

Finally, P5 emphasised the importance of clear policies, stating:

'... there is a negative impact because the situation was probably not handled correctly. That is why it's very important to have supporting policies or procedures to govern that request and why it would be accepted or rejected ... So I think it's dependent on how you deal with those situations. And, again, like how you manage that feedback ... it needs to be governed; the criteria needs to be there to justify why you would say no to an employee.' (P5)

Meanwhile, P3 recognised the potential for misunderstandings, commenting:

'[That is] a tough one. Right? So, if yes, because if you personalise it, you won't be satisfied, right, you will definitely not be motivated ... There will be a group of people that will still be able to understand that the decision taken has nothing to do with personal emotions and all of that; it's real business.' (P3)

Theme 7: Organisational responses and improvements

The theme of organisational responses to i-deals encompasses the steps taken by organisations to manage and improve the handling of individualised work arrangements. This includes how organisations address requests, provide feedback and adapt their strategies.

Participant P8 noted that:

'The organisation primarily manages i-deals at the individual or team level. However, after refusals, they provide guidance to employees on areas that require improvement. It demonstrates the organisation's commitment to addressing individualised needs and fostering a better understanding of i-deals.' (P8)

This approach reflects the organisation's effort to support employees even when specific requests cannot be accommodated.

P12 highlighted the need for broader organisational adjustments, stating, 'Organisations must realign structures and strategies to address i-deals issues. The impact is individual and extends to the broader organisational framework' (P12). This suggests that managing i-deals effectively requires changes that go beyond individual cases and affect the overall organisational setup.

P5 discussed the importance of structured responses, observing:

'I think so; obviously, this is if there is a negative impact because the situation was probably not handled correctly. So I think it's dependent on how you deal with those situations. And, again, like how you manage that feedback. And it also needs to can't be sort of thumb stuck; it needs to be governed or the criteria needs to be there to justify why you would say no to an employee.' (P5)

This highlights the necessity of having clear criteria and procedures to manage i-deal requests and refusals effectively.

Lastly, P6 noted improvements in organisational communication and transparency, stating:

'Our organisation has improved a lot with better communication and transparency. The vision and mission are clear now, and many platforms are available for us to voice our concerns. The HR roundtable is one such platform.' (P6)

This reflects the positive changes in how the organisation engages with employees and addresses their concerns.

Discussion

The investigation into the negotiation and influence of i-deals within a technology organisation has shed light on the significant repercussions of successful and unsuccessful i-deal negotiations on individual employee experiences and broader organisational relationships. This study highlights the popularity of personalised work arrangements such as flexible working hours, remote work options and hybrid work models (Gagné et al., 2022). The research findings support the existing literature highlighting the importance of i-deals (Bal, 2017; Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2018) and identifying the factors that influence an employee's customisation of their work which is crucial to ensure successful and beneficial arrangements for both the employee and the organisation (Rousseau, 2015; Yang, 2020). The findings from the study highlight the complex nature of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) (Dhanpat & Legoabe, 2022), particularly in how these deals influence employee experiences and organisational dynamics. The themes emerging from the research reveal critical insights into the negotiation processes, the factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful negotiations, and the consequent impacts on employees' job satisfaction, motivation and overall organisational commitment.

Theme 1: Nature and types of i-deals negotiated

The study identifies several key types of i-deals commonly negotiated within the organisational context, including work flexibility, workload adjustments and salary adjustments. These findings align with existing literature, which indicates that i-deals are typically customised work arrangements tailored to meet individual employee needs (Anand & Rofcanin, 2022a; Hornung, 2018), often leading to enhanced work engagement (Ngobeni & Dhanpat, 2022) and performance (Dhanpat & Legoabe, 2022). I-deals, when granted, can give employees more flexibility in work schedules, helping them balance work and private lives and fostering more favourable attitudes towards work (Kelly et al., 2020). The findings highlight the growing importance of workplace flexibility and the need for organisations to adapt to the changing needs and preferences of employees. This perspective aligns with Smite et al. (2022), who argue that flexibility has become a decisive factor in contemporary employment decisions. Task-related i-deal negotiations are role-making processes in which supervisors and employees negotiate adjustments to job content and alter roles (Hornung et al., 2014). Such role readjustments introduce uncertainty and often require further investments from both parties. For instance, supervisors may provide employees with time and resources to fulfil new job tasks (Morf et al., 2019). Maltarich et al. (2017) suggest that financial i-deals may enhance individual performance for recipients, particularly in pay-for-performance settings.

Theme 2: Initiation and negotiation of unique work arrangements

Successful negotiation of i-deals appears to hinge on several factors, including alignment with modern working norms,

effective communication and mutual trust between employees and managers. Trust and open communication are well-documented in the literature as critical components for successful i-deal implementation (De Winne et al., 2024; Simosi et al., 2023). The findings suggest that when trust and open communication are present, employees are more likely to secure favourable i-deals (De Winne et al., 2024). Additionally, the adaptability of organisational policies to accommodate modern working conditions reflects a progressive approach to managing the evolving expectations of the workforce. According to Simosi et al. (2021), i-deals can be distinguished by comparing individual and co-worker arrangements and by examining variability within groups, both in actual and perceived terms. These findings highlight the diverse nature of i-deal negotiations within organisations, showcasing individual and team-oriented approaches and the organisation's flexibility to meet unique employee needs and preferences. In this context, HR departments are advised to develop clear guidelines for managers when considering employees' requests for individual deals (Laulié et al., 2021). Such guidelines ensure that managers are better aligned with the organisation's strategic goals and objectives (Van Der Heijden et al., 2021). It is common for employees to initiate the i-deal negotiation process. Findings indicate that employees often take the proactive step of initiating discussions with their line managers to express a desire for flexible working arrangements or other specific needs. This proactive approach allows employees to negotiate better deals that align with their personal and professional goals (Afacan Findikli et al., 2022). The success of these negotiations often depends on the relationship between an employee and their manager.

Negotiations can take the form of verbal agreements or written documentation, depending on the context. Both employees and line managers actively participate in organising and negotiating i-deals (Guerrero & Bentein, 2015). For example, an employee negotiating an i-deal to relocate for family reasons, or a team negotiating for a day to work remotely, illustrates how organisations accommodate specific requests and employee preferences. This employee-driven approach in i-deal negotiations enables employees to secure terms that meet their personal and professional interests (Anand & Rofcanin, 2022a).

Theme 3: Factors contributing to successful negotiation

The granting of i-deals often deviates from standard policies, relying primarily on transparent communication, trust and performance for effectiveness. Successful i-deal negotiations depend on honesty, dedication and open-minded management, with standardised processes ensuring fairness. Typically, high-performing employees receive i-deals as rewards, reflecting organisations' adaptability to meet personalised employee needs within a constantly evolving work landscape (Perera & Li, 2022).

According to Vidyarthi et al. (2016), employees who customise their work arrangements (i-deals) are more successful when they maintain honest and open communication with their employer. This is particularly important for remote or non-traditional work arrangements. Although these arrangements may not always align with standard organisational policies, adaptability and trust emerge as essential themes, underscoring the importance of transparent communication in supporting the effectiveness of these unique arrangements. Research further supports this notion; Anand and Rofcanin (2022a) suggest that transparent communication with the entire team fosters a supportive climate that facilitates the successful institutionalisation of i-deals.

When negotiating individualised deals or unique arrangements, it is essential to apply objective performance criteria. Effective communication, trust and performance are critical to ensuring a fair and successful negotiation process. By prioritising these elements, negotiators can achieve their goals transparently and equitably (Meuser & Cao, 2022). The negotiation process also requires recognising that employees may need different strategies or specific attributes to succeed. Based on the findings, the successful negotiation of i-deals relies on several key factors, with organisations adapting policies to align with evolving work trends. This fosters a mutually beneficial relationship where both employees and employers have their needs met (Rousseau et al., 2006). Transparent communication, supported by trust and performance, forms the foundation of effective negotiations, while a standardised, fair evaluation process ensures fairness and prevents discrimination (Anand & Rofcanin, 2022a). Furthermore, managerial empathy plays a crucial role in moderating negotiations. Managers who consider reasonable requests and adhere to a fair process increase the likelihood of successful outcomes (Kelly et al., 2020). By offering i-deals to high-performing employees, organisations recognise the value these individuals contribute. Collectively, these elements contribute to successful i-deal negotiations, fostering a dynamic, adaptable and mutually beneficial work environment.

Theme 4: Granted i-deals and impact on job satisfaction, motivation and work-life balance

The findings indicate the implications of i-deals on job satisfaction, motivation and work-life balance, particularly through introducing flexible working hours. Participants expressed gratitude for the organisation's support, which significantly bolsters job satisfaction and commitment. Additionally, managers are highly attuned to the happiness and work-life balance of employees benefiting from i-deals, as the outcomes, driven by social support, impact overall employee well-being and performance (Wasti et al., 2022).

I-deals positively impact employees' work-life balance, motivation and job satisfaction. Flexible working hours improve work-life balance, and receiving i-deals is positively related to employees' job satisfaction and affective

commitment (Van Der Heijden et al., 2021). The provision of i-deals can greatly affect an employee's perception of support from their employer. By helping employees achieve a better balance between their work and personal lives, i-deals can lead to increased job satisfaction and motivation. One common feature of i-deals is flexible working hours, which can have a significant impact on improving work-life balance (Vidyarathi et al., 2022). This arrangement allows employees to dedicate more time to personal activities.

The approval of i-deals signifies the organisation's confidence in its employees and its readiness to make compromises, potentially augmenting job satisfaction and personal growth. Research supports this notion, as managers are closely affected by the i-deal recipient's happiness and their ability to maintain a work-life balance (Afacan Findikli et al., 2022; Liao et al., 2016). The approval of i-deals significantly enhances employees' job satisfaction, motivation and work-life balance. This aligns with the broader understanding that i-deals, when successfully implemented, serve as a mechanism for aligning organisational objectives with individual employee needs (Hornung et al., 2014; Van Der Heijden et al., 2021), thereby fostering a more engaged and motivated workforce (Ngobeni & Dhanpat, 2022). The participants' positive experiences with granted i-deals emphasise the importance of organisational support in achieving a better balance between professional and personal life, increasingly recognised as a critical determinant of employee well-being and performance.

Theme 5: Denied i-deals arrangements and reasons for refusal

Findings revealed that budget constraints were a significant factor impeding i-deal negotiations, often leading to denied requests because of financial limitations. The discretion of individual managers also played a crucial role, with their decision-making authority impacting outcomes (Laulié et al., 2021). This highlights the need for organisations to evaluate available resources, policies and contextual factors to support more favourable i-deal outcomes (Fulmer et al., 2021).

The findings show how line managers communicate decisions when refusing an employee's i-deal request. Managers frequently rely on company policies to diplomatically convey refusals, especially when requests exceed established boundaries (Sharma et al., 2022). This reliance on policy frameworks indicates their role in providing standardised justifications for refusals. For instance, an organisation's decision to decline a salary adjustment because of financial limitations illustrates how budget constraints can impede granting i-deals, affecting the negotiation process.

Managers' decision-making authority can either facilitate or hinder negotiations (Simosi et al., 2021), highlighting the importance of assessing resources and policies to ensure smoother i-deal negotiations and more favourable outcomes. Findings suggest that typical communication strategies used

by line managers to decline i-deal requests, showing how decisions are framed diplomatically by citing organisational policies. When requests are deemed outside policy limits, managers emphasise job requirements, such as the need for physical presence, reflecting the flexibility in handling requests through formal and informal channels. This adjustment to changing work habits may require organisations to modify policies, potentially reducing employee-employer tensions when employees disagree with these changes.

There are differing views on the most effective approach to communicating refusals. Some participants advocate for an empathetic approach involving active listening, while others note that insufficient managerial support can lead to strained relationships and dissatisfaction. These perspectives highlight the importance of clearly and effectively communicating refusals to maintain positive employee-employer dynamics (Perera & Li, 2022).

Managers often rely on policy-based explanations to justify refusal, integrating organisational rules into everyday work behaviours, as described by Liu and Wang (2012). Findings reflect the diplomacy used in refusals, especially for requests outside policy limits, suggesting that organisations rely on policy frameworks to provide standardised rationales (Fulmer et al., 2021; Montag-Smit & Smit, 2021).

Refusals often relate to job roles that require physical presence, emphasising the role of job requirements and policies in determining i-deal feasibility. Subjective factors, like perceived favouritism, can also influence decision-making. This view aligns with Anand and Vidyarathi (2015), who argue that i-deals can be perceived as favouritism, potentially undermining workgroup justice and discouraging i-deal recognition.

According to Rofcanin et al. (2017), managers' emotions in i-deal negotiations significantly impact the relationship between negotiation success and obtaining i-deals. Positive attitudes strengthen this association, while negative attitudes weaken it. Denial of i-deals has been observed to negatively impact employee morale, commitment and the work environment (Liao et al., 2016). Literature suggests that refusing i-deals, especially when perceived as unfair, can lead to dissatisfaction, reduced motivation and turnover intentions (Caliskan et al., 2019; Ngobeni & Dhanpat, 2022). The findings also highlight perceived fairness concerns in i-deal negotiations, with participants citing favouritism and inconsistent policy application (Marescaus et al., 2019).

Theme 6: Refusal and its effects on morale, commitment, retention and the work environment

The quality of the relationship between employees and their managers is critical for employee retention (Liao et al., 2017). In an ever-changing work environment, employees

increasingly seek external job opportunities, often because of unfulfilled requests and dissatisfaction, which can create a negative atmosphere. This sense of unmet needs may lead employees to provide limited positive feedback regarding the organisation's leadership (Ng, 2017).

Findings indicate that when employees' requests are declined, their negative reactions often extend beyond the specific issue, creating a spillover effect that impacts both the manager and the broader organisation. Employees may perceive such rejections personally, generating negative views about the organisation, which can ultimately affect employee engagement surveys and overall morale (Morf et al., 2019). Declined requests are thus seen to negatively influence employees' attitudes and the work environment (Ng, 2017).

I-deal refusals can erode job satisfaction, reduce motivation and weaken employees' commitment to their roles and the organisation, impacting overall performance and well-being in the workplace (Van Der Heijden et al., 2021). Many research participants noted that if an i-deal is declined, it often diminishes job satisfaction, motivation and commitment. Findings further suggest that rejecting i-deals can lead to disengagement and reduced productivity, resulting in lower levels of organisational commitment.

To mitigate the adverse effects of declined i-deals, it is crucial for organisations to handle these situations carefully, with clear policies and criteria that support a positive working environment conducive to staff retention. Simosi et al. (2021) support this, noting that i-deals are increasingly part of the HR toolkit, with HR consultants advising their use to attract, motivate and retain employees. Previously, such arrangements were often reserved for high-status employees.

Theme 7: Organisational responses and improvements

It is important to note that i-deals are typically addressed on an individual basis, though they may occasionally involve team considerations. This underscores the need for organisations to accommodate employees' unique needs effectively.

Managing i-deals requires a holistic organisational approach, as refusals can have complex emotional consequences, largely shaped by how they are communicated. While initial refusals may harm employee morale, clear communication and exploring alternative options can help mitigate these adverse effects. The concept of an i-deal policy – where organisations allow managers the discretion to negotiate personalised employment terms – is well-supported in the literature (Fulmer et al., 2021). Effective post-refusal communication and transparent mechanisms for employees to voice concerns are essential in reducing the negative impact of rejected i-deals. These findings highlight the critical role of i-deals in shaping employee attitudes, engagement and organisational success, underscoring the importance of

developing policies that address the diverse needs of employees (Fulmer et al., 2021).

Limitations and recommendations

As with any research, this study has its limitations (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The findings are specific to the technology-based organisation in Johannesburg and should not be generalised. Therefore, they must be interpreted with caution. Research on i-deals within the South African context is limited (see Dhanpat, 2017; Dhanpat & Legoabe, 2022; Ngobeni & Dhanpat, 2022), indicating the need for further scholarly investigation. Future research could adopt a quantitative or mixed methods approach. The current study focussed on a telecommunication organisation, with a focus on technology. Expanding the study to include a variety of technology-based organisations with different sizes, structures and cultures could provide more generalisable insights.

Implications for practice

The findings of this study offer insights for developing effective employee retention strategies through workplace arrangements using i-deals. The study suggests that employees should actively engage in negotiating idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) that align with their personal goals, motives and career aspirations. Engaging in i-deal negotiations is considered a proactive approach that can lead to tailored work arrangements, thereby fostering job satisfaction and engagement. Human resource professionals play a significant role in facilitating this process. It is recommended that HR create a structured process for i-deals negotiations that are fair, transparent and equitable. By providing guidelines and training for both managers and employees on how to effectively negotiate these i-deals, HR can ensure that the deals are beneficial to both the organisation and the individual. Human resource practitioners can enhance policies and practices, improve negotiating skills and offer alternatives for rejected i-deals to boost employee morale and job satisfaction. Based on the findings, HR should consider tailoring policies to accommodate the growing demand for i-deals within technology-based organisations. This may include more flexible work arrangements, personalised development plans and customisable benefit packages, all of which can enhance employee retention and satisfaction.

There is a need for ICT organisations to invest in clear i-deal policies that encourage open communication, provide clear performance evaluation standards and establish trust-building negotiations to promote a healthy work environment. To ensure that i-deals are effectively implemented and contribute to positive outcomes, HR should regularly monitor and evaluate the impact of these customised arrangements on both individual performance and organisational goals. Feedback mechanisms should be established to make necessary adjustments and maintain a fair and inclusive workplace.

Conclusion

The study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of i-deals within a technology organisation, highlighting the critical factors that influence their negotiation and implementation. The findings suggest the importance of trust, communication and policy adaptability in fostering successful i-deal arrangements, while also cautioning against the potential negative consequences of declined i-deals. These insights contribute to the growing body of literature on i-deals within the South African context and offer practical implications for organisations seeking to navigate the complexities of customised work arrangements in an increasingly dynamic work environment.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, N.D., upon reasonable request.

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