



## Establishing idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) as a precursor to work role performance



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### ABSTRACT

The study determines the relationship between i-deals and work role performance amongst employees across industries in the South African context. The study follows a quantitative approach, and a cross-sectional design was adopted. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was chosen. An online questionnaire was used. A total of 231 employees from various industries in Johannesburg, South Africa, were included in the sample. Data were collected using pre-established instruments, and SPSS was used to analyse data. Reliability analysis was used to determine the psychometric qualities of the instruments. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis were chosen to examine the data against the research objectives. This paper highlights that (i) a relationship between i-deals and work role performance exist (ii) task and work responsibility, schedule flexibility, and career development predict work role performance (iii). The study adds to the literature on i-deals and their relationship to work role performance in a South African context. The results contribute to the literature on i-deals and their relationship with work role performance within a South African context.

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## Introduction

Employees face increased pressure from their employers. At the same time, organisations experience challenges in maintaining a desirable level of employee performance (Tauba & Kimwolo, 2021). As such, it is left to management to motivate employees, which is hinged upon manager credibility, ensuring employees have a strategic fit for the organisation (Lees & Dhanpat, 2021). In doing so, motivated employees participate in proactive behaviours and take the initiative by actively shaping their work and employment conditions (Bindl & Parker, 2011). It is known that i-deals have similarities with functional proactive behaviour (Parker & Collins, 2010), and Hornung, Glaser and Rousseau (2018) suggest that such behaviours contribute to organisational goals and involve employees engaging in active performance. This has sparked much interest in customising work through idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) (Rousseau, 2015).

Even though research on i-deals continues (Anand et al, 2018; Liao et al, 2017), there is a lack of empirical research on i-deals within the South African context (Dhanpat, 2017). The current study establishes the relationship between i-deals and work role performance. In establishing a relationship with performance, previous research has provided insight into established relationships of idiosyncratic deals on innovative performance (Huang & Chen, 2021), employee performance (Tauba & Kimwolo, 2021), and work performance (Rofcanin et al, 2021).

Recently studies on i-deals placed emphasis on negotiating (Bal, 2017; Simosi, Rousseau, & Weingart, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to understand that i-deals are essential, as it explains why employees introduce changes in their work environment and how they affect their performance. The study aims to establish the relationship between i-deals and work role performance and determine

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which i-deals (task and work responsibilities, schedule flexibility, location flexibility, financial flexibility, career development) best predict work role performance? The paper is organised as follows: the subsequent section provides insight into the study's theoretical background, preceded by the literature review. Subsequently, the research method adopted is detailed. The last section of the article details the findings and discussion and concludes with future research recommendations and implications.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical and Conceptual Background

#### Theoretical Underpinning of I-Deals

The influential work done by Rousseau (2001) brought much attention to the concept of i-deals. Research on i-deals includes antecedents, implications, and the negotiations of i-deals (Hornung, Rousseau & Glaser, 2008; Tauba & Kimwolo, 2021). How i-deals are operationalised in the workplace can be best understood from the theory of social exchange, which outlines the dynamics that underlie the exchange of resources between two or more parties. SET maintains that reciprocity in the relationship is retained in terms of benefits and contribution, even if it is not needed (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017). Notably, i-deals have beneficial implications for organisations, mainly when discussing fairness issues (Hornung, Rousseau, Glaser, Angerer & Weigl, 2010).

In implementing this concept, employees are likely to feel encouraged to reciprocate through positive work behaviour such as commitment, enhanced work performance, and satisfaction (Rousseau, 2005). The reciprocation of employees is likely to differ depending on with whom they negotiate (Liao, Wayne, Linden, & Meuser, 2017).

I-deals are *individually negotiated*. A central feature of i-deals is that individual employee directly negotiates with their employer regarding some aspects of their employment that are different from other negotiated arrangements of the individual's co-worker (Rousseau, Tomprou, & Simosi, 2016). I-deals can be characterised as *heterogeneous*, i-deals are specifically granted to individuals different from other employees in a similar position or same workgroup (Çaliskan & Torun, 2019; Rousseau et al, 2016). I-deals can *benefit both employees and employers*. I-deals aim to serve the interests of both the employee and employer (Hornung, Glaser, & Rousseau, 2018; Laulić, Tekleab, & Lee, 2019; Rousseau et al, 2016; Taser, Rofcanin, Las Heras, & Bosch, 2021). The successful result of i-deals involves a bargaining process whereby an employee requests and receives special working conditions (Rosen et al, 2013). Employers expect to attract and retain employees with valuable skills (Bal & Rousseau, 2015; Guerrero et al. 2014; Ho & Tekleab, 2016). I-deals can only be regarded as i-deals if they benefit both parties. I-deals also *vary in scope*. Individuals' special arrangements vary from their co-workers (Bal & Rousseau, 2015). One employee may negotiate for certain aspects of their employment, while other employees may negotiate to change the working conditions from task responsibilities, flexible working hours, compensation, and location (Rosen et al. 2013).

According to Rosen et al. (2013), four forms of i-deals are routinely negotiated and are outlined below: Task and Work Responsibility are based on changes made to job content through negotiation to make employee task activities meaningful. Due to such arrangements, employees seek duties or responsibilities aligned to their personal interests and capabilities. These arrangements may be achieved by altering, reducing, or expanding the scope of work activities without requesting permission from the manager (Rousseau et al, 2016). Schedule Flexibility can be seen as one of the contemporary workplace's key concepts (Bal & Jansen, 2016). Organisations are trying to adapt to constantly changing economic and social conditions (Angelici & Profeta, 2020), while employees' approaches to their jobs and careers are expected to be more flexible. In addition, employees are increasingly seeking more flexibility in balancing their work with their personal lives and developing their careers (Bal & Jansen, 2016). Location Flexibility refers to restructuring scheduled work to allow for customised working hours to meet individual needs. In this type of i-deal, employers change when employees can perform their tasks and duties (Bal & Jansen, 2016; Rosen et al, 2013). Such changes could be developed by making changes to employees' schedules. Financial responsibility refers to the arrangement made concerning an employee's compensation structure. This type of i-deal is based on the changes made to employee's remuneration package, such as arrangements concerning employee's salaries, bonuses, and incentives (Oostrom et al, 2016).

Employers grant i-deals to employees to expect that they will improve employees' performance (Rosen et al, 2013). Customised work arrangements lead to individuals' tendency to participate in social comparisons between co-workers, proximal, similar, and instrumental. It has also been found that granted i-deals relative to others' arrangements in the workplace are more likely to motivate employees to perform beyond their prescribed duties, perform better and in ways that will benefit organisations (Vidyarthi et al, 2016).

Work roles are defined as "the total set of performance responsibilities associated with one's employment" (Otero-Neira, et al, 2016, p.863). Work role performance is regarded as the behaviours or actions relevant to the organisation's objective. Three notions accompany this definition: (a) The definition of work performance should be based on behaviour rather than results, (b) work performance involves behaviour that is appropriate to the organisation's objectives, and (c) work performance is multi-dimensional. Therefore, performance is described as what an individual can observe and measure in terms of individual skills and contribution level (Otero-Neira., et al, 2016). Griffin, Parker & Mason (2007) further defined work role performance as a measure of individual

behaviour assessed in any job and work environment. Work performance recognises that individual employees take on and enact multiple organisational roles, such as team member, and organisational member, and individual role (Hauschildt & Konradt, 2012).

Work role performance is a cross-classification of the three kinds of behaviour: proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity, in which role behaviour can contribute to the effectiveness of an individual, team, and organisation (Griffin et al, 2007). Each type of role behaviour can contribute to effectiveness within organisations at different levels. The level at which behaviour can contribute to effectiveness is regarded as the direction of work role behaviour (Neal, Yeo, Koy, & Xia, 2012). The current study will focus on performance at the individual level. In terms of the current study, work role behaviour at the individual level refers to the behaviour of an individual's tasks (Griffin et al, 2007). This concerns behaviour that contributes to individual effectiveness, namely: Individual Task Proficiency describes behaviour that can be formalised without being embedded in a social context. These behaviours represent the degree to which an individual meets the recognised standards and specification of the individual's role (Griffin et al, 2007). It describes individual behaviour that reflects the degree to which an employee meets the expected requirements of the job. Organisational loyalty and civic virtue are similar concepts (Park & Park, 2019). Individual Task Adaptivity reflects the degree to which an individual can cope, respond to, and support changes that might occur. Adaptive performance relates to an individual's capacity to alter their behaviour to satisfy the requirements of a new setting. For instance, a nurse who accepts and copes well with a new medication administration procedure shows adaptability to individual assignments (Griffin et al, 2007). *Individual Task Proactivity* behaviour refers to how an employee can become innovative and future-directed to change their role and the way the organisation operates (Neal et al, 2012; Otero-Neira et al, 2016). A nurse, for instance, could develop a safer way to administer medication or scan the environment to identify possibilities for better care delivery (Griffin et al, 2007). Proactive individuals may suggest or change their way of carrying out their key tasks, i.e., initiate better ways to carry out the core task (Otero-Neira et al, 2016).

The following hypothesis were developed:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between i-deals and work role performance

Hypothesis 2: i-deals predict work role performance

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research approach**

This study adopted a positivist research strategy. A quantitative research approach was adopted. A quantitative study is often regarded as an empirical approach to social science, and its strength lies in its predictive quality (Pluye, Grad, Levine, & Nicolau, 2009). The study is cross-sectional in nature.

### **Population, sampling procedure and sample size**

The sample comprised employees at all levels from various industries in South Africa. The online questionnaire was distributed and resulted in 242 responses, of which 231 were usable. The online survey was distributed on LinkedIn and social media, indicating that individuals need to be employed as a criterion. The study used a non-probability sampling technique, and convenience sampling was adopted. After receiving the completed questionnaires, the responses were electronically recorded and sent for statistical analysis. The sample consisted of 145 female respondents (62.5%) and 85 male respondents (36.6%). Most of the respondents were 35. Regarding the race of the respondents, the majority of the sample was Black (69.4%), followed by White (15.9%), Coloured 7.3%, and Indian (6.5%). The majority of the respondents' level of employment was a general worker (28.9%), followed by middle management (26.7%).

### **Ethical consideration**

Ethical standards were applied to the study, and ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management at the University of Johannesburg. Several steps were taken to maintain ethical conduct in the study. An explanatory statement was included before the respondent completed the questionnaire on the first page of the online survey. Participants were made aware of the purpose and nature of the study. Contact details of the researcher were provided if respondents had any questions related to the study.

Furthermore, the informed consent stated that involvement in the study was voluntary; participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without reprisal. The survey was to be completed anonymously. It was also indicated that the survey responses would be kept confidential.

### **Measuring instrument**

The following measuring instruments were used to collect data:

*The I-Deals Measurement Scale.* The scale was developed by Rosen et al. (2013) and measured personalised working arrangements negotiated by employees. The scale consists of 16 items. All items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The instrument measures the participants' i-deals and an example of an item includes "I have successfully asked for extra responsibilities that take advantage of the skills that I bring to the job".

*Work role Performance Measurement Scale.* The measure was developed by Griffin et al, (2007) and measures work behaviour that contributes to employees’ effectiveness. The original scale consists of 27 items. The instrument measures the participants’ behaviour along with three factors: individual core job, teamwork, and organisation. The current study looked at the individual level and thus used the nine items of the scale that measure individual performance. All items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very little*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

Data was collected by pre-established measures. It was circulated in hard copy to employees in various industries in South Africa. The survey was also made available online through a secure URL link (through Google Forms). The link circulated to working South Africans via e-mail and different social networking sites (LinkedIn and Facebook). An informed consent stated that involvement in the study was voluntary; participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without reprisal. The survey was to be completed anonymously. It was also indicated that the survey responses would be kept confidential and would not be shared with any other parties not involved in the study.

**Statistical analysis**

The study used the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS; Version 27) program to analyse data. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The dimensions of the I-Deals Scale were subjected to PCA. Upon inspection of the correlation matrix, the coefficients had a value greater than .30. The KMO value for I-Deals overall was .88, exceeding the recommended value of .60. Hence, it is acknowledged that Bartlett’s test of sphericity reached statistical significance and therefore supported the factorability of the correlation mix. PCA revealed five factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 67.65% of the variance. According to Pallant (2011), factor loading above .40 is strong. Cartell’s (1966) scree plot confirmed a five-factor solution..Work Role Performance was subjected to PCA. Upon inspection of the correlation matrix, the coefficients had a value of greater than .30. The KMO value achieved for the Work Role Performance overall was .82, exceeding the recommended value of .60. Hence, it is acknowledged that Bartlett’s test of sphericity reached statistical significance and therefore supported the factorability of the correlation mix. PCA revealed one factor with an eigenvalue exceeding 1, explaining 52.64% of the variance. Pallant (2011) states that a factor loading above .40 is strong. Catell’s (1966) scree plot confirmed a one-factor solution. Therefore, a one-factor solution was accepted.

**Empirical Analysis and Findings**

The results of the study are presented through the use of descriptive and inferential statistics.

**Descriptive statistics**

Table 1 shows that employees negotiated their tasks and work responsibilities (mean = 3.50). This was followed by uncertain schedule flexibility (mean = 3.24) and career development (mean =3.04). The other dimensions of i-deals scored low mean values, indicating a lack of negotiation. Work role performance scored a mean value of 4.17, suggesting employees can remain proactive and adaptive in their performance. Table 1 also provides insight into the measure’s psychometric properties by assessing the Cronbach’s coefficient  $\alpha$ . All dimensions achieved  $\alpha$  above .70, which indicates internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics of i-deals and work role performance

Dimension	Mean	Skewness	Kurtosis	Standard Deviation	Variance	alpha
Task and Work Responsibility	3.50	-.69	.56	.87	.76	.85
Schedule Flexibility	3.24	-.17	-.89	1.03	1.06	.75
Location flexibility	2.79	-.17	-.87	1.20	1.44	.88
Financial Flexibility	2.54	.63	-.62	.98	.96	.81
Career Development	3.04	-.31	-.56	1.02	1.05	.80
Work Role Performance	4.17	-1.58	7.01	.64	.41	.83

**Table 2:** Pearson Correlation for I-Deals and Work Role Performance

Factor	1	2	3	4	5
<b>1. WRP</b>	—	.400	.157	.219	.274
<b>2. TWR</b>	.400	—	.570	.475	.503
<b>3. SF</b>	.157	.570	—	.490	.480
<b>4. LF</b>	.219	.475	.490	—	.379
<b>5. FI</b>	.274	.503	.480	.379	—

Note. WRP = Work Role Performance; TWR = Task and Work Responsibility; SF = Schedule Flexibility; LF = Location Flexibility; FI = Financial Incentives

Table 2 provides the Pearson correlation analyses for the dimensions of i-deals and work role performance. A relationship does exist between the independent variable (i-deals) and the dependent variable (Work Role Performance). A correlation of 1.0 implies a perfect relationship between the variables irrespective of the direction of the relationship (Pallant, 2011). The closer the  $r$  value is to 1.0, the more likely employees are to agree with the i-Deal factors, and the more likely employees are to learn new skills that help them adapt to changes in their core task.

All variables have a positive relationship with work role performance, which suggests that the more that employees are likely to agree with a particular i-deals factor, the more their performance will increase. The  $r$  value ranged from .157 to .400,  $p < 0.0001$ . Therefore, hypothesis one is accepted.

#### **Multiple Regression of i deals on work role performance**

A multiple regression analysis is used to predict a single dependent continuous variable from one or more independent variables. A multiple regression analysis was calculated to predict which i-deals (task and work responsibility, schedule flexibility, location flexibility, financial flexibility, and career development) was the best predictor of work role performance. A significant retention equation was found,  $R^2 = 0.183$ ,  $F(4,223) = 12.458$ ,  $p < 0.000$ . Table 3 indicates that the model explained 42.7% ( $R^2$ ) of the total variance in the dependent variable (Work Role Performance).

Table 3 indicates how the variables contributed to the dependent variable's prediction (Work Role Performance). Task and Work Responsibility and Schedule Flexibility produced significant results and could be interpreted as the best predictors of Work Role Performance. Task and Work Responsibility had the most significant beta coefficient (0.400); this suggests that Task and Work Responsibility contributes more to Work Role Performance than Schedule Flexibility (-0.161), which negatively contributed toward Work Role Performance. The other dimensions (Location Flexibility and Financial Flexibility) could not be interpreted, as they did not produce significant results. Therefore, hypothesis two is partially accepted.

**Table 3:** Multiple Regression analysis of i-deals on work role performance

Retention factors	Standardised Coefficients	<i>T</i>	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for <i>B</i>		<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> -square	Adjusted <i>R</i> -square	Std. error of the estimate	Collinearity statistics	
	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound					Tolerance	VIF
<b>1</b> (Constant)		16.521	0.000	2.648	3.365	0.434	0.188	0.185	0.496		
Task and Work Responsibility	0.400	5.004	0.000	0.196	0.450					0.574	1.741
Schedule Flexibility	-0.161	-2.026	0.044	-0.215	-0.003					0.580	1.723
Location Flexibility	0.060	0.825	0.410	-0.048	0.116					0.695	1.440
Financial Incentives	0.127	1.736	1.736	-0.012	0.187					0.683	1.464

## **Discussion**

The study provided insights on i-deals (task and work responsibility, schedule flexibility, financial flexibility, location flexibility, and career development) related to work role performance. It also established the relationship between i-deals and work role performance.

An average mean value of 3.50 (maximum = 5) was obtained for Task and Work Responsibilities. This indicates that respondents partially agreed on negotiating customised arrangements for their tasks and work responsibilities. Employees make personalised agreements on job content and their work responsibilities (Wang et al, 2018). Such negotiations allow for practices that promote career development (Yang, 2020). Employees who negotiate on task i-deals are likely to experience job satisfaction (Rousseau et al, 2016) and are associated with positive outcomes such as personal initiative (Liu et al, 2013) and meaningful work (Hornung et al, 2009).

An average mean value of 3.24 (maximum = 5) was obtained. This indicates that respondents partially agreed on being able to negotiate for schedule flexibility. Employees make customised agreements about when they can perform their tasks and duties to meet their individual needs. Granting such arrangements can lead to employees' ability to coordinate and integrate work and private life closely related to work-life balance (Wang, Wang, Yao, Hsu, & Lawler, 2019).

An average mean value of 2.79 (maximum = 5) was obtained. This indicates that employees have not negotiated with their supervisors to conduct their duties outside their regular workstation. A lack of opportunity to negotiate for performing work outside employees' workstations can negatively influence employees' attitudes towards the organisation, which will negatively influence employees' performance. Being able to provide employees with the opportunity to perform their work in a different location will assist employees in changing their work conditions and setting expectations that are viewed as valuable to the organisation (Engelen et al, 2019).

An average mean value of 2.54 (maximum = 5) was obtained. This indicates that employees had also not negotiated for arrangements about their compensation structure. Financial arrangements develop through a tit-for-tat transaction and are normal for the short term. It is also indicated that such i-deals provide little involvement between the employee and their employer (Liao et al, 2017).

An average mean value of 3.04 (maximum = 5) was obtained for Career Development. This indicates that employees were neutral on negotiating for opportunities that might secure their career development. It has been found that lack of career growth is likely to negatively influence employees' negotiating for opportunities to grow within the organisation (Van Dyk, Coetzee, & Takawira, 2013).

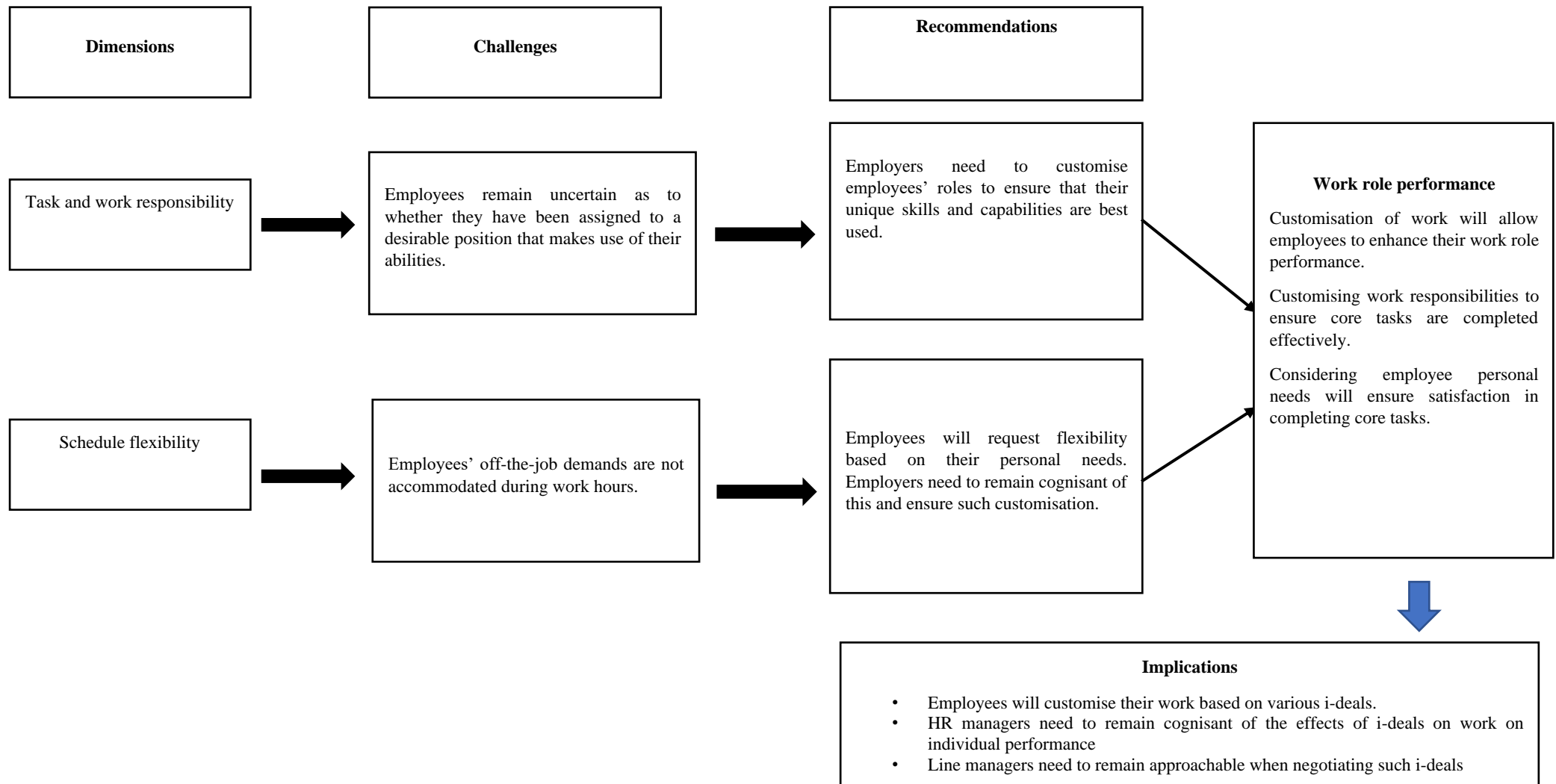
The study aimed to determine if i-deals (task and work responsibility, schedule flexibility, financial flexibility, location flexibility, and career development) predict work role performance. Task and Work Responsibility was the best predictor of Work Role Performance, as it had the highest beta value of .400. Tasks and responsibilities are seen to have a favourable impact on employees' innovative performance (Ho & Kong, 2015). This can help employees tap into their resources, assist them in overcoming challenges in the innovation process, and increase their performance. The availability of resources assist employees to have a strategic connection with the organisation (De Braine & Dhanpat, 2019). Overall, task and work responsibility are granted to assist employees in achieving personal career goals and growth and motivating employees to negotiate to work fewer hours to attend to personal needs. Schedule Flexibility obtained a negative score of  $-.161$ , meaning less flexibility in the workplace will decrease employees' work role performance. The aim of employees' requesting schedule flexibility is to assist them in performing effectively in both their private and work lives, which is achieved through negotiating working arrangements (Kelly, Rofcanin, Las Hera, Ogbannaya, Marescaux & Bosch, 2020). Schedule flexibility allows employees to minimise stress, reduce travelling costs, and meet their flexibility needs. Employees who are granted work flexibility are considered well-motivated, organised, disciplined, self-sufficient, and good communicators. Hence, employees can deliver high performance for organisations willing to grant such arrangements to retain high performers (Austin-Egole, Iheriohanma & Nwokorie, 2020). Location flexibility did not predict work role performance, although it has been argued that location flexibility allows employees to carry out their work duties in places that are far from office, which can be at home or other places where employees can find inspiration (Austin-Egole et al, 2020). Financial flexibility did not predict work role performance, as it would be expected that employee's performance would increase once employees have negotiated for financial flexibility. The reason for this is because financial flexibility is related to pay; it can be argued that such i-deals might not have a strong relationship with employability. The other reason that can be argued is that financial arrangements are based on reflecting an employee's value towards the current organisation which might not be transferred to another organisation (Rousseau et al, 2016).

Personalised working arrangements have flourished over the past decade (Bal & Rousseau, 2015). Proactive behaviour involves self-initiated and future-focused actions to change oneself or the situation (Rofcanin et al, 2016). Employees are now engaging in work activities beyond their job descriptions and proactively shaping and personalising their tasks and duties, work conditions, and employment. I-deals with an HR strategy that may fit individual employees' professional development

needs while also assisting employees in balancing work and personal life (Wang et al, 2018). I-deals can also be regarded as a strategy for employees to introduce proactive changes based on their motivations, such as goals or intentions (Lin, Law, & Zhou, 2017). They provide employees with different individualised work arrangements (Rofcanin et al, 2020).

This study makes recommendations for customised work arrangements through i-deals and their implications for employees and their work role performance. These are presented in Figure 1.





**Figure 1:** An I-Deal View for Work Role Performance

## Conclusion

Research is never void of limitations. The study used a wide spread of employees from working samples, and hence, it cannot be applied to a particular industry. The results should be evaluated with caution. An item was erroneously excluded from the Work Role Performance Scale. Self-administered questionnaires were utilised to collect data and can increase of social desirability, by which respondents will answer in a manner perceived as socially acceptable but not entirely reflective of one's reality. This creates a mismatch between respondents' true perceptions of reality and how those perceptions are presented to researchers (Bergen & Labonte, 2020).

Future researchers can use the findings and recommendations from this study to enhance their research into how workers might engage in a broader range of proactive behaviour. To understand the broader role and implications of this particular work arrangement between the employer and employee, there needs to be more understanding of these work arrangements related to work role performance, specifically at an individual level. This study can further assist researchers and practitioners in dealing with i-deals and understanding how these customised work arrangements affect individual performance, specifically within the South African context, where research on i-deals is scant. More insight is required. The current research focused on i-deals using i-deal measures developed by Rosen et al. (2013). The recommended measures by Rofcanin et al, (2016) were also considered. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the nature of work. Employees have been encouraged to work from home to minimise the spread of the virus. Changes in the nature of work have resulted in customised work arrangements. It is recommended that future research establish such arrangements through qualitative insights. Lastly, it is recommended that a longitudinal study should be conducted to determine if there is fluctuation in the relationship between i-deals and work role performance over a period of time.

The study adds value to the scant research on i-deals in a South African context. The research has provided valuable information about the relationship between i-deals and work role performance. I-deals are a relatively new concept that has grown in popularity over the previous decade. The study established that the hypothesis i-deals predict work role performance was partially accepted as only task and work responsibility, schedule flexibility and career development predicted work role performance. Based on the study; it can be noted that employees negotiate with their employers for specific arrangements to introduce new ways to improve and enhance their individual performance.

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