

Demands in flexible, boundaryless work systems – Do i-deals help or are they part of the problem? (Commentary on Glaser, Hornung & Höge)

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In their article *Organizational Tensions, Paradoxes, and Contradictory Demands in Flexible Work Systems*, Glaser, Hornung and Höge present an interesting approach linking organizational tensions and job demands for employees. This is done by applying paradox theory, role theory, and action regulation theory. After outlining organizational tensions and paradoxes, the authors describe typical strategies to resolve organizational tensions and paradoxes referring to Putnam, Myers and Galliard (2014). Further, they discuss the potential effects of the specific strategies on employees and supervisors. In a next step, the article focuses on a major organizational paradox, that is, between increasing work performance and maintaining employee health. Referring to this paradox, the authors develop a link between organizational tensions and work design based on action regulation theory. Finally, the authors propose the concept of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) as a mean to reconcile or reduce conflicting interests regarding health and performance goals.

One of the article's major strengths is the attempt to introduce theoretical approaches rarely referred to in work psychology, to link them, and to integrate them in a unique theoretical framework. This helps to link different levels of economic and organizational phenomena that are usually examined separately. In particular, I appreciated the description of different organizational strategies (selection, separation, integration) and their specific effects on employees and supervisors. The reference on concepts such as ambidextrous leadership is very useful. In particular, the questioning of these rather accepted approaches within the developed theoretical framework is very interesting. The same can be said for the emphasized double-edged effect of proactive employee behaviors (p. 25) and the general linkage between organization theory and work design approaches – in particular Moldaschl's action-regulation-based model of stressful

demands as contradictions between goals, rules, and resources. To summarize, there is a variety of promising approaches in this article that broaden the view on aspects of organizational design and job design, and that contribute to further theory development. However, when reading the paper, I had some concerns and questions that I would like to address in the following. Rather than as criticism, I understand the outlined concerns as a starting point for further discussion.

Throughout the paper, the starting point of flexible work system is – in my view – slightly underdeveloped. The paper starts by describing some aspects of the development of new forms of work, but it remains unclear, how the described paradoxes relate to the issue (and the specific aspects) of flexibility. I suggest that phenomena such as working *anytime / anywhere* play a different role in this process than *changing structures* or *flexible employment*. In my view, it is much more fruitful to spell out the specific phenomena, rather than using the more general (buzz) word of *flexibility*. For example, I believe that the authors could outline in much more detail, that concrete features of flexible work such as *indirect control* and *delegation* – but not flexibility itself – may transfer organizational paradoxes. On page 24 the authors discuss with reference to the autonomy-control paradox more specifically how the different features of flexibility (delegation of responsibility, anytime / anywhere) interact to create risks for employee health. I would have liked to read more of this. The paper could also be supplemented by references to the works of Peters (2014) and Krause, Dorsemagen, Stadlinger and Baeriswyl (2012) on indirect control. These works provide additional useful descriptions and explanations on how new forms of management and indirect control may lead to *self-endangering work behaviors* (Dettmers et al., 2016), to which the authors also refer to as *self-hazardous work behavior*.

While I share and appreciate the elaborated and theoretically rooted multilevel approach to describe the relationships between organizational tensions and individual job demands of workers, I am not fully convinced by the proposed solution of i-deals. In my view, the paper takes the risk of most (work) psychological approaches to overemphasize individual solutions and to neglect structural and collective solutions. The authors remain a bit vague about who profits most from i-deals (supervisor or employee). In my view, it can be shown that for both groups, i-deals can create as much chances as risks. For supervisors, the explicit organizational strategic decision to refrain from general regulations and to foster i-deals can not only be a chance, but also a permanent source of role conflict and role ambiguity. With regard to employees, the authors acknowledge on page 27 that personalized work arrangements may imply the risk of increasing interpersonal tensions among employees, in particular, if organizational settings emphasize competition for limited resources, rather than cooperation and solidarity among employees. The authors mention briefly that „in analogy to processes of collective bargaining“ individual agreements between supervisors and subordinates can be a means to cope with organizational tensions. Instead of „in analogy“ I would suggest „in addition“, meaning that collective agreements should always be the basis of personalized work arrangements. Proposing the concept of i-deals isolated from other structural or collective approaches risks to ignore the existing power differences between supervisors and subordinates and the preference of excellent workers against average or poorer performers when arranging i-deals.

To take this argument further, I would like to put forward the potentially provoking hypothesis that i-deals are not the solution to cope with demands that are imposed on workers in flexible and boundaryless work systems, but rather are part of the phenomenon of boundaryless work itself. Regarding a higher level, one of the developments in western industrial countries since the 1990s is increasing deregulation and the decrease of worker organization in trade unions and work councils, in particular, in the service sector (Marsden, 2015). Particularly, high skilled workers in the service sector increasingly renounced collective action and collective agreements against the promises of individualized solutions and advantages, which of course not always hold true in the long-term. The relationship between collective agreements (e.g., at the level of worker councils and top management) and individualized personal agreements such as i-deals, is rather complicated. Future research should examine, if i-deals act more as a substitute of or a supplement to collective agreements. In other words: Do i-deals lead to or are they a consequence of reduced collective agreements and general regulations?

I completely agree with the proposed advantages of idiosyncratic deals to adapt work demands to the individual requirements and preferences of workers, which results in various positive effects that have been demonstrated in many studies. However, I would suggest that we should investigate this concept much more in relation to collective agreements, institutional participation, and general work organization. The divergent developments of working conditions in different industries have shown that collective agreements within a framework of organized employees is needed more than ever, in particular, against the background of new forms of flexible work. To conclude, i-deals should always be a supplement and not a substitute of collective deals.

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