

# Individual antecedents of i-deals: the role of self-efficacy, networking abilities and perceived employability

## Antecedentes individuales de los *i-deals*: el rol de la autoeficacia, las habilidades de *networking* y la empleabilidad percibida

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to examine the direct and indirect effects of self-efficacy, networking abilities and perceived employability on the negotiation of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) between individual workers and their employers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In total, 213 managerial professionals – a non-random sample – working for different small and medium-sized enterprises from several industries in Argentina were surveyed online. Hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling.

**Findings** – The results revealed that self-efficacy and networking abilities exert an indirect effect on i-deal negotiation through perceived employability. Those individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy or greater networking abilities tend to develop more positive perceptions of their employability and, therefore, are more prompted to negotiate i-deals with their employers.

**Research limitations/implications** – This research sheds light on the dynamics underlying the relationship of employees' characteristics and skills with i-deal negotiation. Besides, it provides further



evidence that individual bargaining has become widespread in professional employment contexts, above and beyond the collective labor agreements that prevail in most Latin American countries.

**Practical implications** – Self-efficacy and networking abilities can be relevant individual factors in understanding i-deal negotiation, given that both shape employees' perceptions of employability.

**Originality/value** – Although the impact of employee characteristics and skills on the idiosyncratic negotiation of employment terms has been broadly recognized, scholars have called for further exploration of the mechanisms underlying this relationship. By simultaneously investigating the impact of self-efficacy, networking abilities and perceived employability on i-deals, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how an individual's personal characteristics and skills facilitate the idiosyncratic negotiation of employment terms.

**Keywords** Idiosyncratic deals, Self-efficacy, Networking abilities, Perceived employability, I-deals

**Paper type** Research paper

## Resumen

**Objetivo** – Este estudio examina los efectos directos e indirectos de la autoeficacia, las habilidades de *networking* y la empleabilidad percibida en la negociación de acuerdos idiosincráticos (*i-deals*) entre los empleados, en forma individual, y sus empleadores.

**Diseño/metodología/enfoque** – 213 gerentes profesionales – muestra no aleatoria – que trabajaban en PyMEs pertenecientes a diversas industrias en Argentina completaron encuestas de modo online. Las hipótesis fueron testeadas utilizando modelos de ecuaciones estructurales.

**Resultados** – Los resultados revelaron que la autoeficacia y las habilidades de *networking* ejercen un efecto indirecto en la negociación de *i-deals* a través de la empleabilidad percibida. Aquellos individuos con niveles más altos de autoeficacia o mayores habilidades de *networking* tienden a desarrollar percepciones más positivas de su empleabilidad y, por lo tanto, están más dispuestos a negociar *i-deals* con sus empleadores.

**Implicancias para la investigación** – Esta investigación contribuye a dilucidar la dinámica que subyace la relación entre las características y habilidades de los empleados y la negociación de *i-deals*. Asimismo, provee una evidencia adicional de que la negociación individual se ha extendido en contextos de empleo de tipo profesional, más allá de las negociaciones colectivas de trabajo que prevalecen en la mayoría de los países de América Latina.

**Implicancias prácticas** – La autoeficacia y las habilidades de *networking* pueden ser factores individuales relevantes para comprender la negociación de *i-deals*, siendo que ambos moldean la propia percepción de empleabilidad del individuo.

**Originalidad/valor** – Aunque el impacto de las características y habilidades de los empleados en la negociación idiosincrática de los términos de empleo ha sido ampliamente reconocido en estudios anteriores, se ha planteado la necesidad de continuar examinando los mecanismos subyacentes a dicha relación. Al investigar simultáneamente el impacto de la autoeficacia, las habilidades de *networking* y la empleabilidad percibida en la negociación de *i-deals*, este estudio provee una comprensión más completa de cómo las características y habilidades personales del individuo facilitan la negociación idiosincrática de los términos de empleo.

**Palabras clave** Contratos idiosincráticos, Autoeficacia, Habilidades de *networking*, Empleabilidad percibida, I-deals

**Tipo de artículo** artículo de investigación

## Introduction

The employment relationship has undergone a profound transformation during the past few decades. As the labor market has become increasingly heterogeneous and competitive, most organizations have confronted the so-called “war for talent” and thus adopted a new set of HR strategies in their efforts to attract, motivate and retain their core employees (Cappelli, 2000, 2008). At the same time, highly qualified workers have become more aware of the differential value they provide to the organizations in terms of knowledge, skills or network relations (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) and thus started to play a more active role in negotiating specific working conditions that best fit their personal needs or preferences (e.g. career advancement, job content, flexible work hours, additional pay; Rousseau, 2005). As a result of this transformation, organizations have experienced a downturn in their standardized human

resources (HR) practices and, simultaneously, a growing presence of idiosyncratic deals, or i-deals, understood as those personalized arrangements that each employee obtains after a process of individual bargaining with their current or potential employer (Rousseau, 2005; Rousseau *et al.*, 2006).

The factors leading to an effective negotiation of i-deals have received a great deal of attention in the recent organizational literature (for extensive reviews, see Hornung, 2018; Hornung and Rousseau, 2017; Liao *et al.*, 2016). This body of research has revealed that some employees are more effective than others in negotiating i-deals, based on their personal characteristics or skills. Indeed, employee's personal initiative, operationalized also as proactive behavior, is the most consistent and well-established antecedent of i-deal negotiation (e.g. Hornung *et al.*, 2008, 2009; Tang and Hornung, 2015). Likewise, social skills, including both negotiation and political abilities, are also essential for obtaining i-deals (e.g. Lee and Hui, 2011; Rosen *et al.*, 2013).

The organizational literature has suggested other personal characteristics or skills of the employee as potential antecedents of i-deals, which include, for instance, emotional intelligence (Huang and Niu, 2009), psychological capital (Knering *et al.*, 2019) or self-efficacy (Caliskan and Torun, 2019). However, the empirical evidence here has been much more incipient and elusive, which explains the recurring call among organizational scholars for new research that examines the impact of employees' personal characteristics or skills on i-deal negotiation, as well as the mechanisms through which those individual-level factors interact to explain how employees bargain idiosyncratic employment terms for themselves (Liao *et al.*, 2016; Shaughnessy, 2012).

The present study responds to this call for examining the individual-level factors that affect i-deal negotiation by simultaneously investigating the effects of self-efficacy and networking abilities. Self-efficacy reflects the level of confidence that an individual has in his/her own capabilities to achieve successful outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Networking abilities refer to whether an individual understands his/her social context and develops instrumental ties or connections with key actors in the organization (Bacharach and Lawler, 1998). Individuals who possess higher levels of self-efficacy and greater networking abilities can be in a better position to effectively negotiate i-deals, particularly in qualified occupational contexts such as the managerial profession studied here (cf. Dabos and Rivero, 2012; Rousseau, 2005; Rousseau *et al.*, 2006). In the context of the managerial profession, educational programs not only focus on the acquisition of technical expertise but also provide resources that strengthen an individual's self-efficacy (Cruz and Wood, 2015) and networking abilities (Sturges *et al.*, 2003).

Moreover, this study sheds light on the mechanisms through which self-efficacy and networking abilities, as individual-level factors, affect idiosyncratic negotiation, by examining whether perceived employability plays a mediating role in the proposed relationships. Perceived employability reflects an individual's own evaluation about her job prospects both inside and outside the organization. As such, perceived employability is likely to be enhanced in cases where an individual possesses a broader repertoire of resources and abilities, which in turn might increase the likelihood of achieving an effective i-deal negotiation. By using a structural equation modeling approach, this research contributes to overcome the limitations of previous studies that analyzed the effects of specific factors in isolation or omitted the underlying mechanism through which individual-level factors relate to i-deal negotiation. It also contributes by providing new evidence of how pervasive the idiosyncratic negotiation of employment terms can be among professional workers, even in a Latin American country such as Argentina, where the collective bargaining of labor agreements has had a prevailing and long-standing tradition (Cardoso and Gindin, 2009).

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## Theoretical framework and hypothesis development

### *Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals)*

According to Rousseau (2005), i-deals can be defined as voluntary, personalized, non-standardized and mutually beneficial agreements that individuals negotiate with their current or potential employer on certain aspects of the employment relationship. Specifically, this author argued that i-deals have four distinct attributes: (1) they are negotiated individually by employees with their current or future employer; (2) they represent heterogeneous employment conditions, as they involve benefits that differ from the standardized conditions received by other employees; (3) they generate mutual benefits for both parties, the organization (which becomes more capable to retain its valuable human resources) and the employee (who can obtain working conditions that are better aligned with her own needs or preferences); and (4) they vary in scope, depending on the number of personalized and idiosyncratic conditions included in the negotiation.

Previous research has suggested that there can be different types of i-deals depending on the content of the negotiation (Hornung *et al.*, 2014; Rosen *et al.*, 2013; Rousseau, 2005). Job content i-deals are those arrangements that involve adjusting the employee's tasks to make them more attractive or appealing for the individual. Career development i-deals refer to those agreements that include greater opportunities for career advancement and professional visibility in the organization. Flexibility i-deals are those arrangements that involve either time flexibility (e.g. vacations or sabbatical periods), or location flexibility, i.e. the possibility of performing specific work roles outside the organization (e.g. home office). Finally, financial incentive i-deals are those agreements that involve an increase in either monetary compensations or other benefits that reduce the cost of living for the employee.

Two recent reviews of the literature have also pointed out that employees can be in a better position to negotiate i-deals depending on their personal characteristics or skills (Hornung, 2018; Liao *et al.*, 2016). To provide an example, the effective negotiation of i-deals may be determined by the proactive behavior of the employee who initiates an individual bargaining. Indeed, several studies conducted in a variety of research settings have confirmed that an employee's personal initiative, operationalized also as proactive behavior, is one of the most consistent and well-established antecedent of i-deal negotiation (e.g. Hornung *et al.*, 2008, 2009; Tang and Hornung, 2015). Previous research has also examined the effects of other characteristics or skills of the employee, including emotional intelligence (Huang *et al.*, 2009), psychological capital (Knering *et al.*, 2019), self-efficacy (Caliskan and Torun, 2019) or social skills (Lee and Hui, 2011). However, the evidence in this research stream has been much more elusive, as the number of empirical studies examining the impact of individual-level factors on i-deal negotiation is still limited. The present study contributes to this body of research by investigating the role of employee's self-efficacy and networking abilities, two factors that can be relevant to explain i-deal negotiation particularly in professional employment contexts (Rousseau, 2005; Rousseau *et al.*, 2006).

### *Self-efficacy and effective negotiation of i-deals*

Generalized self-efficacy, i.e. an individual's level of confidence in her ability to overcome difficult life situations, plays a significant role in shaping individuals' perceptions, motivations and behaviors (Bandura, 2009). Although the relationship between self-efficacy and i-deal negotiation has been limitedly explored, a few studies have reported a positive relationship between both constructs (e.g. Caliskan and Torun, 2019; Liao, 2014). Indeed, those individuals with higher self-efficacy levels tend to think more strategically and be more confident about their capabilities to achieve successful outcomes, whereas those with lower self-efficacy tend to think more erratically and distrust their personal competences (Bandura, 2009). The individual characteristics associated with higher-levels of self-efficacy, i.e. being agentic, proactive, self-organized, self-reflecting and self-regulating (Bandura, 1997,

2001), are the cornerstone of the social cognitive theory as they enable individuals to exert influence over the course of events.

Drawing on the principles of the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), this paper argues that self-efficacy is a vital personal resource that affects every area of human endeavor (also see Bandura, 2000), including the negotiation of i-deals. In this regard, the COR theory proposes that those individuals who possess a greater pool of personal resources are also more capable of resource gain, and thus are more likely to obtain, retain, protect and nurture workplace resources that either have value on their own right or act as means to attain valuable goals or ends (Hobfoll, 2002). From this perspective, self-efficacy may act as a personal resource that plays a fundamental role in the processes involved in creating an i-deal, not only in the “prework” phase, by shaping workers’ beliefs regarding what is negotiable and by laying the groundwork for idiosyncratic agreements, but also in the “negotiation” phase, by affecting the set of request tactics and problem-solving strategies used by workers to reach a feasible arrangement with the employer (Rousseau, 2005, pp. 112–113). It follows that highly self-efficacious individuals, who are more confident about their capabilities to achieve successful outcomes, are also more likely to effectively engage in the negotiation of i-deals with their employer (Liao, 2014). Drawing on this rationale, the present study hypothesizes that:

*H1.* Self-efficacy will be positively related to the effective negotiation of i-deals.

#### *Networking abilities and effective negotiation of i-deals*

Different scholars have suggested that individuals’ networking abilities may be important in i-deal negotiation (Liao *et al.*, 2016; Rousseau, 2005). Empirical studies have also confirmed that social skills, which include the successful development of political abilities, exert positive effects on the negotiation of i-deals (Lee and Hui, 2011), particularly on those related to job content and job flexibility (Rosen *et al.*, 2013). Networking abilities, in particular, can enhance an individual’s set of social or political skills (conceptualized as the capacity to adjust one’s behavior to different situational demands and to effectively influence the responses of others), at least, through two mechanisms (Ferris *et al.*, 2001; Treadway *et al.*, 2005). First, individuals who have greater networking abilities are usually better at building stronger ties with key actors in the organizations. Second, individuals who are better connected also tend to interpret the social context more accurately and to identify the moments and forms of expressing their requests more appropriately. Although these scholars did not explicitly frame their studies within the COR theory, the present study proposes that networking abilities may act as a personal resource that provides individuals with the ability to gain new resources or, in the case of this paper in particular, to build social relationships with key actors or role constituents in the organization (see Hobfoll and Lilly, 1993). Thus, workers with greater networking abilities are more likely to develop a better “understanding of why an i-deal would be legitimate and how to make it more broadly beneficial . . . [Relationship building can also] help to remove obstacles, offset negative reaction, and . . . solicit support for an i-deal” (Rousseau, 2005, pp. 118–119). It follows that those individuals with greater networking abilities are more likely to engage in the negotiation of i-deals with their employer. Thus, based on the principles of the COR theory, as well as on the theoretical and empirical evidence presented in this section, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H2.* Networking abilities will be positively related to the effective negotiation of i-deals.

#### *The mediating role of perceived employability*

Although previous studies have revealed that employees’ characteristics or skills may exert a significant influence on the idiosyncratic negotiation of employment terms, research has yet to elucidate the mechanisms through which that influence occurs (Liao *et al.*, 2016). The present study argues that the effects of self-efficacy and networking abilities on i-deal

negotiation may be mediated by perceived employability, i.e. employees' perceptions of their own employability (Forrier *et al.*, 2015; Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). In this sense, perceived employability represents a psychosocial construction that emerges from the evaluation that individuals make about their own job prospects both inside the organization (i.e. perceived internal employability) and outside the organization (i.e. perceived external employability; De Cuyper *et al.*, 2011).

In this regard, it is worth noting that the COR theory may offer a useful theoretical framework for understanding the mediating role of perceived employability in the relationships among self-efficacy, networking ability and i-deal negotiation. From this perspective, individuals' resources not only get lost as they face job demands and perform their work roles but also can be replenished and fostered over time if used appropriately (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). In this sense, the COR theory proposes that those individuals who possess more resources are also more capable of gaining new resources, as resource acquisition increases not only the individual's resource pool in the short term but also their likelihood of future resource gain (Salanova *et al.*, 2010). Thus, this process explains why resources rarely exist in isolation, but rather tend to aggregate in "resource caravans" by triggering "positive gain spirals" (Hobfoll, 2011). Consistently with the COR theory, the present study proposes that those employees with a greater pool of personal resources, in terms of both self-efficacy and networking abilities, will develop more positive perceptions of their own employability, and thus be more likely to acquire future job resources through the effective negotiation of i-deals.

From a more empirical point of view, previous research has demonstrated that generalized self-efficacy is usually associated with more positive self-constructions of perceived employability (Eades and Iles, 1998). Indeed, since self-efficacious individuals are confident in their capabilities to achieve successful outcomes (Bandura, 2009), they are also more likely to feel that their competences and skills are highly valued, both inside and outside the organization, and thus experience higher levels of employability (Ngo *et al.*, 2017). Likewise, other research has suggested that employees with greater networking abilities not only perform better than others (Bacharach and Lawler, 1998), but also have access to central actors, information and job opportunities (Pfeffer, 1992). This differential access to highly valued social capital for relationship building, in turn, may increase these individuals' career prospects (Colman, 2018; Fugate *et al.*, 2004) and their perceived levels of employability (Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014).

By feeling more employable, these individuals – who are high in self-efficacy and networking abilities – may also experience greater bargaining power and thus be more prompted to negotiate i-deals with their employers (Rousseau *et al.*, 2006, 2009). Indeed, individuals who perceive themselves as more employable based on their past performance, potential contributions or distinctive competences – that are valued in the labor market – often pose an obligation on the employer to reciprocate with special recognition or treatment as means to attract or retain those valuable individuals (Rousseau, 2005; Rousseau *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, workers who develop more positive perceptions of their own employability and job prospects in both the internal and external labor market are more likely to effectively engage in the negotiation of i-deals (as a form of special recognition) with the employer. Based on the evidence presented above, the present study hypothesizes that:

*H3.* Perceived employability will mediate the relationship between self-efficacy and networking abilities (as individual factors), and effective negotiation of i-deals.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

This study was conducted in a non-random sample of 213 professionals who performed managerial roles in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Argentina. Managerial

roles refer to the executive or administrative tasks that professionals perform at different organizational levels from the functional areas to the middle or top management. The final sample of managerial professionals consisted of 119 individuals with an undergraduate degree in business administration (bachelor) and 94 graduates of a master of business administration (MBA). All of them attained their degrees from the same public university, which is one of the most recognized higher education institutions nationwide, based on the accreditation standards it has achieved. The mean age of participants was 34.68 ( $SD = 7.75$ ), and their average tenure in the organization was 7.21 ( $SD = 7.00$ ). About 54% of the participants were women. The sample comprised managerial professionals who worked in a wide range of SMEs that operated in different markets and industries (e.g. agroindustry, banking, construction, consulting, healthcare, manufacturing, software, science and technology, among others). Such a sample diversity has been highly recommended in previous research on i-deals (e.g. Guerrero *et al.*, 2016; Rousseau *et al.*, 2009). Finally, it is worth noting that the SMEs is one of the more dynamic segments of the Argentinian economy, particularly in terms of growth and innovation, accounting for about 70% of the formal private employment (Ministerio de Desarrollo Productivo, 2021).

### *Procedures*

Following the recommendations made by Churchill (1991), a pilot instrument was designed and then administered to a small non-random sample of managerial professionals and academics. The pilot test was conducted by the first author using personal interviews to better seize the respondents' first impressions and suggestions as they were completing the pilot instrument. After a process of subsequent refinement of the instrument, which included a re-check in consulting with respondents of the pilot test (Reynolds *et al.*, 1993), the final version of the questionnaire was sent by email to the actual participants, along with a description of the purpose of the study and an online consent form. To this end, two different distribution lists were created, given that the data sources were obtained from different organizational units. The Alumni Office of the Business Administration Department provided the email addresses of the professionals who had only a bachelor degree, whereas The Graduate School provided a list of those professionals who held an MBA degree. All subjects were ensured that their participation in the study was confidential. Although 281 individuals completed the survey, the responses from those who worked as independent professionals or entrepreneurs ( $n = 68$ ) were eliminated since those activities did not unfold within a conventional employment relationship and, thus, did not offer the chance of negotiating i-deals. The final sample consisted of 213 professionals who performed managerial roles.

### *Variables and instruments*

Since all of the scales used in this study were originally published in English, a translation procedure was performed in two stages (Brislin, 1980). First, two researchers who were native Spanish speakers and proficient in English independently translated each scale from English into Spanish. After comparing these two versions, the team reached consensus on the final Spanish version of the instrument. Furthermore, the other two researchers (who were also native Spanish speakers and proficient in English) independently translated the instrument from Spanish into English. Again, the two back-translations were compared and any discrepancy was solved through the consensus of all four team members.

*Effective negotiation of i-deals.* In general, the scales used in previous studies to assess the effective negotiation of i-deals have some limitations. For instance, most scales do not include all of the content types that can be negotiated by individuals (e.g. Hornung *et al.*, 2008; Liao, 2014). Other scales are too context specific, which means that they are excessively adapted to

the setting in which they have been validated (e.g. Rosen *et al.*, 2013). With these limitations in mind, an *ad hoc* scale was developed for the purpose of this study. It should be noted, however, that this scale was based on the different instruments that have been previously validated in the international literature on i-deals (e.g. Hornung *et al.*, 2008, 2014; Rosen *et al.*, 2013; Rousseau *et al.*, 2009) as well as on the incipient research conducted in Latin America on idiosyncratic employment agreements (Dabos and Rivero, 2012). The final scale comprised 16 items that examined the extent to which participants have negotiated specific content types with their current employer (Appendix). The internal consistency in this study was  $\alpha = 0.86$  for job content i-deals,  $\alpha = 0.88$  for developmental i-deals,  $\alpha = 0.87$  for flexibility i-deals and  $\alpha = 0.86$  for financial incentive i-deals.

*Self-efficacy.* Respondents' self-efficacy beliefs were assessed with seven items taken from the general self-efficacy scale (Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 1995). A sample item was "I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough." The internal consistency in this study was  $\alpha = 0.85$ .

*Networking abilities.* The networking ability sub-scale included in the political skills inventory (Treadway *et al.*, 2005) was used to examine participants' networking abilities. This sub-scale comprised six items (e.g. "I spend a lot of time at work developing connections with others"). The internal consistency in this study was  $\alpha = 0.89$ .

*Perceived employability.* Participants' perceived employability was measured using Rothwell and Arnold's (2007) scale. It consisted of 11 items (e.g. "Anyone with my level of skills and knowledge, and similar job and organizational experience, will be highly sought after by employers") that measured both internal and external aspects of employability. The internal consistency in this study was  $\alpha = 0.87$ .

The responses to the four scales were anchored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*totally*).

*Control variables.* Following Bernerth and Aguinis (2016), a literature review was conducted to identify the variables that could co-vary with the substantive variables. First, past literature has reported that *gender* may influence individuals' perceptions of their employability, suggesting that female employees may be more likely to perceive themselves as less employable (e.g. Qenani *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, *tenure* may increase employees' chances of negotiating i-deals with an employer, especially with their supervisors (Rosen *et al.*, 2013). In this sense, individuals with tenure are more likely to have more experience, competences and a better understanding of the organizational context, which may subsequently increase their chances of negotiating i-deals (Lee *et al.*, 2015; Rofcanin *et al.*, 2016). Finally, *MBA education* was included as a control variable since past research has suggested that those individuals with MBA education tend to develop higher levels of perceived employability, as they possess knowledge and skills that are highly valued in the management field (e.g. Cruz and Wood, 2015). In particular, this variable was examined by using information from an internal database and consisted of a dichotomous variable with two possible categories: participants with an MBA degree (i.e. MBA graduates) and those without an MBA degree (i.e. professionals with an undergraduate degree in business administration).

## Results

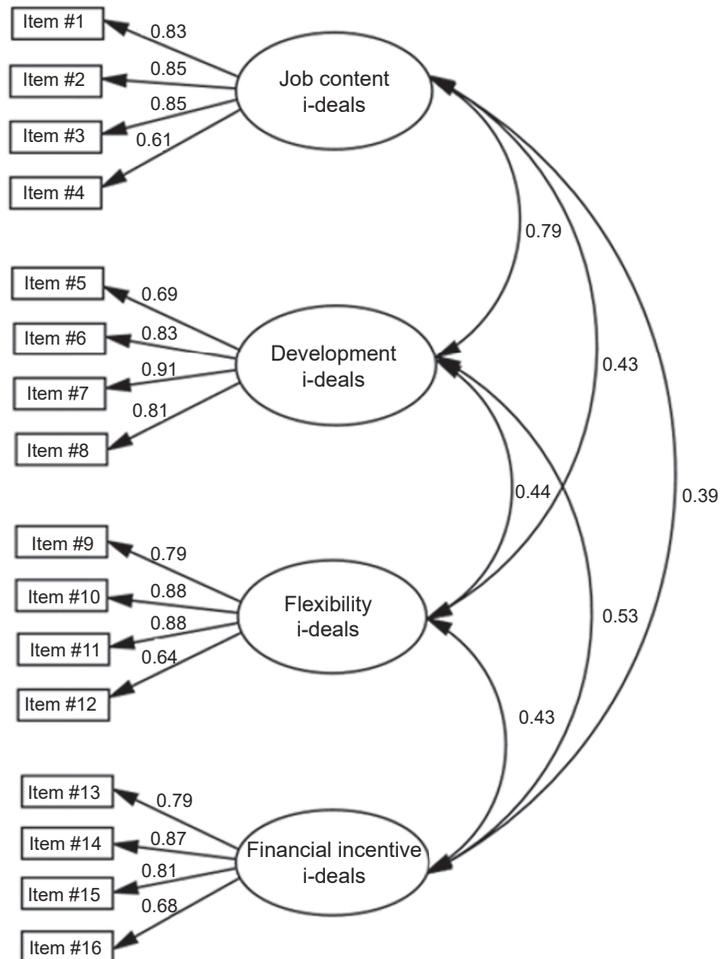
### *Preliminary analyses: validation of the effective negotiation of i-deals scale*

The psychometric properties of the i-deals scale were examined in terms of: (1) internal consistency, by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient; (2) dimensionality, by performing a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA); (3) convergent validity, by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE); and (4) discriminant validity, by comparing each dimension's AVE with its shared variance estimates.

CFA was conducted using a maximum likelihood estimation method. Drawing on previous findings, it was initially assumed that the 16 items of the scale would load into four

latent factors (i.e. job content, career development, flexibility and financial incentives, see Figure 1). To evaluate this model, several fit indices were calculated and compared, such as the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) statistic, the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). According to Byrne (2001), values of CFI, TLI or GFI  $\geq 0.90$  and of RMSEA  $\leq 0.08$  indicate a good fit.

The results of the CFA indicated that the four-factor model provided a satisfactory fit to the data (Model 1),  $\chi^2(213, 98) = 199.43, p < 0.01, GFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.07$ . However, two alternative models were also tested. First, since the covariance between the job content latent factor and the career development latent factor was found to be quite high (0.79), which has also been reported in previous research (e.g. Rosen *et al.*, 2013), Model 2 assumed that the four items representing job content i-deals and the four items



**Figure 1.**  
Dimensionality of the  
effective negotiation of  
i-deals scale

**Note(s):**  $N = 213$ . All standardized factor loadings and covariances are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level

representing career development i-deals would load into the same latent factor (i.e. three-factor model). Finally, and following Liao's (2014) approach, Model 3 proposed that the scale of i-deals would exhibit a unidimensional structure. The chi-square difference tests were used to compare the three models. As shown in Table 1, the four-factor model (Model 1) provided a significantly better fit to the data,  $\Delta\chi^2(213, 3) = 113.55, p < 0.01$  (Model 1 vs Model 2) and  $\Delta\chi^2(213, 6) = 732.99, p < 0.01$  (Model 1 vs Model 3).

The reliability (internal consistency) of the four sub-scales was examined by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Table 2). The results indicated that the internal consistency of the four sub-scales was satisfactory (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Further, each dimension's AVE was calculated to assess the convergent validity of the scale. The results revealed that the instrument exhibited an adequate convergent validity (Hair *et al.*, 2010), as the AVE of each of the four dimensions was the following: 0.63 (job content i-deals), 0.66 (developmental i-deals), 0.65 (flexibility i-deals) and 0.62 (financial incentive i-deals). Regarding the discriminant validity of the scale, each factor's AVE estimates were compared with their shared variance estimates (Table 2). The results indicated that the discriminant validity of the scale was satisfactory.

#### *Descriptive statistics and correlations*

Means, standard deviations and correlations among the variables of the study are presented in Table 2. As this table shows, the reported extent of the four types of i-deals was moderate, with mean scores ranging from 2.40 to 3.22. Given that the sample size of this study was rather small for testing the hypotheses via structural equation modeling, and that the correlations among the four dimensions of the i-deals scale were found to be moderate to high, a composite variable measuring the effective negotiation of i-deals was developed based on the average scores of the four content types. Hypothesized antecedents were found to be significantly correlated with the four types of i-deals and with the composite variable. Besides, self-efficacy and networking abilities displayed positive and statistically significant correlations with perceived employability.

To determine which variables should be included as control variables in the structural equation models, a series of bivariate tests was conducted. The effects of quantitative variables such as tenure were examined by calculating Pearson's correlation coefficient, whereas the effects of qualitative variables (such as gender or MBA education) were analyzed by conducting *t*-tests. The results showed that both gender and MBA education displayed significant associations with most of the variables of the study, suggesting that they should indeed be entered in the structural equation models as control variables. Regarding tenure, the findings indicated that it only displayed a significant correlation with financial incentive i-deals. Since, as it will be shown in the following sections of the manuscript, the four types of i-deals will not be included as separate observed variables, but rather as indicators of a single latent variable, the results did not provide enough empirical support to the inclusion of tenure as a control variable in the structural models. The results of the aforementioned tests are available from the first author upon request.

Model	Chi-square	df	CFI	GFI	TLI	RMSEA
I-deals (four-factor model)	199.43	98	0.95	0.90	0.94	0.07
I-deals (three-factor model)	312.96	101	0.90	0.82	0.88	0.10
I-deals (one-factor model)	932.42	104	0.61	0.58	0.55	0.19

**Note(s):** *N* = 213. df = degrees of freedom

**Table 1.**  
Factor structure of the effective negotiation of the i-deals scale

**Table 2.**  
Means, standard  
deviations, correlations  
and reliabilities

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Job content i-deals	3.22	0.96	<i>0.86</i>									
2. Developmental i-deals	2.92	1.06	0.70 [0.49]	<i>0.88</i>								
3. Flexibility i-deals	3.19	1.16	0.45 [0.20]	0.44 [0.19]	<i>0.87</i>							
4. Financial-incentive ideals	2.40	1.15	0.38 [0.14]	0.50 [0.25]	0.41 [0.17]	<i>0.86</i>						
5. I-deal (composite variable)	2.93	1.15	0.79 [0.62]	0.83 [0.69]	0.75 [0.56]	0.75 [0.56]	<i>0.91</i>					
6. Self-efficacy	3.96	0.55	0.23 [0.05]	0.30 [0.09]	0.15 [0.02]	0.11 [0.01]	0.25 [0.06]	<i>0.85</i>				
7. Networking abilities	3.33	0.83	0.28 [0.08]	0.33 [0.11]	0.03 [0.00]	0.18 [0.03]	0.26 [0.07]	0.36 [0.13]	<i>0.89</i>			
8. Employability	3.57	0.67	0.42 [0.18]	0.44 [0.19]	0.23 [0.05]	0.32 [0.10]	0.45 [0.20]	0.58 [0.33]	0.53 [0.28]	<i>0.87</i>		
9. Gender (male = 1)	0.46	0.50	0.11 [0.01]	0.12 [0.01]	0.08 [0.01]	0.12 [0.01]	0.14 [0.02]	0.22 [0.05]	0.19 [0.04]	0.14 [0.02]		
10. Education (MBA = 1)	0.44	0.50	0.16 [0.03]	0.18 [0.03]	0.11 [0.01]	-0.02 [0.00]	0.14 [0.02]	0.17 [0.03]	0.21 [0.04]	0.24 [0.06]	0.17 [0.03]	

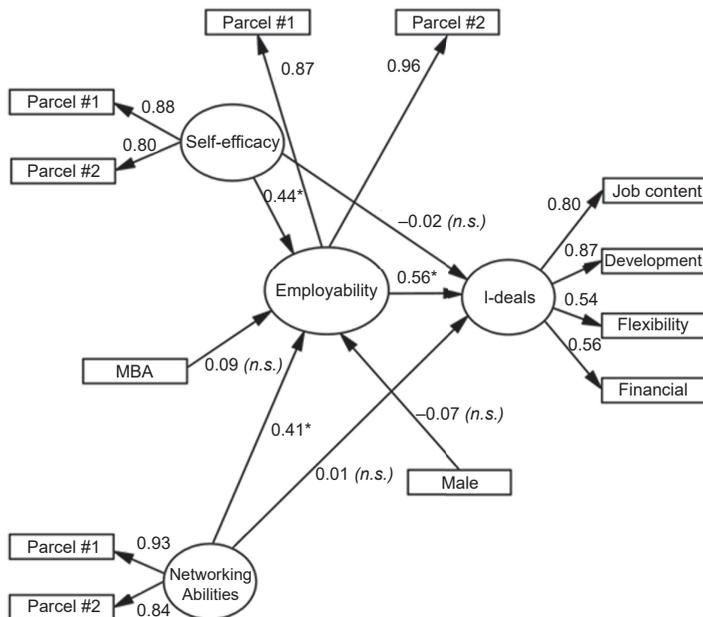
**Note(s):** *N* = 213. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard deviation. Correlations above 0.13 are statistically significant at the *p* < 0.05 level (two-tailed). Correlations above 0.17 are statistically significant at the *p* < 0.01 level. The internal consistency of each scale (Cronbach's alpha coefficient) is reported on the principal diagonal in italics. Shared variance estimates (squared correlations) are reported in brackets. The mean scores, standard deviations and correlations for the variables "gender" and "education" are provided for the purposes of the structural equation modeling analysis only. Since these variables are qualitative in nature, their respective descriptive statistics and correlations should be interpreted with caution

*Structural equation model*

A structural equation modeling analysis was performed in Amos (22) to test the hypotheses of the study (Weston and Gore Jr., 2006). The hypothesized model included two endogenous latent variables (i.e. perceived employability and effective negotiation of i-deals), two exogenous latent variables (i.e. self-efficacy and networking abilities) and two exogenous observed variables (i.e. MBA education and gender). Following a partial disaggregation approach, parcels of items were created for each latent variable (Hall et al., 1999). For instance, in the hypothesized model, the effective negotiation of i-deals latent variable was computed as the average scores of job content, career development, flexibility and financial incentives.

*Hypothesis testing*

The results of the structural equation modeling revealed that the hypothesized model provided an adequate fit to the data,  $\chi^2(213, 43) = 89.96, p < 0.01$ ; CFI = 0.96; GFI = 0.94; TLI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.07. As shown in Figure 2, the results showed that both self-efficacy and networking abilities affect the effective negotiation of i-deals indirectly, through individuals' perceptions of their employability. In this regard, it should be noted that the findings indicated a full mediation of perceived employability in the link from self-efficacy and networking abilities to i-deal negotiation, which provides full support to H3 but only partial support to H1 and H2 (since the direct effects are not significant). Overall, the results showed that those individuals who were highly self-efficacious, as well as those with better networking abilities, developed more positive evaluations of their career prospects and, in turn, were more prompted to engage in an effective negotiation of i-deals with their employers.



**Note(s):**  $N = 213$ . \* $p < 0.01$ , n.s. = not significant. All factor loadings are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level. Unobserved errors and covariances among the independent variables are not displayed in the figure for simplicity

**Figure 2.** Standardized estimates for the hypothesized model

To further test the effects of self-efficacy, networking abilities and perceived employability on i-deal negotiation, a bootstrap analysis using a maximum likelihood estimation method (1,000 bootstrapped samples) was performed (MacKinnon, 2008). As shown in Table 3, the results of the bootstrap analysis revealed that the indirect effect of self-efficacy on i-deal negotiation was significant (standardized estimate = 0.25,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $0.13 \leq 95\% \text{ B-CCI} \leq 0.44$ ). Likewise, the indirect effect of networking abilities on the negotiation of i-deals was also significant (standardized estimate = 0.23,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $0.13 \leq 95\% \text{ B-CCI} \leq 0.38$ ). Thus, these results provided support to the hypothesized mediation from self-efficacy and networking abilities to i-deal negotiation through perceptions of employability (see Cheung and Lau, 2008).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of individual-level factors as antecedents of i-deal negotiation. Specifically, the present research analyzed the effects of self-efficacy and networking abilities in the negotiation of i-deals, as well as the mediating role of perceived employability in these dynamics. The findings extend those of previous studies that reported that individual factors such as self-efficacy (e.g. Caliskan and Torun, 2019; Liao, 2014) or social and political skills (e.g. Lee and Hui, 2011; Rosen et al., 2013), including employee’s networking abilities, are important to explain the effective negotiation of i-deals. Moreover, the findings also contribute to elucidate the underlying mechanisms that affect an effective i-deal negotiation, by providing evidence of the mediating role of perceived employability. Since previous research has investigated the role of some of these individual-level factors in isolation, the present study provides a more comprehensive examination of how these factors can simultaneously facilitate the idiosyncratic negotiation of employment terms.

The results of this study demonstrated that self-efficacy, as well as networking abilities, contribute to the effective negotiation of i-deals through an indirect mechanism involving individuals’ perceptions of their own employability. These findings seem plausible for at least three reasons. First, highly self-efficacious individuals tend to be more confident in their capabilities to achieve successful outcomes (Bandura, 2009), which is expected to enhance their self-constructions of perceived employability (Eades and Iles, 1998). Second, these individuals are also more likely to be rewarded by the organization in many ways, including, e.g. the job opportunities that are offered to them, which may also contribute to increase their perceived employability (Fugate et al., 2004). Third, individuals with greater networking

**Table 3.** Direct, indirect and total effects of self-efficacy, networking abilities and employability on i-deal negotiation

	Standardized estimate	Test of significance	95% B-CCI	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
<i>Direct effects</i>				
Self-efficacy → i-deals	-0.02	0.823	-0.25	0.18
Networking abilities → i-deals	0.01	0.999	-0.18	0.18
Employability → i-deals	0.56	0.001	0.35	0.84
<i>Indirect effects</i>				
Self-efficacy → employability → I-deals	0.25	0.001	0.13	0.44
Networking abilities → employability → I-deals	0.23	0.001	0.13	0.38
<i>Total effects</i>				
Self-efficacy → i-deals	0.23	0.011	0.06	0.40
Networking abilities → i-deals	0.24	0.025	0.03	0.40

**Note(s):**  $N = 213$ . 95% B-CCI = 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals

abilities have access to highly valued social capital and are more capable of building instrumental relationships with key actors, which may increase their career prospects and, thus, their levels of employability (Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014). As individuals develop more positive constructions of their own employability, they become more confident about their distinctive competences and bargaining power as marketable workers, which in turn place them in a better position to negotiate i-deals with their employer (Rousseau, 2005). All in all, these findings are consistent with the COR theory as they suggest that individuals' personal resources, such as self-efficacy and networking abilities, make them more prone to further resource gain by increasing their employability levels and their chances of negotiating i-deals (consider the ideas of "resource caravans" and "positive gain spirals" in Salanova *et al.*, 2010).

In addition, the present study makes two important contributions in terms of both context and methods. From a contextual perspective, it provides evidence that individual bargaining of specific employment terms is widespread in these Argentinian SMEs, at least for the professional workers studied here. Until now, the empirical evidence on i-deals has come almost exclusively from studies conducted in North America, Europe and Asia. The results of the present study suggest that further examination of i-deals is worthy for understanding functional employee-organization relationships in other regions (e.g. Latin America) and even in countries in which labor institutions are regulated by strong unions and collective agreements (e.g. Argentina; Cardoso and Gindin, 2009). From a methodological perspective, the present study also contributes to further refine and validate a measure to examine the effective negotiation of i-deals. The results of the CFA indicated that the scale reflected four underlying dimensions: job content, career development, flexibility and financial incentives, which is consistent with the original typology proposed by Rousseau (2005, p. 17). Moreover, the four types of i-deal content assessed in this study exhibited a satisfactory internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity. Scholars should continue to examine the validity of the scale proposed in this paper across different occupations, cultures and regions (Guerrero *et al.*, 2014, 2016; Hornung and Rousseau, 2017).

The findings of this study have several implications for professional practice. For those professionals seeking to shape their employment terms, this study demonstrated that certain personal factors facilitate i-deal negotiation. Indeed, the results revealed that those employees who are more self-efficacious or have greater networking abilities are in a better position to negotiate i-deals. For those organizations intending to retain their most valuable employees, i-deals may be used to complement their traditional standardized HR practices as a way to manage employees' individual differences and changes in role requirements over time (Hornung *et al.*, 2014; Rousseau, 2005).

Despite the contributions and implications of these findings, some reflections need to be made regarding its limitations to identify future lines of research. First, consistently with previous research (e.g. Bal, 2018; Rosen *et al.*, 2013; Rousseau *et al.*, 2009), this study focused on employees' perceptions of i-deal negotiation and excluded other key actors, such as supervisors or HR managers. Future research should take an organizational perspective on the study of i-deals and analyze the degree of congruence in the perceptions between employees and employers (or their multiple agents).

Second, some organizational and contextual variables may have influenced the findings of this study. In this regard, past literature has shown that organizational culture, for instance, may either facilitate or hinder the negotiation of idiosyncratic deals by affecting the extent to which these agreements are considered "acceptable" in a particular setting (Hornung *et al.*, 2008; Las Heras *et al.*, 2017). In a similar vein, the COR theory has suggested that individuals' resources exist within ecological conditions that either foster or block resource creation, thus affecting, e.g. the degree to which personal resources such as self-efficacy or networking abilities lead to i-deal negotiation (Liao *et al.*, 2016; also consider Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Thus, as argued by Hobfoll *et al.* (2018), the extent to which individuals

are successful at maintaining and developing their “resource caravans” not only depends on their own skills and efforts, but also is affected by the circumstances that define social ecologies in organizations. In this sense, future research should address how work structures and other characteristics of the organizational context (e.g. cultural values, change processes, leadership styles) affect the processes through which individuals develop and invest their resources to negotiate i-deals.

Third, the present study relied exclusively on self-report data from a single survey, which may cause common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). In this regard, it should be noted that the results of Harman’s one-factor test indicated that one single factor explained only 26.95% of the variance, suggesting that the common method bias did not significantly affect the results. In spite of this, future research may reduce the common method bias by measuring constructs at different point of time, using experimental research designs, considering a comprehensive set of control variables or including objective measures of the variables of interest (see Spector, 2019, for further considerations).

Fourth, this study drew on cross-sectional data, which means that cause–effect relationships cannot be drawn, and that alternative explanations to the findings cannot be overruled. For instance, in the same way that the present research proposed that higher perceived employability levels might contribute to i-deal negotiation, reverse causality is also plausible. Indeed, previous research has shown that job content i-deals increase employees’ perceptions of their employability, as these individuals are more likely to be confident in their skills (Hornung *et al.*, 2010) and to assess job opportunities more positively (Oostrom *et al.*, 2016). Likewise, the present study hypothesized that self-efficacy is positively related to the effective negotiations of i-deals; yet, other research has suggested that self-efficacy can be enhanced by an individual’s successful experience in negotiating i-deals (Liao, 2014; Liao *et al.*, 2016). Thus, since there seems to be a reciprocal relationship between personal and job resources (see considerations in Kohn and Schooler, 1982), future research should address the causality of the proposed relationships by using longitudinal designs or diary studies.

Finally, as pointed out by Hornung and Rousseau (2017), the literature on i-deals has only begun to address the mechanisms underlying the process of idiosyncratic negotiation, which opens a wide range of research opportunities. For instance, by viewing the negotiation of i-deals as a proactive career-related behavior, future research could examine the role that self-career planning plays in the negotiation of i-deals (De Vos *et al.*, 2009). Career planning may lead to i-deal negotiations that involve an array of new developmental opportunities (Rousseau, 2005). Future research should investigate how career-related variables might affect the idiosyncratic negotiation of employment terms.

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## Appendix

### Spanish version of the effective negotiation of i-deals scale

Considerando que los empleados, en forma individual, pueden tener acuerdos laborales que difieren de los de sus compañeros de trabajo, indique en qué medida ha negociado o acordado cualquiera de los siguientes aspectos con su empleador actual, utilizando la escala debajo presentada.

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Para nada</i>	<i>Ligeramente</i>	<i>Moderadamente</i>	<i>Significativamente</i>	<i>Totalmente</i>

- \_\_\_ Tareas que se ajusten a mis habilidades y talentos (*contenido*)
- \_\_\_ Tareas que se adapten a mis intereses personales (*contenido*)
- \_\_\_ Tareas que me resulten personalmente motivadoras (*contenido*)
- \_\_\_ Autonomía en la forma de realizar mi trabajo (*contenido*)
- \_\_\_ Oportunidades de capacitación que aseguren mi desarrollo profesional (*desarrollo*)
- \_\_\_ Plan de carrera personalizado que se ajuste a mis objetivos personales (*desarrollo*)
- \_\_\_ Asignaciones de trabajo que potencien mi desarrollo de carrera (*desarrollo*)
- \_\_\_ Objetivos de desempeño desafiantes (*desarrollo*)
- \_\_\_ Jornada de trabajo que se ajuste a mis necesidades personales (*flexibilidad*)
- \_\_\_ Flexibilidad en el horario de entrada y salida del trabajo (*flexibilidad*)
- \_\_\_ Flexibilidad de tiempos para atender cuestiones personales (*flexibilidad*)
- \_\_\_ Posibilidad de realizar mi trabajo fuera de la oficina (*flexibilidad*)
- \_\_\_ Salario acorde a mis competencias profesionales (*financiero*)
- \_\_\_ Paquete de beneficios que se ajuste a mis necesidades personales (*financiero*)
- \_\_\_ Incentivos financieros por desempeño (*financiero*)
- \_\_\_ Período adicional de vacaciones pago (*financiero*)

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