PEER PERSPECTIVES ON EMPLOYEE IDIOSYNCRATIC DEALS

[1]JEONG-YEON LEE, [2]HYESOOK CHUNG

Seoul National University, Cornell University
E-mail: [1]jaytalks@snu.ac.kr, [2]hc329@cornell.edu

Abstract - In this paper, we attempt to describe the relationship between the observation of coworker idiosyncratic deals (i-deals: Rousseau et al., 2006; Rousseau, 2005) and employee turnover intention by incorporating two explanatory mechanisms: workplace flexibility and procedural justice. We hypothesize contrasting implications of coworker flexibility i-deals and developmental i-deals on these two mediating mechanisms. Based on a sample of 176 employees from multiple organizations, we find differential implications for the two types of i-deals and mediators. We discuss these findings and the implications of our research.

Index Terms - I-deals, Procedural Justice, Workplace Flexibility, Turnover Intention

I. INTRODUCTION

Idiosyncratic deals (or i-deals) are special terms of employment negotiated between individual workers and their employers that satisfy both parties' needs (Rousseau et al., 2006). In a modern employment situation, which is characterized by a competitive and global environment, maintaining skilled workers becomes a key issue. The flexibility offered by i-deals may be an essential ingredient for both employers and employees in retaining knowledge workers (Rousseau, 2001, 2004, 2005; Rousseau et al., 2006). In particular, i-deals can be an efficient employment contracting mode given the rapidly changing environment that has been represented by a "boundaryless career" (Arther & Rousseau, 1996).

Although the relevance of i-deals exists, particularly in the context of keeping and maintaining talent, empirical studies on the role of i-deals in reducing employee turnover or turnover intentions have just begun (Liao et al., 2014; Ho & Tekleab, A. G., 2013). This is still a significant void in both i-deal and turnover literature because the utility of i-deals can be highlighted most effectively when they help organizations keep knowledge workers from leaving. In fact, the original motivation of Rousseau et al.'s (2006) conceptualization of i-deals came from the belief that existence of i-deals may be equated with a situation where organizations are able to create "win-win scenarios for both employee and employer." One clear win-win scenario in i-deal literature is helping organizations attract and maintain knowledge workers and talents within the organizations.

Despite almost normative hope embedded in the very definition of i-deals, in reality, the aforementioned "win-win scenarios" associated with i-deals may be a relative concept depending on whose perspective (i.e., self, peer, or supervisor) is taken into consideration and the dominant criteria (justice vs. flexibility) that these stakeholder may use. For this reason, prior i-deal literature has emphasized the need to investigate stakeholder perspectives other than employees themselves including co-workers (Lai et. al, 2009) and supervisors (Anand et al., 2011; Hornung et al., 2009). However, empirical research on other stakeholder perspectives is at its early stage,. More importantly, a comprehensive framework that embraces relative and competing meanings of i-deals has been lacking in the literature.

Given these voids, in this research we attempt to investigate the relationship between i-deals and turnover intention. In doing so, we first focus on the relationship between employee sense of their co-worker ideals and employee turnover intention. Second, we consider the possibility that two kinds of coworker i-deals, flexibility and developmental i-deals may bear different implications for employee turnover intention. Third, we investigate two different potentially competing mediators between coworker i-deals and turnover intention: workplace flexibility and workplace justice, particularly procedural justice.

II. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

A. Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals)

A few studies have recently suggested that an individual's i-deals are negatively related to his/her turnover intentions (Ho & Tekleab, A. G., 2013; Liao et al., 2014). In testing the relationship between workplace i-deal use and employee turnover intention, we acknowledge that there may be fundamental differences between when employees themselves engage in i-deals and when employees observe their coworkers engaging in i-deals. When employees

engage in i-deals by negotiating with and getting approval from their supervisor, both parties feel benefited in the i-deals. However, an employee's reactions to their coworker's i-deals may be more complex than employee perceptions of their own i-deals (Lai et al., 2009; Rousseau et al., 2006). A comparison between coworker and employee is necessary as the employment terms are different in i-deals, Furthermore, actor-observer differences (Jones & Nisett, 1972) and self-serving bias might exist in processing the meanings of coworkers' i-deals. Thus, in this paper, we examine workplace flexibility and justice perception of employees as well as subsequent turnover intentions relating to coworkers' i-deals.

B. Coworker i-deals as a source of workplace flexibility

From the worker perspective, workplace flexibility refers to "the degree to which workers are able to make choices to arrange core aspects of their professional lives, particularly regarding where, when, and for how long work is performed" (Hill et al., 2008, pp 151). Although the literature pays little attention, workplace flexibility perceived by employees may be subject to self-serving bias, where their own chance to gain flexible arrangements is the main criteria to evaluate workplace flexibility rather than the normative values and beliefs they see in such a construct. Along a similar vein, in previous i-deal studies (Lai et al., 2009; Rousseau et al., 2006), a coworker's willingness to approve i-deal attempts from a specific employee depends on the likelihood of getting similar special arrangements. In addition to self-serving bias, based on this "me, too" framework, a completely opposing employee assessment of the likelihood of getting special arrangements are possible, when employees observe coworkers engaging in flexibility i-deals vs. developmental i-deals.

When these two types of coworker i-deals are considered together, we argue that the observation of coworker flexibility i-deals will negatively affect an employee's sense of workplace flexibility because a co-worker's successful negotiation of flexibility i-deals reduces the likelihood of their chance to get the same type of deal. Many of the fruits of flexibility i-deals are personal rewards (i.e., pay/benefits, time, location, and content of the work) for which coworkers are often competing against one another. With a reduced chance of getting the rewards for themselves, self-serving bias may begin operating in a way that co-worker i-deals may be interpreted as a weakened chance of getting flexible arrangements for themselves, thereby creating a reduced sense of workplace flexibility. On the other hand, when two types of i-deals are considered together, the observation of a coworker engaging in developmental i-deals will be positively associated with an employee sense of workplace flexibility. While signaling fluidity of work arrangements, coworker developmental i-deals do not lessen the chance for employees to receive flexible work arrangements. In fact, many of the objects of developmental i-deals are viewed as requiring significant commitment, workload, and performance expectations rather than rewards (Lai et al., 2009). Co-workers committing to such i-deals will create greater room for employees to negotiate and receive flexible work arrangements, resulting in a positive relationship between developmental co-worker i-deals and workplace flexibility. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: An employee's observation of coworker flexibility i-deal will be negatively associated with perceived workplace flexibility.

Hypothesis 2: An employee's observation of coworker developmental i-deal will be positively associated with perceived workplace flexibility.

C. I-deals as source of injustice

Although i-deals mostly occur between an employee and manager, due to the visible aspects of the special arrangement (e.g., changes in work assignment, reduced workload, flexible work schedules, working from home), the presence of i-deals will become known to other employees who monitor the treatment by managers. An employee's knowledge of their coworkers' different employment arrangements may cause the employee to feel that the coworkers are over-benefited, which in turn evokes feelings of underpayment within the employee regardless of whether or not the coworkers deserve i-deals (Greenberg et al., 2004). This is because i-deals represent an exception to the standardized employment practices that provide fair treatment across employees in the organization (Rousseau, 2005). According to Equity theory (Adams, 1965), individuals are concerned about the outcomes relative to their inputs and compare their ratio against the ratio of coworkers. Employee inputs are often captured in their workloads or work hours. Thus, when the employees (without i-deals) work longer hours or with less flexibility than their coworkers, but receive the similar levels of outcome such as pay or promotion, they will likely feel a sense of injustice. This may be especially true in the current trend of rising workloads in the workplace (e.g., 2013 Work and Well-being Survey by American Psychological Association). Moreover, the more frequently employees observe their coworkers engaging in i-deals, the more

diminished perceptions of justice the employees may form. Therefore, we argue that coworker i-deals can be viewed as procedurally unfair to employees.

When the two types of coworker i-deals are considered simultaneously, contrasting implications associated with them may shadow over workplace procedural justice. Previous literature suggests that when it comes to viewing their own i-deals, employees regard flexibility i-deals in a positive light, while viewing developmental i-deals in a negative light. While employees regard their own flexibility i-deals as tools to reduce work-life conflict, workload, and performance expectations, they view developmental i-deals as requiring more commitment, more workload, and a higher level of performance expectations (Lai et al., 2009).

However, when it comes to looking at coworker i-deals over these two types of i-deals, the positive and negative views may be reversed. First, self-serving bias may exist. When a flexibility i-deal, which is a more desirable outcome for employee themselves, is negotiated and successfully taken by the co-workers, the level of employee relative deprivation is likely to be high and the sense of justice, particularly in terms of the procedure the deal is made, is likely to be low. A co-worker initiation of developmental i-deal, on the other hand, as it requires significant commitment and work, is not only unthreatening but could also be perceived as even beneficial because of the indirect benefits (i.e., more efficient cooperation and learning from each other), thereby creating the sense of justice. Secondly, given that many organizations still employ standardized work arrangements, flexibility i-deals initiated/negotiated by coworkers could easily go against company or group norms, while developmental i-deals are perfectly in line with the norms. A recent study suggests that where employee cognition of internal labor market operations (characterized more as standardized employment arrangements) in the workplace reduces employee i-deal requests (Lee et al., forthcoming). This suggests that when standardized work arrangements are the norm, coworker's flexibility i-deals may be viewed to be inappropriate and also unjust as they become an exception of the standardized arrangements. On the other hand, however rigid the standardized arrangements they may have, organizations typically allow flexibility in employee training opportunities and skill development since they are typically more long-term and team-oriented in nature. For this reason, observations of coworker developmental i-deals are likely to be perceived as procedurally just. Therefore, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 3: An employee's observation of coworker flexibility i-deals will be negatively associated with employees' justice perception.

Hypothesis 4: An employee's observation of coworker developmental i-deals will be positively associated with employee's justice perception.

D. Workplace flexibility and turnover intention

As implied by the main thrust of i-deals, the role of workplace flexibility plays key role in the modern employment relationship. Employee perceptions of workplace flexibility affect not only their physical and mental health (Grzywacz, Casey, & Jones, 2007) but also may negatively affect their turnover intention. For employees, their perception of workplace flexibility is closely linked with their sense of work-life balance (Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2001). Several studies suggest that an employee's sense of work-life balance and related human resource practices, in fact, lower employee turnover intention through enhanced employee commitment (Huang, Lawler, & Lei, 2007), perceived organizational support (Casper & Harris, 2008), sense of control over managing work and family (Batt & Valcour, 2003), and reduced sense of work-family conflict (Batt et al., 2003). Thus, the following is hypothesized.

Hypothesis 5: Workplace flexibility will be negatively associated with employee turnover intention.

E. Procedural justice and turnover intention

According to the group value model (Lind & Tyler, 1988), unfair treatment by organizational agents (e.g., managers) signals to employees that they are not valued group members. As such, employee perceptions of unfair treatment indicate their marginal position within the group. This will lead to their decreased trust in and obligations to the group or organization to which they belong. Research on indirect reciprocity involving the third party (i.e., coworkers) suggests that individuals may direct their reciprocating behavior (positive or negative) toward the organization instead of the actual beneficiary of the returned favor (i.e., i-deals). That is, instead of blaming their coworkers for their special arrangements, employees may hold the organization (represented by the manager) accountable for the unfair decisions, and as a result decreasing their identification with and commitment to the organization. Additionally, they may try to restore balance by withdrawing their work effort and thinking about quitting. Research findings also suggest that an employee's sense of justice is negatively associated with their intent to quit (Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; Dailey & Kirk, 1992; Konovsky & Cropanzano, 1991; Masterson, Lewis,

Goldman, & Taylor, 2000; Miceli, Jung, Near, & Greenberger, 1991; Sweeney & McFarlin, 1997). Accordingly, we propose:

Hypothesis 6: Workplace procedural justice will be negatively associated with employee turnover intention.

III. METHODS

A. Participants and procedure

The data was collected from participants of corporate training center of a large medical device company located in California. 549 participants who were enrolled in one of six training programs that dealt with the four topics (Leadership, Human Resource Management, Teamwork, and Project Management) between 2005 and 2010 were identified with the help of corporate training center. These participants were contacted through email to participate in the study. After three email invitations were made to participate in the online survey, a total of 205 individuals responded (response rate: 37.34%). Among the respondents, 29 individuals did not complete the survey. Thus, the final sample size was 176.

B. Measurement

Coworker flexibility i-deals. Coworker flexibility i-deals was measured with five 7-point (1: never, 2: very rarely, 3: rarely, 4: occasionally, 5: frequently, 6: very frequently, and 7: always) Likert scale items adopted from (Rosen et al., 2013). Sample items are "I have seen some coworkers in my organization: negotiating for and receive special pay and benefit deals; choosing suitable work schedules as a result of personal deal-making with our management; making deals with management regarding with whom they will work. " Cronbach's α for the scale was .68.

Coworker developmental i-deals. Three items adapted from Rousseau and Kim (2006) were used to measure coworker developmental i-deals. Items are "I have seen some coworkers in my organization: asking for and successfully negotiating for training opportunities; being assigned tasks that develop their skills at their request; successfully negotiating with management for additional resources. " The same 7-point Likert scale as flexibility i-deals was used. Cronbach's α for the measure was .73.

Workplace flexibility. To measure workplace flexibility, participants responded to three items from Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, and Weitzman (2001). Items were "In your work place, how much flexibility do you see in: selecting the location of where you work; scheduling when you do your work; scheduling what work you do. " A 7-point Likert scale was used (1: none, 2: little, 3: a little, 4: somewhat, 5: much, 6: a great deal, and 7: complete flexibility). Cronbach's α for this measure was .68.

Justice. Justice was measured with five items developed by Niehoff and Moorman (1993). A 5-point Likert scale was used (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). Sample items include "job decisions are made by the company in an unbiased manner; to make my formal job decisions, my company collects accurate and complete information; employees are allowed to challenge or appeal job decisions made by the company. " The reliability of the scale (Cronbach's α) was .86.

Turnover intention. Three items of the turnover intention scale (Colarelli, 1984) were used to measure intention to leave the current organization. A 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree) was applied to the three items (if I have my own way, I will be working for this organization in one year from now [reverse coded]; I frequently think of quitting my job; I am planning to search for a new job during the next 2 months). Cronbach's α for the items was .83.

Control variables. To address other factors that might affect turnover intention, controlled were external mobility opportunity, affective commitment to the organization, and gender of the respondents. Firstly, when an employee perceives opportunities in an external job market as favorable, turnover intention is likely to increase ceteris paribus. Four items (Cronbach's α = .79) with 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree) adopted from Price and Mueller (1986) were used to measure external mobility. Sample items are "it would be easy for me to find a job with another employer that is as good as the job as I now have; it would be easy for me to find a job with another employer that is better than the job I now have." Secondly, if an employee maintains strong emotional attachment towards the current organization, his or her intention to leave would be lower than others in the same situation. Thus, employees' affective organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997) was included to the model as a control variable. Cronbach's α for the four items (e.g., I do not feel emotionally attached to my company [reverse coded]; my company has a great deal of personal meaning for me) was .85. Finally, gender (1: female, 0: male) was controlled. While the literature showed mixed findings (Lee, 2012), past studies reported that there were significant differences between male and female in turnover behaviors, especially when specific reasons (i.e., personal or family related issues) for turnover was considered (Lee, Gerhart, Weller, & Trevor, 2008; Sicherman, 1996; Theodossiou, 2002).

IV. RESULTS

Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypotheses using Mplus 7.0 with maximum likelihood estimation (Muthen & Muthen, 2007). Fig. 1 presents the structural model tested along with path coefficients and significance for the relationships between the variables. The model fit (χ^2= 487.88, df = 310, p < .001, CFI = .904, RMSEA = .057, SRMR = .071) was appropriate as in the measurement model. As expected, affective organizational commitment was negatively related with turnover intention of employees (γ = -0.43, p < .001). In addition, external mobility seemed to be positively related to intention to leave the current organization, at least, marginally (γ = 0.70, p = .07). Females turned out to have less turnover intention than males (γ = -0.28, p = .05). This might be because most participants of this study are in the early stage of their career. Mobility or job change pays off most at the early stage (Lam, Ng, & Feldman, 2012). If young male employees tend to exploit this opportunity in the labor market more aggressively than female counterparts, their intention to leave the current firm also might be higher than those of young female employees.

Hypothesis 1 predicted a negative relationship between flexibility i-deals and workplace flexibility. As can be seen in Figure 2, the relationship was not significant (γ = -0.53, p = .32). Thus, hypothesis 1 was not supported.

In contrast, hypothesis 2, which expected a positive relationship between development i-deals and workplace flexibility was supported (γ = 0.67, p = .03).

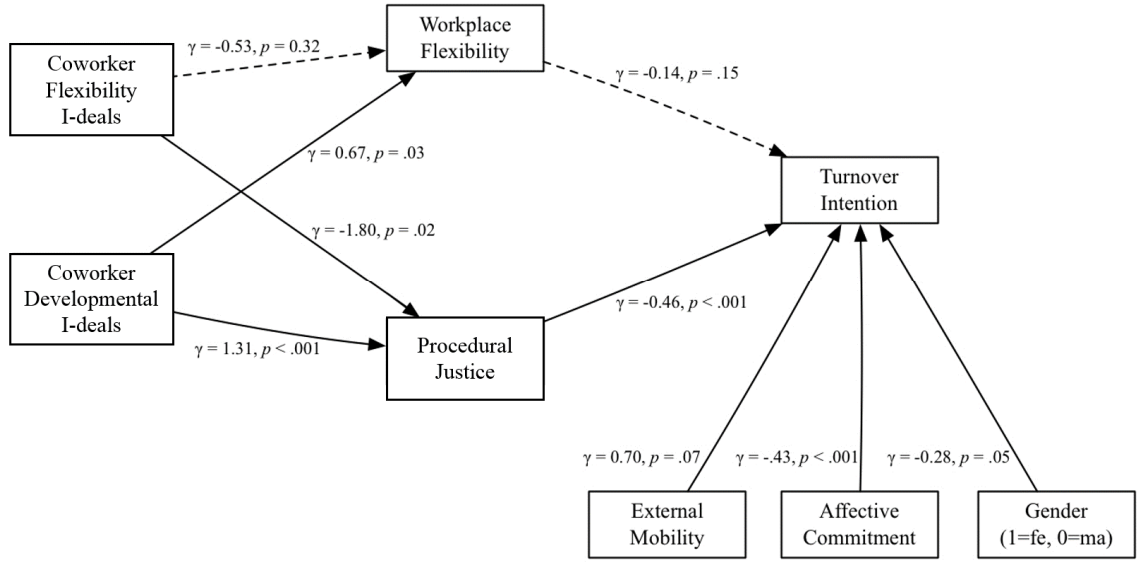


Fig. 1. Structural equation model results

In hypothesis 3, a negative relationship was assumed for flexibility i-deals and justice. As expected, the path coefficient was significantly negative (γ = -1.80, p = .02). Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported. Hypothesis 4 proposed that development i-deals, unlike flexibility i-deals, would be positively related with justice. Model results supported the prediction (γ = 1.31, p < .001). Thus, hypothesis 4 was also supported.

Hypothesis 5 predicted a negative relationship between workplace flexibility and turnover intention. The relationship was not significant, (γ = - 14, p = .15). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was not supported. Hypothesis 6 also predicted that procedural justice is negatively associated with turnover intention. The path coefficient was negative and significant (γ = - 46, p < .001), supporting Hypothesis 6.

We also assumed potential indirect effects of i-deals on employee turnover intention via workplace flexibility and justice perception. Table 3 shows estimates of the indirect effects with bias corrected confidence intervals retrieved from bootstrapping (iteration: 5000). As can be seen in the table, workplace flexibility did not mediate the effects from i-deals to turnover intention. However, development i-deals had a negative indirect influence (indirect effects: -0.60, p = .01) on turnover intention via justice perception, and flexibility i-deals had significant positive indirect effects (indirect effects: 0.83, p = .04) on turnover intention via justice perception in the expected direction.

DISCUSSION

Our research reveals several interesting and

meaningful findings. First, we find that between flexibility and justice, justice is the main mediating mechanism that governs the nature of the relationship between coworker i-deals and employee turnover intention. This is interesting because previous studies have emphasized the virtue of i-deals through the workplace flexibility that i-deals offer (Ng and Feldman, forthcoming; Hornung et al. 2010; Rosen et al., 2013; Rousseau et al., 2006). However, it is also consistent with previous theorizations of i-deals in that coworkers may be more sensitive to justice issues associated with i-deals (Lai et al., 2009; Rousseau, 2005). Second, our results suggest that, with justice as the main criterion, employees possess quite contrasting positions on the two types of coworker i-deals: developmental vs. flexibility i-deals. In particular, employees not only viewed coworker developmental i-deals procedurally just but also, through the perception of justice, reduced their turnover intention. On the other hand, employee observations of coworker flexibility i-deals were inversely associated with their sense procedural justice in the workplace. In addition, observing such co-worker flexibility i-deals increased their intent to quit through the reduction of procedural justice. This suggests that developmental i-deals may be much more in agreement with group norms in many occupations and organizations, while controversy may exist over flexibility i-deals.

Even though workplace flexibility has been highlighted more frequently in the literature, a simple switch of perspective from employee to coworker allowed us to discover that justice may be a stronger framework to explain coworker responses to i-deals. That is, the presence of coworker i-deals was a weak signal of workplace flexibility to employees when justice was taken into consideration at the same time. On the other hand, coworker i-deals were interpreted as a strong source of workplace justice for the employees.

Although flexibility was not the main mediating mechanism, it is worthwhile to note that employees perceived workplace flexibility by observing coworkers engaging in developmental i-deals. Coworker engagement in developmental i-deals may signal a fluid nature of the employment terms and conditions without emphasizing the short-term, zero-sum nature of the negotiation game with management in acquiring scarce rewards (more pay, autonomy, and control) and without reminding employees that coworkers are competitors in these games. Most importantly, co-worker developmental i-deals may make employees over-evaluate their chance of getting flexible work arrangements as developmental i-deals often require further commitments from coworkers (Lai et al., 2009).

Our study is not without limitations. First of all, our dependent variable was the intention to turnover. Respondents may act or not act upon such intention. A bit of caution is needed for readers in interpreting our results - not all intentions will likely to lead to action. Secondly, although self-reporting is necessary given the fact that our research deals with employee evaluations of coworker i-deals, relying on a single data source for our independent and dependent variables may lead to common method biases (Podsakoff et al. 2003). However, we believed that common method variance is less likely since our i-deal measures were tapping the frequency of coworker i-deals, which is more objective in nature.

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