

Emotional Intelligence & Job Performance

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In this interview, O'Boyle and Humphrey discuss their roles in VCU's study of emotional intelligence and job performance and explain how the study's results can be used to improve safety performance within an organization.



Ernest O'Boyle

MPS: Please provide a brief description of your professional backgrounds and of your roles in Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) study, "The Relation Between Emotional Intelligence and Job Performance: A Meta-Analysis."

EB: I received my Ph.D. from VCU in 2010. I am currently an assistant professor at Longwood University in the College of Business and Economics. I study counterproductive work behavior, business ethics, predictors of job performance and research methodology. My primary contribution to the project on emotional intelligence (EI) was as the data analyst.

RH: I am a professor in VCU's Department of Management. I teach organizational behavior and leadership courses at the undergraduate, M.B.A. and doctoral levels. I am on the editorial board of Leadership Quarterly, and I am currently writing a textbook to be called Modern Leadership. I also recently edited Affect and Emotion: New Directions in Management Theory and Research (2008).

I have been conducting research on emotions in the workplace, empathy and EI for a long time, so I was happy to join Ernest and some of VCU's other outstanding former graduate students (Jeff Pollack, Tom Hawver, Paul Story) in the EI meta-analysis study. My role in the meta-analysis study was to help develop the overall framework for the study and to write most of the literature review and conclusions.

MPS: Why was this study conducted?

EB/RH: The major controversy in the field of EI is this: does having high EI/competencies improve employees' job performance? Many studies have shown that employees with high EI/competencies have better job performance than employees with low EI/competencies.

However, controversy over the subject still remained because researchers wanted to know if EI/competency increases our ability to explain job performance when we also control for cognitive ability and personality factors. Our study answers this question by statistically summarizing the available research while using the latest procedures to control for cognitive ability and personality measures.

MPS: The study's results indicated that high EI is related to strong job

performance. How did the study define "emotional intelligence" and "strong job performance"?

EB/RH: We examined three major ways in which EI and competencies were defined. First, EI can be defined as a set of abilities similar to cognitive intelligence. Mayer, Salovey, Caruso and Sitarenios stated that EI consists of four inter-related abilities: 1) the ability to perceive emotions, 2) the ability to use emotions to facilitate thought, 3) the ability to understand the social meaning and importance of emotion and 4) the ability to manage emotions.

A second approach uses this same four-branch model of the dimensions of emotions but argues that emotions can be measured in the same way as personality traits can be measured by using self- and peer reports. Thus, this approach views EI more like a personality trait than like a cognitive intelligence.

The third approach examines emotional competencies as a set of skills, abilities and competencies related to affect and emotions and includes a broader set of variables, such as the ability to manage social relationships.

For job performance, we used a broad definition and included a variety of behaviors, such as supervisor ratings, objective performance measures (e.g., sales), 360° evaluations

and customer feedback. We believe this is one of the strengths of the paper as we were able to show that the relation between EI and job performance was remarkably consistent across these definitions.

MPS: *What methodology was used to conduct the study?*

EB/RH: The methodology was a meta-analysis. This technique summarizes the existing knowledge on a given topic and provides an accurate estimate of a true relationship between two constructs, such as EI and job performance. The primary advantage of this technique is its ability to control for sampling error.

For example, if I flip a fair coin ten times, then I would expect it to land on heads five of those times. However, sometimes it will land on heads four times, sometimes six, and every once in a while it may not land on heads at all. However, if we look across all of these trials, we will get an average of five. Although more complicated than this, a meta-analysis is able to accomplish the same thing. Some authors found weak relationships between EI and job performance, some found strong relationships and some even found negative relationships. We were able to look across all of these studies and to find the true relationship.

Using some relatively new procedures in meta-analysis, we identified that not only was EI related to job performance, it also predicted job performance above and beyond the five-factor model of personality (at present, the most prominent personality theory) and cognitive ability (a.k.a. IQ). In other words, EI and emotional competencies improve job performance.

MPS: *What are the three prominent testing procedures for emotional intelligence? How do they predict job performance?*

EB/RH: The first method, known as the ability method, uses a series of objective “right or wrong” questions to measure test-takers’ emotional intelligence. This method is similar to an IQ test in that it has

objective answers. The second approach, the “trait approach” described above, has people rate themselves on the four branches of EI, or it has peers, supervisors, co-workers, etc. to rate someone on his or her EI. The third approach, the competency approach, also uses self-ratings and peer/other ratings. All three methods predict job performance, and the consistent pattern across all three ways of measuring emotional intelligence/competencies further demonstrates the value of emotional intelligence/competency to job performance. However, the self-report and peer report trait and competency measures are somewhat better predictors of job performance than the ability measures when controlling for cognitive intelligence and personality.

MPS: *How might the results of this study be adapted to safety performance?*

EB/RH: Many measures of job performance used in our study included aspects related to following company procedures and completing activities in the proscribed way. Extrapolating from these results, our study suggests that those with higher EI are less likely to cut corners, ignore safety guidelines or put others in danger. In addition, past research has shown that many traffic accidents occur while drivers experience high negative emotions (i.e., anger, frustration). We see clear parallels to the workplace with emotionally intelligent individuals being better able to recognize and control negative emotions and thus reduce accidents.

In addition, we can also extend our findings to increasingly problematic area of workplace violence. Emotionally intelligent workers are more likely to recognize emotionally charged situations, control their own emotions and diffuse highly charged situations. This can have profound impact on lowering what many see as one of the most important safety issues in today’s workplace.

MPS: *Did the study yield any surprising results?*

EB/RH: We entered the project fairly confident that EI would relate positively to job performance but not entirely clear whether it would be able to predict job performance after taking into account general intelligence and the five-factor model of personality. Traditionally, IQ scores and traits, such as conscientiousness and agreeableness, have dominated the research on trait predictors of job performance, and some doubted whether EI could compete in such rarified air. The surprise was that overall, not only did EI hold its own, it was the second strongest predictor.

Another surprising finding was how robust the relation between EI and job performance was. We found this positive relation across a variety of industries, measures and cultures.

MPS: *Why do some dispute the legitimacy of EI?*

EB/RH: Much skepticism comes from those who believe that EI is simply a proxy for general intelligence. This belief is somewhat flawed as anecdotally we all know people with high IQs who are still unable to emotionally connect with others or to control their own emotions. However, our commonsense anecdotal understanding of the difference between EI and cognitive intelligence still needed to be verified empirically. Our findings clarified the relationship between EI and general intelligence and found that the two constructs were most definitely distinct. In addition, our results also demonstrate that EI/competencies are also distinct from other personality traits like extraversion and conscientiousness.

MPS: *How can employers, business consultants and managers best make use of the study’s results, especially if they are trying to improve safety performance within an organization?*

EB/RH: Given that EI relates to job performance, the next step is to integrate these tests into the selection process. At present, very few employers use EI as a screening instrument, and we believe that EI may allow managers to make more accurate hiring decisions.

In addition, one of the great things about EI and emotional competencies is its malleability as compared to general intelligence. Individuals can be trained to behave in more emotional intelligent ways. As such, consultants and managers attempting to improve safety performance or performance in general can look to EI as an additional tool to improving their workforce.

MPS: What new research on emotional intelligence and job performance is on the horizon?

EB/RH: Much research is currently underway examining EI, job performance and a variety of other outcomes. The management field is

increasingly recognizing the importance of emotions in today's world, and we have seen an explosion of research on the topic in recent years linking EI to a variety of work outcomes, including emotional labor.

We are next taking EI into stressful environments, such as operating rooms and high-stakes businesses. We hypothesize that EI and emotional competencies will play a pivotal role in important outcomes, such as job burnout, workplace deviance, critical errors and safety records.

In addition, a just-published review by Walter, Cole and Humphrey (2011) found that EI is also very important to leadership. This review found that emotionally

intelligent leaders can improve their team members' performance but that studies in this area need to include more relevant control variables like cognitive intelligence and personality measures. ☺

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Kuwait Chapter to Hold 6th Annual PDC

A SSE's Kuwait Chapter will hold its sixth annual professional development conference and exhibition on health, safety, security and environment (HSSE) from Nov. 29-Dec. 1, 2011. The conference is intended to gather HSSE professionals from across the globe to participate in workshops, presentations and discussions to further the safety community.

ASSE's Kuwait Chapter invites individuals as well as public and private sector organizations with interests in:

- workforce safety and safety management;
- occupational health and hygiene;
- ergonomics;
- environmental protection;
- fire safety;
- loss prevention;
- industrial security;
- emergency management and business continuity;
- sustainability and corporate social responsibility;
- regulatory compliance;
- behavioral-based safety;
- safety culture;
- training and performance measurement.

EXHIBITION & SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

The conference is planned to be one of the biggest HSSE gatherings in the region. Organizations will gain the attention of more than 500 attending delegates, potential customers and decision makers. Opportunities exist for buying stands in the exhibition and other advertising.

PROPOSALS FOR TRAINING WORKSHOPS & CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES

The Kuwait Chapter also welcomes proposals from individuals and agencies offering relevant training workshops, motivational speaking and engaging conference activities.

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