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Emotional Intelligence Testing
By Rebecca Johnson

In the second of our series of commissioned articles freelance journalist Rebecca Johnson looks at the popular and sometimes controversial area of Emotional Intelligence

Science in the early 1990s enabled us for the first time to have a real insight into how the emotional centres of the brain work. It was these discoveries that Dr Daniel Goleman brought together in his influential and popular book *Emotional Intelligence*, and that introduced the business world to the notion that there were other aspects of intelligence that significantly affected a person's performance, aside from their IQ or other specific abilities.

Since then, emotional intelligence, encompassing self-awareness, self-management, interpersonal awareness and relationship management, has come to be viewed by many as one of the most important aspects of the performance of individuals and teams.

Psychometric testing for emotional intelligence began to be developed in the late 1990s as businesses grasped the impact of management behaviour. The past couple of years have seen a real upswing in the popularity – and availability - of effective emotional intelligence measures, fully researched and verified, for business use.

Because emotional intelligence (or EI) testing is so new, there is still considerable confusion about what psychometric instruments can reveal and how those results can be used. The confusion stems initially from a perceived lack of clarity about the concept itself. What exactly is emotional intelligence, and how does it affect performance at work?

According to Goleman, emotions and our ability to understand and manage them in ourselves, and in others, are the key not only to our relational, familial and workplace success, but profoundly affect our biological well-being and our chances of leading happy, healthy lives. "Emotions are social phenomena and there is no social life to speak of without emotions," says Daniel Goleman, explaining that the emotional and social circuitry is the most malleable part of the brain, and therefore amenable to training and development. Emotional and social intelligence, as he explains them, are the abilities to shape and direct our emotional responses to our experiences and relationships, and to influence the emotional climate for those around us. The difference, he says, can be as marked as that between inspiration, creativity and health as against fear, toxic relationships, and stress-related illness. It stands to reason that organisations would prefer to encourage the former, and identify those workers and managers most likely to foster such behaviour, and to help those less skilled in the emotional arts to learn and improve.

Ali Gill, Managing Director of GetFeedback, a consultancy that uses a range of EI measures, says organisations are often unsure where to start. "There is a lot of confusion in the marketplace," she contends, emphasising the variety of approaches and the hype that has accompanied the EI concept. "Goleman's research is very complex and its popularity had superseded the research," she believes.

Kenneth Nowack, Ph.D. the developer of Consulting Tools' EI instruments and member of the EI consortium, an international forum for research on Emotional Intelligence in Organisations (www.eiconsortium.org), helps to clarify matters. He explains that there are three main approaches to emotional intelligence that are used in testing, of which Goleman's is only one. While Goleman's competency-based concept is that EI should be a set of teachable, trainable skills that can be enhanced through interventions such as coaching, one alternative, derived from Yale professor Peter Salovei's research, is ability-based, looking at subjects' capacity to detect emotion, for example using facial expressions. The third approach is based on personality measures, and attempts to get at trait aspects of how individuals regulate and perceive their emotions. Tests from this approach have similarities to the newer generation of so called 'big-five' personality factor instruments like the NEO and Facet5 and also with the global factors of classic assessments like the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire.

Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses, although the competency and personality versions remain the most widely used. "Critics suggest that personality-based EI measures overlap with personality tools and that it is just a way of marketing them, rather than something new", Nowack says. "Others say the concept of personality is more resistant to change, unlike EI. There is also very little correlation between the different approaches, which raises questions about what is really being measured." Of Goleman's approach, he says critics argue that this focuses only on change. "Another debate is what value self-assessment of emotional intelligence has for those who lack it," he adds, saying that where circumstances allow, a 360° version of tests gives greater perspective as it provides a way to comparing self-perception to that of others.

According to Nowack, the competency-based approach resonates with many businesses as an excellent tool for development and coaching. However, the personality approach may be more appropriate for recruitment and selection. The ability-based tests for EI tend to be used mainly in educational contexts; however, this approach is closely tied to the 'multiple intelligences' research coming out of Harvard and Yale universities that examines 'how' you are smart, rather than IQ, which measures 'how much' you are smart on a single dimension. "But each of the three types seems uniquely psychometrically strong and differentially predictive of performance and career success," Nowack adds.

Research by Malcolm Higgs and Victor Dulewicz at Henley Management College suggests that EI accounts for as much as 36 per cent of success in management contexts, while IQ only relates to 27 per cent and management competencies 16 per cent overall, leaving 29 per cent of success due to factors that cannot be accounted for, such as connections, luck and other elements.

Higgs and Dulewicz's tests measure personality characteristics associated with EI including intuitiveness, self-awareness, emotional resilience, influence and conscientiousness. Unusually for EI instruments, which tend to be focused on management-level assessment, their suite offers a test suitable for non-managerial staff as well as one aimed at more senior levels, both available in 360° versions.

David Holmes, Founder Director of the Transformational Leadership Group, believes EI's strength is in learning and development. He cites an example of using EI tests with the dysfunctional board of a medical research organisation. Senior directors couldn't get on with one another and needed something to help them work out why. As Holmes

describes it: “It was a question of ability to build relationships and be collaborative – things an EI test brings out.” Using a 360° measure from Consulting Tools, he fed back results to each board member individually and asked them to share their profiles with the others. The results were a surprise to many. “The one area that came out strongest was that none of them welcomed feedback on their own performance,” he says.

“It is pretty good at getting people to face up to challenges,” Holmes says of the questionnaire, “but it doesn’t leave you there. It takes you on to what you are going to do about it.” The feedback event for this board helped them to recognise each others’ preferences and differences as well as developing personal action plans, and a coaching programme Holmes designed helped them to address their issues. “You have to pick and choose instruments according to the circumstances. This was a classic situation to use a 360° EI instrument. Typically it is used where people are causing real trouble in an organisation,” Holmes explains.

Ali Gill, of GetFeedback, agrees that EI is a powerful learning and development tool. “Especially if you are dealing with very intellectual people,” she points out. “They like the richness of the concept: the science has many different strands and can lead to lots of interesting places.” For selection and recruitment, however, she says, she would pick a more personality-based measure.

Mark Slaski, independent consultant and chief psychologist of Consulting Tools, helps unpick the differences – and similarities – in outcomes. “One of the cornerstones of EI is that all the different models and theories agree that self-awareness is the key and that this can be taught. People used to think work and emotions don’t mix,” he continues. But research has shown otherwise. “People with high EI are less stressed, have fewer health problems, less absenteeism and higher morale as well as better perceived performance,” he says.

Martin Reed, Chief Executive of Thomas International, emphasises how recent EI developments are in terms of psychometrics, and that the growth in their popularity coincides with realisations in organisations that few managers understand their impact on others or have the necessary ‘soft skills’. The market, says Reed, is still very much in development but is likely to figure more prominently in the future if Amex’s recent slogan “EQ + IQ = success” is any indicator. Thomas International’s instruments are designed by Professor Adrian Furnham and his team and are based on personality traits, but on a wider basis than the main personality test they offer, the PPA, in order to be able to feed into development processes.

Reed’s advice is that far too many companies wait to test people for development purposes until they are in their 30s and 40s. “My advice is to do it as soon as possible. I did tests at 15 and it changed my view of my career – I didn’t have to go through 10-15 years of pain! The challenge of the entire testing market is to bring it to a lower level and make it work. School and university careers services should be using them,” he urges.

David Holmes wants to see more robust research for EI tests and believes more tests are needed with this level of validation. He also believes users need more coaching in using and interpreting tests and in the theories behind them, to be able to use them effectively, arguing that the skills EI diagnoses are very much the hard end of business behaviour.

Slaski warns that however good tests are, unless companies incorporate them into an 'end-to-end' process, such as competency frameworks that include EI, and reward systems that encourage behaviour change, the approach will fail. Change programmes based on EI are just a gateway, he argues, and companies must provide a supportive context. "A lot of companies recognise that they want to be different but just don't know how to do it," he says.

EI may be immature as a theory, but is rapidly gaining recognition and accumulating validating data. "There is growing evidence that people don't leave organisations, they leave poor leaders, so everyone is struggling to retain high performing talent and facilitate engagement," Nowack points out. He warns, though, that claims for emotional intelligence as a panacea may have been oversold on the basis of, as yet, not enough cumulative evidence. So, stresses Nowack, "It is not the only answer."

Daniel Goleman agrees validation should continue. But he believes that emotional and social intelligence testing will go from strength to strength. "Empirical assessments are the only way to be able to give HR the hard data they need to decide which tool is best for which job," says Goleman. "Data emerging from social neuroscience suggests there should one day be a new variety of training and assessment tools that are able to measure how people differ in ways they can't report consciously nor can other people observe consciously. We will see much more of this in the future," he predicts.

Rebecca Johnson is a freelance journalist and writer on business, management, careers, workplace and women's issues. She was formerly Features Editor on People Management and a Media Relations Manager at Campaign for Learning