

During the past decade, the topic of emotional intelligence (EI) has become extremely popular. Just Google the term and you'll see about 9.47 million results with diverse contexts, including education, health, relationships, and work.

In the *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* article "Emotional Intelligence: Towards Clarification of a Concept," Cary Cherniss explains that the concept of EI is generally based on three premises:

- Emotions are important in both work and nonwork interactions.
- There are individual differences in the capacity to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions.
- Differences in EI are important in some contexts and less important in others (for example, leading and customer service).

Current definitions and models of EI

The concept of EI is potentially as confusing to training and development practitioners as the concept of engagement. It often is unclear if EI is just another label for social intelligence, interpersonal competence, self-awareness, emotional control, relationship intelligence, aspects of the "big five" personality constructs, emotional competence, emotional resilience, core self-evaluations, transformational leadership, intrapersonal intelligence, or other related concepts (or aspects of all of them). What is a bit clearer is that there is a difference between definitions and models of EI and emotional and social competence.

Emotional

A close-up photograph of a hand with light-colored nail polish holding a white ruler against a textured, light-colored wall. The ruler is positioned horizontally, showing markings from 1 to 7 meters. The word "Emotional" is overlaid in large, bold, black letters across the top of the image.

Intelligence

Defining and Understanding the Fad

By Kenneth M. Nowack

Trainers, coaches, and organizations must be wise to what EI means, what different models exist, and which methods best measure it.

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To understand the fad of EI, it is useful to separate definitions from models of the concept. Most researchers and practitioners agree more on a common way to define EI such as “The ability to perceive and express emotions, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in self and others.”

Given this definition, it also is important to understand that there are at least four different models of EI that seem to be the most commonly recognized and mentioned (each with different approaches to measurement). These four might be described as personality based, competency based, mental ability based, and trait based.

Personality based. This model was popularized by Reuven Bar-On in 2007 and comprises five main components of skills and abilities: intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, stress management, and adaptability or mood.

Competency based. This model is based on the work of Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis. In a 2008 *Harvard Business Review* article, “Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership,” they conceptualize EI as a set of social and emotional competencies associated with performance, health, and success. This popular EI model organizes a set of competencies into four areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social-relationship management.

Mental ability based. Another model is based on the 2008 *American Psychologist* article “Emotional Intelligence: New Ability or Eclectic Traits?” by professors Jack Mayer, Peter Salovey, and other colleagues. They conceptualize EI as a “mental ability” (ability based) that has four unique branches: ability to perceive emotions, ability to use emotions for thought, ability to understand emotions, and ability to manage emotions in self and others.

Trait based. This model is a newer generation approach sometimes called trait EI, and represents a mixed model of various personality traits, competencies, and abilities. Based on K.V. Petrides, Ria Pita, and Flora Kokkinaki’s 2007 *British Journal of Psychology* article, “The Location of Trait Emotional Intelligence in Personality Factor Space,” this model is thought to include four aspects: sociability, self-control, well-being, and emotionality.

Measuring EI

Suppliers and companies are all claiming to have developed valid EI assessments, but there are different approaches to measuring EI and emotional and social competence for each of the four models. These approaches have led to a variety of self-report, 360-degree feedback, personality-style, and ability-based measures. However, some of these EI measures don’t overlap at all with one another, and some appear to assess similar, if not identical, aspects of this broad concept.

For example, competency-based approaches to measuring EI have shown virtually no overlap with the most popular ability-based measure (the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test; MSCEIT), making it difficult to interpret current research on the topic or to evaluate the best EI assessment to use for specific coaching, training, and talent development initiatives. Each EI measurement approach has some fundamental strengths and potential challenges, as seen in the sidebar on page 63.

Personality and EI

At the most basic level, EI and emotional and social competence typically involve the ability to perceive, understand, and manage your emotions and behavior, as well as others’, effectively. Each of these

three areas appears to be strongly linked to one or more personality traits. Most normal personality can be described as fitting into one of the “big five” categories of extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness. The relationship between the cascading aspects of EI and personality appears to be clearly understood.

Emotion perception. This fundamental process is most strongly associated with conscientiousness. People who are organized, planned, detail oriented, and diligent seem most competent to pick up clues about the feelings and behaviors of others as well as themselves.

Emotion understanding. Cognitive ability (general intelligence) appears to be most strongly associated with the ability to understand and label thoughts and feelings. People who are high in mathematical-logical intelligence seem to score higher and excel on this aspect of EI.

Emotion management. The concept of emotional stability appears to be most strongly associated with resilience, coping with emotions, and managing strong feelings that might interfere with social interactions (for example, practicing “sign language” when you get cut off while driving on the freeway). This is one reason that stress management, relaxation, and coping sometimes seem to be part of the confusion in both defining and measuring EI.

What EI predicts

Most researchers conclude that general mental ability (IQ) accounts for between 10 percent and 20 percent of work and life success. Some, but not all, of the rest of the factors involve EI (for example, socioeconomic status, family, and life circumstances). So what, if anything, do we know about what EI really predicts?

An earlier comprehensive summary by



- Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, www.eiconsortium.org
- Emotions Network, www.emotionsnet.org
- Geneva Emotion Research Group, www.unige.ch/cisa/gerg.html
- International Society for Research on Emotions, www.isre.org
- Positive Psychology Center, www.positivepsychology.org
- Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test, www.questionwritertracker.com/quiz/61/Z4MK3TKB.html

Dana L. Joseph and Daniel A. Newman of 69 independent studies initially explored the relationship between emotional intelligence and diverse work and job performance outcomes. These results suggest that despite the diversity in EI measurement, the concept is moderately associated with both job performance and general mental ability measures.

In general, a growing research literature seems to support a significant association between diverse measures of EI and job performance, particularly in positions requiring social and interpersonal competence. In fact, there appears to be a negative relationship between EI and performance when emotional and social competence is not highly job related.

A much newer review by professor Ernest O'Boyle and his colleagues, which was published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* in 2010, included 65 percent more studies and twice the sample size outcomes of previous studies. Their research offers the following insights about EI and job performance.

- Self-report measures and ability-based measures of EI do not appear to be assessing the same thing.
- Competency and trait EI measures show improved predictability of job performance over mental ability and personality measures.
- Women and white individuals score higher than men and other racial or ethnic groups on ability-based EI measures.
- Trait, personality, and “mixed” measures demonstrated meaningful associations with job performance.

Team EI

Do teams, like individuals, possess EI? If so, can we describe the elements of how EI teams look for ways to enhance performance, creativity, and cooperation?

In a 2010 *Science Magazine* article, “Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups,” Anita Williams Woolley from the Carnegie Mellon Tepper School of Business and her colleagues explored whether the concept of team EI exists and what might be associated with it. They conducted two studies with 699

Advantages and Disadvantages of Different Approaches to Measuring EI

Ability-Based EI Measures

- Independent of five factor personality measures
- Weak association with other cognitive measures
- Some scoring challenges
- Overlaps with knowledge

Competency, Personality, and Mixed Measures

- Moderately high correlations with five factor personality measures
- Limitations of self-report (for example, self-enhancement)
- Limitations of 360-degree feedback (for example, weak inter-rater group associations)
- Ignores situation, setting, and context

people working in groups of two to five on a wide variety of tasks with specific and measurable outcomes (for example, visual puzzles, brainstorming, making collective moral judgments, negotiations, and architectural design game).

Overall, they found that individual intelligence was a significant predictor of performance when these tasks were performed individually, but not a significant predictor of group performance. Additionally, they found that when both individual intelligence and team EI were compared against each other, team factors were more strongly associated with task performance.

It seems intuitive that group cohesion, satisfaction with the team, and engagement would be pretty important for team success and performance. However, none of these was a significant predictor of high performance. Two factors seemed to emerge that suggest that team emotional intelligence is real and that it can be fostered:

- Group EI was significantly associated with the average social sensitivity of a group's members measured by a common social and EI face recognition test (Reading the Mind in the Eyes test).
- Team intelligence was inversely associated with having dominant group members who spoke a lot—smarter groups had more equal

distribution of “conversational turn-taking” in speaking.

What it all means

The conceptualization and measurement of EI has come a long way in the past decade. Trainers, coaches, and organizations using EI should be clear in how they define the concept and which model of EI makes the most sense for the initiative in mind. Each EI model tends to have a different measurement approach that may, or may not, be useful for specific initiatives (for example, succession planning, coaching, and talent development).

There is much we still don't completely know about the role of EI with such outcomes as job performance and health. However, one thing is fairly certain: it's not how smart you really are that matters in terms of work and life success, but how you are smart.

Kenneth M. Nowack is a licensed psychologist and president and chief research officer of *Envisia Learning Inc.*, a provider of assessment, training, and development tools to coaches and consultants. He also is president of *LifeHub Inc.*, a corporate health and wellness provider; ken@envisialearning.com.

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