Emotional Intelligence and Career Wellbeing

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the human emotional aptitude that represents an inherent ability for learning or understanding in human interaction and interpersonal relationships. Research suggests that social and emotional competency, as represented by EI, are significant predictors of individuals' success in their lives and careers. To this end, this article addresses the role of EI in the context of vocational and career psychology. Guided and informed by major career theories, it will propose counselling interventions that may help individuals with low EI enhance their capacity to cope with their vocational life more effectively.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, career wellbeing, career theories, counselling interventions

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Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the aptitude to perceive, identify, assess, and manage others' emotions and our own (Mayer et al., 2004; Serrat, 2017). It is the aptitude to understand oneself and others (Serat, 2017). EI is a more recent concept that has emerged within the study of psychology since the mid-1990s (Serat, 2017). It has also sparked much interest in other mental health disciplines, the broad social sciences, and the humanities. This increasing attention to EI is likely due to its influential role in influencing individuals' effective functioning in many situations.

Research on EI indicates a direct and clear correlation between individuals' level of EI and their capacity to achieve (Noor & Hanafi, 2016). As represented by EI, social and emotional competency are important predictors of individuals' success. Because people's work-life and career development are always essential parts of their life, EI can significantly affect the vocational aspects of their lives, enhancing or hindering their career well-being. The present article addresses the role of EI in the context of vocational and career psychology, focusing primarily on how to utilize the concept of EI in helping persons with a low level of EI improve their emotional competency, aiming to facilitate their vocational wellbeing. With this goal in mind, the article will first provide a conceptual overview of EI, illustrating some of the significant characteristics of EI and their negative impact on individuals with low EI in work-life and career experiences. Guided and informed by major career theories, it will propose some considerations that may help individuals with low EI enhance their capacity to cope with their vocational life more effectively, along with implications for career development practice and counselling interventions.

Words such as "career," "vocational life," "work," and "work-life" are used interchangeably in the discussion that follows. They all refer to individuals' vocational aspects of life in a more loosely defined and inclusive manner. Similarly, "individuals with low EI" and "low EI individuals" are also used interchangeably. They all mean persons with a low degree or level of emotional intelligence, i.e., individuals who possess low emotional competence and skills in their daily life functioning that embody various aspects of their career development experiences and vocational lives.

What is Emotional Intelligence?

A relatively new concept in psychology, emotional intelligence (EI) generally refers to the ability to monitor, discriminate, and manage one's own and other's feelings and emotions (Drigas & Papoutsi, 2018). EI is a competence that includes skills such as self-awareness, cooperation, and control of impulses that, in conjunction with psychological well-being, is predictive of strong interpersonal relationships (Agu & Nwankwo, 2019). EI represents one's overall capacity to reason about and regulate emotion (Drigas & Papoutsi, 2018). As a result, EI leads to better interpersonal problem-solving skills (Krishnakumar et al., 2019). Due to its clear interpersonal benefits, EI plays an essential role in fostering an individual's subjective well-being as it assists us in navigating life's social situations (Extremera et al., 2020; Sanchez-Alvarez et al., 2016).

How Does Emotional Intelligence Influence Vocational Wellbeing?

Individuals benefit from a high degree of EI; it equips them with emotional competence in dealing with various issues in their work life and they are less likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviours (Kundi & Badar, 2021; Makkar & Basu, 2019). Those with greater EI show restraint in using aggressive conflict resolution skills at work (Moeller & Kwantes, 2015). The positive correlation between EI and job satisfaction can be considered a product of these positive interpersonal benefits of EI in the workplace (Miao et al., 2017). However, individuals with low EI levels are vulnerable to workplace difficulties (Makkar & Basu, 2019). The state of low EI often hampers individuals in their communication with others in the workplace, negatively impacting their interpersonal relationships, which are of pivotal importance to the quality and success of their vocational well-being and workplace success (Makkar & Basu, 2019).

Four Branch Model of Emotional Intelligence

Mayer et al. (2004) proposed a model of EI based on four different "branches" of abilities. These four branches include one's ability to perceive, use, comprehend, and manage emotions (Mayer et al., 2004). According to Mayer et al., these four ability aspects appear to capture the essential characteristics of EI functioning. The branches are ordered in terms of integration; the first branch, perception of emotions, is the most easily included in one's basic psychological model. The fourth, the management of emotions, is the most difficult (Mayer et al., 2004). Using the four branches, the following describes the role of EI in one's vocational and career development in the world of work.

Branch 1: Perception of Emotions

The perception of emotions is considered the most basic function of EI. It refers to a person's ability to detect and decipher emotions in others' facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. It also encompasses the basic capacity to identify one's emotions (Mayer et al., 2004). It is important to correctly interpret and comprehend the non-verbal emotional cues of others to avoid many disadvantages. Meanwhile, a lack of awareness and understanding of one's emotions causes similar, if not more, difficulties in interpersonal exchanges. As a result, low EI individuals often find themselves caught in conflict, misunderstanding, and confusion.

Constrained by low EI, these individuals› work lives can be negatively affected in various ways. They may need more support in their effort to seek employment. For example, low ability or inability to perceive even supposedly «trivial» emotional cues in a job interview may be regarded as a sign of incompetence in communication and thus jeopardizes one›s opportunity to compete with others whose other qualifications may not be as strong as the low EI applicant. Likewise, a low caliber to perceive emotions may limit workplace communication with coworkers and supervisors. Consequently, others might see a low EI worker as not being a cooperative and constructive team member. At best, this could pose unnecessary communication barriers between the low EI individual and others. At worst, this could lead to a damaged collegial relationship, low productivity level, and missed career advancement opportunities for the low EI individual.

Branch 2: Use of Emotions

A second issue for individuals with low EI is the inability to use emotions for optimal cognitive processing. According to Mayer et al. (2004), individuals with low EI have difficulties using emotions to facilitate thinking and problem-solving. Nevertheless, work requires that individuals utilize their emotions positively and productively. Therefore, emotions can be used effectively while approaching tasks and handling demands and challenges in the workplace. For instance, using both calmness and excitement in a balanced manner can be a requirement for a person to carry out a task, such as a professional presentation, at work. A calm mood helps the person concentrate better and be more meticulous and accurate, while being in an excited mood may help stimulate the individual to be engaged in the task with higher interest, working toward a more productive and creative end.

Individuals with low EI, however, have little or no sense of using their emotions to enhance their cognitive functioning in their work life. They have little self-efficacy or belief in accomplishing tasks involving emotions (Udayar et al., 2020). In the case of a job search, an individual with low EI may have a hard time thinking of and expressing a balanced mood while presenting and marketing oneself to the prospective employer. As a result, the low EI individual may be perceived by others as possessing little enthusiasm and initiative in the potential career opportunity. Such incidents may become repeated in similar contexts when individuals with low EI fail to demonstrate their basic emotional competence because they cannot harness their emotions at work. When this incompetence of using emotions optimally and effectively is recognized as a liability to the present or future job performance, one's vocational development and career success are adversely affected.

Branch 3: Comprehension of Emotions

The third aspect of persons with low EI is the inability to comprehend emotional language or to discern slight variations between emotions, such as frustration, irritation, sorrow, and depression (Mayer et al., 2004). Individuals with low EI possess little or no knowledge of a basic sense of empathy in interpersonal relationships. Empathy involves recognizing and understanding others' emotions, with the appreciation that these emotions may not be the same as ours (Cuff et al., 2016). High trait empathy is associated with various successes in the workplace, including pro-organizational behaviour and leadership emergence, among effective behaviours (Clark et al., 2019).

Individuals with low EI and low empathy often have difficulties comprehending emotions in the workplace (Clark et al., 2019). For example, when hearing a co-worker's grief, the low EI individual may react insensitively without showing the needed support, compassion, kindness, or understanding of the situation. Similarly, in discussing the allocation of a work assignment within the team, the individual with low EI may ignore what other colleagues in the situation have to say. Failing to understand how others would feel about the matter, the low EI individual may say things and act in ways that seem careless and disrespectful to other people's perspectives and emotions. Hence, others may interpret the low EI individual's lack of empathy as coldness, unfriendliness, and self-centeredness. The result of this interpretation may often lay the roots for a non-collegial atmosphere entangled with a lack of cooperation, mistrust, or even hostility and conflict in the workplace.

Branch 4: Management of Emotions

The fourth major issue concerning individuals with low EI is their inability to manage their emotions (Mayer et al., 2004). This means that these individuals often have difficulty controlling their emotions, which can jeopardize their ability to establish social networks. Mood regulation is the inward analysis of one›s emotions and the ability to control disruptive moods or impulses to promote improved judgement and coping skills in daily interpersonal exchange. Without the mental capacity and necessary skills to manage emotions, individuals with low EI often show low proficiency in managing relationships in the workplace (Adeoye & Torubelli, 2011). In work life, ineffective or low control of one's mood may make low EI individuals much more

susceptible to situations of failure of communication, soured interpersonal relationships, suspicion of ill will, and other relational conflicts. As a result, they are likelier to have a lower organizational commitment to their employer and work team (Adeoye & Torubelli, 2011).

For individuals with low EI, failing to manage emotions can occur under any circumstances of their work life, regardless of the nature, scale, and consequence of such incidences. For example, in a job interview, a low EI individual may moodily ascribe his previous job loss to others' fault. Also, a low EI person may easily show verbal and bodily disinterest and impatience during a business encounter without letting the other parties finish the whole presentation of their views. Moreover, a person with low EI may not be able to control her temper and turn a simple disagreement on a task into a heated argument that is unnecessary and should have been easily avoided. To make things worse, an individual with low EI may be more prone to losing control of his temper and yelling at their boss over a slight difference in opinion. These conflicts may often poison the interaction between the low EI individuals and others around them in various vocational contexts, where increased tension and distress may negatively drain all parties involved in such emotional conflicts. Of note, this kind of interpersonal constraint can negatively affect the low EI individuals themselves as they feel they are disliked, misunderstood, and alienated.

The social and interpersonal aspect has become increasingly important in today's world of work. In other words, nearly all kinds of work require interpersonal contact to achieve organizational goals and objectives for workplace productivity, effectiveness, and efficiency. As most organizational tasks are accomplished in teams, possessing strong interpersonal skills has become essential for workers in most workplaces. Organizations seek individuals who can successfully interact with others and possess soft skills, such as effective communication, attentive listening, flexibility, creative thinking, and other people-oriented skills. Thus, the lack of self-management of emotions poses a considerable roadblock that can be hindering or even detrimental to low EI individuals' successful access to employment, ability to maintain a more desirable occupation, and opportunity to prosper and advance in their career prospects.

Strengthening Emotional Intelligence in Life-Careers

Many programs currently exist that claim to improve EI; however, current literature suggests they have a moderately positive effect on improving participants' EI. Three meta-analyses published between 2018 and 2019 (Hodzic et al., 2018; Kotsou et al., 2019; Mattingly & Kraiger, 2019) investigated the effectiveness of various EI training methods. Hodzic et al. (2018) analyzed 24 studies that looked at various EI teaching methods for adults and the various outcomes of these EI interventions. The EI interventions were based on a variety of theoretical models. Mayer and Savoy's model (cited as Mayer et al., 2004) was the most common intervention approach. These interventions applied the four branches of EI abilities discussed above (perception, use, comprehension, and management of emotions). Training models based on Mayer and Savoy's model (2004) had the greatest standard mean change between pre and post-intervention EI measures (Hodzic et al., 2018). However, all EI models (including mixed and trait) displayed moderate standard mean changes. Follow-up effects were also maintained. Hodzic et al. (2018) suggested that EI can be increased through training and interventions, with training models that use Mayer and Savoy's (2004) ability model having the greatest effect size.

A similar systematic review by Kotsou et al. (2019) found comparable results to Hodzic et al. (2018); there were moderate improvements in EI and other wellbeing outcomes because of EI training. Kotsou et al. (2019) provided recommendations for further research on EI training effectiveness including standardized pre- and post-intervention EI measures, peer and manager EI ratings more frequently versus self-reports, and longer-term follow-up (Kotsou et al., 2019). Mattingly and Kraiger (2019) analyzed both published and unpublished studies on the effectiveness of EI training, finding moderate positive effects on EI measures and other outcomes (well-being, psychological health, interpersonal relations) between pre- and post-intervention. Unlike Hodzic et al. (2018), Mattingly & Kraiger (2019) did not find any significant difference in the effect sizes of EI training based on the training model (i.e., ability-based, trait-based). In summation, the results of these three recent reviews on the effectiveness of EI training in the workplace indicate that moderate effects of these training programs appear to be present and that there is no conclusive "superior" training method.

A study by Nelis et al. (2009) provides a sample of a typical EI intervention using the Mayer and Savoy's (2004) model of EI. In the study, participants attended four training sessions, once per week, that were 2.5 hours long, based on the four branches of EI. The training sessions included readings, group discussions, short lectures, and role-plays.

Activities to improve the perception of emotion included "identifying one's emotions using three doors (e.g., physiological activation, cognitions, and action tendencies), facial expression decoding… and asking the right question and empathic" (Nelis et al., 2009, p. 40). These activities address the potential underlying causes of miscommunication and confusion by helping the student identify another person's feelings. Next, activities to improve the student's skills in using and comprehending their emotions were explained. For example, instruction on coping strategies, how to use them in response to intense emotions, and the effectiveness of these strategies were taught and discussed in a group setting. Mind-body awareness and relaxation exercises were also taught in this module to assist in regulating intense emotional responses. These lessons aimed to help control strong emotions by helping students become aware of their reactions and put space between feelings and responses, and then, if necessary, relaxation exercises are used to reduce intense emotions.

Finally, in the managing emotions module, Nelis et al. (2009) included a lesson on positive reappraisal. By helping the participants focus on a positive aspect of a situation instead of the negative, students experienced overall greater and more frequent positive affect, and therefore an increase in positive interpersonal experiences. All the managing emotion module activities helped establish and nurture social networks, which are also crucial for vocational success.

Overall, this EI intervention led to improvements in the "perceiving" and "managing" branches, according to the Mayer and Savoy (2004) model of EI. While no significant changes were found in the "understanding" branch, the researchers speculated that the reason for this may be because the lesson in emotion comprehension was not based on the framework related to the specific assessment of this EI branch (Nelis et al., 2009). The use of emotions was not measured in this study. Overall, these findings were consistent across all participants and did not depend on the participants' initial level of emotional intelligence. In a career counselling setting, if the counsellor could help low EI clients to at least perceive and manage their emotions, it could have a positive impact on the client's ability to secure employment and to be successful in their employment long-term.

Suggested Career Counselling Strategies: Using EI Within Current Career Theories

To effectively help individuals with low EI manage their work life, it will be essential to impart skills in as many of the four branches of EI as possible: perceiving emotion, using emotion effectively, comprehending the meaning of emotion, and successfully managing emotion. Two career theories that could adequately integrate these criteria include Cochran›s Narrative Career Counselling Theory and the Social Cognitive Career Theory. In both theories, there are opportunities for career counsellors to help individuals build EI skills while supporting the client›s self-efficacy at the same time.

Narrative Career Counselling

In Cochran›s Narrative Career Counselling approach, the client has seven steps: 1. Elaborating on a Career Problem, 2. Composing a Life History, 3. Eliciting a Future Narrative, 4. Reality Construction, 5. Changing a Life Structure, 6. Enacting a Role, and 7. Crystallizing a Decision. The first three steps focus on meaning-making, the second three on the client's action, and the final step on solidifying a final decision (Cochran, 1997).

In the first three steps, the client is encouraged to identify their career challenge(s), narrate a life history, and create a future narrative. When the client conveys past events and challenges in their life through narrative, the counsellor can get a clearer picture of how their client interacts with the world around them and what lessons they are taking from these interactions (Young et al., 2002; Young et al., 2007). Listening to the client's stories can also help a counsellor identify patterns of behaviour that may reveal meaning behind the client's interactions at work that the client may not be aware of (Cochran, 1997).

Using narratives, the client will also have an opportunity to create a more desirable future story with more focus on their personal values. Similarly, using narratives to create a future career story can help the client determine what behaviours they need to engage in to achieve their future goals. For example, the client may need to learn how to manage intense emotions or listen empathically if they wish to become a manager. This leads to Steps 4, 5 and 6.

With this information, the career counsellor can then tailor an appropriate intervention to include skill building in one or more of the four branches of EI. In Steps 4, 5, and 6, the counsellor will be able to suggest actions for the client to take to make progress toward the goals that were outlined collaboratively during the creation of a future narrative in the third step. During this process, the career counsellor can incorporate the client's thoughts and feedback on how specific EI skills can help to improve their work life. Encouraging the client to reflect on previous interpersonal experiences can also provide a source of valuable information to the client and directs the locus of control internally. By helping the client to see where they have control over their actions, a greater sense of self-efficacy is likely to emerge (Bandura, 1995; Lent et al., 2017).

In-session role-plays combined with psychoeducation will help illustrate practical ways of perceiving, using, comprehending, and managing emotion. Furthermore, it can help in developing a new skill "reality" for the client (Step 4). There are several possible techniques a career counsellor can employ. For example, to work on perceiving emotion, the career counsellor can show a variety of photographs with different facial expressions and ask the client to identify what the individual might be feeling. This will help the low EI client better understand others' non-verbal language. Role-play between the career counsellor and the client could help the low EI client to practice empathic responses and to discuss what it is like to understand someone else's point of view. Managing emotion will also be critical to building healthy workplace relationships. Relaxation exercises and practicing constructive responses to strong negative feelings (e.g., anger, disappointment, jealousy) may help individuals with lower EI learn how to respond in emotionally challenging situations. These exercises will assist in illustrating how perception, comprehension, and management of emotion contribute to building relationships in the workplace.

Practice and reflection over several weeks will ensure the client maintains the skills learned in the counselling sessions. Meeting with a career counsellor once per week will be most helpful if supplemented with homework assignments such as additional readings related to EI and keeping a reflection journal (Darce Pool & Qualter, 2012). By reading additional information on EI and keeping a journal, the client is more likely to reflect on how this information is relevant to their own life and the example of interpersonal situations in which EI can help to create a positive outcome. A reflection journal will also help the client to keep track of an emerging personal theme or career project. This further solidifies their new career life structure (Step 5).

In Step 6, Enacting a Role, the client can work with the counsellor by trying the new EI skills out in the workplace or during interviews. For example, the low EI client may begin by actively listening to their coworkers. An unemployed, low EI client may be able to practice active listening skills and manage emotions in interviews, such as nervousness. Feedback and support from the career counsellor during this time will be very important because the client may or may not be successful at first. Discouragement can lead to early dropout before the training is over and before the client can integrate the EI information they have learned. The counsellor's support during these challenges will assist the client in overcoming obstacles and maintaining confidence in their ability to develop EI skills.

Finally, in Step 7, Crystallizing a Decision, the client begins to understand which solutions are appropriate for their career problem. In the final stages of this process, the career counsellor helps the low EI client to identify which skills relating to the four branches of EI have been most helpful to the client in their journey to achieving their career goal. Using this information, the career counsellor can then help the client to solidify these EI skills by creating a plan in which they will be practiced regularly. The career counsellor can help the low EI client identify potential obstacles that the client may encounter and discuss how to overcome them should they arise. By anticipating future challenges along with the solutions to manage them, the client can gain confidence in their EI abilities.

The EI Blueprint is one exercise that mirrors the four branches of EI and lends itself to Cochran's Narrative Career Counselling approach (Brackett & Katulak, 2007). This process works well within Narrative Career Counselling because it effectively guides the client through a storytelling process. Using four questions,

the EI Blueprint asks a client to describe the details an interpersonal interaction as they relate to the four branches of EI. The questions are:

1. How was each person feeling? (Perception of emotion)
2. What were you and the other person thinking about due to those feelings? (Use of emotion)
3. What caused each person to feel the way he/she did? (Comprehension of emotion)
4. What did you and the other person do to manage those feelings? (Managing emotion)

After the four questions have been answered, the participant is asked to reflect on the interaction and write out how the situation could have been handled effectively. This also aligns with Step 7 of the Narrative Career Counselling approach.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is another career counselling approach that integrates EI skills training. SCCT posits that specific cognitive processes are responsible for influencing an individual's career behaviours (Lent et al., 2002; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent & Brown, 2017). Specifically, the cognitive concepts of outcome expectations, personal goals, and self-efficacy can significantly impact an individual's behaviour and subsequent career success. Working with these three cognitive concepts, a counsellor can effectively teach EI skills that will also support the career development.

Outcome Expectations

Outcome expectations are an individual's estimate of the probability of an outcome. For individuals with low EI, misinterpreting interpersonal cues can skew their outcome expectations. For example, if an individual perceives their boss as being overly critical, they may expect a confrontational outcome. As a result, they may behave very defensively. This may affect their relationship with their boss, hindering their career success. Improving EI can help the client improve their ability to detect their boss' emotional cues. The counsellor will also work on the client's outcome expectations based on their improved emotional perception abilities. This will guide the client towards more desirable and emotionally intelligent responses.

Personal Goals

The counsellor can also use personal goal setting to encourage the client as they learn EI skills and put them into practice. The client's goals should be created after considering an initial assessment of EI, such as the EQ-i 2.0 by Multi-Heath Systems Inc or the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test 2.0 (MSCEIT 2.0; Bru-Luna et al., 2021). A career counsellor may want to help the client establish concrete and meaningful goals and explain how EI can contribute to achieving those goals. Once the client understands the connection, they are more likely to behave in a way that will lead them toward their goal and employ the EI skills to help achieve it. The satisfaction of achieving goals is quite powerful and makes goals potentially self-motivating (Lent & Brown, 2019). Furthermore, as clients become more familiar with how to perceive, use, comprehend and manage emotions correctly, they may experience an intrinsic motivation to use their EI skills due to the more positive interpersonal interactions they create.

Self-Efficacy

Finally, to support the persistence it will take to learn how to perceive, use, comprehend and manage emotion, the counsellor can work directly with the client›s beliefs related to their EI self-efficacy. Individuals with low self-efficacy are more likely to feel overwhelmed and may not persist on difficult tasks (Lent et al., 2002; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent & Brown, 2019). During this time, the individual may feel discouraged and not want to keep up with the assigned career counselling practice and homework tasks. By helping the client understand that building EI skills takes time, and providing feedback on improvements made, the counsellor

can foster self-efficacy within the client as he or she progresses through the training. Using the reflection journal can also be helpful for the client to refer to moments when they have felt successful in applying EI skills, which can function as a reinforcement of their progress.

While having a high level of self-efficacy is helpful, it is important to note that self-efficacy is not a substitute for ability. The counsellor should mitigate a client's overestimation of their ability, if it should arise, to prevent discouragement when the client's outcome does not meet his or her expectations. The key to achieving this balance resides primarily in the first few sessions. Matthews et al. (2012) explained the importance of getting the client to buy into the process and having him or her set meaningful and realistic goals. By doing so, the client is prepared and motivated for the work ahead. By setting realistic goals, the career counsellor can create realistic expectations, whose achievement will support the client's self-efficacy. Discussing how achieving these EI goals will create positive change in the client's life will not only motivate the client but will also highlight the active role that the client needs to take. Both will further support the client's sense of career self-efficacy.

Conclusion

With the latest research outlining the importance of EI in career success and career well-being, EI training proves to be a precious tool in career counselling settings. Providing support in EI skills training particularly for individuals with low EI, career counsellors can help clients secure work and thrive in their workplace settings. Using experiential exercises, journaling, and support from the career counsellor, EI training can become a crucial tool in the career counselling profession. Therefore, career counselors should acquire training in emotional intelligence to offer additional guidance and counsel individuals who may struggle in interpersonal situations. As a result, EI training could take on a more central role in career counselling in general.

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