

Emotional intelligence: Fact or fad?

September 14 2012, by Dr Carolyn Maccann

Emotional intelligence is not the cure-all elixir for spotting who will succeed in work and life, but it is more than a useless fad, says Carolyn MacCann.

Popular interest in emotional intelligence began with a 1995 self-help book called *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*, written by psychologist Daniel Goleman.

Goleman proposed that IQ is not the only road to success, and that emotional skills are more important in many areas of life. He packed the book with references to research by high-calibre academics, supporting the credibility of his ideas.

The book sold like hot cakes, and the concept took off. Suddenly emotional intelligence was everywhere: on the [Oprah Winfrey](#) show, on the cover of *TIME Magazine*, voted the most useful new word by the American Dialect Society, and enthusiastically used by business and HR professionals for selection, training and evaluation.

The suddenness and the extent of this popularity lent emotional intelligence an air of faddishness. The cartoon Dilbert lampooned emotional intelligence as a meaningless executive buzzword with one character telling another: "You have to consider my 'emotional intelligence', which is defined in a book I haven't read".

Despite its popularity at the time, there was little to no evidence emotional intelligence was more important than IQ for job performance.

Although academic research began in 1990, by 1999 only a handful of peer-reviewed studies had been published.

So why did emotional intelligence become so popular in the absence of any evidence? To answer this question, it helps to understand what was going on in [psychological testing](#) when the hype began.

Runaway success leaves science behind

In the early to mid-nineties, it was all about IQ. Research had shown that how smart you were would determine your success in life—not just academic and job success, but how long you would live, your health, divorce rates and whether you would end up in prison or not.

In 1994, a book called *The Bell Curve* summarised research on race differences in intelligence in the USA. The book also proposed that different rates of success between races were due to different levels of intelligence between races. This caused a huge public furore with the authors accused of racism. Intelligence research and intelligence tests became tarred with the same brush.

Research scientists, and the public, were looking for an alternative to intelligence—something that was a better explanation for why people succeed or fail in their lives. When Goleman's book came out the year after *The Bell Curve*, emotional intelligence shot to popularity. People believed that EI was much more important than IQ, and acted accordingly.

The sudden spike in popularity had two consequences.

First, research could not keep pace with popular demand for emotional intelligence test batteries and training programs. Because tried and tested methods did not exist, HR professionals used whatever was available.

Claims about the effectiveness of emotional intelligence were also untested, yet were widely believed.

The second consequence of this popularity was that many independent teams became interested in emotional intelligence at the same time, and began working in parallel. Without knowing what others were doing, different research teams defined emotional intelligence differently, measured it differently, and made quite different claims about what emotional intelligence was good for.

In an effort to end the confusion, researchers classified different types of emotional intelligence research into two kinds: 'ability models', and 'mixed models'.

Ability models defined emotional intelligence as an ability just like verbal, numerical, or musical ability, except that the content area was human emotions rather than words, numbers, or music. Mixed models were much more inclusive, defining emotional intelligence as a large number of character traits, motivation levels, and/or learned skills.

There were a large number of mixed model definitions of emotional intelligence, but really only one main ability model definition. Professor John Mayer, at the University of New Hampshire, had been quietly studying emotional intelligence years before Goleman's book pushed it into the spotlight.

Mayer's definition is now the most widely used and agreed upon. He defines emotional intelligence as four key capacities: "the capacity to perceive emotions, assimilate emotion-related feelings, understand the information of those emotions, and manage them."

Mayer and colleagues also developed a test to measure emotional intelligence, and most of the research on ability-based emotional

intelligence comes from this test.

So does it really work?

It's now almost 20 years since emotional intelligence leapt into the spotlight, and there is now enough research to evaluate those early claims using meta-analysis (a statistical technique for summarising the results of many different studies).

Let's consider the claim that emotional intelligence is more important than IQ for predicting success. Differences between people's IQ scores can explain about 25 percent of the differences between people's job performance. In contrast, differences in people's emotional intelligence can explain just over 3 percent of differences in job performance. For jobs that require workers to express positive emotions (for example, service with a smile for customer service), differences in emotional intelligence explain around 7 percent of differences in job performance. So the idea that emotional intelligence is more important than IQ is plainly not true.

Sceptics might believe that the blatant falseness of these early claims deem emotional intelligence a useless fad. However, there are several reasons why this viewpoint might be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

First, explaining 3 to 7 percent of the differences between people is non-trivial. Being 7 percent more efficient is equivalent to an extra three to four weeks of work per year.

Second, there are a lot of complex professional jobs where low-IQ people are simply not hired. In these jobs, there are few differences between people in IQ, so other characteristics (such as emotional intelligence) are more important explanations for why people succeed.

Third, performing well at work is not the only important part of life. My research shows people with high emotional intelligence tend to use more effective coping strategies, and to feel more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions .

In addition, my colleagues and I found that differences in people's emotional intelligence can explain 29 percent of the differences in people's eudaimonic wellbeing (the aspect of wellbeing related to reaching one's potential).

The conclusion seems to be that emotional intelligence is not the cure-all elixir that early claims suggested. Moreover, a lot of untested products and claims still abound in management and business circles. But research demonstrates that emotional intelligence really can be important for emotion-related jobs, and for life outcomes outside of work.

Most people would like to cope more effectively with stress, and feel greater meaning and wellbeing in their lives. [Emotional intelligence](#) can be a valuable tool to achieve these outcomes.

Provided by University of Sydney

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