

Why Emotional Intelligence Is a Critical Skill for the Future Workforce

While artificial intelligence and automation take over routine mental and physical tasks, Emotional Intelligence (EI) is becoming the key differentiator in achieving excellence in individual and organizational engagement, product innovation, and customer experience. **BY BILL BENJAMIN**



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The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, technological disruption, and robotics is driving the need for increased Emotional Intelligence (EI) skills in the future workforce. We define EI as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions and recognize, understand, and influence the emotions of others.

Consider the following:

1. The World Economic Forum has ranked Emotional Intelligence as one of the top 10 skills needed for the fourth industrial revolution in 2020 and beyond.

2. The McKinsey Group has identified that between now and 2030, the need for social and emotional skills will grow at a much faster pace than the need for cognitive skills.

3. The Institute for Health and Human Potential's research indicates that Emotional Intelligence skills now account for 85 to 90 percent of what is required for exceptional performance and leadership (www.ihhp.com/future). This percentage keeps growing as more Millennials enter the workforce.

4. A recent *Harvard Business Review* article, "The EI Advantage," states: "Corporate cultures that lack EI are becoming a major liability as business environments change."

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ALL LEVELS OF THE ORGANIZATION

Emotional Intelligence skills are no longer only necessary for people responsible for coaching and developing others. The need for EI skills is significant at all levels of an organization:

- **Individual contributors.** With the dramatic increase in the knowledge required to do any job function and the complexity of business processes,

every role in an organization requires collaboration in order to solve problems and remain competitive through innovation—even the most technical roles. In addition, with technology disruption, people have a higher rate of change thrust upon them, requiring flexibility and agility that was not needed as much as only a few decades ago.

- **Customer-facing roles.** Having a great product or service is the table stakes for a business nowadays. The companies that truly excel are those that build an emotional connection with their customers and create raving fans who recommend them at every chance, including on social media.

- **Salespeople.** The need to be able to connect with clients and be resilient is not new for people in sales positions. What has become clearer is the direct return on investment for having salespeople who are high in EI. For example, a study by Sanofi Aventis found that a group of salespeople trained in Emotional Intelligence outsold a control group that did not receive the training by 12 percent.

- **Leadership roles.** People don't leave companies, people leave people. The No. 1 driver of employee engagement and retention is employees' relationship with their direct supervisor and the degree to which they feel valued, coached and developed, trusted and included. This requires the manager to have strong Emotional Intelligence and coaching skills.

- **Millennials and older generations.** Rajat Shah, executive vice president and chief operating officer of U.S. Bridge, a global leader that has built more than 10,000 bridges in 50 countries, finds that when teams have high degrees of EI skills, Millennials and older workers start to behave in similar ways, with a shared sense of values and capabilities. "Older workers start to behave like Millennials," he says. "They want to do the same things. They want to grow and learn, even in the late stages of their careers."

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND INNOVATION

In today's world of ever-increasing technology disruption, companies that aren't able to innovate may not exist in 10 or 20 years. Think of the fate of Kodak, Blockbuster, Atari, and even taxi companies. According to the *Harvard Business Review* article: "Today, decisions are made so quickly that organizations no longer can rely on time-consuming, top-down decision-making and orders dictated from above. More often, individuals must collaborate with each other to solve problems and develop innovative solutions on their own."

We're all naturally creative. Everyone has ideas on how to improve the organization. We all like to have input into things that are important to us. If we're not using our creativity and innovating, it's because an emotion is holding us back.

Most of us have a number of emotional responses to various events during the day: an unexpected request, a client demand, a comment or an e-mail, or a look from another person. When we have this reaction, our emotional system causes us to lose thinking capacity and working memory. We then lose perspective and cannot create as many options or solutions—we lose our ability to innovate. When we have an emotional response, we have a "need to be right," and are no longer able to consider other solutions. We become tied to "we've always done it this way," and resistant to new ideas and change.

Let's say a client calls and complains, and then threatens to take their business elsewhere. The team has an emotional response, looks at who's at fault, focuses on justifying their actions, starts blaming, and moves to right/wrong thinking. This has a serious impact on trust and collaboration, impairing the organization's ability to respond to the client. If team members have learned to manage their emotions, they are able to avoid these destructive behaviors and keep the outcome in mind. They come up with creative solutions, solve the problem, and keep the client's business.

Another example where emotions can stifle innovation: Your organization wants people to share their ideas in meetings. The reason people don't share their ideas is they often are afraid someone might get upset if they challenge old ways of doing things or they are afraid their idea will be rejected. Once they learn to understand their emotions, and manage them, people are more likely to overcome the fear that keeps them

from speaking up. Leaders also can learn how to create an environment where people are willing to take the risk and share their ideas—even when it comes in the form of critical feedback.

The EI-based skills of managing our own emotions and creating psychological safety for others are the keys to fostering great innovation.

IT'S NOT EASY, BUT IT'S CRITICAL TO YOUR FUTURE WORKFORCE

According to Harvard research, only 18 percent of companies have Emotional Intelligence ingrained in their culture and only 10 percent actually measure the level of EI in their organization.

Why are these numbers so low? It goes back to the third industrial revolution. "Most people value EI capabilities, but organizational processes and systems can work against them. The challenge goes back to Taylorism in the 19th century and the drive for efficiency on the assembly line. Achieving that efficiency included monitoring people with stopwatches. People were basically cogs in a machine that should be made as efficient as possible," according to Annie McKee, senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania School of Education.

Fast forward 100 years and machines now are running the assembly lines—not to mention a whole bunch of other things—leaving humans to focus on the roles that require social and emotional mastery. McKinsey predicts that time spent at work using these kinds of skills will increase by 26 percent by 2030 across all industries. That outpaces all other human functions, including physical labor and cognitive skills.

Forward-thinking organizations are cultivating Emotional Intelligence skills in their employees to strengthen the relationships they have with their employees and their customers, and to foster greater innovation and agility. As the *Harvard Business Review* article states, "Outstanding interpersonal and leadership skills are a 'must have' if organizations are going to keep pace with their competitors and the social cultures they inhabit."

Emotional Intelligence is the critical skill your organization needs to develop in its workforce in order to survive—and thrive—in the continuing technology revolution we are facing over the coming decades. ■

For information on the Institute for Health and Human Potential's online Emotional Intelligence training, visit: www.ihhp.com/liveonline