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## The biggest predictor of career success? Not skills or education - but emotional intelligence

By Ray Williams

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What determines the probable future career success of individuals? Is it intelligence, technical knowledge and skills, their socio-economic background or educational success? Are the forces that make success the same for Generations X and Y as they are for the Baby Boomers? These questions have been researched extensively by recruiters, talent management experts and human behaviour researchers in the past decade.

The answers now point to emotional competencies. First, it's important to note that a distinct North American and particularly American myth has been perpetuated that colours our perspective on career success: The "self-made man" or "anyone can make it to the top" myth. While it may have been true in the last century and the early part of this one, evidence doesn't support its veracity now. Researchers for the past century have investigated the determinants of career success. While intelligence has been the most consistent factor in determining job success, the definition of intelligence has expanded to include emotional intelligence.

A 2006 study by Accenture of 251 executives in six countries concluded that while intelligence is important for career success, it's a matter of how you are smart. Interpersonal competence, self-awareness and social awareness - all elements of emotional intelligence - are better predictors of who will succeed and who won't. A recent study, published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*<sup>3</sup>, by Ernest O'Boyle Jr. at Virginia Commonwealth University, concludes that emotional intelligence is the strongest predictor of job performance. Numerous other studies have shown that high emotional intelligence boosts career success. For example, the U.S. Air Force found that the most successful recruiters scored significantly higher on the emotional intelligence competencies of empathy and self-awareness. An analysis of more than 300 top level executives from 15 global companies showed that six emotional competencies distinguished the stars from the average. In a large beverage firm, using standard methods to hire division presidents, 50% left within two years, mostly because of poor performance. When the firms started selecting based on emotional competencies, only 6% left and they performed in the top third of executive ranks.

Research by the Center for Creative Leadership has found the primary cause of executive derailment involves deficits in emotional competence. A recent study, published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* by Lillian Eby and her colleagues - psychologists at the University of Georgia - looked at predictors of success in the current era of "boundaryless" careers. They conclude linear, life span careers with traditional measures of success no longer exist. In boundaryless careers, the Financial Post: The biggest predictor of career success? Not skills or education - but emotional intelligence. Importance of psychological success - pride, and personal accomplishment - becomes more important than external or tangible indicators such as salary growth. The second factor they identify is "knowing whom" or developing positive relationships, including the skill of networking. The final factor they identify is "knowing how," or educational/training, and job skills. The researchers conclude that among the three factors, "knowing why" or self-awareness and meaning, were the most important set of predictors for career success.

Can you improve your emotional intelligence? Nearly 3,000 scientific articles have been published on EQ since the concept was first introduced. These studies conclude that while EQ is mostly influenced by our early childhood experiences, it can be improved with substantial effort, guidance, and coaching. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, author of *The Psychology of Personnel Selection*, argues that career success in traditional organizations favoured the less creatively talented people because of the reliance on command-and-control management structures. In the clear boundary organizations and careers, he says, the prescription for workplace success was "be predictable, minimize your bosses' workload and suck up to them." He bases these conclusions not on cognitive or psychological assessments but on an observation of

what managers want of their employees - get stuff done quickly, be efficient and do exactly what the boss wants. Unfortunately, he says, that precludes many brilliant, talented creative people and those with an entrepreneurial spirit, who are uncomfortable with close and authoritative supervision. Further, the predominant traditional stereotype of organizational leader as a confident, even aggressive, extroverted male whose strengths are strategic decision-making and performance management, with little concern about emotional competencies is being slowly replaced by leaders whose prime strengths lie in the emotional competencies realm.

So it seems that emotional competencies, and the capacity to build and manage positive relationships are replacing traditional skill based or cognitive assessment as a way of predicting potential and continuing career success.

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