



# Emotional intelligence as a predictor of employees' career adaptability



Melinde Coetzee\*, Nisha Harry

Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, University of South Africa, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence and career adaptability are crucial psychosocial meta-capacities for successful adaptation in various spheres of life, including the realm of careers. However, little is known about the relationship between emotional intelligence and Savickas's (2005) notion of career adaptability. The current research examines the relation of emotional intelligence to career adaptability. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with a sample of 409 early career black call center agents (Mean age = 32) employed in three of the largest outsourced financial call centers in Africa. Canonical correlation analysis and structural equation modeling confirmed the predictive validity of emotional intelligence in relation to career adaptability. The results showed that managing one's own emotions contributes the most in explaining overall emotional intelligence and the variance in overall career adaptability with its four domains of career concern, career control, career confidence and career curiosity. The results of the study highlight the importance of developing individuals' emotional intelligence in order to strengthen their career adaptability. The research contributed new and valuable insights that may inform career development interventions for call center agents.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's global economy, coping with the stress associated with career uncertainty and the unpredictability of ongoing changes requires frequent emotional and cognitive adjustments. To respond effectively to career transitions, individuals must display both emotional intelligence (Yitshaki, 2012) and career adaptability (Savickas, 2005, 2013). People's emotional intelligence is acknowledged as a crucial psychosocial meta-capacity for successful adaptation in various spheres of life (Jain, 2012), including the realm of careers (Puffer, 2011). However, research on emotional intelligence as a psychosocial meta-capacity for adapting to the turbulence and stress is limited (Harry & Coetzee, 2011). There is more evidence that career adaptability is a psychosocial meta-competency required to make effective career transitions. Career adaptability has recently gained momentum as an important psychosocial meta-capacity for coping positively with chaotic employment conditions (Johnston, Luciano, Maggiori, Ruch, & Rossier, 2013; Porfeli & Savickas, 2012; Savickas, 2011). Career adaptability represents individuals' resources (attitudes, beliefs and competencies) to respond to potentially stressful work-related situations and challenges (Johnston et al., 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Research on emotional intelligence and career adaptability has been separately pursued in contexts other than call centers and in relation to various dispositional variables. For example, emotional intelligence has been shown to relate to career commitment (Carson & Carson, 1998), career self-management (Brown, George-Curran, & Smith, 2003) and career exploration (Dahl, Austin, Wagner, & Lukas, 2008; Puffer, 2011). Career adaptability has been shown to relate to personality (Teixeira, Bardagi, Lassance, Magalhães, & Duarte, 2012), employability skills (De Guzman & Choi, 2013), orientations to happiness and work stress (Johnston et al., 2013), and general and professional well-being (Maggiori, Johnston, Krings, Massopudi, & Rossier, 2013). The paucity of

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, Pretorius Street, Muckleneuk, Pretoria 0003, South Africa.

E-mail address: [coetzem1@unisa.ac.za](mailto:coetzem1@unisa.ac.za) (M. Coetzee).

research to jointly explore these constructs warrants the present study. The present study aimed to add to the extant literature on career development and well-being by investigating whether individuals' emotional intelligence significantly and positively predicts their career adaptability.

We expected that emotional intelligence would positively predict career adaptability. In line with the reasoning of Cobb and Mayer (2000) and Savickas and Porfeli (2012), both constructs are self-regulatory strategies and capacities that serve as important psychosocial resources in the person (psychological) and environment (social) interaction (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Apart from other more stable personality traits that individuals may possess, emotional intelligence and career adaptability are thought to be more malleable cognitive–affective behavioral latent traits and abilities that can be improved through training, counseling, and coaching (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2011; Di Fabio, Palazzeschi, & Bar-On, 2012; Johnston et al., 2013; Porfeli & Savickas, 2012; Savickas, 2005). Research that examines the relationship between emotional intelligence and career adaptability is therefore deemed important because it may inform the design of interventions that help individuals successfully manage their career development and well-being in a demanding work environment.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Emotional intelligence

The original ability–trait (mixed) model of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) is relevant to the present study. Salovey and Mayer (1990) espouse emotional intelligence as a set of information-processing skills that individuals use to construct reality from emotional stimuli for the purpose of managing life in an adaptive manner (Puffer, 2011). Emotional intelligence is seen as the characteristic ability to perceive and express emotion accurately and adaptively, the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge, the ability to use feeling to facilitate thought, intellectual growth and problem-solving, and the ability to regulate emotions in oneself and in others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Subsumed under these emotional intelligence abilities are cognitive self-regulatory processes such as an objective awareness and appraisal of one's own and others' feelings, the ability to manage and express these feelings and using emotions to motivate as part of the utilization of emotions (Cobb & Mayer, 2000). These processes are thought to be important psychological resources for adaptive intrapersonal and interpersonal emotional functioning (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Schutte, Malouff, & Bhullar, 2009).

Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey (2000) conceptualize emotional intelligence as an ability that is similar to cognitive intelligence. According to Caruso, Mayer, and Salovey (2002), emotional functioning forms an integral part of individual's thinking and reasoning (cognitive) functioning and intelligence. However, in contrast to cognitive and social intelligences, Schutte et al. (2008) argue that emotional intelligence can be seen as a latent trait, competency or skill within the individual that may or may not be displayed in the individual's everyday functioning. The underlying assumption is that emotional intelligence provides the potential for performance, rather than performance itself; how individuals would use this latent potential is a matter of personal choice (Jain, 2012).

A handful of researchers emphasize the importance of emotion and emotional intelligence in explaining and understanding career behavior. Kidd (1998) emphasized the role of emotional experience, expression and communication when discussing career decision making. People use both emotional and cognitive abilities when constructing and developing narratives about career (Brown et al., 2003). Carson and Carson (1998) reported a positive relation between individuals' emotional intelligence and their career commitment. Emotion is thought to energize, control and regulate action (Young, Paseluikho, & Valach, 1997) and therefore needs to be considered in the career self-management and decision-making process (Brown et al., 2003; Schutte et al., 2009). The ability to use emotions to guide one's thinking and actions appears to relate to perceptions and feelings of efficacy in planning and managing career-related actions and tasks (Brown et al., 2003), cognitive task performance (Schutte, Schuettepelz, & Malouff, 2001) and greater adaptability and emotional functioning (Schutte et al., 2008).

Research shows that emotional intelligence relates positively to less dysfunctional career thinking, greater career decision-making self-efficacy, greater career exploration behavior and career commitment (Dahl et al., 2008; Puffer, 2011). Research by Di Fabio et al. (2012) validates the unique role of emotional intelligence in predicting difficulties in career decision-making. In addition, Di Fabio, Palazzeschi, Asulin-Peretz, and Gati (2013) reported that high emotional intelligence significantly predicts low career indecision for both men and women. Cobb and Mayer (2000) and Goleman (1998) regard emotional intelligence as predictive of success in life and achievement behavior. Research shows that individuals who better understand their feelings are more successful in regulating them and, therefore, achieve higher decision-making performance (Seo & Barrett, 2007; Yitshaki, 2012). However, despite the amount of research on emotional intelligence in the career context, the predictive validity of emotional intelligence in terms of Savickas's (2005, 2013) notion of career adaptability remains unexplored.

### 2.2. Career adaptability

The construct of career adaptability subsumes a set of self-regulatory cognitive–affective behavioral capacities or psychosocial resources that individuals may draw upon to cope with current and anticipated career developmental tasks, occupational transitions, and complex and ill-defined career- and work-related problems (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The adaptability domains of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence are involved in the translation of individual dispositions into positive career problem-solving and coping behaviors (Johnston et al., 2013; Rossier, Zecca, Stauffer, Maggiori, & Dauwalder, 2012). These four domains of cognitive–

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