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A time-lagged study of emotional intelligence and salary

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ABSTRACT

Despite strong claims for the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in the workplace, few studies have empirically examined the influence of emotional intelligence on career success. Theoretically, emotional intelligence should help employees to develop stronger interpersonal relationships and leadership skills, leading to higher financial compensation. To test this proposed relationship, we examine whether an ability-based measure of emotional intelligence in 126 college students predicts their salaries 10 to 12 years post workforce entry, controlling for personality, general mental ability, gender, and college GPA. We find that emotional intelligence has a significant, positive effect on subsequent salary levels, and that this effect is: 1) mediated by having a mentor and 2) stronger at higher organizational levels than at lower levels. Our results suggest that emotional intelligence helps individuals to acquire the social capital needed to be successful in their careers. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been characterized as a set of skills “relevant to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and in others, the effective regulation of emotion in self and in others, and the use of feeling to motivate, plan, and achieve in one’s life” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990: 185). As such, emotional intelligence has been linked to a wide range of individual and group outcomes, including academic success, leadership effectiveness, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being (Cartwright & Pappas, 2008; Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000; Fiori & Antonakis, 2011). In the workplace, emotional intelligence is considered an important predictor of career success, in part due to its role in building interpersonal relationships and developing effective coping strategies (Armstrong, Galligan, & Critchley, 2011; Lopes et al., 2004).

An extensive body of research indicates that career success is a function of ability (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005), personality (Ng et al., 2005), opportunity (Cokley, Dreher, & Stockdale, 2004; Dreher & Ash, 1990), and their interactions. Yet there are few systematic examinations of the relationship between emotional intelligence and career success, despite strong interest in the popular press (e.g., Bradberry, 2014; Oaklander, 2014). Most of the extant literature has focused on short-term work outcomes such as job performance and job satisfaction, with disappointing findings (Semadar, Robins, & Ferris, 2006; van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004). These results have called into question the importance of emotional intelligence for longer-term measures of career success (e.g., Landy, 2005).

The few studies that have examined the link between emotional abilities and career success have been limited in terms of design. One investigation reported no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and career success after just two years of work experience (Rode, Arthaud-Day, Mooney, Near, & Baldwin, 2008). Amdurer and colleagues found that emotional intelligence was

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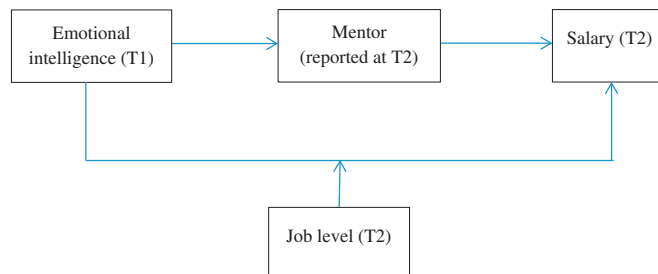


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

related to self-reported career success over a 5- to 19-year time period in a sample of MBA graduates (Amdurer, Boyatzis, Saatcioglu, Smith, & Taylor, 2014). However, they utilized an observation-based measure of emotional intelligence that is difficult to replicate. The few other studies examining the EI-career success relationship are cross-sectional in nature (e.g., Momm et al., 2015), which precludes any definitive conclusions regarding causality.

To address these shortcomings in the literature, we develop a model that proposes two linkages between emotional intelligence and longer-term career success (see Fig. 1). First, we propose that emotional intelligence should be related to one's ability to build supportive social networks, or social capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Lin, 2001), which in turn facilitates higher job performance and associated outcomes. In support of this argument, we hypothesize that emotional intelligence increases the likelihood that an individual will develop a relationship with a mentor, which is a specific form of social capital shown to be positively related to career success in prior research (i.e., a mediated pathway; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). Consistent with the view proposed by Allen and Eby (2007) and Ragins and Kram (2007), mentors could be individuals either within or outside the respondent's organization. Second, echoing the literature linking emotional intelligence with leadership effectiveness (Kerr, Garvin, Heaton, & Boyle, 2006; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005), we also propose that emotional intelligence will be more strongly related to career success at higher organizational levels where leadership skills become increasingly important (i.e., a moderated effect).

We test our hypotheses using a time-lagged study design, where we administered an ability-based measure of emotional intelligence to 126 college students and then collected objective data on their career progression approximately a decade later. Career development theorists argue that first ten years or so of employment are marked initially by a concern with establishing oneself in the organization, followed by a desire for personal achievement and promotion (Hall & Nougaim, 1968; Low, Bordia, & Bordia, 2016; Super, 1980; Van Maanen & Katz, 1976). After the first ten years, employees enter a "maintenance stage" which is defined by a reliance on established relationships with others and reduced self-focus (Hall, 1976; Low et al., 2016). Similarly, Dalton, Thompson, and Price (1977) argue that the early years of career development include the apprentice stage, where the emphasis is on developing one's capabilities, and the colleague stage, where work is performed more independently in collaboration with peers. Thus, the primary developmental tasks of the first decade of employment suggest a primary focus on social capital formation as the basis for career success and subsequent career progression. In particular, young employees are likely to benefit from relationships with more advanced workers in the later career stages who serve as mentors, helping them to build their skill base and to navigate social networks and organizational realities.

If our conceptual model is correct, the lack of a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and early career success reported by Rode et al. (2008) may have been because the study's two-year time period did not allow adequate opportunities for social capital to develop. In contrast, the 10- to 12-year time lag in the current study ensures that enough time has elapsed for significant work relationships to form and for participants to advance into leadership positions in their organizations. Moreover, the significant time lag between the measurement of emotional intelligence and career success provides compelling evidence regarding the causality of the proposed theoretical relationships, in contrast to prior studies relying on cross-sectional data.

In addition, this paper makes a significant practical contribution. While many claims have been made regarding the importance of emotional intelligence for career success, our study is the first to establish an empirical relationship between an ability-based measure of emotional intelligence prior to entering the workforce and an objective indicator of career success several years later. As individuals advance within their careers, the amount of compensation their skill sets command increases. While salary is not the sole indicator of success, it is a clear outward sign of one's worth within an organization and industry compared to other workers, and has a direct impact on that individual's quality of life. Moreover, it is not subject to the perceptual biases of self-reported indicators of career success that may be influenced by various contextual factors and individual differences, including emotional intelligence. Our findings therefore have significant implications for college education curricula as well as employee selection and development programs.

1. Theory and hypotheses

We follow the "mental abilities" conceptualization of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000), which proposes that emotional intelligence represents the intersection of general mental ability and emotions. In other words, both emotional intelligence and general mental ability are dimensions of an overall construct of intelligence that involves the flexible application of declarative and procedural knowledge (e.g., Cantor & Harlow, 1994; Lohman, 2000). However, emotional intelligence differs from

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