



## Reducing burnout and enhancing job satisfaction: Critical role of hotel employees' emotional intelligence and emotional labor

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### ABSTRACT

Despite its strong theoretical relevance with emotional labor, employees' ability to understand and regulate emotions (i.e., emotional intelligence, EI) has seldom been studied, especially how it affects hotel employees responding to the firm's display rules (i.e., emotional labor) and experiencing burnout and job satisfaction. Thus, this study investigated direct and indirect effects of employees' EI on two different forms of emotional labor (i.e., emotional effort: EE; emotional dissonance: ED): burnout and job satisfaction. Data were collected from 309 customer-contact hotel employees and managers in the United States. Results of structural equation modeling showed that EI had a direct, positive effect on EE and personal accomplishment and a direct, negative effect on ED and depersonalization. EI was also found to indirectly affect job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion through the mediating roles of personal accomplishment and ED, respectively. Additionally, ED was found to directly affect depersonalization and indirectly affect job satisfaction through emotional exhaustion while EE directly affects personal accomplishment and indirectly affects job satisfaction through personal accomplishment. Finally, personal accomplishment was found to mediate the depersonalization–job satisfaction relationship. Managerial implications for human resource practices are provided.

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### 1. Introduction

The quality of the interpersonal interaction between customers and service employees is critical in satisfying customers, ultimately influencing the bottom line of the company (Ashkanasy et al., 2002; Bitner, 1990). Positive attitudes and emotions in service employees during service encounters can create a favorable impression on customers. They are then more likely to purchase a product, do return business with the company, and speak well of the company (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Because of this, most companies in today's highly competitive business environment have begun to focus heavily on managing their employees' emotional behavior (Diefendorff and Richard, 2003), prescribing implicit and explicit display rules for the appropriate emotional expressions that their employees should use during customer encounters (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). In hospitality, employees perform two types of emotional labor; some employees may choose outward displays consistent with display rules but hide or mask felt emotions. In contrast, others may

attempt to modify internal feelings about display rules or customer contact situations (Hochschild, 1983).

Employees who repeatedly suppress their true emotions or fake them to follow the display rules suffer a continuing discrepancy between inner feelings and outward expressions (Grandey, 2000). This emotional discrepancy leads to emotional discomfort and job stress that in turn causes burnout and job dissatisfaction (Zapf, 2002). On the other hand, when employees make an effort to feel the required emotions, they feel emotional congruence between true feelings and emotional display, increasing their personal accomplishment and job satisfaction (Adelmann, 1995).

The ability of an individual to recognize his/her own feelings and those of others and to motivate and manage his/her own emotions well in relationship with others (i.e., emotional intelligence – EI) is critical in performing emotional labor (Goleman, 2000). Research has shown that EI can influence how people control their emotions and handle frustration. Emotionally intelligent people are sensitive and empathetic to the feeling and emotion of others (Cheung and Tang, 2009). The positive attributes of EI may change employees' emotional labor behaviors and, thus, may contribute to reducing burnout and increasing job satisfaction.

Recently, during the global economic downturn, customers have become value-seekers, and service providers strive to provide quality service at reduced cost. Accordingly, the concept of emotions

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at work has attracted the interest of researchers and practitioners alike (Cartwright and Pappas, 2007). However, research has focused more on showing direct associations of emotional labor with antecedents such as personal/job characteristics or consequences such as job related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Abraham, 1999; Bakker and Heuven, 2006; Brotheridge and Lee, 2002, 2003; Chau et al., 2009; Côté and Morgan, 2002; Diefendorff et al., 2005; Kim, 2008; Zhang and Zhu, 2008). Little empirical research has been devoted to an integrated view, examining antecedents of emotional labor that may further influence the outcomes of emotional labor (Allen et al., 2010; Austin et al., 2008; Giardini and Frese, 2006). Therefore, this study investigated the antecedent role of employees' EI on the links between emotional labor, burnout, and job satisfaction. Specifically, this study examined how employees' EI directly influences emotional effort (EE) and emotional dissonance (ED) and indirectly affects the three burnout dimensions and job satisfaction through emotional labor in the hotel setting.

In the hospitality industry, where face-to-face and voice-to-voice interactions between service providers and customers continually occur, employees are particularly vulnerable to the demands of emotional labor (Pizam, 2004). However, although current hotel human resources managers are aware of the concept of emotional labor, not many hotel organizations effectively implement strategies to control emotional labor and prevent burnout (Johanson and Woods, 2008). Thus, a deeper and clearer understanding of the EI-emotional labor process and its positive or negative consequences for employees is critical in attempting to create strategies for controlling emotional labor and its outcomes (Johnson and Spector, 2007). Thus, the comprehensive view of the interactions among EI, emotional labor, burnout, and job satisfaction in this study will provide hospitality practitioners and researchers with insights into the process of EI and how emotional labor affects hospitality employees' job attitudes and behaviors. With these insights, they may also develop and implement effective employee support programs and policies associated with EI, emotional labor, burnout, and job satisfaction.

## 2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Emotional intelligence

Salovey and Mayer (1990) first introduced the concept of EI, as separate from general intelligence, and their later definition (Mayer and Salovey, 1997) is the most widely accepted one in research on emotional labor (Carmeli and Josman, 2006):

“... the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thoughts, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer and Salovey, 1997, p. 5).

Mayer and Salovey (1997) conceptualized EI in four dimensions: (1) appraisal of emotion in self, (2) appraisal and recognition of emotion in others, (3) regulation of emotion in self, and (4) use of emotion to facilitate performance. Self-emotion appraisal reflects the ability to accurately perceive and appraise one's own deep emotions and to express these emotions naturally. Appraisal of others' emotions is the ability to accurately perceive and understand the internal and external emotions of others. Regulation of emotion involves managing, controlling, or altering emotions in specific directions to facilitate pleasant feelings, to enhance positive affective states during psychological distress. Use of emotion reflects the ability to make use of emotion for constructive activities and for personal performance (Mayer and Salovey, 1997).

### 2.2. Display rule and emotional labor

Display rules refer to organizational standards prescribing the feelings and emotions displayed by an employee when providing service to customers (Diefendorff and Richard, 2003). Employees should thus choose either to modify outward displays to be consistent with display rules or attempt to modify internal emotions to be consistent with display rules (Hochschild, 1983). As such, emotional labor is defined as the labor to enhance, fake, or suppress emotions to comply with an organization's display rules (Grandey, 2000).

Grandey (2000) and Kruml and Geddes (2000) translated these responses into two related dimensions of emotional labor: emotional dissonance (ED) and emotional effort (EE). ED is the discrepancy between genuinely felt and feigned emotion (Hochschild, 1983; Kruml and Geddes, 2000). ED occurs when employees fake, suppress, or amplify emotional expressions that differ from their true feelings. Hochschild's (1983) concept of surface acting, changing the emotional display but not the inner feelings, is conceptually interrelated with ED, and the two have been used interchangeably (Morris and Feldman, 1997; Zapf, 2002). According to Giardini and Frese (2006) and Zapf (2002), surface acting implies a state of ED because almost any employee in a job involving manipulating emotions will experience ED to some extent.

EE is an employee's attempt to actively change their internal thoughts and feelings to match the feelings they are expected or required to show (Grandey, 2000; Kruml and Geddes, 2000). While ED is simple regulation of outward expressions of emotion, EE is an employee's endeavor to regulate his/her inner thoughts and feelings to produce genuine positive expressions in line with organizational requirements (Kruml and Geddes, 2000). EE is identical to Hochschild's emotional labor concept of deep acting: an attempt to invoke and actually feel the displayed emotions (Brotheridge and Lee, 2002). In both cases, employees actively try to internalize emotions required by display rules (Kruml and Geddes, 2000).

### 2.3. Effect of emotional intelligence on emotional labor

Previous research has found that the functional attributes of EI are associated with emotional labor. According to Mayer and Salovey (1995), emotionally intelligent people tend to be more adaptive and flexible in regulating their emotions to be consistent to situational demands than those who are not. Fabian (1999) also argued that an employee who has the EI ability to monitor his or her emotional expression is aware of what emotions are expected and (un)acceptable in a given interpersonal interaction. An empirical study by Modassir and Singh (2008) revealed that those with high levels of EI tend to behave in ways that encourage positive emotional experiences, so they attempt to present emotions that please others (i.e., EE). Another study by Lopes et al. (2005) suggested that people with higher levels of emotional labor have more positive social interactions with others; they tend to show concern for others, voluntarily help others, and be perceived as good peers or friends by others because they can comprehend social cues (i.e., emotional expression and behavior) in communication. Lopes et al. (2005) also found that people who could regulate their emotions well can modulate emotions to affective states, use emotional strategies effectively, make good decisions in stressful situations, and use various skills necessary for effective social behavior. Such findings imply that those with high EI can more successfully align actual feelings to positive emotional display because they can quickly solve the conflict between felt and expressed emotions (Carmeli, 2003).

Previous research has also considered EI as an individual's capacity for emotional control and emotional labor as an expression of that capacity (e.g., Mastracci et al., 2010; Mikolajczak et al.,

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