Full length article

Emotional intelligence and communication levels in information technology professionals

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A B S T R A C T

In today's digital and technical environment, employers are looking for personnel that can contribute to the organization not only with the use of technical skills but can also express their expertise with the use of positive emotional intelligence and communication effectiveness. As research is lacking in the investigation of soft skills used by information technology professionals, the relationship between emotional intelligence and communication adaptability is the focus of this research. This quantitative non-experimental correlational analyses the emotional intelligence and communication adaptability level of 111 Information Technology professionals that work in the United States. The research found a significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and the communication adaptability of the information technology professional. The positive outcome of this study suggests that information technology professions that have a strong relationship between emotional intelligence and communication aptitude can have positive implications for organizations for organizational teamwork/relationship building.

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1. Introduction

Today, businesses increasingly requires that information technology (IT) professionals have both technical skills, emotional intelligence (EI) and communication aptitude (CA). Interpersonal skills are increasingly appearing as official job requirements; however, IT professionals often lack the appropriate interpersonal skills. Moreover, IT professionals are generally an introverted personality type thereby accentuating their lack of interpersonal skills. As Promís (2008) contended, the "soft skills, traditionally most valued in upper management, are now essential at all levels of the professional workforce" (p.28). While these soft-skills have traditionally been valued in other parts of the organization, namely senior management, as IT becomes more pervasive it is increasingly required to demonstrate and utilize soft-skills. Given the large investments in IT and the critical impact of IT on the organization, the discipline needs to make adjustments to become more business oriented and customer focused. This work serves as an important first step in determining the EI and CA of IT professionals via the

Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) and the Communication Adaptability Scale (CAS).

As organizations are requiring IT professionals to effectively use their soft skills within their roles, the value that a varied skilled employee (mix of technical expertise and soft skills) are important for organizational success. Gallagher, Kaiser, Simon, Beath, and Goles (2010) found that relationship skills are paramount to allowing the IT staff to communicate and work well with others, which in turn leads to effective development and delivery of technical and operational solutions. The connection between an individual's EI level and their CA can lead to the identification of deficiencies in relationship building and management. If deficiencies are improved upon an IT professional can develop a heightened positive balance of technical expertise and soft skills.

As it stands the correlation between EI and CA has not been studied to provide insight into the IT culture within the U.S. population. This gap needs to be studied not only to understand the technology culture but, to provide a self-reflective tool to enhance organizational skills that can be elevated to enrich human capital. As Akhtar, Boustani, Tsivrikos, and Chamorro-Premuzic (2015), established that "personality factors are valid predictors of work engagement", seeking an advanced EI or CA within an employee may allow for the development of the soft skills needed for

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retention (p.46). Finding the missing link between what is expected within the workplace and what the individual is providing can allow for training of effective communication with positive EI. Such training may focus on the development of the skills needed to build stronger relationships, communicate more efficiently, and use soft skills (e.g., empathic communication and interaction with others in an emotionally regulated state) to advance in the professional environment.

EI and communication skills are the valued within an organization and retention of IT professionals with higher EI and clear communication are organizationally valuable (Şimşek & Aktaş, 2013). This research examines the relationship between EI and CA among U.S. IT professionals. Individuals entering the IT field or who seek to understand the professional culture can use this study to further research the implications of emotions in the workplace on organizational behavior. This study has practical implications for IT professionals, departments, and organizations, as well as help contribute to the body of knowledge.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a review of the literature to support this study, Section 4 illustrates the methods, participants, measures, procedure, and data analysis. Subsequently, Section 5 offers the results of this study with Section 6 providing conclusions and limitations.

2. Literature review

Information technology (IT) departments and IT professionals play a vital role in the creation, education, dissemination, and application of the information used within an organization, as well as the collaboration of ideas to problem solve technological problems within an organization (Park, Lee, & Lee, 2014). However, IT professionals lack appropriate interpersonal skills to interact with end-users/clients delivering the services in a connective manner that can have a positive impact on service quality, customer/user satisfaction, and performance (Lie & Liu, 2014).

Shih, Lie, Klein, and Jiang (2014) found IT professionals are expected to parallel their technical skills with their service skills. Positive emotional intelligence traits or competence as Vaida and Opre (2014) reasoned are personality qualities that can be developed. Wilkerson (2012) provided a review of the current literature on MIS-related job skills and skill gaps. Wilkerson (2012) found that only 2 of 20 papers reviewed did not include interpersonal skills in required MIS job skills. Furthermore, the research found that MIS professional soft skills are found to be more important than technical skills for career success. Spath, Bauer, and Praeg (2010), echo this understanding in their qualitative study that examined the IT service climate. In that study, a senior IT manager stated; "I would rather hire someone who may not be as technically strong but can work and communicate with our clients effectively. The project may take longer, but the outcome is going to be much better" (p.176).

Research conducted by Bassellier and Benbasat (2004) stated that "Organizations need to educate and train their IT professionals to be more business oriented, given that they invest substantial amounts of money in IT and often depend on IT to gain competitive advantage, to avoid a competitive disadvantage, and to ensure the survival of the business" (pp.677). Their study identified specific business knowledge, skills and abilities including, but not limited to, organization unit, leadership, and inter-personal communication. Additionally, a research study conducted by Huang, Kvasny, Joshi, Trauth, and Mahar (2009) synthesized information technology job skills identified in academic studies, practitioner publications and job ads. They found an increasing demand for business acumen, which may include, but is not limited to, project management, financial analysis, and communication skills.

A more recent study by Stevens and Norm (2016) also found similar results. However, their research recognized the ongoing global shortage of information technology workers, which is driving renewed interest from leading government policy-makers to examine alternatives to recruiting overseas. The study sought to identify industry expectations of soft skills in information technology graduates. Their study identified specific business knowledge, skills and abilities, including, but not limited to, interpersonal skills and teamwork/project management skills.

2.1. Emotional intelligence importance

Research by Lounsbury, Sundstrom, Levy, and Gibson (2014) found that "IT professionals had significantly higher levels of agreeableness and tough-mindedness, and lower conscientiousness, emotional stability, extraversion, assertiveness, customer service orientation, optimism, and work drive" (p.38). They also found that these qualities characterized a customer service professional who was able to adapt to change. The consistent interaction with clients while applying enhanced interpersonal skills and positively-driven emotions aids in establishing connections with customers; some IT professionals may lack these qualities.

Shih et al. (2014), validated and furthered Lounsbury et al. (2014) findings. They found IT professionals usually have introverted personalities, which can be a barrier to understanding the customer/client's position or thought process. As such, an IT professional may lack the emotional intuitiveness to pick up on the cues that are communicated by the person with whom he or she is communicating. Without this emotional connection, the IT professional may not be able to teach a client or coworker how to solve the problem; he or she also needs to be able to offer reassurance that the problem can be solved. Thus, the blending of cognitive and emotional intelligence (EI) is found to be an essential characteristic when one expects an IT professional to engage in service relations successfully (Moquin & Riemenschneider, 2014).

2.2. Emotional intelligence

The concept of EI grew from Taine's (1871) evaluation of common human capacities and the need to measure an individual's intellectual qualities to provide a conceptual understanding of human capacities. Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined EI as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (p.188). Many scholars call for a clearer and more unified definition and theory in order to explain further what an individual's emotional intelligence can tell us about human characteristics and behaviors, the methods by which the assessment is proctored can reveal what the researcher is attempting to uncover in an individual behavior (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2012; Nafukho, 2009; Petrides & Furnham, 2003). Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2008) have found that there are a many observations and discussions from researchers in the emotional field of study that find the term emotional intelligence is used too generally and too all-inclusively to define the term successfully.

Currently, EI individuals have been found to have not only advanced interpersonal skills but also higher levels of effective communication. From an organizational perspective, the need for communication can affect culture, team building, dissemination and transfer of knowledge, as well as the ability to maintain successful relations (Moquin & Riemenschneider, 2014). The connection between emotional intelligence and communication adaptation may provide a link that can not only assess how an individual uses emotion to convey a message, but also how that information is successfully accepted by the receiver.