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Hiring for Emotional Intelligence

5:28 PM Wednesday November 19, 2008

by Christina Bielaszka-DuVernay | [Comments \(16\)](#)

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by [Christina Bielaszka-DuVernay](#)

Making a hire can be a hit-or-miss affair. A promising candidate can turn out to be a disaster, leaving frustrated colleagues and tattered client relationships in his wake. Sooner than anyone planned, the new hire and the organization part ways, with recrimination and regret on both sides.

To increase their chances of making good hiring decisions, many companies subject candidates to an extended battery of interviews. But according to Adele B. Lynn, author of *The EQ Interview: Finding Employees with High Emotional Intelligence* (Amacom, 2008), conducting more interviews is not really the answer. What's needed are better interviews--interviews that take a measure of candidates' emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence--EQ, for short--"accounts for anywhere from 24% to 69% of performance success," says Lynn. Some positions require more emotional intelligence than others, but there are very few jobs in which a solid level of EQ does not confer advantage. For managers it is crucial, as it is for anyone who needs to be adept at the give-and-take of working as part of a creative, dynamic team.

"After all, what does it matter if a software engineer is ferociously hardworking if he alienates his peers?" says Lynn, also founder of the [Adele Lynn Leadership Group](#) (Belle Vernon, Pa.). "What's the benefit of deep marketing expertise if a manager can't recognize how her behavior demoralizes

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her direct reports and drives half of them to look for other jobs?"

There are multiple aspects to emotional intelligence, but homing in on these three in the interview process will go a long way toward identifying candidates with high EQ--and eliminating those likely to destroy more value than they create:

1. **Self-awareness and self-regulation.** The candidate understands the needs and wishes that drive him and how they affect his behavior. He regulates his emotions so that any fear, anger, or anxiety he experiences doesn't spread to his colleagues or make him lose control.
2. **Reading others and recognizing the impact of his behavior on them.** The candidate has well-developed emotional and social "radar" and can sense how his words and actions influence his colleagues.
3. **The ability to learn from mistakes.** He can acknowledge his mistakes, reflect critically upon them, and learn from them.

What follows are guidelines for questions to ask and answers to listen for in interviews. The advice here is also pertinent to managers who need to interview colleagues outside their units to decide whether to appoint them to cross-functional teams.

1. Self-awareness and self-regulation

Anyone working in an organization needs to recognize his moods, his emotions, and the deeper emotional needs that drive him--and how they shape his behavior. Generally people are competent at labeling their moods ("I'm in a good/bad/restless/mellow mood") and emotions ("I'm happy/sad/angry/anxious"), but fewer can articulate the strong emotional desires that shape much of their behavior and identity, such as a longing for validation, a hunger for power and status, a strong need to be liked.

This is the case for Ian, a manager in a midsize specialty consumer products company. Ian places a high premium on always being right but is unaware of this need and how it makes him arrogant, defensive, and cautious in turn. When a project falters or a client is unhappy, Ian is unable to work with his direct reports, his boss, and his coworkers to reach a common understanding of the problem. Instead, he focuses on demonstrating his blamelessness for it--not very helpful when what's needed is a solution.

In addition to understanding her emotions, an emotionally intelligent person is able to regulate them and control her behavior. When anxious or fearful, she is self-aware enough to recognize that she tends to broadcast these emotions nonverbally, allowing her to put extra effort into projecting calm optimism. When angry, she has the self-control not to rage at her colleagues or direct reports.

To assess a candidate's self-awareness and ability to self-regulate, ask these questions, which, like the other questions in this article, are adapted from Lynn's book *The EQ Interview*:

- Can you tell me about a time when your mood affected your performance, either negatively or positively?
- Tell me about a conflict you had with a peer, direct report, or boss--how did it start and how did it get resolved?
- A manager has to maintain a productive, positive tone even when she's anxious about a business threat. How have you been able to do this in previous positions?


2. Reading others and recognizing the impact of his behavior on them

Because so much of a manager's work is accomplished with and through others, the ability to read other people--to pick up their emotions and discern their opinions--can spell the difference between success and failure. Managers also need to recognize how their behavior influences that of others.

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High-EQ individuals are deft persuaders and motivators because they can read others' cues and adjust their own words and behaviors accordingly.

To assess a candidate's skill level in this aspect of emotional intelligence, ask questions such as:

- Tell me about a time when you did or said something that had a negative impact on a customer, peer, or direct report. How did you know the impact was negative?
- Have you ever been in a business situation where you thought you needed to adjust your behavior? How did you know and what did you do?

In one interview Lynn participated in, "the candidate gave a few examples of when he had a negative impact on someone, but in each case, he said someone called him aside and told him where he fell short--he didn't seem able to recognize these things on his own." In contrast, says Lynn, "another candidate for the same position pointed to very specific examples of when he was able to read another's body language and behavior that indicated that something was wrong." The second candidate landed the job. "No doubt that built-in radar system will help him read other people and situations, too," says Lynn.

Misreading a customer can be fatal to the relationship, Lynn points out. A financial services account manager directed a customer he took to be of modest means to a less expensive product than the one the man had been considering. Feeling insulted and humiliated, the client took his business elsewhere.

3. The ability to learn from mistakes

Missteps and outright failure offer opportunities for growth, and high-EQ individuals are able to learn from them. Here again, look for positive patterns in candidates' past experiences:

- Have you ever been in a situation where you felt you needed to modify or change your behavior? How did you know? How have you been able to take lessons learned from that situation and apply them to another?
- Tell me about a situation when you discovered that you were on the wrong course. How did you know? What did you do? What, if anything, did you learn from the experience?

Lynn was part of an interview team for an IT position. When the candidate was asked to describe her work on a project that faltered, she spoke of a systems overhaul that missed key deadlines and required several course corrections. Asked to analyze how she could have made it run more smoothly, the candidate answered that she should have documented expectations at the outset of the project and communicated more precisely and consistently with users. She also cited her tendency to be reserved and acknowledged that in the past she sometimes held back from asking necessary questions. This candidate concluded by saying that she had thought a lot about what went right and wrong in the project and how she could be more effective the next time she was called on to contribute to such a project.

Contrast the self-awareness and openness to learning in her answer with the defensiveness and rigidity in another candidate's response. When asked about conflicts she had experienced, she ticked off several diverse examples: a schedule delay, a customer dispute, a delayed product launch. Asked to reflect on how they started and what part she played in them, she portrayed herself as a victim of incompetent colleagues, unreasonable customers, and unlucky circumstances. Several times in her narration she said, "I knew I was right--the others just refused to see it."

Her ability to learn and progress was about zero--an ominous sign for her future performance.

Christina Bielaszka-DuVernay is the editor of Harvard Management Update. Reach her at cduvernay@harvardbusiness.org.

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COMMENTS

[Like](#)**Showing 16 comments**Sort by [Popular now](#)[Subscribe by email](#) [Subscribe by RSS](#)**Rob Beswick** 12/10/2008 02:28 AM

I am on Evelyn Mungau's side. Over 23 years hiring people or assembling project teams has taught me this: When individuals trust each other, when openness and respect are high, the group almost always performs at a higher level than their individual skills would suggest. They are able to adjust for weaknesses. I have read several of Adele Lynn's other excellent books on EQ, and I frequently refer back to them for practical guidance in my business and personal life.

What I like best about Adele's work is its clarity. She takes on the complexities of how people relate and reduces them to simple truths.

Rob Beswick

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)**make money online** 01/02/2011 01:12 PM

Hold on!

[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Larry Hokaj** 12/16/2008 05:23 PM

Commenting from a non-HR background (IT), I've come to recognize the value of observing EQ not initially in our employee hiring practices, as my organization is small and turnaround is somewhat infrequent, but in the internships we've established with a local university.

Our relationship with the university brings 1-4 interns to our organization each semester (within the IT discipline), with the university selecting the individuals and us accepting those selections without question. The productivity/success of the internships each semester can, somewhat clearly, be traced back to the EQ of the individual students. We don't formally measure the EQ of any student during any point during their time here. However, we are afforded the opportunity to observe/evaluate the students over a 6-month period.

In my opinion, we very much benefit seeing what both success and failure looks like.

So, part of our hiring strategy is to first look towards our pool of past interns as candidates and then review performance with key staff members. Technical know-how within this review is important, especially in IT, as you might imagine, but non-technical staff will more typically point out characteristics of high/low EQ.

Which leads me to a question: Can EQ effectively be measured within the briefness of a somewhat regular

and predictable interview process, whether that be a single interview or multiple interviews, for which candidates are typically prepared and at their "best", or would an organization benefit more, in the long run, from planning for a "probation" or "evaluation" period which might include a more thorough and measured EQ evaluation?

Like Reply



Gretchen Neels 12/08/2008 01:47 PM

Having been in the recruiting game for a number of years, I know what happens when the focus is put on technical expertise and not emotional intelligence during the interview period. This article is a great summary of Lynn's newest book, *The EQ Interview*, and a must for everyone who thinks their behavioral interview questions are sufficient. They're not - you'll need to dig even deeper to find the best match for your open position.

As a work place consultant, I see few problems that don't originate with bad hiring decisions. Recruiting is fundamental - if your organization doesn't hire the right people in the first place, all the strategy and incentives in the world won't make the place run as it should.

Like Reply



Lúcia Meili 12/07/2008 10:01 AM

The organizations have made every effort to hire people involved, especially leaders with skills to recognize talent, hire them and keep them in business, and now more than ever these powers are necessary to overcome tense moments, and uncertain scenarios. Before those hiring happen so empirical, but Adele Lynn brings us concrete and specific ways to help all who need to find the right people, with suggestions of objective questions to be put to the applicants.

This would also help the interviewers in their self-development and knowledge.

The timing of the interview is unique and should be viewed not as a routine task, which seeks to fit the candidate profile within the tried, but to really listen this person who is in front of us, and try to understand her/him, with experiences, dreams, successes, failures, stories of life, especially values, and then we can see if this person could contribute to the organization and where he/she could feel performed with the challenges that he/she will face.

Like Reply



Adele Lynn 12/07/2008 05:20 AM

Thanks for the excellent comments. I am the author of the book *The EQ Interview*.

Maureen, Bill, and Mark make essential points regarding the need for strategy in the hiring function. Too often, strategy is lacking and that leaves hiring managers and interviewers in the position of hiring people they think they like or who they think may have the technical skills needed on the job. When approached strategically, specific EQ competencies would be understood as part of the unique competitive advantage of the organization and integrated into the hiring process. Maureen talks about the cost of a failed hire – one of which is the reputation of the company who puts a poor fit into an assignment. This cost, whether in a domestic or international assignment is great and speaks to the business need. When hiring is approached strategically, the hiring process would follow a plan that collects data through the interview process to support predefined essential EQ competencies.

Anand and Maureen talk about the need for the hiring or interviewing managers to be competent. I completely agree. In practice, I find that discussing the competencies not only improves the quality of the

candidates, but it raises the expectations around EQ for those doing the hiring as well. I recommend a process for teaching and aligning the hiring managers to these concepts.

As Evelyn points out, the payoff for hiring the candidate with EQ is great. By formalizing a strategy, we take this from the subjective (Evelyn called it women's intuition) to a more objective process.

Douglas and Mandeep – Your comments are very important. My model of emotional intelligence includes something I call "Mastery of Purpose and Vision." Simply stated, it is an understanding of our innate meaning and purpose and alignment of our vision, values and behaviors to that end. It is the source of our authenticity. I did not include much discussion about it in The EQ Interview. I have written about it in a previous book – The EQ Difference.

Cyril – "How can a candidate understand the EQ of his superiors?" is a great question. I think what Douglas says in a joking manner is correct. Look for cues in the behavior of the hiring managers. Both verbal and non-verbal cues can give you some indication of how the manager will relate on the job. If he dismisses your answers or doesn't appear to listen, or makes light of something, then, he may not be the best choice as a superior. I think your question in an indirect way, indicates the reason that EQ is important. When people have a choice, they choose to work for someone who demonstrates these competencies.

Thank you all for the excellent insights and discussion.

Like Reply



evelyn mungau 12/05/2008 08:51 AM

At last...professional, experienced agreement with the thoughts I have had as long as I have been an HR practitioner. On more than a few occasions I have had to turn down more "qualified" candidates because of EQ issues (and as often been accused of using woman's intuition in the place of cold hard paper in making these decisions)instead picking candidates who are less impressive academically but who have great attitudes and willingness to work. I am happy to report that I have never lost an EQ based decision and almost all of my sceptical bosses have rued their IQ-only-counts mindsets.

Like Reply



Bill 12/04/2008 04:05 PM

An excellent article to kick off a great discussion. No easy answers to this stuff. What I see are those doing the interviews and trying to use EQ approaches, do not themselves believe or understand what is happening. Consequently, the judgements being made about the the person being interviewed still boil down to the basic question, is this person I want sitting in the empty chair, "will we like him/her?"

Lots of material out there that can be used to aid in this work. One question I have asked the client, seeking to use this approach to interviews, is: "what is it that draws you to an EQ approach?" and, "how does your organization use EQ in its approach to getting the daily and strategic tasks accomplished?"

So, what is the optimum mix of consult vs the harsh realities of using EQ in a number of different capacities? Like KM, is the expectation that the organization becomes not only a learning community, using communities of practice, but also an EQ organization?

Regards,

Bill

[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Maureen Rabotin** 12/04/2008 03:02 PM

You're quite right Mark. And that is the issue at hand.

Just look at the cost of a candidate that doesn't fit, the cost of replacing this person, the cost of a vacant post while trying to replace him/her.

What about the cost of a failed international assignment, this goes beyond the hire's salary or move expenses: the assignee, his / her family, the cost of repatriation, replacement, and especially the cost of a failed assignment from a personal point of view as well as the company's reputation of having sent an "ox in a china shop" because the person was chosen on intangibles which included behaviors inappropriate for the host country.

Just food for thought.

Maureen

[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Mark Frank** 12/04/2008 11:45 AM

All,

Many excellent comments and points made and I do not wish to be negative, but... While I'm am aware of terms mentioned in this article and comments made. I'm at least somewhat aware of these ideas. However, I'm of the belief most hiring managers and HR people have no deep far reaching strategy in terms of hiring, they simply hire based upon their perception of skill compared against technical need. That's about as deep as it goes, even among intelligent and well read hiring managers, "The thoughts too often are, do I like this person and is he/she capable and that's about it, the same as its always been.

Sorry.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Christina Bielaszka-DuVernay** 12/04/2008 10:27 AM

Cyril and Anand: You both raise great questions--I'll look into them as the basis for a follow-up article on this topic.

Douglas and Mandeep: Very insightful. Douglas, who are the authors you are referring to? I'm interested in learning more about their work.

Maureen: Work on cultural intelligence is fascinating. Like you, I lived and worked as an American in France. I worked closely with French, British, and German nationals, as well as other Americans. The cultural contrasts, and misreadings, were at times quite striking. We were all fortunate, though, to be working in an institution that was, almost by definition, highly attuned to human commonalities despite cultural differences: an international school.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)**Maureen Rabotin** 12/04/2008 09:43 AM

A great article about a very interesting book and subject. I think Anand Kumar hit the nail on the head as we say in US English by stating:

"The one common mistake I have seen being made when doing these kinds of behavior based interviews is the lack of awareness on the part of the interviewer or interview panel..."

This so very true as interviewers can fall into the "hire people who resemble me" trap if they have little or no global executive experience. Cultural Intelligence is essential when trying to read or interpret other people's behaviors. As an American living in France, I have learned that my "Can-do" attitude or my informal, friendly behaviors can be perceived as pushy and arrogant. My expressions of gratitude and positive reinforcement are not exactly European either i.e., perceived as superficial.

Human Beings are complex, so by being self aware: Knowing what makes me tick, motivate and innovate can enable me to better understand what makes me feel frustrated or elated in a different culture without expecting others to act or react like me. I can then step back, reflect and re-frame and not judge and complain. Cultural Intelligence allows me to do that which enables Emotional Intelligence.

Like Reply



Mandeep Dhillon 12/04/2008 05:13 AM

well i agree with Douglas Chalmers. we Indians strongly believe in SQ. Spirituality does not mean a blind faith in miracles. BHAGWAT GITA and GURU GRANTH all taught us spirituality is worship of work, justification of means and ends. it gives u emotional strength which is imperative for IQ. i remember long time back during my childhood i asked my father what is the meaning of prayer and why do we need it. He told me that prayer is meant for strength. words hav meta-physical effects, we are energised by reciting some words. some phone hav more cosmic energy.

so we need to pray for this strength.

Like Reply



Douglas Chalmers 11/25/2008 08:26 AM

Cyril: "How can we, as a candidate, understand what is the level of EQ of our next superior..."

Ha ha, if they act more stupid that you in the interview, just walk out.

But nothing can really be explained in terms of only "intelligence" or even "emotional intelligence". As there are three qualities, not one or two, there is another dimension often left unexplored in the human psyche. Some would prefer it to remain so as it is a level beyond either cleverness or basic feeling.....

Quote from Amazon on a book about "SQ".....

"...as psychologists discovered ways and means to measure intelligence, Aristotle's definition of man as 'a rational animal' developed into an obsession with IQ. In the mid-1990s, Daniel Goleman popularized research into emotional intelligence, EQ, pointing out that EQ is a basic requirement for the appropriate use of IQ....."

There is enough collective evidence from psychology, neurology, anthropology and cognitive science to show us that **there is a third 'Q', 'SQ' or Spiritual Intelligence**. Unlike IQ, which most computers have and EQ which exists in higher mammals, SQ is uniquely human and, the authors argue, the most fundamental of the three. Strongly linked to humanity's need for meaning, SQ is what we use to develop our longing and capacity for vision and value. It allows us to dream and to strive..."

Like Reply

Anand Kumar 11/25/2008 01:23 AM



This is a great article around hiring based on EQ index (if I may use the word), the one common mistake I have seen being made when doing these kinds of behavior based interviews is the lack of awareness on the part of the interviewer or interview panel since sometimes (most of the times in interviews I have participated on in India) they seem to be radiating all the vibes which dont make for a conducive interview atmosphere, especially on evaluating EQ.

Any ideas around that in terms of prepping an interview panel in conducting interviews for evaluating EQ of a candidate ?

Anand Kumar

Like Reply



Cyril 11/22/2008 08:10 AM

For sure using EQ in interviews will greatly help a company hire the best candidate to fill a position (and as you say, it's particularly important for a management position).

But if we take the question on the other side. How can we, as a candidate, understand what is the level of EQ of our next superior ?

Interviewing the candidate is only one part of the equation, make sure that the candidate will feel understood is also really important.

What would you suggest as a question a candidate should ask ?

Cyril

Like Reply

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