



Connections between emotional intelligence and workplace flourishing



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ABSTRACT

The individual difference characteristic of emotional intelligence may be a foundation for workplace flourishing. Responses from 319 working adults recruited from the United States and Australia showed that higher emotional intelligence was significantly related to better mental health, more work engagement, more satisfaction with social support in the workplace, and more perceived power in the workplace. Mediation path models indicated that more satisfaction with social support in the workplace and more perceived power in the workplace linked greater emotional intelligence to indicators of flourishing.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Emotional intelligence in the workplace

The individual difference characteristic of emotional intelligence is a useful construct in workplace research (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011; Cherniss, 2010; Joseph & Newman, 2010; O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005; Schlaerth, Ensari, & Christian, 2013). Emotional intelligence describes and operationalizes adaptive emotional functioning. Perception, understanding, and managing emotions effectively in the self and others are described as core competencies in most operationalizations of emotional intelligence (Bar-On, 2000; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004, 2008). These competencies are central both in the ability conceptualisation of emotional intelligence (e.g., Mayer et al., 2004, 2008) and the trait, or typical functioning, conceptualisation of emotional intelligence (e.g., Petrides & Furnham, 2000). Emotional intelligence is generally assessed through performance tests in the ability approach (Mayer et al., 2004, 2008) and through self- or other-report in the trait approach (Petrides & Furnham, 2001).

Higher levels of emotional intelligence are associated with a variety of general positive intrapersonal outcomes (Schutte & Malouff, 2013a). These outcomes include greater subjective well-being assessed through indices such as positive affect and life satisfaction (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; Schutte & Malouff, 2011) and better mental

health (Martins, Ramalho, & Marin, 2010; Schutte, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2007). Higher levels of emotional intelligence are also associated with a variety of interpersonal outcomes, including more cooperative behaviour (Schutte et al., 2001), better interpersonal relationships (Lopes et al., 2004; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003), and more relationship satisfaction (Lopes et al., 2003; Malouff, Schutte, & Thorsteinsson, 2014). Individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to perceive having more social support and are more satisfied with their social support (Austin, Saklofske, & Egan, 2005; Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008).

Meta-analyses combining the results of many studies indicate that in the workplace more emotionally intelligent employees show better work performance (O'Boyle et al., 2011) and especially tend to perform better in high emotional labour work (Joseph & Newman, 2010). Further, meta-analytic results indicate that more emotionally intelligent employees tend to show superior leadership (Harms & Credé, 2010), including more constructive conflict management (Schlaerth et al., 2013).

Individuals with higher emotional intelligence may have both a greater sense of power in their work environment and perceive their work environment as more supportive (Houghton, Wu, Godwin, Neck, & Manz, 2012). For example, individuals with higher emotional intelligence have a greater sense of control over their work and both higher emotional intelligence and greater sense of control are associated with better mental health (Johnson, Batey, & Holdsworth, 2009). Employees with higher emotional intelligence build more social capital (Chun, Litzky, Sosik, Bechtold, & Godshalk, 2010), which may result in more satisfaction with social support.

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1.2. Positive psychology theory applied to work: workplace flourishing

Seligman (2012) described positive psychology theory as focusing on “the study of positive emotion, of engagement, of meaning, of positive accomplishment, and of good relationships” (p. 70). An aim of the positive psychology approach is to promote ‘flourishing’ or optimal functioning in individuals and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman, 2012). As Diener (2009) pointed out, much positive psychology research has focused on the individual, but some research has examined the individual in the context of institutions and groups. The application of positive psychology theory integrating the individual and institutions has largely focused on school settings (Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGiuseppe, 2004) and workplaces (Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Macdonald, Burke, & Stewart, 2012).

The positive psychology approach to understanding workplace related flourishing shows promise (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008) and is one of the newest theories to be applied to work (Ashleigh & Mansi, 2012). This approach encompasses both a management-focused emphasis on enhanced employee engagement and productivity as resulting from optimal conditions as well as an employee-focused emphasis on personal well-being resulting from optimal conditions (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). The positive psychology approach focuses on recognizing and fostering positive organisational behaviour and individual strengths and the reciprocal nature of workplace conditions and individual strengths. Examples of employee strengths that have been found to be beneficial include self-efficacy, optimism, resilience, positive emotions, transformational leadership ability (Fitzgerald & Schutte, 2010; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2012), and emotional intelligence (Joseph & Newman, 2010; O’Boyle et al., 2011; Schlaerth et al., 2013). Practical applications in the workplace are increasingly building on theoretical frameworks and research findings generated by the positive psychology approach (Ashleigh & Mansi, 2012).

The individual difference characteristic of emotional intelligence, which has become a central concept in the positive psychology approach to the workplace, may be a platform for the development of intra-personal and interpersonal workplace characteristics such as perception of power and satisfaction with social support, which in turn bolster workplace flourishing. Emotional intelligence is embedded in environmental and social contexts (Schutte, *in press*) and thus falls into the positive psychology conceptualisation of the individual in the context of institutions and groups (Diener, 2009).

Better perception, understanding, and regulation of emotion, core components of emotional intelligence, may facilitate employees’ mastery of workplace events and reactions to events, encouraging a greater sense of power. Better perception, understanding, and regulation of emotion may also lead to better interpersonal work relationships and thus to more satisfaction with the social support offered by the workplace. The competencies comprising emotional intelligence may directly facilitate workplace flourishing and may also indirectly impact workplace flourishing through encouraging development of other qualities such as perception of power and workplace satisfaction that may in turn further encourage workplace flourishing.

1.3. Sense of control and power in the workplace

The issue of power and control in the workplace has garnered much research attention. Power in the workplace has often been defined in terms of social power more generally (French & Raven, 1959). Social power is defined as the measure of influence an individual is able to assert over other people or outcomes (French & Raven, 1959). It is the *capacity* to influence others that is of importance. Thus an individual’s power may only be understood in rela-

tion to another individual or group of individuals (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012). A sense of control may be defined in terms of employees’ decision-making ability and sense of autonomy in their work (Cho, Laschinger, & Wong, 2006); the authority individuals have over their own work tasks. Research indicates that when people feel a sense of control in their job they are more engaged in their work, more committed to the organization, and less likely to experience negative outcomes such as burnout, physical illness, job turnover, absenteeism, and diminished organizational commitment (Cho et al., 2006; Inoue et al., 2013; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

1.4. Social support in the workplace

Social support may be defined as “an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient” (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984, p. 13). There are many potential stressors to be found in the workplace, from normal everyday hassles through to more serious disturbances such as bullying or harassment. The literature generally supports the contention that social support buffers stress and positively influences well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Shirey, 2004). A review (Shirey, 2004) examining social support and well-being in the nursing profession concluded that social support in the workplace has an effect on outcomes such as burnout, absenteeism, job satisfaction, and overall work engagement. Shirey (2004) found that the presence of a support network initially and the quality of the support offered is more important than the size of the network.

Social support may be regarded as a form of social capital in the workplace. Social capital is defined as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). Support from colleagues and supervisors can act as buffers against negative outcomes in the workplace (e.g., burnout) because it reduces the burden on the individual’s personal resources. Colleagues can provide support not only with work-related problems; they can also offer “an ear” to listen when other troubles arise in the workplace. Support from supervisors and/or management may take the form of direct, instrumental assistance with job task problems and advice. Additionally, a positive relationship with supervisors may result in fewer job demands (Luchman & González-Morales, 2013), reducing an individual’s feeling of being overwhelmed by work tasks.

1.5. Aims of the research

Emotional intelligence has become one of the most applied individual difference positive psychology constructs in the workplace (Brackett et al., 2011; Cherniss, 2010; Joseph & Newman, 2010; O’Boyle et al., 2011; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005; Schlaerth et al., 2013). Emotional intelligence may facilitate the development of various adaptive intra- and interpersonal qualities in many realms of life (Schutte & Malouff, 2013a), and these adaptive qualities may, in part, account for the connection between greater emotional intelligence and flourishing.

The present study examined whether emotional intelligence might be a foundation for workplace flourishing. Good mental health of employees and the person–organization interaction quality of employee work engagement were used as markers of flourishing. As well as examining the direct relationships between employee emotional intelligence and these markers of flourishing, the study investigated whether emotional intelligence might be a foundation for other qualities that facilitate workplace flourishing. The study examined one such interpersonal factor, satisfaction with social support at work, and one intrapersonal factor,

perception of power in the workplace, which might facilitate workplace flourishing.

The study examined the following hypotheses:

1. Greater emotional intelligence is positively associated with the flourishing indices of good mental health and high work engagement.
2. Greater emotional intelligence is positively associated with the characteristics of more satisfaction with workplace social support and more perception of power in the workplace.
3. Satisfaction with workplace social support and perception of power in the workplace are positively associated with indices of workplace flourishing.
4. Satisfaction with workplace social support and perception of power in the workplace are mediating paths in the connection between higher emotional intelligence and greater workplace flourishing.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 319 working adults were recruited from the United States and Australia through the Qualtrics panel system. One hundred and sixty-two of the employees resided the United States and 157 resided in Australia. The 163 female and 156 male employees had an average age of 45.76 ($SD = 15.53$). Participants completed on-line measures of work engagement, mental health, satisfaction with social support at their workplace, their perception of their power in their workplace, and emotional intelligence.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Mental health

The short-form Depression Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21; Henry & Crawford, 2005) assesses symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress through items such as “I felt down-hearted and blue” and “I felt I was close to panic”. Each item is rated on a 4-point scale from 1 (*Did not apply to me at all*) to 4 (*Applied to me very much, or most of the time*). Internal consistency of the scales has been good in previous research and the scales have evidence of construct validity (Antony, Bieling, Cox, Enns, & Swinson, 1998; Henry & Crawford, 2005). To create a composite measure of mental health for the present research, scores on these three scales were converted to z-scores and summed, with scores coded so that higher scores indicated better mental health. The internal consistency of this three scale composite mental health measure, as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha, was .92.

2.2.2. Work engagement

The Abridged Job in General Scale (Russell et al., 2004) is a global measure of satisfaction with work assessed by five items such as “On most days I am enthusiastic about my work.” Items are rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). In previous research the scale had good internal consistency and evidence of validity (Russell et al., 2004). The Work Withdrawal Scale (6 items) and the Job Withdrawal Scale (3 items) (Hanisch & Hulin, 1990) assess work disengagement versus engagement with items focusing on behaviours such as making excuses to be able to leave work and intentions such as changing workplaces. The scales have previous evidence of reliability and validity (Hanisch & Hulin, 1990). In order to capture the broad domain of work engagement, consisting of dedication and involvement, the dimensions assessed by these three scales were combined into a composite measure. To create this composite measure of work engagement, scores on these three scales were

converted to z-scores and summed, with higher scores indicating greater work engagement. The internal consistency of this three scale composite work engagement measure, as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha, was .71.

2.2.3. Perception of power

Individuals’ perception of personal power within their workplace was assessed through the 8-item Sense of Power Scale (Anderson et al., 2012). The scale instructions can be worded to suit any interpersonal interaction situation. In the current study, participants were asked about how much power they experience in their workplace through items such as “I can get other people to listen to what I say” with high scores indicating more perceived power. Items are rated on a scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Anderson et al. (2012) previously found the scale had good internal consistency ranging across a range of contexts. The internal consistency in the present study, as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha, was .82.

2.2.4. Satisfaction with social support

Satisfaction with social support at work was assessed by the satisfaction subscale of the Social Support Questionnaire Short Form (SSQ3; Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, & Pierce, 1987) with six items asking respondents about social support in their work context, with higher scores indicating more satisfaction with social support. Three items ask about the number of persons people can rely on for social support and three about the level of satisfaction with each item rated on a scale from 1 (*Very dissatisfied*) to 6 (*Very satisfied*). Previous research has found that the subscale had good internal consistency and evidence of validity (e.g., Sarason et al., 1987). The internal consistency for the current study, as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha, was .88.

2.2.5. Emotional intelligence

The 33-item Assessing Emotions Scale (Schutte, Malouff, & Bhullar, 2009) measured trait emotional intelligence. The scale assessed how well respondents typically identify, understand, regulate, and harness emotions in themselves and others with each item rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). The scale has good internal consistency and evidence of construct validity through association with theoretically related constructs (Schutte et al., 2009). Higher scores indicate greater emotional intelligence. Internal consistency in the present sample, as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha, was .94.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

There were no significant differences between male and female employees on the main variables, except on perceived power, on which men scored higher (mean = 36.83, $SD = 7.96$) than women (mean = 33.93, $SD = 8.37$), $t(317) = 2.90$, $p = .002$. Older employees reported significantly better mental health $r(317) = .32$, $p = .001$; more work engagement, $r(317) = .35$, $p = .001$; and more perceived power, $r(317) = .22$, $p = .001$. There were no significant differences between employees recruited from the US and employees recruited from Australia.

3.2. Main analyses

Higher emotional intelligence was positively and significantly associated with better mental health and more work engagement as well as with more satisfaction with social support at work and more perceived power at work (See Table 1). Social support

Table 1

Relationships between emotional intelligence, satisfaction with social support in the workplace, perceived power in the workplace, mental health and work engagement.

Measures	Emotional intelligence	Satisfaction with social support	Perceived power	Mental health	Work engagement
Emotional intelligence	–	.34**	.31**	.23**	.12*
Satisfaction with social support	.39**	–	.27**	.34**	.26**
Perceived power	.30**	.28**	–	.28**	.42**
Mental health	.25*	.31**	.31**	–	.34**
Work engagement	.14*	.24**	.44**	.43**	–
Mean	118.91	13.92	35.33	0.00	0.00
SD	17.14	3.32	8.26	2.78	2.39

N = 319, *p < .05, **p < .01.

Note. Correlations above the diagonal are controlled for age and gender; correlations below the diagonal are not controlled for age and gender. Scores are coded such that higher scores indicate more of a quality; for example, a higher score on mental health denotes better mental health.

satisfaction and perceived power were related to better mental health and more work engagement (See Table 1).

Mediation analyses using the procedures recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008) examined the mediating effect of satisfaction with social support and perception of power in the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health and work engagement, respectively. Figure 1 shows the mediation results for mental health. Both satisfaction with social support and perception of power were significant mediators of the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health. Figure 2 shows the mediation results for work engagement. Both satisfaction with social support and perception of power were significant mediators of the relationship between emotional intelligence and work engagement.

4. Discussion

The present study examined a model positing that trait emotional intelligence is a foundation for workplace flourishing and, in part, leads to workplace flourishing through facilitating the development of other characteristics that support flourishing. Employee emotional intelligence has previously been found to be related to good outcomes in the workplace (Joseph & Newman, 2010; O’Boyle et al., 2011; Schlaerth et al., 2013). In the present study good mental health and work engagement served as markers of flourishing.

Supporting hypotheses one and two, the present study found that higher employee emotional intelligence was significantly related to more work engagement, better mental health, more satisfaction with social support in the workplace, and more perceived power in the workplace. Supporting hypothesis three, greater satisfaction with workplace social support and greater perception of

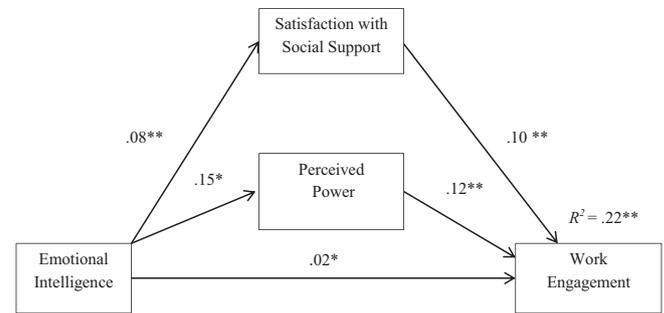


Fig. 2. Path model showing satisfaction with social support and perceived power mediating the relationship between emotional intelligence and work engagement. The total indirect (mediation) effect was $B = .03$, $SE = .005$, $Z = 5.13$, $p = .001$. The indirect effect of social support satisfaction was $B = .008$, $SE = .003$, $Z = 2.38$, $p = .02$. The indirect effect of perceived power was $B = .02$, $SE = .004$, $Z = 4.50$, $p = .001$. N = 319. Numbers in the model are standardised regression coefficients. *p < .05; **p < .01.

power in the workplace were related to better mental health and more work engagement. Supporting hypothesis four, testing of mediation models found that perceived workplace power and satisfaction with workplace social support significantly mediated between emotional intelligence and work engagement and mental health. These results suggest that emotional intelligence may be a foundation for other characteristics such as satisfaction with social support and perception of power that in turn influence mental health and work engagement.

The results of the present study are consistent with previous findings linking emotional intelligence to better mental health (Martins et al., 2010; Schutte et al., 2007) and better work-related outcomes (Joseph & Newman, 2010; O’Boyle et al., 2011; Schlaerth et al., 2013). The results of the study are also consistent with previous research on the importance of social support in the workplace (Putnam, 1995; Shirey, 2004) and the role of perception of power in the workplace (Cho et al., 2006; Inoue et al., 2013; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Emotional intelligence may be a foundation for the development of other characteristics as suggested by research such as that of Kotsou, Nelis, Grégoire, and Mikolajczak (2011) and Nelis et al. (2011) which found that interventions intended to enhance emotional intelligence are associated with increases in other beneficial characteristics. The paths between emotional intelligence and workplace flourishing found in the present study extend previous work in suggesting that emotional intelligence may be a foundation for characteristics related to workplace flourishing.

The present study focused on trait emotional intelligence (e.g., Petrides & Furnham, 2000) and through the associations found between trait emotional intelligence and workplace outcomes, provides additional support for the importance of this aspect of emotional intelligence. Ability emotional intelligence is also

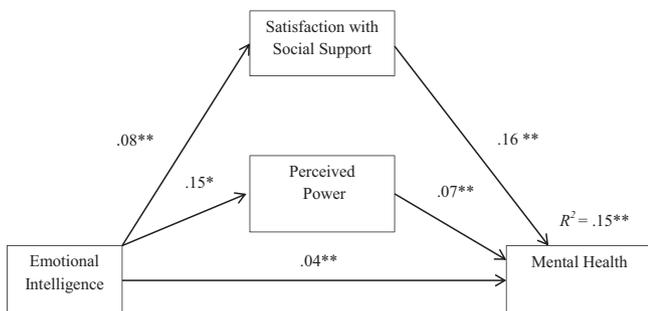


Fig. 1. Path model showing satisfaction with social support and perceived power mediating the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health. The total indirect (mediation) effect was $B = -.02$, $SE = .005$, $Z = -4.44$, $p = .001$. The indirect effect of social support satisfaction was $B = .01$, $SE = .004$, $Z = 2.99$, $p = .03$. The indirect effect of perceived power was $B = .01$, $SE = .003$, $Z = 3.16$, $p = .002$. Numbers in the model are standardised regression coefficients. N = 319, *p < .05, **p < .01.

associated with workplace outcomes such as performance (Joseph & Newman, 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2011) and future research might further investigate the role of ability emotional intelligence in workplace flourishing.

This initial study examining a model of workplace flourishing in which emotional intelligence is posited to provide a foundation for the development of characteristics that facilitate flourishing has limitations but also provides an anchor for future research. The concurrent data collection makes causation relationships speculative. Future experimental intervention research may provide more definite answers regarding the role of emotional intelligence as a foundation for the building of workplace strengths. The results of a number of studies indicate that emotional intelligence can be increased through training (for a review see Schutte & Malouff, 2013b). Future research might explore whether emotional intelligence training of employees is a vehicle both for increasing emotional intelligence and a variety of strengths building on emotional intelligence, which in turn may lead to workplace flourishing.

A limitation of the present study is the common method variance stemming from the use of self-report measures. Future research might draw on indices based on alternative information sources such as supervisor ratings of emotional intelligence or work engagement and behavioural indices such as actual changing of workplaces. Some constructs measured in the present study, such as experienced mental health and perception of power, reflect internal processes that can be difficult to assess through alternative means. Conway and Lance (2010) suggest that to the extent there is construct validity evidence for self-report measures and no overlap in item content between measures, self-report common method variance is less problematic.

There were no significant gender or age differences in emotional intelligence. Male employees were higher in perceived power and older employees reported more perceived power, better mental health, and more work engagement. These findings suggest that programs intending to increase actual and perceived power of employees might especially target female employees and programs focused on enhancing employee mental health or work engagement might target younger employees.

This initial study examined selected characteristics and markers of flourishing that might build on emotional intelligence. Future research might examine alternative measurement approaches and conceptualisations of constructs, for example using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006) to assess work engagement through the dimensions of vigour, dedication, and absorption. Future research might examine additional important characteristics such as ability to create work-life balance. Future research might also examine other indices of workplace flourishing such as productivity and positive career development activity.

This initial study examining a model of workplace flourishing in which emotional intelligence is posited to provide a foundation for the development of characteristics that facilitate flourishing support the utility of both the emotional intelligence concept and the positive psychology approach applied to work. The results of the present study provide an anchor for future research which has practical implications. Emotional intelligence conceptualised as a source of workplace flourishing can provide promising application avenues for workplace programs promoting employee well-being and engagement.

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