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Emotional intelligence: a new criterion for hiring?

Researchers from UNIGE and UNIBE have developed an emotional intelligence test for the workplace that can be used to assess and predict an employee's abilities in interpersonal relations and leadership capabilities.

The cognitive skills and personality of a future employee are examined during a job interview: does the candidate have the right training? The right career history? Does he present himself well? And is he affable? However, qualifications and a nice character don't necessarily mean that the interviewee will be a good boss or a competent colleague, especially in professions where social interactions play a pivotal role. The individual's emotional intelligence has to be factored in, that is, his or her capacity to understand, regulate, recognise and manage emotions in the specific context of the work environment. Researchers at the Universities of Geneva (UNIGE) and Bern (UNIBE), Switzerland, have devised an emotional intelligence test that measures emotional competences at work. Known as the Geneva Emotional Competence Test (GECO), it is now available for research purposes and commercial use – and you can read all about the results in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

The importance of emotional intelligence is widely acknowledged today, whether it's about recognising and understanding emotions, regulating one's own feelings or managing those of others. But up to now there has never been a test for measuring these skills in the specific context of work and the standards that govern it, that was entirely based on scientific findings and empirically validated. "In fact, someone may behave in a totally different way with their family or at work. They might be authoritarian in one environment and submissive in another," points out Marcello Mortillaro, a researcher in UNIGE's Swiss Center for Affective Sciences (SCAS). "That's why we were so keen to develop an emotional intelligence test focusing exclusively on situations specific to the professional environment. The aim was to assess a person's level in this area and provide both individuals and organizations with a scientifically based description that could help in personal development, in hiring the right candidate for the job, and in giving the right job to the person."

The Geneva Emotional Competence Test

The Geneva Emotional Competence Test (GECO) consists of four tests for evaluating the different parts of emotional intelligence, namely: understanding emotions, recognising emotions, regulating one's own emotions and managing other people's emotions. Katja Schlegel, a researcher at UNIBE's Institute of Psychology, explains: "We concentrated on problematic situations that involve negative emotions: fear, sadness, anger and inappropriate happiness or Schadenfreude."

"The GECO results were controlled and validated by additional tests, and they are very convincing," continues Mortillaro. "The more emotional intelligence skills you have and the better those skills are, the better your work outcomes are, above and beyond your cognitive intelligence or personality." The researchers also found that a superior ability to regulate



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High definition pictures



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one's own emotions is linked to earning a slightly higher salary. In fact, emotional intelligence goes hand-in-hand with a higher degree of empathy, openness to others, respect for moral rules and, in overall terms, a positive temperament. "We tested GECO on people aged 20 to 60, and the results show that emotional intelligence increases with age and experience, meaning it's a faculty that can be improved and developed," says Mortillaro. Women on the whole obtain superior results than men, notably when asked to interpret nonverbal emotional expressions. "Emotional intelligence is also linked to a person's well-being and satisfaction with his or her lifestyle," adds Schlegel.

"We also noted that managers who perform well on GECO have better results in standardized leadership tasks and students with higher GECO scores get better grades," says Schlegel. This finding explains why GECO is now being marketed by a Bern-based company and is being used for recruitment and career guidance assessments. The test currently exists in French, English and German with an Italian version being developed. "We now want to analyse the data to see whether there are differences across different language regions. We're continuing to develop GECO so that it can support the role of emotional intelligence in recruitment and scientifically validate the predictive aspect of a person's abilities in their professional careers," says Mortillaro.

1000 people to validate GECO

The various questions included in GECO were drawn up using interviews with over 40 managers working in Swiss-based firms. Participants were asked to explain diverse situations where they were faced with fear, sadness, anger or inappropriate happiness. They then presented the answers specific to these situations, which were validated by emotion experts and other managers as well as representatives of the general public. More than 1000 individuals then completed the four tests that make up GECO.

During the first subtest, which focuses on understanding emotions, participants are presented with 20 emotional scenarios and are asked to choose from 15 possible options which emotion was probably experienced in each scenario. The second test, designed to assess the recognition of emotions, consists of 42 videos of a person expressing a particular emotion. Once more, participants had to select the right emotion from 14 suggestions. The third test was geared towards the ability to regulate emotions: 28 scenarios portrayed a particular situation, with participants having to choose how they would behave. There were four possible answers but subjects were only allowed to choose two, the objective being to reduce the negative emotion rather than maintain it. Finally, the fourth test evaluated the management of other people's emotions. As Mortillaro notes: "This was the most important and meaningful test, especially in a professional context". In each of 20 scenarios, a person expressed fear, sadness, anger or inappropriate happiness. Participants had to choose from five possible courses of action the one they thought most effective to manage the emotional state of the other person: cooperation, compromise, acceptance, avoidance or assertiveness. "In this instance, context is everything. You might think that cooperation is always the right solution but that's by no means the case," warns the UNIGE researcher.