

# Empathy pays off at work

*The faster business gets, the greater the need to read emotions in a snap*

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In this job market, it's not just who you know, or even what skills you've mastered. It's how well you understand other people that will get you ahead.

This is the age of emotional intelligence, often called EQ, and today's hiring managers want proof you've got it.

Do you have the maturity and independence to follow a project to completion? Can you motivate and lead a group of your peers? Do you genuinely care about the company's values and goals? Are you the type to be sensitive to the needs of a troubled co-worker? Can you control your anger when a supervisor is rude to you?

"Employers are looking for better-rounded workers these days," said Marilyn Edelson, founder and chief executive of Newton, Mass.-based OnTrack Coaching and Consulting Inc. "If you're just a grabber, looking for what you can get for yourself, you might be seen as a bright spark in the beginning, but it won't carry you through a career."

EQ comprises a collection of so-called "soft" skills, including self-awareness, an understanding of how your mood and behavior affect others; impulse control, including how you manage stress on the job; initiative, whether you can be counted on to report to work on time, manage your own time and meet expectations; and the ability to motivate and lead others.

But empathy -- the ability to understand and acknowledge another person's point of view -- is "the big enchilada in my mind when it comes to emotional intelligence," said Nancy Mobley, chief executive of Dedham, Mass.-based workplace consultants Insight Performance. "If you are an employer looking to hire for a leadership position, you want to know whether they can put themselves in someone else's shoes," she said.

For companies, emotional intelligence is not just some trendy HR phrase. It's costly for employers to replace managers who fail to connect emotionally and to regain the trust of burned subordinates.

Moreover, the ever-increasing business emphasis on technology and globalization means more communication, cooperation and teamwork are necessary to get projects completed on time and on budget. Companies have to hire good communicators if they want to survive.

As for employees, older workers tend to have more emotional intelligence, usually through hard-won experience. Younger workers, however, can close the experience gap by showing genuine excitement about the job, interest in the company and a willingness to learn and grow.

Job applicants, especially those for executive-level positions, should be prepared to be quizzed on their EQ. Typical subjects include behavioral-type questions about how they coped with a past workplace challenge, managed a personality conflict or helped a team project succeed.

Even someone fresh out of college should be ready to demonstrate these skills, perhaps by describing how they managed a fraternity fundraiser, met school newspaper deadlines or trained a group of summer lifeguards, Mobley said.

The increasing importance placed on EQ skills isn't about a kinder, gentler workplace -- actually, it's quite the contrary.

Research collected by the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations shows that salespeople, military recruiters and executives with better scores on written EQ tests outperformed and out-earned colleagues who scored lower.

A 1997 study conducted by the Hay Research and Innovation Group, an EQ consulting and testing company, showed computer sales reps hired especially for their emotional skills were 90 percent more likely to complete training than those hired on other criteria.

Another Hay study from the same year showed insurance agents who scored weakly on empathy, self-confidence and initiative sold policy premiums worth 50 percent less than agents who scored better in those areas.

## HELPFUL HINTS

Some tips from the experts on emotional intelligence:

- **Pay attention to buzzwords** in the job description ("innovative," "flexible" and "friendly," for example) and incorporate them into your cover letter and résumé.
- **Know yourself** and learn everything possible about the values and culture of the company you hope to work for. "It's not emotionally intelligent to force yourself into an office culture where you won't be happy," said Marilyn Edelson, founder and chief executive of Newton, Mass.-based OnTrack Coaching and Consulting Inc.
- **Demonstrate reliability and trustworthiness.** One of Edelson's favorite stories is about a 23-year-old woman who wrecked her car en route to an interview. Instead of being a no-show, she called and explained the situation, and got a ride to the interview. "She was determined to show them she was reliable and would show up when she said she would," Edelson said. (Impressed, the firm hired her on the spot.)
- **Never fib about anything.** Don't say you're fluent in Spanish when you haven't spoken a word since high school. Assess your skills realistically, but follow with a pledge to improve quickly if the job requires proficiency.
- **Send a thank you note** to show off your good manners, another component of intelligence. Handwritten, via snail mail.