



EI valued more than IQ in hiring, promoting

Ability to remain calm under pressure main benefit for employers: Survey

Emotional intelligence is “absolutely fundamental” to the effectiveness of front-line staff and management at Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, according to Anne Harvey, vice-president of employee engagement.

Whether they’re nurses, pharmacists, physicians or administrative staff, high emotional intelligence is important.

“If they don’t have a good sense of people and what they’re experiencing, then they cannot provide that kind of care that we need,” said Harvey, whose Vancouver-based organization has 22,000 employees. “(People with high emotional intelligence) are more empathetic and they also understand their own emotions better.”

Emotional intelligence (EI) is becoming an increasingly important quality in the workplace and 71 per cent of hiring managers in the United States value EI in an employee more than IQ, found a recent survey of 2,662 hiring managers by CareerBuilder.

“We’re starting to see a growing comfort in talking about (emotional intelligence) or soft skills,” said Rosemary Haefner, vice-president of HR at CareerBuilder in Chicago. “We’re starting to see, progressively, companies getting more comfortable admitting they’re using a more holistic view when making important decisions.”

The ability to remain calm under pressure is the top reason why employees with high emotional intelligence are sought after in the workplace, found the survey. This quality has been especially valuable over the last few years as many companies have been stretching employees and putting even more on their plates, said Haefner.

“It’s been an extra stressful time... and it really is this extra bonus to have individuals that are able to work well under pressure and they can go beyond the day-to-day job,” she said. “It really is something that, until you see it in action, it’s hard to appreciate how valuable and strategic it is to have those assets on board.”

Ability to resolve conflict also appreciated

The ability to resolve conflict effectively is the second most desired trait of people with high EI, found the survey. They can see the bigger picture and their goal is to just get through the conflict — which they do quickly and methodically, said Haefner.

“(EI) helps with managing emotions — for people not to lose it and to keep cool, especially in a team or leadership environment,” said Steven Stein, CEO of MHS (Multi-Health Systems) in Toronto, which publishes psychological assessments. “It keeps emotions at a level where you can function well and it prevents derailment.”

Employees with high emotional intelligence are also more empathetic, they lead by example and make more thoughtful business decisions, found the CareerBuilder survey.

“Whether it’s financial decisions or what we used to think were rational decisions, people who ignore their emotions do a poor job of making decisions,” said Stein. “Even people like Warren Buffett talk about how important emotion is in making the financial decisions he makes.”

More than one-third (34 per cent) of survey respondents said they are placing greater emphasis on emotional intelligence when hiring and promoting employees post-recession. A lot of hiring managers are using behavioural interview questions to determine a candidate’s emotional intelligence, said Haefner.

HR should conjure up a high-stress situation with some sort of conflict and ask the candidate how he would handle it, she said.

“If you are interviewing, don’t say very much, just let the candidate run with it, and you’re looking for how comfortable they are when they answer,” said Haefner. “Somebody without high (emotional intelligence) will get visibly agitated — it’s not only what they say but how they say it.”

During an interview, HR should also ask questions to assess how the candidate deals with other people, how much he cares about others, how he motivates people and how he expresses and manages his emotions, said Stein.

To assess these qualities, Harvey uses an assessment tool for executive and management hiring that considers seven pillars — self-control, excellence, strategy, decision-making, communication, collaboration and execution — which all have emotional intelligence components.

“It’s generally indicative and it’s certainly an important part of the hiring position,” said Harvey. “Testing for emotional intelligence allows you to avoid major mismatches in the hiring — I would never ignore a test that identifies major areas where (emotional intelligence) is very low. It’s more of a screening.”

Emotional intelligence is also very important for determining promotions and succession planning, said Stein. Leaders need to be able to manage their emotions to use them interpersonally and convince others to follow them and keep them engaged, he said.

Harvey said she places a lot of emphasis on emotional intelligence when choosing leaders at Vancouver Coastal Health Authority.

“Emotional intelligence affects decision-making styles and leadership styles, and people who are comfortable with themselves are generally more comfortable with others so they are better leaders,” she said.

“We look at relationships, empathy, agreeableness and motivating others.”

To screen current employees for emotional intelligence, on-the-job observation is a great method, said Haefner. Look at how a candidate handled a specific project and consider not just if he stuck to the timeline but how he communicated with the team or motivated others, she said.

Companies that focus on emotional intelligence see its benefits through greater productivity, higher retention and increased engagement, said Haefner.

And focusing on EI will become increasingly important over the next several years with the “generational handover,” said Harvey. Employees with five to 10 years’ experience will be moving into positions where, in the past, people had 15 to 20 years’ experience before moving into them, she said.

“The next generation is going to be in a really difficult spot,” said Harvey. “It’s absolutely crucial we choose people with high emotional intelligence to go into those situations or they themselves are not going to survive and the organizations they lead will go through a great deal of tension, stress and pressure.”

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