

We could do with more emotional intelligence in a tech-driven workplace

At the heart of any organisation, there needs to be an effort to understand, harness and manage emotions.

Yeo Li Pheow

The Covid-19 pandemic was an unprecedented challenge that is not too far behind us.

It was a time that demanded quick and constant adaptation from across the workforce. During this turbulent period, leaders in businesses and organisations found themselves in a position where there was little room for uncertainty or fatigue.

Instead, they had to exercise composure and strengthen themselves to enable smooth implementation of revamped operational strategies. This had to be done while recognising the mental and emotional toll it took on team members, and extending the empathy and support that was required.

During the pandemic, many organisations helped build a cohesive “can-do” attitude, which has been instrumental in helping them emerge more resilient.

These experiences have not only moulded individuals, but also transformed the very fabric of how businesses and organisations operate, creating a more empathetic and resilient workforce that is ready to face future challenges.

One that we are already grappling with is artificial intelligence (AI).

This, along with the many technological advancements of the rapidly digitalising era, has required an urgent push to equip our adult population with new essential skills that are deemed critical to surviving this new normal and staying employable.

But as we learn to better work with machines devoid of feelings and inevitably reduce human interaction through automation, it is important that we do not abandon the critical soft skills.

It is soft skills such as self-awareness and empathy that have pulled us through the pandemic years, and they require the application of emotional intelligence (EI) – the aptitude to understand, harness and manage

emotions.

This needs continued emphasis, especially in the light of the awareness that we have built over mental health and well-being. It is also critical in managing the impact of transitions as we move ahead with technology.

UNDERSTANDING EI

In a 2019 Harvard Business Review study, 50 per cent of the surveyed Asia-Pacific organisations placed EI as a core skill and a central element of strategy and talent management, higher than the global score of 36 per cent.

However, the same research showed that only 23 per cent of Asia-Pacific employees strongly agreed that EI was ingrained in their organisational culture.

The gap signifies a need for better translation of vision to mission, as well as enhanced communication and mindful demonstration of understanding and empathy in every interaction touchpoint.

Research has shown that human interactions remain the bedrock of every societal institution and workplaces, and soft skills continue to be valued assets. It takes more than technical expertise to forge a successful career. It is the invisible human skills exhibited in workplace interactions that illuminate a valuable employee and make the workplace a conducive one.

I recall an instance where a junior IT colleague volunteered to take on the organisational training project for the use of online meeting software. He formulated a curriculum and collaborated with various departments to arrange comprehensive training sessions. While his IT proficiency was evident, his standout quality was his patience in assisting colleagues grappling with navigating the online meeting software, which led to a seamless transition within the organisation’s targeted timeline.

As a result of his efforts, this junior colleague not only gained



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

popularity but also merited a well-earned promotion and recognition among colleagues.

We are often faced with unforeseen situations that put us to the test. The ability to harness emotional intelligence at critical moments will determine who rises to the occasion to pull the team together and overcome the challenge.

Earlier in 2023, a research team at the Institute for Adult Learning published a paper titled Critical Core Skills Profiling And Development In The Singaporean Workforce.

The findings highlighted self-management, influence and creative thinking as the top three in-demand core skills in the Singapore workforce. These skills, which require the exercise of emotional intelligence, are considered essential for employees’ development into independent thinkers and leaders in an organisation.

When it comes to the leaders of an organisation, I have observed that those who are able to “touch the heart” are able to better motivate the team to achieve collectively, as opposed to those who merely instruct from their ivory towers.

If they are endowed with the ability to sense the “work atmosphere in the room”, they may also be more likely to influence others to support their ideas. Such ability would foster greater teamwork and pave the way for increased collaborations and productivity – all desired outcomes at work.

On their own, leaders who are able to understand their own emotions, strengths and weaknesses will be more likely to make sound decisions and

minimise potential negative impact on the team.

INTEGRATING EI

Despite the importance of emotional intelligence and the many benefits it brings, it is completely understandable that companies may prefer to focus on core technical skills when it comes to training, as they allow more measurable outcomes based on their priorities.

But EI does not have to be taught in isolation. In fact, it works better as an integrated part of any course.

Trainers and adult educators who have the relevant training would have the proficiency to design a curriculum that incorporates EI elements. These methods include role-playing, case studies or direct demonstrations, weaving emotional acumen into the broader fabric of professional development. This allows learners to be exposed to the technicalities of their roles while acquiring the emotional skills necessary for success in a collaborative environment.

Earlier this year, at the Singapore Perspectives 2023 Work Panel discussion, Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar from the Singapore Institute of Technology proposed that workplaces should be more open to people from diverse backgrounds, including those with non-traditional academic qualifications, to promote greater social inclusivity.

One way to attain this could be to rework the workplace performance evaluation framework into a more holistic system that acknowledges a broader range of capabilities. Dr

Intan proposed including the ability to manage peers – which requires skilful exercise of emotional intelligence – as part of that framework.

With increasing recognition of EI, private training providers have started to extend courses with an emphasis on the intelligence. It might be helpful for companies to include such courses in employees’ learning and development matrix to empower them as potential leaders.

Out of curiosity, I recently decided to turn to a chatbot for potential problem-solving advice. “Something unexpected cropped up at work. What should I do?” I typed.

The responses I received were a series of systematic approaches: 1. Stay calm; 2. Assess the situation; 3. Prioritise; 4. Communicate; 5. Consult with others; 6. Brainstorm solutions; 7. Take action; 8. Learn from the experience; 9. Stay flexible; 10. Seek support.

It led me to realise that half of these steps require exercising emotional intelligence, while the other half necessitate collaboration with others.

It seems AI agrees that EI is a critical skill.

Clearly, in today’s work environment, soft skills that require the application of emotional intelligence are not just supplementary but essential. Even as automation and artificial intelligence become widespread, the human touch remains essential, and so is the need to bridge the gap between technology and empathy.

• Associate Professor (Practice) Yeo Li Pheow is executive director at the Institute for Adult Learning.