

## The Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Work Absenteeism and Lateness

Matthew R. Feinberg, Christina R. Evola, & Kimberly A. Barchard  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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**Contact Information:** Kim Barchard, Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, P.O. Box 455030, Las Vegas, NV, 89154-5030, USA, [barchard@unlv.edu](mailto:barchard@unlv.edu)

### Abstract

Absenteeism and lateness are major problems that plague the nation's workplaces, resulting in the loss of billions of dollars each year (e.g., Cascio, 1999). The purpose of this study was to determine whether Emotional Intelligence is related to absenteeism and lateness. A sample of 99 employed university students completed a multi-dimensional measure of Emotional Intelligence and reported their absences and latenesses in the last 30 days. Three significant relationships were found: a positive correlation between lateness and both the Regulation of Emotions in Self and the Regulation of Emotions in Others, as well as a negative correlation between absence and Motivating Emotions. These findings were somewhat surprising and apparently contradictory. We therefore outline a study that would test our hypothesis about the underlying reason for these findings.

### Introduction

Absenteeism is a major problem in many work places in America. Dalton and Enz (1987) estimate that every year 400 million work days are lost to absenteeism. This leads to a loss of efficiency that costs companies billions of dollars per year (Cascio, 1999; Dilts, Deitsch, & Paul, 1985). This loss, in turn, has dire effects on the national economy. Steers and Rhodes (1984) found that for every 0.5 percent increase in the national absence rates, the gross national product drops by 10 billion dollars. Various incentives and punishments have been used to help prevent absenteeism, yet they have not succeeded in curbing the high rates of absenteeism that many corporations face (Dalton & Todor, 1993). For this reason, many have raised questions about the true causes of absenteeism. Kohler and Mathieu (1993) have found that absenteeism is related to multiple predictors, including perception and attitude toward work and the work environment.

Similarly, lateness is a major problem that hinders productivity, but employers cannot seem to eradicate it. Like absenteeism, lateness is believed to be directly connected with an individual's attitude, with how passionate people are about their current goals (Alexander, 2004). Given the importance of lateness and absenteeism in the workplace, understanding these behaviors better is very important.

One variable that might be related to absenteeism and lateness is Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence includes the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in the self and in others (Hyken & Barchard, 2003), and thus may be related to attitudes about work. As well, some models of Emotional Intelligence include motivation (Tett, Wang, & Fox, 1997), which is hypothesized to be strongly related to lateness and absenteeism. Given that the workplace is oftentimes stressful and demanding, and that motivation must exist for one to go to work, it seems that Emotional Intelligence might be related to the number of absences from work or how often one is late to work. The purpose of this study was to examine this relationship.

### Method

#### Participants

There were a total of 99 participants (43 male, 53 female, 3 unspecified). Ages ranged from 18 to 52, with a mean of 21.7 and a standard deviation of 5.1. There were 47 Caucasian, 19 Asian, 11 Hispanic, 11 African-American, 4 Pacific Islander, 5 other participants.

#### Measures

The Survey of Emotional Intelligence (Tett, Wang, & Fox, 2003; Tett, Wang, Gribler, & Martinez, 1997) contains 12 subscales (see Table 1). Items use a 6-point Likert-type rating scale, with 1 indicating "Strongly Disagree" and 6 indicating "Strongly Agree."

Lateness was measured using a single item, counting the number of days participants were late in the last 30 days.

Absence was measured using a single item. First we asked how often participants had missed work in the last 30 days because they or a family member was sick. Then we asked how many times they missed work for other reasons. This latter item measured absence for reasons other than illness, and was the focus of our analysis.

#### Procedures

Data was collected during two sessions, held one week apart, and supervised by trained research assistants. The measures were all administered over the computer.

### Results

Of the 24 correlations examined, there were three significant relationships (see Table 1). There were positive correlations between lateness and both Regulation of Emotion in Others ( $r = .27, p = .05$ ) and Regulation of Emotion in Self ( $r = .25, p = .05$ ). As well, there was a negative correlation between Motivating Emotions and absence ( $r = .25, p = .05$ ).

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if Emotional Intelligence could be used to predict absences from and lateness to work. Twelve subscales of Emotional Intelligence were correlated with these variables and three significant correlations were

found. There was a negative relationship between Motivating Emotions and absence, and a positive relationship between both Regulation of Emotion in Others and Regulation of Emotion in Self and lateness. Given that 24 significance tests were conducted using alpha .05, approximately 1 Type I error would be expected by chance, if there were in fact no relationships between any of the variables. Given that we found three significant relationships, we conclude that there is indeed some relationship between Emotional Intelligence and absence from and lateness to work.

The negative relationship between Motivating Emotions and absence is to be expected, but the other two correlations were surprising. Considering that motivated individuals would be more apt to attend work, it logically fits that they would be less likely to be absent. However, the significant positive correlations for lateness and Managing Emotions in Self and Others seem counterintuitive and even confusing when one considers that the correlations with absence for these same two variables were non-significant (but negative).

We propose that people who are good at managing emotions can distinguish between what they can and cannot get away with. People who can regulate emotions in themselves and in others presumably will be more persuasive and convincing when providing excuses for their infractions. Furthermore, we propose that these people know whether or not they will be able to talk themselves out of the likely consequences of their actions, and what those consequences might be. If this is the case, then such people would be more apt to commit minor infractions but be wary of committing anything more serious. In terms of our study, a person with a high score on Regulation of Emotions in Self and Regulation of Emotions in Others knows that s/he can be late on occasion and get away with it, but is much more cautious about being absent because of the difficulty of talking one's way out of trouble, as well as the severity of the punishment that may ensue (being fired).

Further research could shed light on this hypothesis. We suggest a study that examines the connection between people's ability to regulate emotions in themselves and regulate emotions in others and how often participants have committed minor infractions (such as speeding, swearing in public, stealing a pen from work) as well as how often participants have committed more serious infractions (assault, grand larceny, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs). This study could examine the participants' levels of self-esteem, levels of morality, and intensity of guilt after committing an infraction. If our hypothesis is correct, participants with higher scores on regulating emotions in self and regulating emotions in others will be more apt to commit minor infractions and less likely to commit serious infractions, and they would score higher in self-esteem, morality, and lower in intensity of guilt.

**Table 1.** Correlations of Tett's Survey of Emotional Intelligence with Absence and Lateness

	Lateness	Absence
Recognition of Emotion in the Self	.06	-.06
Non-Verbal Emotional Expression	.06	.04
Recognition of Emotion in Others	.15	-.01
Empathy	-.04	.09
Regulation of Emotion in Self	.27**	-.17
Regulation of Emotion in Others	.25*	-.07
Intuition vs. Reason	-.02	-.03
Creative Thinking	.13	-.08
Mood Redirected Attention	.08	-.01
Motivating Emotions	.10	-.25*
Delay of Gratification	-.01	-.08
Emotional Appropriateness	-.12	.10

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

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