Research Reports

Organizational Emotional Intelligence and Top Selling

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore emotional intelligence in association with effective sales performance. The participants involved in this study were sellers in a home furniture company and completed a new tool measuring emotional intelligence at the beginning of their employment with the company. After four months, their volume of sales was calculated and compared with other results. Briefly, evidence from this study indicates that emotional intelligence skills are relevant in association with job performance, particularly relationship management and self-management. The final results support the main hypothesis. Subsequent implications for sales organizations and researchers are discussed.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, sales, organizational intelligence, emotional competencies, sales performance, employee performance, Italy

Introduction

The concept of emotional intelligence has attracted significant scientific interest in the last decade. Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as the capacity to understand our emotions and manage them effectively as well as to understand and effectively manage the emotions of other employees (Giorgi, 2013; Goleman, 1995). A number of models have been developed to measure various domains of EI. Two EI models are specifically recognized by literature: the mental ability model and the mixed model. The mental ability model focuses on aptitude for processing affective information. Thus, EI is viewed as a related set of cognitive abilities for processing emotional information and the adaptive regulation of emotion (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The mixed model conceptualizes EI as a complex construct, including some aspects of personality, and the ability to perceive, assimilate, understand and manage emotions, as well as emotional competencies (Boyatzis, 2008; Goleman, 1998).

In addition, the trait emotional intelligence model recently captured research attention. In this model, EI consists of four components: well-being, sociability, self-control and emotionality (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007).

Although, the presented models have been the subject of rigorous debate for many years as a challenge to the validity of EI (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005; Davies, Stankov, & Roberts, 1998), accumulated research findings have

shown the validity and utility of emotional intelligence in predicting workplace performance across a variety of settings. Indeed, previous researchers have suggested that EI is associated with stress resilience (Slaski, 2001), performance under pressure (Lam & Kirby, 2002) and teamwork skills (Moriarty & Buckley, 2003). Moreover, EI has been correlated with overall job performance (Dulewicz, Young, & Dulewicz, 2005) and sales performance (Wong, Wong, & Law, 2004).

Accordingly, through meta-analytic techniques, O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, and Story (2011) indicated that EI presents an important association with job performance. Recently, another meta-analysis by Joseph and Newman (2010) tested the incremental validity of EI measures to explain job performance. It found that mixed and ability-based EI measures demonstrate incremental validity over and above the Big Five personality traits and cognitive ability.

These two studies particularly confirm that EI is important in job performance (Boyatzis, Good, & Massa, 2012), which has often been considered the 'holy grail' of outcomes in management literature.

O'Boyle's study particularly pointed out the importance of the mixed model in predicting performance. Indeed, mixed model reported the largest incremental validity beyond cognitive ability and the big five. Accordingly, Ashkanasy and Daus (2005) acknowledged that mixed models may predict good performance. Cherniss (2010) also reported that mixed models may have greater predictability on performance because they use self-report measures that may better capture the emotions that employees are actually feeling in the workplace.

Consequently, in light of O'Boyle et al. (2011)'s study, we wanted to test the relationship of a new EI with sales success. However, the present research builds upon extant research in three ways. First, we try to identify those particular emotional dimensions that predict sales success. Consequently, we not only test the assertion that emotional intelligence is related to top selling, but we also try to describe different EI domains by which this is likely to happen.

Indeed, although it is becoming clearer that researchers of EI should make distinctions among the components of EI, researchers have partially accomplished the task of adequately accounting for the relations between the EI domains and performance.

Second, we complement prior research that has investigated the relationship between employees' emotional intelligence and sales success with the use of self-report or supervisors' estimates of performance rather than the metrics of actual performance. Indeed, the tendency to use subjective evaluations rather than real performance metrics has obscured the importance of the actual performance in the workplace (Greenberg, 1991).

The third way in which the present research expands the literature is by using a new mixed model of emotional intelligence called Organizational Emotional Intelligence. In this model, emotional intelligence is linked to the workplace and not to the general life. In previous existing models some EI dimensions appeared to be generally defined and might be applied in different domains of life. In addition, items of EI measures were also too broad and not specific to work. A specific analysis of emotional intelligence, exclusive of the workplace, is also consistent with the literature (Johns, 2006) that stress the necessity to take into account the context wherein emotions occur.

Emotional Intelligence and Sales

Job types with potentially strong EI implications include sales, since job performances are linked to the sales personnel's ability to understand the client's needs, to manage various kinds of selling problems and to deal with possible emotional troubles (Sojka & Deeter-Schmelz, 2002).

Having emotional skills and abilities in oneself and in dealing with others is therefore necessary for sales jobs. Accordingly, emotional competencies appear fundamental.

It can be argued that a seller with high EI should be better able to finalize sales and to create a positive emotional experience with regards to customer care and satisfaction. Indeed, Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2004) found that EI is associated with customer relations.

Sojka and Deeter-Schmelz (2002) pointed out a significant relationship between sales performance and EI. Higgs (2004), in a UK-based call center study, and Heffernan, O'Neill, Travaglione, and Droulers (2008) found similar results. Moreover, Cage, Daus, and Saul (2004) revealed that expressing negative emotions is inversely associated with actual sales performance. Janovics and Christiansen (2001) observed how higher EI scores are associated with better supervisor ratings, even after controlling for the effects of cognitive intelligence, particularly in jobs involving more direct contact with customers. In addition, EI might be particularly important in sales, where salespeople have to cope with particularly difficult customers (Weitz, Castleberry, & Tanner, 2000).

Some studies have further hypothesized that EI in sales might be more necessary than general mental ability (GMA). Although sales people can have a high GMA, they might not be satisfactory as sales performers, if they lack EI competencies (Verbeke, Belschak, Bakker, & Dietz, 2008).

Even though the meta-analytic study of Hunter and Hunter (1984) showed that GMA predicts salespeople's performances particularly well, another study reported an insignificant or very weak relationship between GMA and job performance (Ceci & Liker, 1986).

Domains of Emotional Intelligence and Sales

There may be specific domains of EI which strongly associate with sales. In their study conducted among 1100 sellers, Bar-On, Handley, and Fund (2006) pointed out the role played by self-awareness and social awareness. Assertiveness, empathy, optimism, self-reflection and problem solving were the key EI domains for success in sales. Accordingly, employees with higher social skills should report higher levels of empathy and sensitivity which impact on their customers' satisfaction (Lopes, Salovey, Cote, & Beers, 2005).

In addition, sellers with a high level of self-management are expected to successfully manage their own feelings and emotions. The competence of self-management should be reflected in a more flexible focus of attention and a broader capacity for self-control (Lopes et al., 2005). Thus, it should also be easier for highly competent employees in self-management to sell in difficult or demanding situations (e.g. with demanding customers).

Accordingly, in a research among call-center agents, Totterdell and Holman (2003) pointed out a positive relationship between self-management and the use of positive refocus strategies (e.g., thinking about pleasant things) during difficult deals with costumers.

Finally, in most sales settings, good relationship management plays a crucial role. The theory of the satisfaction mirror (Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1997) has shown that capable and productive employees can enhance both internal and external clients' satisfaction contributing to organizational success.

In most sales jobs, one of the central tasks for the employee is to create a positive affective atmosphere with their colleagues. Such a positive atmosphere with colleagues ensures a successful interaction with the customer while making positive outcomes more likely.

Aim

The main aim of this study is to identify the differences in the EI domain scores obtained by "successful" salespersons, as compared to "less than successful" representatives.

More specifically, we hypothesize that emotional intelligence is related to sales success, particularly via the domain of relationship management. According to Cherniss (2010), certain social and relational EI components may be stronger predictors of performance than classical EI domains (such as self-awareness). Indeed, influencing colleagues' emotions is necessary for employees to develop high quality interpersonal relationships with them (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and might contribute to the development of a good "climate for sale". Accordingly, as noted earlier, Giorgi (2013) pointed out the importance of relationship management competence for success at work.

Method

There were 112 participants who worked for a new megastore of a large furniture company. Their age range was 18-28 years. The research was commissioned by their employer and the results were used to take personnel decisions.

This study utilizes the Giorgi and Majer (2009) Emotional Intelligence Test, the Organizational Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (ORG-EIQ), in order to measure EI, and utilizes data on sales volumes in order to measure sales performance in participants. The sales performance variable was referred to the real sales performance of subjects involved in the study, based on business goal standards established in the company: 200.000 Euros or more; sales between 100.000 and 200.000 Euros; sales below 100.000 Euros. The ORG-EIQ was completed by 112 sellers in non-managerial positions, meaning a 100% response rate. Participation was compulsory. The ORG-EIQ was an entry test. Hence, the group was dominated by people with little sales experience in the company.

All the sellers worked in the frontline, presumably requiring high levels of EI. For example, their work activities included communicating and establishing interpersonal relationships with customers, as well as working for, or directly with, clients. They had recently started working for the company at the time of the study.

To be able to carry out a correct analysis, those subjects that exceeded the 95° percentile in the positive impression scale were eliminated. The "positive impression" scale indicates the subjects who created a better impression of themselves by lying in the questionnaire. For this reason, the final sample was formed of 106 sellers (47% males, 53% females) of the 112 initially tested.

Measures

The Organizational Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (ORG-EIQ) was administered to assess EI (our independent variable). The ORG-EIQ (Giorgi & Majer, 2009) consists of 99 questions that assess emotional and organizational competencies using a self-report methodology. The ORG-EIQ has been validated in a sample of more than 1700 Italian employees. Cronbach's alpha internal reliabilities were assessed for each scale. Most scales had acceptable reliabilities, with alphas close to or above 0.70 (Vogt, 1999), with the exception of the emotional change catalyst and organizational awareness, which only included three items (Alpha 0.60 and 0.65, respectively). The confirmatory factor analysis performed by Giorgi and Majer (2009) showed good validity for all the instruments and for each scale.

The first competency of ORG-EIQ is self-awareness, which involves emotional self-awareness, intrapersonal awareness and self-confidence (Giorgi & Majer, 2009). The second competency of ORG-EIQ is self-management, which includes emotional self-control, adaptability and eagerness (Ibid). The third ORG-EIQ competency is social awareness, which involves empathy, organizational awareness and service orientation (Ibid). The last ORG-EIQ competency is relationship management, which involves leadership, the ability to catalyze change and foster collaboration and teamwork (Boyatzis, 2008).

All items of the questionnaire ORG-EIQ, developed by Giorgi and Majer, relate to emotional job competencies and not emotional competencies in general life. Indeed, all items are connected exclusively to the workplace.

We measured sales success using the participating salespeople's sales volumes (in Euros) four months after administering the questionnaire.

The sales performance variable (the dependent variable in our study design) was based on objective data, with reference to the salesperson's ability to meet individual sales goals.

Consistent with the business performance standard, a "successful performance" was defined as meeting a goal by 100% or by exceeding it: a sale of 200.000 Euros or more; "average performance" was defined as meeting a level of sales between 100.000 and 200.000 Euros; "failure" was defined as a level of sales below 100.000 Euros. The sales performance variable is considered as a categorical variable with three categories ranging from one (top performing) to three (failure).

Procedure

An Italian company selling home furniture opened a new department store in Northern Italy and agreed to participate in the study. The final sample focused on 106 salespeople, who had been recently hired in the megastore.

The ORG-EIQ administration took an average of 20 to 25 minutes and none of the participants had any trouble understanding it. The survey was administered on site by the company's human resources specialist. Four months after the survey was administered, the official organizational records were accessed in order to acquire data on sales volumes and to get sales performance measures for each participant. The considered sales volumes represented the first actual performance of these salespeople in the company.

Data Analysis

The descriptive statistics and frequencies were calculated. Correlation coefficients were then used between the variables considered. Furthermore, in order to assess the association of the top sales group with EI, an ROC curve was used.

Receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve analysis is an analytical technique with origins in statistical decision theory and which quite effectively isolates the effects of the observer's response bias, or decision criterion. This capability provides a relatively pure measure of the discriminability of different stimuli and of the capacity of organisms to discriminate (Swets, 1973). The ROC also treats quantitatively the response, or decision, aspects of choice behavior; the ROC promises a more reliable and valid solution to some practical problems and enhances our understanding of the perceptual and cognitive phenomena that depend directly on these fundamental processes. It is, in essence, a plot of sensitivity against specificity over all possible choices of cut-off values (Yang & Carlin, 2000). In several problem areas in psychology, effects that were supposed to reflect properties of the discrimination process have been shown by the ROC analysis to reflect instead properties of the decision process. The ROC analysis has been applied in the areas of attention (Broadbent, 1971), learning (Grice, 1968), conceptual judgment (Ulehla, Canges, & Wackwitz, 1967), personality and speech (Green & Swets, 1966). ROC curves are used in medicine to determine a cut-off value for a clinical test: the ROC curve is a graph of sensitivity (y-axis) vs. 1 – specificity (x-axis). Maximizing sensitivity corresponds to a large y value on the ROC curve. Maximizing specificity corresponds to a small x value on the ROC curve. Thus, a good first choice for a test cut-off value is that value which corresponds to a point on the ROC curve nearest to the upper left corner of the ROC graph. The area under the curve (AUC) is one way to quantitate the "goodness", or accuracy, of a test. An ROC curve that passes through the upper left corner means that predictor sensitivity and specificity might be significant. Therefore, the closer the ROC curve is to the upper left corner, the higher the test's overall accuracy (Zweig & Campbell, 1993). We established a cut-off (cut-point, threshold) of 200.000, corresponding to "successful performance" for salespeople, and aimed to evaluate this cut-off value in order to verify whether emotional competence was associated with the top-performing employees.

Results

A frequency analysis was used to test how sellers achieved the performance goal. In this study, 24.5% reached the top goal, 57.5% had an average sales volume (between 100.000 and 200.000 Euros) and 18% had a low sales performance. The average sales volume in the three groups was as follows: € 226.759, € 143.684 and € 85.442, respectively.

Firstly, we examined the relationship between EI and the salespeople's performances. Table 1 shows the relationship between the salespeople's total emotional intelligence and EI scores for the four main skills with the sales variable (first group, more than € 200.000 – second group, between € 100.000 and € 200.000 - third group, less than € 100.000).

As shown in Table 1, the salespeople's total emotional intelligence positively correlated with their performance (.19, $p < .05$).

Although the correlation appears to be low, this finding suggests that those salespeople with high EI are likely to achieve a greater sales volume. It is interesting to observe how self-awareness and social competence do not

correlate with sales. On the other hand, self-management and relationship management correlate to sales more than the global emotional intelligence measurement does (.20, *p* < .05) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Correlations Between the Main Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-Awareness	-	.60**	.50**	.49**	.78**	.03
2. Self-Management		-	.68**	.68*	.88*	.20*
3. Social Competence			-	.70**	.85**	.17
4. Relationship Management				-	.84**	.20**
5. Total Emotional Intelligence					-	.19*
6. Sale Performance						-

p < .05. **p* < .01.

In addition, an ROC curve analysis was conducted for the four EI dimensions, with reference to global EI, in order to determine whether emotional competence was associated with the top-performing employees (see Figure 1). We tested the cut-off sales volume of 200.000, corresponding to successful performance.
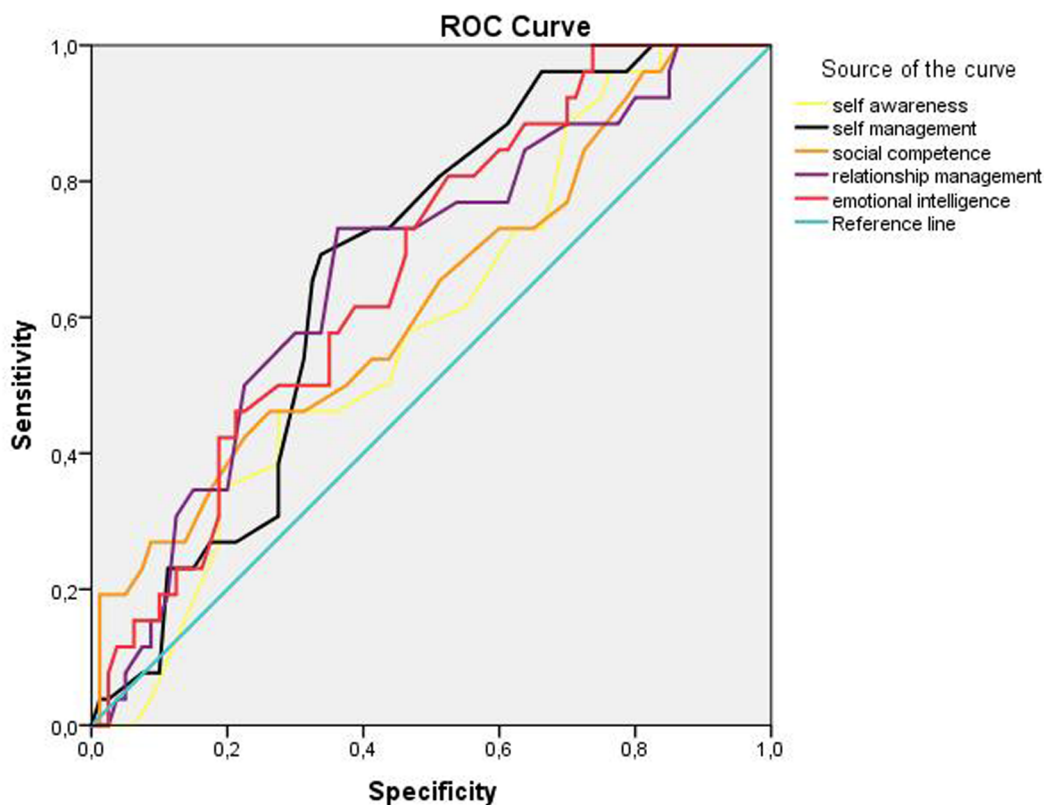

Figure 1. The Roc Curve.

An ROC curve may be interpreted by simple visual assessment, because information about the test's accuracy is reflected by the position of the curve on a plot. The closer a method's curve lies to the diagonal passing from

(0, 0) to (1, 1), the poorer its performance. As shown in Figure 1, with the exception of self-awareness and social competence, the other two dimensions of ORG-EIQ significantly associate with top sales performance ($p < .05$). Emotional intelligence also relates significantly to sales performance ($p < .05$). Since the accuracy of the test increased as the curve moved toward the upper left corner, it is evident that the AUC (area under the curve) for self-management, for relationship management and for emotional intelligence counts are greater than the others from the ROC curve analysis.

The ROC curve for the self-management, relationship management and emotional intelligence counts are closer to the y-axis; this result indicates a good choice for the test cut-off value.

The ROC curve analysis suggests that ORG-EIQ scores are able to fairly accurately identify high performers, demonstrating a relationship between ORG-EIQ and occupational performance in the study sample.

Discussion and Conclusions

The final results show a significant relationship between EI competencies and top sales. However, the importance of distinguishing between the respective contributions of EI domains in the prediction of sales success, rather than treating EI as unitary construct, is suggested. The current results and literature discussed here emphasize that the relationships between each EI domain and sales performance are different, suggesting numerous avenues for future research.

Firstly, self-awareness does not positively associate with sales as expected. It can be argued that being capable of identifying emotions, and recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses, is not a core competence for a seller. Although understanding how sellers think about, and are aware of, their emotions in everyday life is growing in importance (Goleman, 1998), in the present study it is possible to hypothesize that sellers in the early stages of work need to assimilate technical skills rather than basic emotional experiences, such as weighing emotions against one another and against other sensations and thoughts.

This study also assumes that a high score on the social awareness ORG-EIQ scale does not necessarily imply sales success. Surprisingly, interpreting people's feelings or nonverbal cues, and comprehending the implications of interacting with clients, are important competencies, but are not associated with top selling in this specific setting. Indeed, in many studies, emotional intelligence provides an important key for understanding how sales professionals interact with customers (e.g. Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, & Sheng, 2011).

It could be argued that social awareness is strongly emotionally demanding and, consequently, might consume more resources than other competencies (Giorgi, 2013), especially for sellers in the early stages of work. Consequently, this competence might not be related to sales success.

In addition, in the particular sample studied, the need to develop longer-term relationships with the customers might not be as strong as in other companies, attenuating the importance of social awareness for sales success.

However, these findings that do not yield statistically significant results appear important. On the one hand, this research attenuates the "file drawer problem" (Rosenthal, 1979), a publication bias that favours statistically significant results over null results (Edwards, 2008). On the other hand it confirms that dealing with distinct competencies may provide more accurate evidences for research and practical purposes.

In contrast, the results of this study demonstrate that self-management positively relates to top selling. Those who display good self-management are more likely to be responsible for personal performance, continue with commitments and engage in their work with clients with a relaxed and organized approach. This result follows existing literature (e.g. Kidwell et al., 2011). Sellers who are able to keep their composure (i.e. manage their emotions) are likely to perform better. Indeed, sales professionals who manage their emotions more effectively will know better which emotions to display and will, therefore, increase the chance of sales success.

In addition, the results indicate that relationship management positively relates to top selling.

Accordingly, relationship management emerges as an important characteristic in this study. Leading work activities, as well as the engagement in groups and teams at work, appear to be very important factors for sales success.

It is, therefore, possible to argue that sellers often find themselves in contact with other colleagues or their supervisors, and that they also have to know how to manage relationships well in their job. Thus, they not only have to create stimuli for their customers, but also for the people with whom they work.

In addition, with high relationship management skills, sellers can better succeed in introducing products, in negotiating and interacting with colleagues and in enhancing an harmonious climate for sales.

This finding is broadly consistent with previous studies that have linked global EI to better performance on a wide range of leadership measures (Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough, 2009).

The essential role played by relationship management, however, stands in contrast with previous studies that pointed out the necessity of social skills for top selling. The present findings might be interpreted to suggest that different aspects of emotional intelligence are useful in different organizational contexts (Cherniss, 2010). Therefore, we might look more closely at the relationship between job characteristics and the effectiveness of emotional competencies.

In addition, it seems likely that this result reflects the use of a different measure of sales. It can be hypothesized that with actual sales there is probably less chance for social awareness competencies to become effective.

Briefly, relationship management and self-management can be considered key competences for sellers. The current findings suggest that sellers with higher relationship management and higher self-management skills may increase sales in comparison to those having lower skills. Such evidence is already relevant with regards to a single seller (around 21.000 - 22.000, by comparing a top performer with a low performer), but may also assume an extremely elevated economic value when we consider differences across all groups.

The findings in this study are relevant and have important implications for practitioners. EI may be a critical skill that offers practitioners the potential to improve salespeople's performance (Abraham, 1999). In particular, relationship management and self-management appear to be essential antecedents to sales performance and, consequently, it is important to train sales professionals to use emotional intelligence. These findings have the potential to help organizations in shaping EI competencies in ways that may increase sales. Sellers should be aware of the EI concept and how they can improve the various EI elements.

In addition, organizations might select sellers with high emotional intelligence. Consequently, many selection procedures that only test cognitive ability could add an EI assessment, with a stronger focus on relationship management and self-management competencies.

Furthermore, this study is an important first step that presents an innovative hypothesis from which future research can be developed.

First, we used the ORG-EIQ to identify unique emotional competencies that focus on making individuals more effective at work and not merely in general life. This is also consistent with literature (Johns, 2006) that stresses the necessity to take into account the context wherein emotions occur, as well as wherein individual differences are developed.

Second, examining the impact of specific EI competencies on sales performance, we have explained the association of EI and sale volumes more clearly. Objective data were also useful in this respect. By using an objective performance measure, we negated concerns about common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Consequently, even if weak, the emerged relationships seemed to capture the essence of the associations derived from the actual performance data. However, considering the limited strength of the association of emotional intelligence competencies with sales, we hypothesize that further psychological variables might impact on top selling. For instance, sales success depends not only on EI competencies, but also on dispositional affectivity (Rozell, Pettijohn, & Parker, 2004) or organizational commitment (Rozell, Pettijohn, & Parker, 2006). In future studies, further organizational and personal determinants of top selling should be considered in association with emotional intelligence.

Third, the associations of relationship management and self-management with sales are confirmed by using a particularly accurate methodology such as the ROC analysis. ROC methodology has reached a level of maturity at which it can be trusted broadly (Zhang & Mueller, 2005).

We conclude that organizational emotional intelligence impacting on performance is significantly associated with sales performance. Self-management and relationship management competencies seem particularly predictive in the sample studied.

However, this study is not without its limitations. Our study has examined the relationship of emotional intelligence with sales performance within a single organization and industry. Consequently, it is uncertain to what extent the present findings could be generalized to other organizations and industries. To address this issue, we advocate additional studies to determine if the present results hold in other organizational and industry contexts, where selling strategies and products are different. Furthermore, the objective performance data considers a four-month period, which appears to be short in regards to the elimination of fluctuations in performance. An additional limitation of this study is that there is a range restriction, given that the participants were already selected as employees of the organization. Therefore, the participant recruitment method has limitations. As documented in depth in numerous social researches, the obligation to compile the questionnaire limits the interpretive results and cautions the wider applicability of research findings to the general population (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In addition, the participants' age was low (under 30) and sales were only measured after the first four months in the job. Consequently, those who were not top sellers might not yet have possessed the technical skills to perform the job well. To address this issue, future studies should measure the link between emotional intelligence and top selling in employees

with higher job seniority. Further, additional demographic data (such as job experience) should be investigated in future studies.

In conclusion, a greater understanding of the role played by EI in sales performance can be developed most effectively by conducting investigations programmatically.

It would therefore be interesting to observe the extent to which findings such as the present are replicated in future research using different research methods and measures (e.g. performance-based measures) as advocated by the literature (e.g. Antonakis & Dietz, 2010; Breso, Ferrer, & Giorgi, 2013).

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