

‘Don’t forget the need for person-to-person excellence.’ AI Skills Are Important— Up to a Point



“I

was in the bottom half of my class in college, but I’ve done well in my career,” a vice president at a global consulting firm told me. It was emotional intelligence, he added, that explained his success.

As we enter the brave new world of AI in the workplace, this human skill set will matter greatly, as it always has. Emotional intelligence, of course, is a different way of being “smart”: self-awareness, managing your emotional life, and understanding those around you—and putting that all together to have effective relationships.

These days, determining how to make the best use of AI in a company is top of mind for decision-makers. No one wants the competition to outdo them

on this key transition. Even so, the human qualities that drive productivity still matter immensely. Great leaders need emotional intelligence.

This key fact can be lost amid the excitement spurred by AI. But consider this: A cadre of brilliant technologists at the top of a firm may mean that many “nerds” are in leadership positions. And people disengage when their boss is a person they don’t trust or feel a connection with.

To be sure, someone gifted in the tech realm can also have a great deal of emotional intelligence. That’s an ideal combination. But to hire or promote mainly for tech excellence risks installing leaders who are low in the personal qualities leadership demands.

As AI allows companies to flatten their hierarchies, leaders will be directing more and more people. At some companies today, a manager or CEO may have 50 direct reports. This broader human-to-human



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interface makes people skills all the more important. That’s because outstanding leaders know how to inspire, guide, and tune into the feelings of those they lead—as well as understand and manage their own feelings. These human skills are crucial, for instance, in managing workers’ fears as AI leads to jobs disappearing or taking new forms.

A Korn Ferry survey of 250 global CEOs and directors found that while nearly 70 percent ranked tech skills and AI as their top leadership priority in coming years, only 38 percent cited emotional intelligence. But the challenges of leading people have not changed. Companies everywhere need leaders who are confident, self-aware, calm, clear, empathetic, and able to lessen people’s fears while inspiring them to do their best work.

In its most recent *Future of Jobs* report, the World Economic Forum lists dozens of core competencies it deems essential for success in coming years. While analytical skills lead the list, emotional intelligence in one form or another—like motivation or active listening—dominates the top 10. That’s no wonder: Researchers find that high levels of emotional

intelligence in leaders mean workers feel more engaged with their jobs and are more productive.

What can a company do if a valuable employee lacks elements of this personal and interpersonal skill set? The good news here comes from the research of Richard Boyatzis, professor at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University: Given the right motivation and coaching, most leaders can boost their emotional intelligence. In an emotional-intelligence course for executives returning to business school for their MBA, Boyatzis found not only that they had improved on target skills, but also that bosses and fellow workers perceived the improvement up to seven years later.

The lesson here suggests caution rather than unbridled enthusiasm when it comes to the tech-savvy digital experts who can help you bring AI into your company. Don’t forget the need for person-to-person excellence in your leaders and throughout your workforce. My advice: Hire for the skills you need, but develop for the perennial human qualities of leadership—emotional intelligence. ■

Goleman is the author of the international best seller, *Emotional Intelligence* and *Optimal: How to Sustain Personal and Organizational Excellence Every Day*.