

Assessment of Emotional Intelligence in Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Agents.

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Introduction/Need for Research

The use of emotional intelligence (EI) for employee selection and training has increased (Argabright et al., 2013; Livingstone & Day, 2005). Research indicates EI development in the workforce strengthens commerce and develops that human capital inherent to success (Goleman, 1995). The Cooperative Extension Service has provided resources and education to families and agriculturalists since the Smith-Lever Act was enacted in 1914 providing for a national system focused on practical, research-based information about agriculture, home economics, and energy to the people (Andrews, 2014). Emotional intelligence is defined, as the “ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to guide one’s own thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189), becoming a prominent and recognizable analysis of intelligence by educators, employers, and the informed public (Livingstone & Day, 2005).

Theoretical /Conceptual Framework

The study was viewed through the theory of Human Capital (HCT), Human Capital encompasses the investment that is made in a population, which in turn will give back to the local economy (Longley, 2019). In the workplace, employers invest in their employees for the benefit of the company. Feeding into employees’ Human Capital with opportunities such as family assistance, professional development, and other types of training and education will have a lasting impact on the success of the company (Longley, 2019). This study aligns with the American Association of Agricultural Education’s (AAAE) National Research Agenda and addresses Research Priority 3, “Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century” (Roberts et al., 2016).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore the importance and inclusion of emotional intelligence in Texas AgriLifecounty extension agents. To accomplish the purpose of this study, the following objectives were sought:

1. To identify demographic information (i.e. Gender, age, years of experience, etc.) of county extension agents in Texas;
2. To compare the Overall Emotional Intelligence (OEI) between County Extension Agents and School-Based Agricultural Educators in Texas.

Methodology

The population for this study included all county extension agents in Texas during the fall of 2019 (N = 508). Data were collected from 200 (39.3%) participants, meeting the sample size requirement for survey research (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). This study utilized the Qualtrics survey platform and defined the sample through 14 demographic questions (i.e., Gender, Ethnicity, Age, etc.). The Genos™ Emotional Intelligence (EI) Inventory, an internationally validated assessment tool, assessed the EI of study participants in the following leadership areas: self-awareness, awareness of others, authenticity, emotional reasoning, self-management, and positive influence (Gignac, 2010). The 31 question Genos™ Emotional Intelligence (EI) model (Gignac, 2010) utilized a 5-point Likert-Scale for participant responses, with either a direct or inverse relationship (1 = Almost Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 =

Usually; 5 = Almost Always). Descriptive statistics were analyzed ($p = > .05$) utilizing SPSS 27.0.

Results/Findings

Research question one sought to determine the demographics of the sample. The average agent of this study was a married (61.0%) Caucasian (83.5%) female (57.0%), who was an AGNR agent (42.0%), that was 22 – 30 years old (27.5%), holding a Master's Degree as their highest degree (71.5%), with less than 10 years of experience (59.0%).

Research question two compared the EOI tendencies of Texas AgriLife County Extension Agents ($M = 112.33$, $SD = 35.32$), to Texas school-based Agriculture educators ($M = 120.11$, $SD = 19.09$) Frost (2019) the 3,000 Genos normative values ($M = 121.86$, $SD 13.84$) of Palmer et al. (2009). The normative sample put forth by Palmer et al. (2009) consisted of a sample of workplace individuals with varying ages above 18, varying nationalities, education levels, occupations, industries, and role/employment level.

Conclusions

EI is a growing option to those seeking success to improve upon themselves, those around them, and the companies for which they work for (Argabright et al., 2013; Goleman, 1995). Many employers are now focusing on EI as an option to select and improve upon employees in their company, without the sole reliance of cognitive intelligence (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003). In the present study, the total EOI mean of Texas Agrilife Extension Agents is 112.33, below the normative mean of 121.86 as set by Palmer et al. (2009). Similar literature (Frost, 2019) reported that SBAE showed an EOI mean of 120.11. Although Frost (2019) reports a higher SBAE mean EOI than extension agents, the participants from both populations fell below the normative mean as set by Palmer et al. (2009).

Implications / Recommendations / Impact on Profession

As emotional intelligence is defined as social intelligence with self-awareness according to Salovey and Mayer (1990), the overall mean of emotional intelligence speaks to the emotional intelligence core skills of those surveyed as a level of human capital that can be developed (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008). As such, professional development in Texas Agrilife county extension agents targeting the improvement of emotional intelligence in current agents and in the onboarding process should be considered. Implications exist in the development of extension agents through higher education, as a correlation exists in the results of this study with the level of education and emotional intelligence. As such, courses designed to target emotional intelligence levels and how they influence others should be considered.

Implementing techniques and strategies to improve EI among agents, could potentially show beneficial to AgriLife moving forward. Analyzing the recent research of Argabright et al. (2013) with extension shows the success that the study saw by implementing a leadership institute. Aspects of this study show techniques such as one-on-one feedback, keeping content available to all participants, coaching sessions on enhancing EI, as well as group discussions on challenges faced and strategies used to improve personal EI. Future research should look at extending professional development into the sub-categories heavily effected by demographics of the participants in this study. Focusing time and resources toward the development of the heavily noted sub-categories, could possibly increase the EI of agents.

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