IQ plus EQ: How technology will unlock the emotional intelligence of the workforce of the future
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We all know that machines can enhance a human’s intellectual abilities. Think hand-held devices that use intelligence to deliver patient diagnoses to physicians. Now machines are on the cusp of entering brave, new and surprising territory: partnering with people to radically improve the emotional intelligence (EQ) and social relationships of the workforce of the future.
Companies have long known that emotional intelligence (social skills, empathy, self-awareness) is strongly correlated with star performance. Relationships, or social capital, can be just as important as intellectual capital. However, until now the ability to collect real-time, precise data on people’s emotions and relationships at work and use that data to improve performance has been difficult at best. Without good data, little can be done to move the dial on performance.

A new generation of personal and environmental technologies can collect unprecedented levels of information about social and emotional states at work. According to Accenture Strategy research, 52 percent of business executives expect a moderate to significant change in work practices due to wearable devices. Watches, headbands and rings detect physiological data such as heart rate, skin temperature and brain waves to accurately read a person’s mood. But what does this have to do with performance? Data from sensors can paint a vivid picture using input about emotions, stress levels, relationships, performance, productivity, and collaboration patterns. This information can be used as the basis for giving concrete advice on adjusting workplace behavior.

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Emotional rescue

So what can companies do to capitalize on this emerging opportunity to sharpen employees’ emotional intelligence? Actions range from minimally intrusive steps that merely quantify emotional dimensions at work, to changing the way employees interact with peers and customers to boost their performance.

Quantifying the personal

Data can be collected on individuals and provided back to them in real-time. By increasing self-awareness, workers can make real-time adjustments to tasks at hand. This field is called auto analytics. It is already popular in sports, where teams use heart rate and other biometric feedback to make real-time decisions about the players on the field. Consumers are enthusiastically embracing auto-analytics to gauge how factors like mood, sleep, and exercise are influencing physical and mental performance. Now the technology is entering the workplace. One example is real-time feedback tools that highlight use of positive and negative words in conversation. The goal is to help employees use more positive words to improve social relationships and ultimately boost the bottom line. Container Store sales associates use wearable devices loaded with sensors to provide real-time feedback regarding how well they communicate with each other and with shoppers. Companies that use such devices have shown 5 to 10 percent productivity gains and 3 to 5 percent top line revenue increases.²

Leveraging the power of prediction

With a reservoir of accurate data, an organization can experiment with interventions to boost performance. This includes using intelligent machines to predict emotions and behaviors. These insights help guide interventions aimed at improving performance. Based on previously collected data about each individual’s social behaviors, managers will be able to simulate how well specific people will work together and what challenges will likely emerge. Companies could test different team configurations to maximize different traits. A group with diverse connections could excel at gathering new information quickly, while a team with close-knit connections could be better optimized to execute tasks effectively. Shift scheduling could likewise be done in a way to match people up when they’re stocking shelves or taking inventory to optimize and even predict performance of different pairings. Work assignments, team dynamics, and leader selection, to name a few, can be driven by analytics that can predict the impact of specific decisions.
Building emotional bench strength

Machines can also use analytics and cognitive computing to teach people how to improve their social skills or more accurately read other people’s emotions. This is true not just for workers, but also their managers, who appear to embrace the potential. Recent research from the Accenture Institute for High Performance and Accenture Strategy show that 84 percent of managers believe that cognitive computing will make them more effective and their work more interesting. One specific opportunity is digital coaching, helping improve managers’ abilities to coach or lead their employees. Data can be collected from a variety of sensors regarding things like body posture, facial expressions, physiology, semantics, who a person talks to and when. The aim: to provide feedback on whether the manager is exhibiting effective social behaviors while coaching.

Using tech to forge emotional links

Perhaps the most sophisticated use of technology—but also the most intrusive— involves changing people’s social and emotional behaviors in real time. The least intrusive way to do this is to have machines suggest actions, but still give humans the option as to whether or not they execute on them. Technology with GPS functionality might suggest an interaction with colleagues in close proximity based on similar work goals or shared interests. Expect Labs’ MindMeld technology listens to conversations and provides support to customer service agents by suggesting effective responses in real time. Not only does this human-machine collaboration enhance the customer experience, but it can also reduce call time, make the agent more effective, and improve overall efficiency for the call center.
Companies now have the opportunity to use technology to drive altogether new customer and employee experiences that produce bottom line business results.

Customer-facing workforces can become much more perceptive regarding the emotions of their customers and radically improve their interactions with them. To get started boosting EQ through technology, companies can:

Get employees on board

For employees to accept using sensors and wearables to monitor their every move, they must thoroughly understand how it benefits them. They need to realize that they will have to give up data on themselves in exchange for far more satisfying and productive work experiences. Organizations need to be able to articulate how using cognitive computing in the workplace will improve the social and emotional experience of employees, as well as improve the bottom line. Although some organizations are now experimenting with wearable devices for employees, few organizations are able to draw useful conclusions by overlaying personal metrics with workplace performance data.

Overcome privacy concerns

As a proliferation of sensors enters the workplace, they bring with them concerns about privacy and data rules. Collecting highly personal data on employees regarding their emotions and social behaviors is a significant concern. Seventy-six percent of employees in a recent Accenture Strategy survey said they were concerned that employers will use technology to track their every move. Forty-five percent of leaders say privacy issues are a major concern with respect to digital transformation, the number one concern cited. The monitored workplace is already evident in areas such as logistics or call centers, and is spreading rapidly. Explicit, opt-in, informed consent is an important way to approach privacy issues. So is analyzing data at the aggregate level, rather than the individual level. Companies also need to ensure that the data they collect is protected with the same rigor as their customer data.

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Make it personal

As smart sensors continue to penetrate the workplace, organizations will be best served if they start with the least intrusive technologies first. Starting with auto-analytics—or the ability for employees to collect data on themselves to improve their awareness—will help employees understand the benefits of using wearable tech in the workplace. Workers need to become accustomed to a culture in which they increasingly partner with machines to improve their performance and learn new skills. As organizations start to develop a strong analytics capability and learn what to do with all the data collected by smart sensors, they can move to the next level: using more sophisticated analytics capabilities to predict the social and emotional impact on performance at work.

IT boosting EQ and IQ

Companies have perfected collecting data on consumers to boost sales and customer loyalty. But to date, they have had little insight into how employees interact with each other and what makes them happy or successful at work. A new generation of emerging technologies promises to change that. Boosting EQ as well as IQ. Resulting in a much more engaged, more productive workplace.
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Notes:

1 Accenture Strategy Employer Research on Being Digital, 2015
3 “Managers and machines, unite!”, Accenture Strategy, 2015
5 Accenture Strategy Surveys on Being Digital, 2015

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