

# Climbing High for EI

**MHS creates customized emotional skill job profiles to help the U.S. Air Force and American Express lower training costs and increase retention.**

By Wendy Gordon

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It takes some pretty specialized training to become a pararescue jumper. For the United States Air Force (USAF), training potential grads is a lengthy and expensive process.

In 2009, each PJ trainee spent 21 months in training, focused on air-borne skills, combat diving, underwater egress, and paramedic and apprenticeship programs.

When you factor in all the flight time and specialized equipment, the price tag checked in at \$250K per grad. So the USAF began looking into ways to increase training efficiency. Aware of a successful emotional intelligence (EI) -based employment screening and training program used with their recruiters, the USAF decided to partner once again with MHS to determine if they could achieve similar levels of cost savings.

## Why it was worth a look

Many organizations today are realizing that there are more than just soft

benefits to EI in the workplace. Soft benefits such as higher employee engagement and teamwork are significant; but moreover, companies such as MHS are proving that accurate EI testing can also have measurable benefits and real bottom-line results.

In 1995, USAF recruiters were suffering from high rates of first-year turnover. In their efforts to increase recruiter retention, the USAF used MHS's EQ-i assessment of EI to study the differences between successful and unsuccessful recruiters.

Using their findings from the study, the USAF developed a pre-employment screening system that led to a 92 percent increase in retention and resulted in \$2.7 million in training cost savings in the first year alone.

Encouraged by the EQ-i's ability to predict successful recruiters, the USAF and MHS teamed up to examine whether EI testing could improve selection and development for two other high-cost-training jobs: PJ and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD).

## Accurate EI testing = better selection + cost reductions

In 2009, the USAF assessed their pararescue division using the EQ-i assessment.

The EQ-i is a standardized test that measures how an individual rates herself across 15 emotional and social factors. Five factors were linked to successful completion of the PJ program: flexibility, optimism, self-regard, happiness, and reality testing.

In fact, preliminary research shows that trainees who scored higher in these areas were two to three times more likely to successfully complete the PJ program. If further research and analysis confirms these results, then powerful information could be used by the USAF to offer guidance to trainees regarding their potential for successful completion of the program.

By using MHS's EI-based model, the USAF predicts a 72 to 74 percent potential increase in training efficiency. A preliminary study of EOD trainees is showing a different skill profile that could yield cost savings in the millions.

### The EI edge

Historically, organizations have hired and trained based on test scores that measure cognitive intelligence. Traditionally measured with an IQ test, cognitive intelligence attempts to indicate one's capacity to learn, understand, recall, and solve problems. Our understanding of intelligence has evolved during the latter part of the 20th century to take into consideration certain aspects of intelligence that go beyond the cognitive components.

EI is best defined as the ability to identify and manage emotional information in oneself and others and focus energy on required behaviors. These skills and competencies complement a person's cognitive and technical skills.

"IQ by itself is not a strong predictor of workplace performance," says Diana Durek, a consultant with MHS. "While many professions require a certain degree of cognitive ability, once one is in a given role, EI becomes the better predictor of success."

It's not difficult to see how abilities such as stress tolerance, impulse control, and emotional self-awareness could

affect a high-demand job that involves deep-water rescue or bomb disposal. But only in the last 30 years have attempts to measure and predict these abilities become scientific and highly encouraging.

### Better EI = better leadership

With the advent of EI assessment tools, companies now have the luxury of generating a scientifically validated profile, showing them what qualities make up an effective leader in their particular company or industry.

Researchers at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) have long believed that aspects of EI are related to leadership effectiveness. In 2001, they conducted a study to examine the relationship between EQ-i scores and Benchmarks, their 360-degree leadership development tool. Benchmarks is an instrument based on 24 years studying the skills and perspectives of leadership success.

CCL evaluated 236 leaders and found that ten of the 16 Benchmarks factors were significantly related to EQ-i subscales. In linking the Benchmarks factors with EQ-i subscales, researchers identified those qualities that make the biggest difference in leadership performance. In addition to the correlational studies, researchers divided leaders into high and low performing groups based on their Benchmarks scores and then compared the EQ-i scores of high and low performers:

The findings showed that eight EI factors including self-awareness, stress tolerance, and empathy could predict high leadership performance 80 percent of the time. Measurable results such as this have allowed similar organizations to better assess leadership potential and determine areas for development within their teams.

### Predicting high performance at American Express

Training programs in the private sector are also getting a boost from these types of "star performer" EI profiles. Intrigued by the USAF recruiters' success with EI, American Express in Fort Lauderdale, Phoenix, and Greensboro partnered with MHS to determine the EI skill set

that best predicts success for customer-focused sales associates.

Two metrics were used: customer satisfaction (feedback regarding customer service based on 13 behaviors) and sales goal attainment (profitability of associates' work). MHS quickly realized that while some associates had high customer service skills and some had high sales group skills, few were strong in both performance criteria.

Associates who scored high in both performance categories scored significantly higher on the EQ-i as compared to those who only scored well in one performance area, or were low in both. In other words, high EI was a strong predictor of associates with both required skill sets. "Those who excelled in sales as well as meeting customers' needs clearly outperformed those who did not," says Durek.

Moreover, American Express offered open positions in this department to top telephone service center representatives who were known high performers in client satisfaction. In fact, Durek says, "one-half of the skill set that existing successful telephone service centre reps need to be successful in their new role consists of emotional and social skills."

### Choosing an EI assessment

The first step down the road towards higher performance and cost savings is to choose the right EI assessment tool. There is a plethora of tools to choose from; however, few are statistically valid, reliable, and have proven results.

The USAF, CCL, and American Express all chose MHS's EQ-i assessment of EI because it is valid, reliable, and when used as a predictive model in job success, is yielding some impressive selection and development savings.

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**Wendy Gordon** has contributed to the development of several EI tools and supporting materials, most notably the *Emotional Intelligence Skills Assessment* and the *Benchmark of Organizational Emotional Intelligence*; [wendy.gordon@mhs.com](mailto:wendy.gordon@mhs.com).