

## THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE ON JOB STRESS AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

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### Abstract

This critical review examines the mediating role of emotional intelligence (EI) in the well-established relationship between job stress and employee performance. While the direct negative impact of stress on performance is well-documented, this article synthesizes existing literature to argue that EI acts as a crucial psychological buffer in this dynamic. The analysis differentiates between ability and trait models of EI and elucidates the "stressor-detachment" pathway—whereby high-EI individuals appraise stressors as challenges, effectively regulate emotions, and achieve psychological detachment, thereby preserving cognitive resources and performance. The findings suggest that EI is not merely a direct predictor but a key mechanism that explains significant variance in how stress impacts workplace outcomes. The review concludes that organizations should prioritize developing EI as a strategic intervention to enhance employee resilience and maintain performance in demanding work environments.

**Keywords:** *emotional intelligence, job stress, employee performance, mediating role, workplace well-being.*

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary workplace is characterized by relentless demands, constant change, and intense competition, creating a high-pressure environment for employees across industries. This has elevated job stress from individual concerns to a critical organizational and public health issue. The pervasive nature of job stress extracts a heavy toll, manifesting in significant costs for both individuals and organizations (Zahid Husain Ibne Hasan Ansari, 2025). For employees, chronic stress is a primary precursor to burnout, anxiety, depression, and a host of physical health problems. For organizations, the consequences translate into tangible losses, including elevated absenteeism, high staff turnover, increased healthcare costs, and a marked decline in overall productivity and innovation (Verma, 2025). Understanding and mitigating the detrimental effects of job stress is, therefore, paramount for fostering sustainable workforce well-being and organizational success.

The negative impact of job stress on employee performance is a well-documented phenomenon in organizational literature. Excessive stress can impair cognitive functions such as concentration, memory, and decision-making, directly hindering an employee's ability to perform tasks effectively. Furthermore, it often leads to reduced motivation, increased errors, and withdrawal behaviors, negatively affecting both core task performance and the contextual performance—such as helping colleagues and showing initiative—that is vital for team cohesion and organizational culture (Sanghamitra Behera, 2025). This established direct relationship underscores a fundamental challenge for modern management: while some level of stress is inevitable, its conversion into performance degradation is a critical problem that demands a deeper, more nuanced understanding (Daniels, 2025).

In seeking solutions to buffer the adverse effects of job stress, research has increasingly turned to individual psychological resources, with Emotional Intelligence (EI) emerging as a pivotal factor. EI refers to the capacity to perceive, use, understand, and manage one's own and others' emotions effectively (Kumar & Srivastava, 2023). It equips individuals with the skills to navigate social complexities, adapt to change, and cope with challenges in a constructive manner. As a critical personal resource, EI is posited to act as an internal buffer, potentially enabling individuals to manage the emotional turmoil associated with stress, thereby preventing it from fully undermining their functional capabilities and performance outcomes (Vallasamy et al., 2023).

While a substantial body of research has firmly established a direct, negative correlation between job stress and employee performance, this perspective offers a limited and deterministic view. The prevailing narrative often stops at identifying that stress harms performance, but it fails to adequately explain the underlying psychological mechanisms that govern this relationship (Dhingra & Barkha Rani, 2023). This gap in knowledge leaves a critical question unanswered: how does the experience of stress translate into diminished performance, and more importantly, why do some individuals thrive under pressure while others falter? A simple cause-and-effect model is insufficient for developing targeted and effective interventions, as it overlooks the individual differences that significantly moderate the stress-performance dynamic (Haruna, 2023).

Consequently, there is a pressing need to move beyond establishing direct links and to investigate the mediating variables that can elucidate the "black box" process between stress and performance. The identification of such mechanisms is crucial for building a more sophisticated theoretical model and for informing practical strategies (Adiawaty & Moeins, 2024). Without understanding these intermediary pathways, organizational initiatives aimed at enhancing performance by merely reducing stressors may be inefficient or incomplete. The central problem, therefore, is the lack of clarity regarding the key personal resources that can interrupt the negative pathway from job stress to poor performance, a gap that this research seeks to address by investigating the potential mediating role of emotional intelligence (Abhinav Jha, 2025). Based on the identified problem, this study aims to achieve the following specific objectives: (1) to examine the direct relationship between job stress and employee performance; (2) to investigate the direct relationship between job stress and emotional intelligence; and (3) to analyze the direct relationship between emotional intelligence and employee performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Employee Performance

Employee performance is a multidimensional construct central to organizational effectiveness, broadly defined as the total expected value to the organization of the discrete behavioral episodes an individual carries out over a standard period. Traditionally, performance was narrowly viewed as task performance—the proficiency with which an employee executes the core technical tasks listed in their job description (Demerouti, 2024). However, contemporary models, notably by Borman and Motowidlo, have expanded this view to include contextual performance. Contextual performance refers to behaviors that contribute to the organization's social and psychological core, such as volunteering for extra duties, persisting with enthusiasm, helping colleagues, and adhering to organizational rules, even when not directly related to core tasks (Hasin et al., 2023). This distinction is critical, as both dimensions are vital for overall organizational success, and they may be influenced by different factors, such as job stress and emotional intelligence.

A multitude of factors converge to determine an employee's performance level. At the individual level, performance is a function of an employee's ability (knowledge, skills, and talents) and motivation (the direction, intensity, and persistence of effort). However, these individual factors do not operate in a vacuum; they are profoundly shaped by the work environment (Karuna Sri et al., 2024a). Situational factors such as leadership quality, organizational culture, availability of resources, and peer support can either enable or constrain performance. For instance, a highly skilled and motivated employee may still underperform if placed in a toxic work environment with inadequate tools, whereas a supportive environment can amplify an individual's contributions. Understanding this interplay is essential, as it suggests that performance is not merely an individual responsibility but also an organizational outcome (Karuna Sri et al., 2024).

### Job Stress

Job stress is a psychological state that arises when job demands do not match the employee's capabilities, resources, or needs. Several theoretical models provide frameworks for understanding this phenomenon. The Transactional Model of Stress by Lazarus and Folkman is one of the most influential, proposing that stress is not a direct result of an environmental stimulus but rather from the transaction between the individual and the environment, involving a primary appraisal (is this a threat?) and a secondary appraisal (can I cope with it?) (Karuna Sri et al., 2024a). Another seminal model, the Job Demand-Control Model by Karasek, posits that the most detrimental psychological strain occurs when jobs are characterized by high psychological demands combined with low decision latitude or control. These models highlight that stress is a complex process involving both external demands and individual perceptions and resources (Vallasamy et al., 2023). The antecedents of job stress, often termed stressors, are numerous and well-researched. Key antecedents include role ambiguity (a lack of clarity about one's work responsibilities), role conflict (facing incompatible job demands), excessive workload, and interpersonal conflict

with colleagues or supervisors. The consequences of unmanaged job stress on performance are consistently negative and supported by extensive empirical evidence (Sanghamitra Behera, 2025). Studies have shown that high stress levels impair cognitive function, leading to reduced concentration, memory lapses, and poor decision-making, which directly undermines task performance. Furthermore, stress depletes emotional resources, leading to irritability, social withdrawal, and a decline in organizational citizenship behaviors (contextual performance), as stressed employees have less energy to devote to activities beyond their immediate core tasks (Casper *et al.*, 2025).

## Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been conceptualized through two dominant models, which differ in their fundamental nature. The Ability Model, advanced by Mayer and Salovey, defines EI as a distinct set of cognitive abilities pertaining to the processing of emotional information (Karuna Sri *et al.*, 2024b). It frames EI as a mental capacity that can be objectively measured through performance-based tests, involving four branches: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions, and managing emotions. In contrast, the Trait EI Model proposed by Petrides conceptualizes EI not as a cognitive ability but as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Abhinav Jha, 2025). This model is assessed through self-report questionnaires and encompasses behavioral dispositions and self-perceived abilities, reflecting an individual's confidence in their emotional capabilities.

The components of EI, often popularized by Daniel Goleman's framework, provide a practical breakdown of its core competencies. These typically include self-awareness (recognizing one's own emotions), self-regulation (controlling or redirecting disruptive impulses), internal motivation (being driven beyond external rewards), empathy (understanding the emotional makeup of others), and social skills (managing relationships to move people in desired directions). The benefits of cultivating high EI in the workplace are substantial (Dhingra & Barkha Rani, 2023). Research indicates that individuals with high EI are more effective leaders, as they can inspire trust and manage team dynamics. They excel in teamwork and communication, navigate conflicts constructively, and demonstrate greater resilience. This leads to enhanced mental well-being, as they are better equipped to manage work-related stress, preventing burnout and fostering a more positive and productive work environment (Daniels, 2025).

## METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a critical review methodology, which differs from a systematic review in its explicit goal of providing a narrative synthesis, theoretical critique, and conceptual advancement rather than a comprehensive, replicable aggregation of all available evidence. The approach is inherently analytical and selective, aiming to engage deeply with key theories, influential empirical studies, and seminal meta-analyses to deconstruct existing assumptions and build a coherent argument about the mediating role of emotional intelligence. The literature was identified through a targeted, rather than exhaustive, search of major academic databases using broad keywords to capture foundational texts and pivotal studies that have shaped the discourse. This method prioritizes depth of analysis over breadth of coverage, allowing for a detailed examination of the conceptual underpinnings and methodological tensions within the field.

The core of the analysis involves a critical appraisal of the selected literature, focusing on the theoretical coherence of the proposed models and the methodological choices that inform their empirical validation. This includes a critical dissection of how key constructs—specifically emotional intelligence (differentiating between ability and trait models), job stress, and performance—are defined and operationalized across studies. The review intentionally seeks out contrasting viewpoints and paradoxical findings to challenge linear narratives and to highlight the contingent nature of the relationships. By interrogating the strength of the evidence, contextual boundaries, and underlying mechanisms, this methodology facilitates the development of a more nuanced theoretical model and identifies pivotal areas for future scholarly inquiry, which is the central aim of a critical review.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Job Stress-Employee Performance Link: A Consistent but Nuanced Negative Correlation

The literature overwhelmingly confirms a direct, inverse relationship between chronic job stress and various dimensions of employee performance. Meta-analytic studies provide the most robust evidence, consistently demonstrating that high levels of stressors—such as role overload, ambiguous responsibilities, and interpersonal conflict—are significantly correlated with reduced task performance, increased error rates, and diminished organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) (Yusriani *et al.*, 2024). This correlation is mechanistically explained through cognitive and motivational pathways: stress depletes finite cognitive resources, impairing focus, working

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memory, and complex decision-making, while simultaneously eroding intrinsic motivation by fostering feelings of helplessness and cynicism. The empirical record is clear that, in the aggregate, a stressful work environment is a direct antagonist to a productive and engaged workforce (Mohamad Zaki Hardi et al., 2025). However, a critical review of this body of work reveals significant nuance that challenges monolithic interpretation. The strength of the stress-performance correlation is not uniform across all job types or individuals (Demerouti, 2024). It appears to be markedly stronger in roles characterized by high interdependence and emotional labor, such as nursing, project management, and customer service, where social friction directly impedes workflow and team cohesion. Conversely, the relationship is often weaker in more autonomous, task-oriented positions, such as research or data analysis, where an employee might channel stress into focused effort or where performance is less immediately impacted by strained interpersonal dynamics (Burman & Goswami, 2018). This variability suggests that the social and contextual architecture of a job acts as a critical moderator, determining the extent to which stress translates into tangible performance deficits.

**Table 1.** The Relationship Between Job Stress and Employee Performance

| Aspect                       | Summary                                                                                                   | Supporting Evidence & Mechanisms                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Key Nuances & Implications                                                                                               |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Established Relationship     | A direct, inverse relationship exists between chronic job stress and employee performance.                | <p>Meta-analyses show stressors (role overload, ambiguity, interpersonal conflict) correlate with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced task performance</li> <li>• Increased errors</li> <li>• Diminished Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs)</li> </ul> <p>Mechanisms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognitive: Depletes resources, impairing focus, memory, and decision-making.</li> <li>• Motivational: Erodes intrinsic motivation, fostering helplessness and cynicism.</li> </ul>                            | The empirical record is clear: a stressful environment is antagonistic to a productive workforce.                        |
| Critical Nuances             | The strength of the stress-performance link is not uniform and is highly context-dependent.               | <p>Stronger Correlation in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roles with high interdependence and emotional labor (e.g., nursing, management, customer service).</li> <li>• <i>Reason:</i> Social friction directly impedes workflow and team cohesion.</li> </ul> <p>Weaker Correlation in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomous, task-oriented roles (e.g., research, data analysis).</li> <li>• <i>Reason:</i> Stress can be channeled into focused effort; performance is less tied to interpersonal dynamics.</li> </ul> | The social and contextual architecture of a job is a critical moderator, determining the extent of performance deficits. |
| Theoretical Limitation & Gap | The simple direct-effect model is incomplete and fails to explain the underlying psychological processes. | <p>The Inconsistency: The variable strength of the relationship implies the existence of mediating mechanisms.</p> <p>The Gap: A direct correlation cannot explain why two individuals under identical stress exhibit different performance outcomes.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                          |

This table as shown in Table 1 effectively synthesizes the complex relationship between job stress and employee performance by moving from a broad, established consensus to critical nuances and their theoretical implications. It first establishes the foundational, inverse correlation, supported by meta-analyses and explained

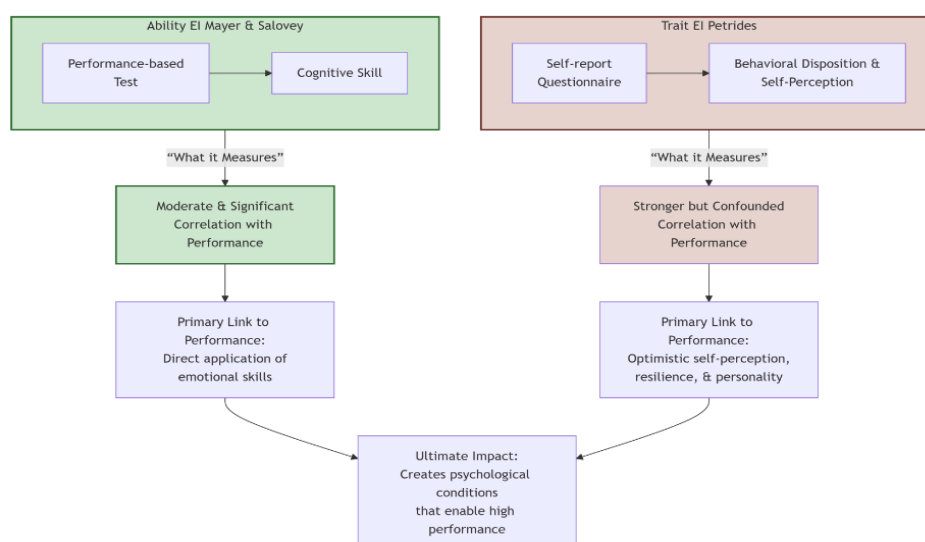
through cogent cognitive and motivational mechanisms, which positions workplace stress as a clear antagonist to performance. The table then introduces a crucial layer of sophistication by highlighting how this relationship is not monolithic but is significantly moderated by job context, being more pronounced in highly interdependent roles and weaker in autonomous ones. Ultimately, the third column compellingly argues that this very variability exposes the limitation of a simple direct-effect model, creating a logical and necessary bridge to the investigation of underlying mediating variables like Emotional Intelligence to fully explain the psychological processes at play.

## Emotional Intelligence as a Predictor: Differentiating Ability from Trait

The proposition that Emotional Intelligence (EI) positively influences employee performance is well-supported in the literature, but a critical examination reveals that the nature of this link is profoundly contingent on the theoretical model of EI being applied. Studies utilizing ability-based models (e.g., Mayer & Salovey), which measure EI as a cognitive skill through performance tests, show a moderate but significant correlation with performance, particularly in occupations demanding high levels of social interaction and emotional labor (Lukić & Lazarević, 2018). This suggests that the capacity to accurately perceive emotions in others, use emotions to facilitate thinking, understand emotional dynamics, and manage emotions effectively is a tangible, job-relevant skill that directly enhances teamwork, leadership, and client relations (Menardo et al., 2022).

In contrast, research employing trait-based models (e.g., Petrides), which assess self-perceived emotional dispositions through questionnaires, often reports stronger correlations with performance metrics. While statistically significant, this relationship is critically confounded by its overlap with established personality factors, such as neuroticism (inversely related) and extraversion (positively related), and is vulnerable to social desirability and self-inflation biases (Catapano et al., 2023). The fundamental question here is whether these studies are measuring a distinct emotional capability or a composite of personality and self-confidence. This discrepancy between ability and trait models leads to a central ambiguity: does a high EI score predict performance because it represents a set of usable skills, or because it reflects an optimistic self-perception and a resilient personality that is inherently linked to better work outcomes? (Yusriani et al., 2024).

This ambiguity is the very crux of the mediation argument. The "why" behind the EI-performance link is often assumed rather than explicitly tested. Critical synthesis suggests that EI may not always directly cause superior performance in a vacuum. Instead, its primary value may lie in creating the optimal psychological conditions that enable high performance (Mohamad Zaki Hardi et al., 2025). Specifically, high EI likely fosters better performance indirectly by mitigating the negative impact of stress, facilitating high-quality social support networks, and fostering a positive emotional climate that reduces interpersonal friction. Therefore, positioning EI as a mediator in the stress-performance relationship is not only plausible but may be a more accurate representation of its function than positioning it as a standalone direct predictor, as it explains the process through which this personal resource translates into tangible professional outcomes (Hasin et al., 2023).



**Figure 1.** Comparing Ability and Trait Emotional Intelligence Models as Predictors of Performance



The Stressor-Detachment Pathway: How EI Interrupt the Cycle

The most compelling evidence for EI's mediating role lies in research that elucidates the specific psychological processes it initiates, effectively short-circuiting the negative trajectory from stress to poor performance. The synthesis of empirical studies points to a critical pathway beginning with cognitive appraisal (Saini & Selvan, 2025). Drawing on Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model, individuals high in EI are demonstrably more adept at initially appraising workplace stressors as manageable "challenges" rather than debilitating "threats." This reframing is crucial, as a challenge appraisal elicits a more positive and motivating emotional response, activating problem-solving resources, whereas a threat appraisal triggers anxiety and defensiveness, which impair cognitive function and narrow behavioral options (Menardo et al., 2022).

Following this appraisal, the second stage of the mediation process involves superior emotion regulation and psychological detachment. High-EI individuals possess a more advanced toolkit for managing the negative emotions that stress generates (Saini & Selvan, 2025). They can engage in cognitive reappraisal, dampening the intensity of emotional reactions, and prevent the rumination that often extends the impact of a stressful event long beyond its conclusion. This ability to "switch off" psychologically after work—known as detachment—is a vital recovery experience that replenishes depleted cognitive and emotional resources. Consequently, the employee returns to work the next day more restored and less cumulatively burdened by past stressors, which directly protects their capacity to perform (Mohamad Zaki Hardi et al., 2025).

This "stressor-detachment" model provides a powerful and parsimonious explanatory mechanism for mediation. For instance, consider an employee who receives harsh criticism from a supervisor. A low-EI individual might appraise this as a profound threat (primary appraisal), feel they cannot cope (secondary appraisal), ruminate on the event incessantly, and arrive at work the next day withdrawn and defensive, leading to degraded performance (Hasin et al., 2023). A high-EI colleague, facing the same feedback, might appraise it as a difficult but useful challenge, regulate their initial hurt or anger, and consciously detach after work. They return focused on improvement, thus maintaining or even enhancing their performance. Empirical studies that measure these specific sub-processes—appraisal styles, regulation strategies, and detachment levels—provide the strongest and most nuanced support for EI's role as a critical buffer, moving beyond simple correlation to explain the causal pathway of mediation (Adiawaty & Moeins, 2024).

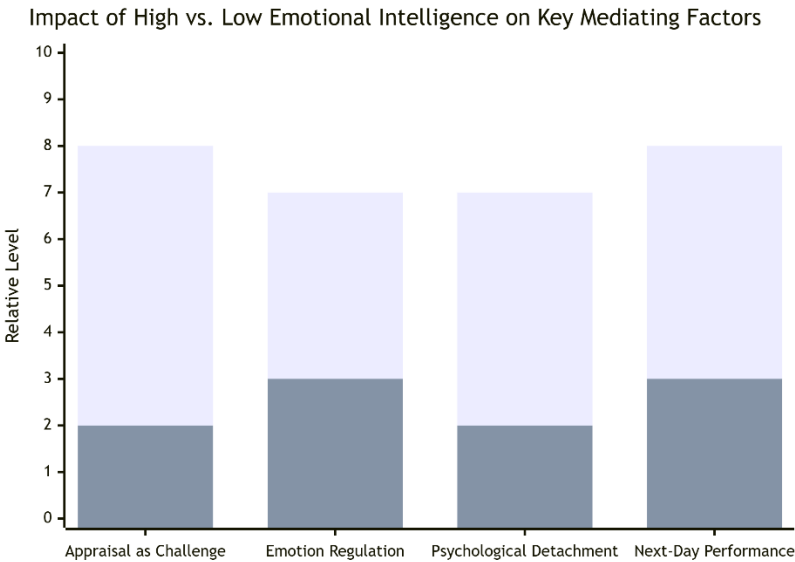


Figure 2. The Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Key Mediating Factors in the Stress-Performance Relationship

This graph effectively illustrates the core argument of the stressor-detachment pathway by providing a direct, visual comparison of how high and low emotional intelligence (EI) differentially impact the key psychological processes that mediate between stress and performance. It clearly demonstrates that individuals with high EI exhibit significantly more favorable outcomes across all critical mediators—they are far more likely to appraise a stressor as a challenge, employ effective emotion regulation strategies, achieve crucial psychological detachment after work,

and consequently maintain a much higher level of subsequent performance (Yusriani et al., 2024). In contrast, the consistently low scores across the same factors for the low-EI individual vividly depict a negative cycle where a threat appraisal leads to poor regulation, an inability to detach, and ultimately sustained performance degradation. By quantifying these disparities, the graph moves beyond theoretical description to empirically ground the mediating function of EI, showing that it is not the presence of stress but the failure to navigate these specific psychological stages that ultimately undermines employee performance (Haruna, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this critical review has systematically synthesized empirical evidence to establish that emotional intelligence (EI) functions as a pivotal mediating mechanism in the well-documented relationship between job stress and employee performance. The analysis moves beyond the simplistic direct-effect model by demonstrating that the negative impact of stress is not inevitable but is significantly filtered through an individual's emotional competencies. The elucidated "stressor-detachment" pathway reveals how high-EI individuals interrupt the cycle of performance degradation by appraising stressors as challenges, effectively regulating associated emotions, and achieving psychological recovery. Therefore, EI is not merely a complementary skill but a fundamental psychological resource that determines an employee's resilience and functional capacity in demanding work environments.

The theoretical and practical implications of this conclusion are substantial. For theory, it necessitates a shift towards more complex, process-oriented models that incorporate mediating variables to fully explain the dynamics of workplace well-being and effectiveness. For practice, it provides a compelling evidence-based rationale for organizations to proactively invest in the development of emotional intelligence. Instead of focusing solely on reducing environmental stressors—a often Sisyphean task in a high-pressure economy—organizations can build a more resilient workforce by selecting for EI potential and implementing targeted training programs that enhance emotional appraisal, regulation, and recovery skills. Ultimately, cultivating a workforce with high emotional intelligence is a strategic imperative, transforming stress from a performance liability into a manageable challenge and unlocking sustained individual and organizational success.

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