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Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace: A Critical Evaluation of EI Models and their Role in Recruitment Across Generation

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
1.0 Introduction	3
2.0 Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace: Critical Evaluation	4
Figure 1: Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Framework Created by Franca Mastroianni (2025), based on Goleman (1995).....	6
Figure 2: Wiedmer's Conflict EI Framework Created by Franca Mastroianni (2025), based on Wiedmer (2015).	7
Figure 3: MBSR Emotional Intelligence Framework Created by Franca Mastroianni (2025), based on Kabat-Zinn (1990).....	8
Figure 4: MBWA Emotional Intelligence Framework Created by Franca Mastroianni (2025), based on Peters and Waterman (1982). ...	9
3.0 Emotional Intelligence and Recruitment Across Generations	10
3.1 Traditionalists.....	11
3.2 Baby Boomers	12
3.3 Generation X.....	12
3.4 Millennials	13
3.5 Generation Z.....	13
4.0 Conclusion	14
5.0 Recommendations	15
6.0 References	15

Abstract

This report critically examines the role of emotional intelligence within contemporary organisational contexts. Drawing on key models including Goleman's mixed model, Wiedmer's conflict framework, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Management By Walking Around (MBWA), the study evaluates how employees apply emotional intelligence to manage emotions, relationships and workplace challenges. The report further explores the importance of emotional intelligence in recruitment across different generations, highlighting its relevance for inclusive, effective and sustainable organisational practice. This report concludes by offering practical recommendations for emotionally intelligent recruitment practices.

1.0 Introduction

Emotional intelligence has become a central theme in contemporary organisational studies as workplaces increasingly shift toward collaborative, diverse and psychologically demanding environments. While the idea that emotions influence judgement and behaviour is not new, models such as Goleman's (1995) reinterpret emotional intelligence in a way that makes it directly relevant to leadership, teamwork and organisational performance. Goleman suggests that emotionally intelligent individuals are not only aware of their own emotional states, but are also capable of regulating their reactions, understanding the emotions of others and building effective professional relationships. Similarly, Wiedmer (2015) emphasises the relational dimension of emotional intelligence, particularly in the context of communication and conflict management.

As organisations place growing importance on relational competence alongside technical expertise, emotional intelligence provides a valuable framework for understanding how employees navigate stress, interpersonal dynamics and organisational change. This report critically evaluates the application of emotional intelligence within workplace contexts through a range of theoretical models, including Goleman, Wiedmer, MBSR and MBWA. It further examines the role of emotional intelligence in recruitment, with particular attention to generational differences, before offering recommendations to support the development of emotionally intelligent organisational practices.

2.0 Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace: Critical Evaluation

Emotional intelligence (EI) plays an increasingly significant role in modern organisations, particularly as workplaces become more complex, collaborative and unpredictable. Employees must navigate challenging interpersonal dynamics, high workloads, organisational change and demands for flexibility, often under considerable pressure. In this context, emotional intelligence becomes a fundamental capability that influences how individuals interpret situations, regulate their reactions and support others. This section critically evaluates how employees use EI components in the workplace, drawing primarily on Goleman's mixed model and Wiedmer's conflict-oriented perspective. Additional frameworks—including Bar-On's emotional-social model, Trait EI, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), Management By Walking Around (MBWA) and the GROW model—are incorporated to deepen the evaluation and reveal the strengths and limitations of EI in practice.

Goleman's (1995; 1998) five-part framework—self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills—remains one of the most influential EI models used to analyse workplace behaviour. Each component captures a distinct aspect of how employees understand and manage emotions, both internal and external. Beginning with **self-awareness**, Goleman highlights the importance of recognising personal emotional patterns and understanding how they influence behaviour. In the workplace, employees with strong self-awareness are better able to identify early signs of stress, frustration or defensiveness, which allows them to prevent escalation. For instance, an employee who notices rising tension during a team meeting may choose to slow down their speech, ask clarifying questions or excuse themselves briefly before reacting impulsively. This aligns with Mayer and Salovey's Ability Model (1997), which positions emotional perception as the foundation of emotional functioning. However, a limitation of self-awareness is that it relies heavily on introspection, which can be inaccurate; some individuals genuinely believe they are emotionally aware when, in reality, their behaviour tells a different story. Trait EI research supports this concern by showing that self-perceptions of emotional competence do not always correspond to observable behaviour (Petrides, 2001).

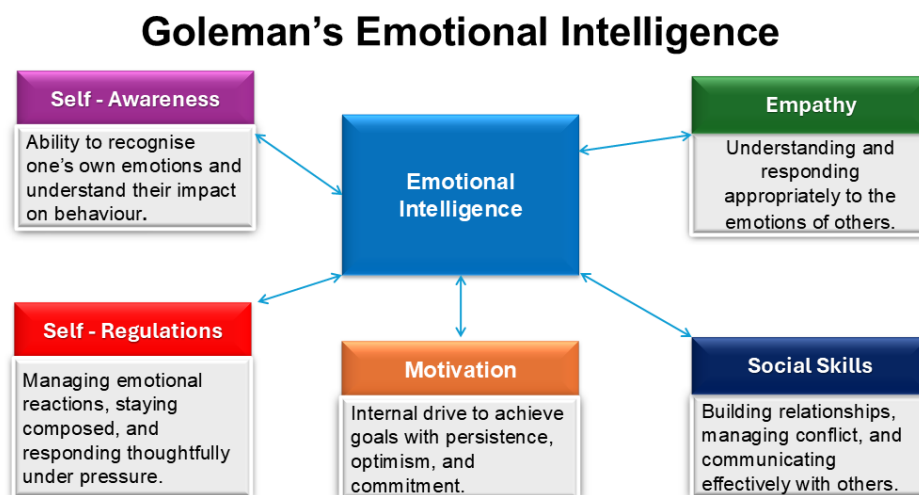
The second component, **self-regulation**, is particularly visible in emotionally demanding roles such as customer service, healthcare and hospitality. Employees who regulate their emotions effectively can maintain professionalism even when faced with hostility or unreasonable demands. For example, a staff member receiving unfair criticism from a client may experience anger internally but choose to respond calmly, seeking clarification and proposing solutions. Bar-On's (1997) framework adds further nuance by emphasising stress tolerance and impulse control as essential ingredients for sustaining emotional regulation. Nevertheless, an overemphasis on regulation can carry risks: employees may suppress emotions excessively in order to "appear professional," which can contribute to emotional exhaustion. This highlights a broader issue—EI cannot compensate for poor organisational culture. When workloads are unreasonable or leadership is unsupportive, emotional regulation becomes a survival strategy rather than a positive competence.

Motivation, the third element of Goleman's model, refers to an internal drive to achieve goals and remain resilient despite setbacks. Motivated employees typically take initiative, show persistence and reframe challenges as opportunities rather than threats. For instance, an employee whose project fails may analyse the situation constructively and propose improved solutions rather than becoming discouraged. This echoes Bar-On's emphasis on optimism and adaptability. However, motivation is not always healthy; employees may push themselves excessively due to perfectionism or fear of failure. The GROW coaching model (Whitmore, 1992) offers a corrective here by guiding employees through reflective conversations about goals, current challenges, alternative strategies and commitment. By combining EI with structured coaching, employees learn to balance ambition with well-being.

The fourth element, **empathy**, plays a crucial role in team cohesion and workplace relationships. Empathy enables employees to recognise and understand the emotions of colleagues, clients and stakeholders, which supports effective communication. In diverse workplaces, employees frequently encounter colleagues with different cultural norms, communication styles and emotional expectations. Empathy helps bridge these differences by encouraging perspective-taking and reducing misinterpretation. Wiedmer (2015) reinforces the importance of empathy in conflict situations, arguing that many workplace disputes stem not from the issue itself but from individuals feeling unheard or misunderstood. A simple acknowledgement of someone's feelings—such as recognising frustration or disappointment—can significantly reduce tension. Yet empathy also brings vulnerabilities. In emotionally intensive roles, excessive empathic engagement may lead to compassion fatigue, especially without adequate organisational support.

Goleman's final component, **social skills**, comprises a wide range of behaviours that support collaboration, negotiation, conflict management and relationship building. Employees with strong social skills often act as informal mediators, encouraging cooperation and smoothing communication channels. For example, in cross-departmental projects, socially skilled employees help clarify roles, align expectations and maintain team morale. However, critics note that strong social skills can be used manipulatively if not paired with ethical behaviour. This underscores the need to integrate EI with organisational values, ensuring that emotional competence supports fairness and transparency rather than strategic influence.

Overall, Goleman's model provides a practical framework for understanding everyday emotional behaviour at work, but its effectiveness depends heavily on organisational culture and leadership support.



This framework proposed by Daniel Goleman (1995) illustrates the five core components of Emotional Intelligence: Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Motivation, Empathy, and Social Skills. These elements describe how individuals understand and manage emotions in themselves and others within workplace environments.

Figure 1: Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Framework Created by Franca Mastroianni (2025), based on Goleman (1995).

While Goleman provides a broad behavioural framework, **Wiedmer (2015)** offers a focused model for understanding EI in conflict situations, which are common in organisational life. She identifies three key emotional processes: emotional awareness, emotional neutrality and relational communication. **Emotional awareness** involves recognising emotional cues in oneself and others. Employees who notice rising irritation in a colleague's tone can adjust

their approach, preventing escalation. **Emotional neutrality** refers to remaining calm and refraining from defensive or reactive responses during disagreements. This does not imply indifference but rather a mindful stance that avoids adding emotional intensity. **Relational communication**, the third component, involves active listening, validation and clear expression of concerns. Employees who paraphrase others' viewpoints ("What I hear you saying is...") create a climate of respect that supports problem-solving. Wiedmer's framework is particularly effective for de-escalation, but it has limitations: EI cannot overcome structural power imbalances. An employee may communicate empathetically and neutrally, but if a manager dismisses their concerns, conflict resolution becomes unequal and emotionally burdensome.

This highlights that while emotional intelligence can support constructive conflict management, it must be reinforced by fair organisational structures and emotionally competent leadership.

Wiedmer Conflict EI

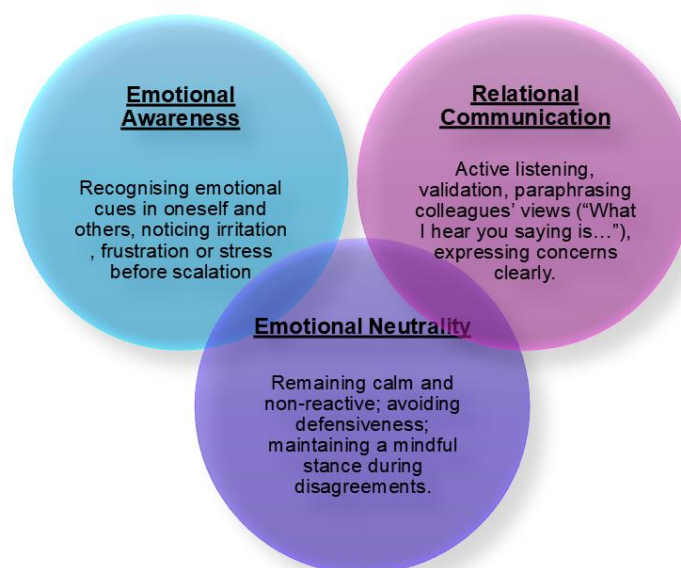


Figure 2: Wiedmer's Conflict EI Framework Created by Franca Mastroianni (2025), based on Wiedmer (2015).

Beyond Goleman and Wiedmer, other EI-related models enrich the analysis. **Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)**, developed by Kabat-Zinn (1990), promotes emotional clarity and non-reactive awareness. Employees practising mindfulness are more likely to recognise emotional triggers early and respond with intention rather than impulse. For example, before entering a challenging discussion, a mindful employee may take a few

breaths to centre themselves, reducing the likelihood of emotional spillover. However, critics caution that mindfulness cannot serve as a substitute for organisational reform; when chronic stress originates from workloads or poor leadership, MBSR may help individuals cope but does not address root causes.

This suggests that MBSR is most effective when integrated into a broader organisational approach that addresses workload, leadership behaviour and psychological safety.

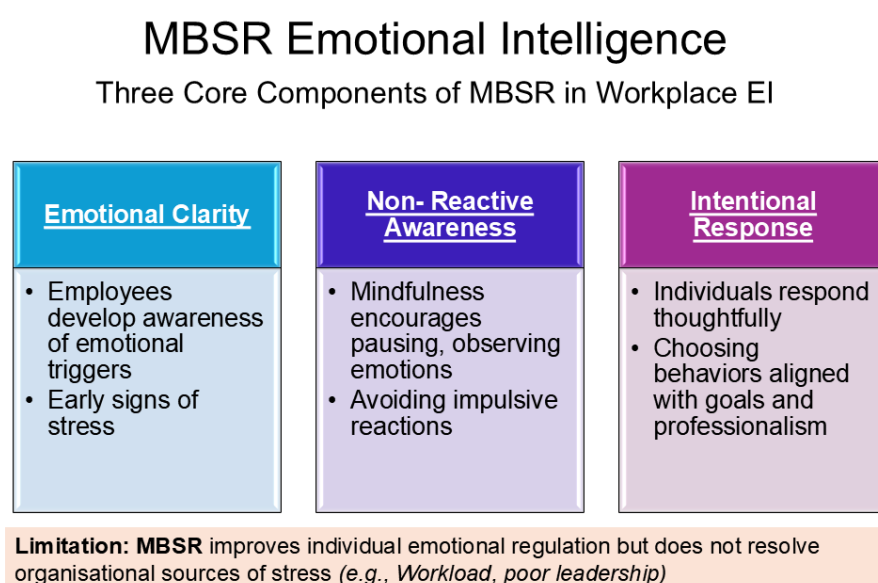


Figure 3: MBSR Emotional Intelligence Framework Created by Franca Mastroianni (2025), based on Kabat-Zinn (1990).

Management By Walking Around (MBWA) offers another context where EI plays a crucial role. When managers walk through the workplace informally, employees often use social skills and emotional regulation to communicate effectively. MBWA can create trust when leaders show genuine curiosity and empathy, making employees feel seen and valued (Peters and Waterman, 1982). Conversely, if managers lack EI, MBWA may feel intrusive or performative, heightening anxiety.

This highlights that emotionally intelligent behaviour must be reciprocal; employees' EI cannot compensate for emotionally unaware leadership.

Core EI Components in Effective MBWA

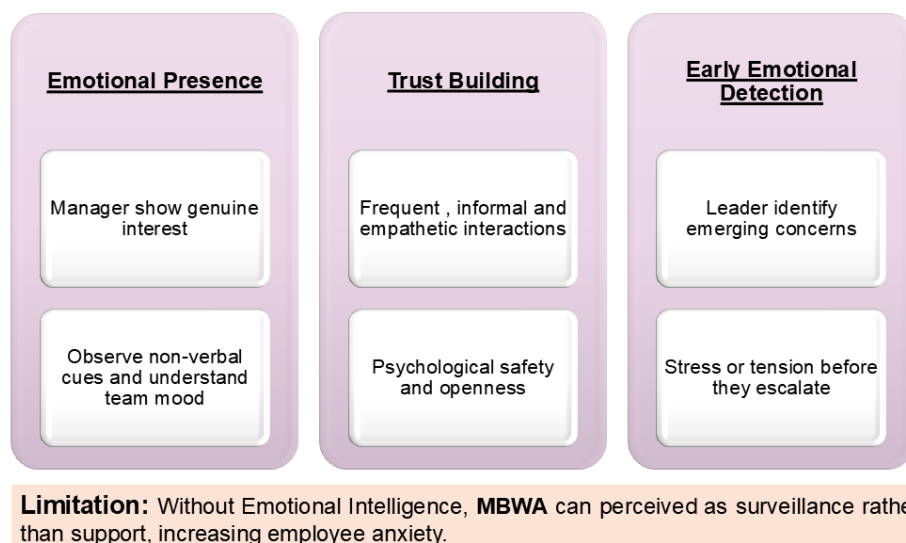


Figure 4: MBWA Emotional Intelligence Framework Created by Franca Mastroianni (2025), based on Peters and Waterman (1982).

This demonstrates that emotionally intelligent behaviour must be reciprocal; employees' EI cannot compensate for emotionally unaware leadership.

Employees also use EI differently across roles and settings. Frontline workers in hospitality or healthcare engage in constant emotional labour, requiring sustained empathy and emotional regulation. Technical professionals may use EI primarily for collaboration and translating complex information. Remote workers must interpret digital communication cues without access to body language, requiring heightened emotional awareness to avoid misunderstanding. These variations show that EI is not a universal skill applied uniformly but a flexible competence shaped by job demands, environment and interpersonal context. Bar-On's adaptability component is particularly useful here, emphasising that emotionally intelligent employees adjust their emotional responses according to situational needs.

Another important dimension in evaluating how employees use emotional intelligence relates to the organisational norms that shape which emotions are considered acceptable. EI is not only an individual capacity but also a social construct influenced by workplace expectations. In high-performance cultures, employees may feel compelled to regulate emotions excessively, engaging in surface acting to appear calm or positive even when overwhelmed. This tension between authentic expression and organisational demands is not fully addressed in traditional EI models. Bar-On's inclusion of well-being and stress tolerance

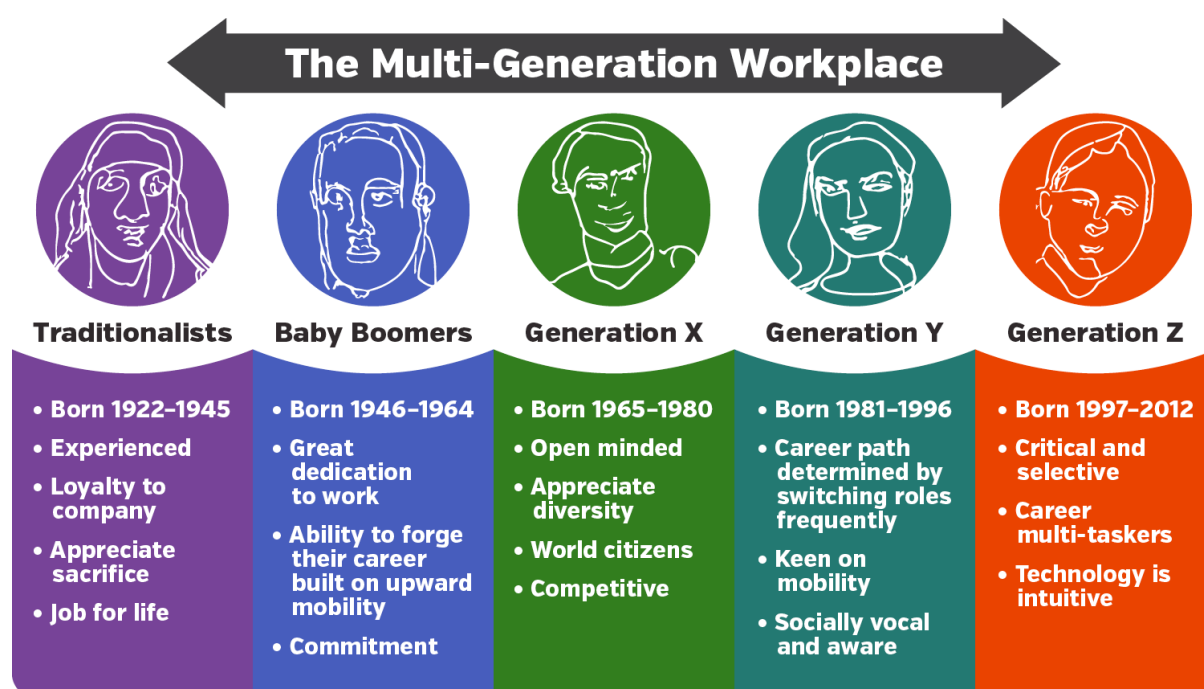
offers a partial response, yet emotional display rules can create emotional dissonance. Employees may appear emotionally intelligent externally while privately experiencing strain, suggesting EI cannot be assessed solely through observable behaviour. This reinforces the need for organisations to adopt a holistic approach that considers emotional intelligence in relation to workload, culture, psychological safety and opportunities for reflection.

Taken together, these models demonstrate that emotional intelligence is a multifaceted and context-dependent capability. Employees use EI to regulate emotions, support colleagues, resolve conflict and sustain resilience, but its effectiveness depends strongly on organisational culture, leadership behaviour and structural conditions. EI cannot thrive in environments where psychological safety is absent or emotional expression is discouraged. When supported appropriately, however, emotional intelligence becomes a powerful tool for navigating the emotional complexity of contemporary workplaces and fostering collaboration, wellbeing and performance.

3.0 Emotional Intelligence and Recruitment Across Generations

Recruiting across multiple generations requires managers to recognise that candidates differ not only in professional experience but also in emotional expectations, communication preferences and underlying values. Emotional intelligence (EI) plays a pivotal role in this process because it allows recruiters to adapt their interviewing style, feedback, tone and organisational messaging to meet the needs of each cohort. While generational differences do not define individuals completely, they provide useful insight into how people interpret the world of work. EI enables managers to approach each candidate with sensitivity, recognising that expectations about leadership, communication and workplace culture have shifted significantly over time. By applying EI to recruitment, organisations increase the likelihood of attracting employees who feel valued, understood and aligned with organisational values. While generational categories offer useful insight, emotionally intelligent recruitment requires avoiding rigid assumptions and responding to individual emotional cues.

The following sections examine how emotional intelligence may be applied when recruiting across different generational groups, including Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z.



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3.1 Traditionalists

Traditionalists, born before 1946, grew up during periods of post-war reconstruction, rationing and economic austerity. As a result, they tend to value stability, loyalty and disciplined work habits. In recruitment, emotionally intelligent managers must adopt a respectful and formal tone, as Traditionalists often expect clear role descriptions and well-defined reporting structures. They typically appreciate face-to-face communication and may prefer structured interviews over more conversational formats. EI is essential for acknowledging their strong work ethic and reliability while avoiding assumptions about technological skills.

Traditionalists may feel uncomfortable with rapid technological change, automated recruitment systems or fast-paced digital assessments. An emotionally intelligent recruiter recognises these anxieties and provides reassurance, step-by-step explanations and additional support where needed. Highlighting organisational stability, long-term vision and opportunities to contribute meaningfully resonates strongly with this generation. While fewer Traditionalists remain in the workforce, they often bring exceptional dependability and historical perspective, making EI crucial to ensuring they feel respected and valued during recruitment.

3.2 Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, experienced post-war economic prosperity, expansion of education and growth in corporate career paths. Consequently, they are often highly career-oriented and value responsibility, commitment and personal achievement. When recruiting Baby Boomers, emotionally intelligent managers should acknowledge the extensive institutional knowledge and leadership capability they bring to the organisation. EI allows recruiters to communicate with empathy, especially when discussing technological requirements or organisational changes that may provoke uncertainty.

Boomers also respond positively to interviewers who highlight opportunities for mentorship, leadership involvement and meaningful contribution. They appreciate a recruitment process that is respectful, structured and transparent. At the same time, emotionally intelligent managers must be attentive to potential concerns, such as navigating digital platforms or adapting to younger managers' leadership styles. EI supports the creation of a psychologically safe environment where Boomers feel confident discussing their strengths without fear of being judged for generational differences. When approached respectfully, Boomers demonstrate high levels of reliability, responsibility and dedication.

3.3 Generation X

Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980, entered the workforce during periods of economic instability, corporate restructuring and technological transition. As a result, they tend to value independence, flexibility and work–life balance. Emotionally intelligent recruitment requires acknowledging these preferences by avoiding overly rigid or authoritarian communication. Gen X candidates often appreciate honest, pragmatic dialogue about role expectations, workload and autonomy. They typically dislike micromanagement, so interviewers should highlight opportunities for self-direction and decision-making.

Gen X employees are known for strong problem-solving skills, adaptability and a practical approach to work. Emotionally intelligent managers must recognise their desire for fairness and transparency. They respond well to recruiters who respect boundaries, acknowledge competing priorities (such as caring responsibilities) and communicate in a concise manner. EI helps recruiters gauge whether a Gen X candidate prefers structured information or

conversational interactions, allowing adjustments that foster trust and a sense of mutual respect. Gen X's resilience and adaptability make them valuable assets during organisational change.

3.4 Millennials

Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, are often characterised by digital fluency, collaborative values and strong expectations for personal development. They entered the workforce during a period of global recession, rising job insecurity and rapid technological expansion. As a result, Millennials value transparency, continuous feedback and opportunities for growth. Emotionally intelligent recruiters must demonstrate authenticity, openness and genuine interest in the candidate's long-term development (Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010).

Millennials often express concerns about data privacy, ethical practices and inclusion. EI enables recruiters to address these concerns empathetically by explaining organisational policies clearly and reassuring candidates about workplace culture. Because Millennials tend to be highly collaborative, emotionally intelligent managers should use a warm, conversational tone and encourage questions throughout the interview. They also appreciate flexibility and work-life balance but can become disengaged if communication appears insincere. EI helps recruiters remain aware of subtle emotional cues—such as hesitation or enthusiasm—which can guide how they describe opportunities, challenges and expectations.

3.5 Generation Z

Generation Z, born from the late 1990s onward, is the most digitally immersed generation to enter the workforce. They have grown up amid economic instability, social media influence and unprecedented awareness of mental health issues. As a result, they tend to be pragmatic, financially aware and cautious yet ambitious. They value job security, opportunities to develop skills quickly and employers who demonstrate authenticity and emotional neutrality. Research indicates that Gen Z may experience higher anxiety levels than previous generations (Twenge, 2019), making emotional intelligence a critical component of recruitment.

EI helps managers create a safe and structured interview environment, where expectations are clear and communication is honest. Gen Z candidates dislike ambiguity and may withdraw if recruiters appear inconsistent or emotionally disengaged. Because they value efficiency, they respond well to technology-enhanced recruitment tools—provided these tools are accompanied by supportive human interaction. EI allows recruiters to recognise signs of nervousness, offer reassurance and maintain a tone that is both calm and clear. Gen Z also values discussions centred on financial literacy, organisational ethics and long-term stability, and emotionally intelligent managers must be prepared to address these topics transparently.

Moreover, because Generation Z places significant importance on emotional well-being and psychological safety, emotionally intelligent recruiters must be able to communicate organisational support systems clearly. Transparent discussions about mental-health resources, training opportunities and long-term career pathways can help Gen Z candidates feel valued and more confident in their decision-making.

4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, emotional intelligence is undeniably central to how modern employees and managers navigate the complexities of today's organisational environments. By applying insights from a range of models—such as Goleman's framework, the Mayer–Salovey Ability Model, MBSR practices, and MBWA—it becomes evident that emotional competence is a foundational element of effective communication, teamwork, conflict management, and overall resilience.

In the realm of recruitment, emotional intelligence enables managers to grasp and respect the distinct emotional expectations of different generations, ensuring fair and inclusive hiring practices that align with organisational values. This generational sensitivity, viewed through the lens of EI, not only fosters a more inclusive and engaging workplace but also strengthens long-term employee retention and satisfaction.

Ultimately, embracing a culture of emotional intelligence means building organisations that are not only adaptable and empathetic but also genuinely committed to the well-being of their people. In doing so, companies can navigate the emotional complexities of the modern workplace and create environments where both employees and leaders thrive.

This reinforces the strategic value of emotional intelligence in building sustainable and inclusive organisations.

5.0 Recommendations

To strengthen emotional intelligence across organisational systems, managers should receive structured EI training that includes self-awareness development, empathy-building exercises and emotional regulation strategies. Integrating mindfulness-based practices, such as MBSR, can enhance employees' resilience and improve their capacity to respond thoughtfully in high-pressure environments. Recruitment processes should be adapted to acknowledge generational differences by employing flexible communication styles and providing psychological safety for all candidates. Traditionalists and Baby Boomers may benefit from structured interviews and clear expectations, while Gen X candidates value autonomy and honest dialogue. Millennials and Generation Z respond well to transparency, opportunities for growth and emotionally supportive communication. Organisations should also embed EI into leadership development programmes and performance reviews, ensuring that emotional competence is recognised as a core professional capability. By promoting a culture grounded in emotional intelligence, organisations can attract, develop and retain a diverse workforce capable of thriving in complex organisational settings.

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