

WHITEPAPER

Project Management and Emotional Intelligence in the Age of Technology

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For quite some time, the term has been looming on the horizon of professional and personal success related stories and discussions alike. The debate resting namely in the comparison of the emotional and intelligence quotients, or EQ versus IQ. Bringing rise to the concept that “pure” intelligence or being “book smart” was no longer a sufficient determinant of a person’s success; and what was dubbed as being “street smart” could be of equal or more value in some career paths.

This debate, however, took a twist with the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI). In some ways as if IQ stepped behind AI to better push it forward; turning the debate’s focus on AI versus EI or, more radically, the machine versus the human. Possibly for this reason, the role of emotional intelligence seems stronger now, more than ever; as what it stands for shifts from what we classified as “street smarts” to a somewhat more “humane capacity”.

In our previous white paper “AI & the Future of Project Management”, we concluded that EI was the main factor supporting the theory that it’s unlikely tomorrow’s project managers become robots (within today’s understanding of AI). However, just as all skills evolve with time and IQ has somewhat interlinked itself with AI; it should not be assumed that being human automatically gives us an inherent level of EQ making us untouchable. EQ is also evolving, and it is important to understand how improving your EQ can make you more successful as a project manager.

Emotional intelligence is generally understood as consisting of four fundamental capabilities: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skill. In a world where EI may be the future for surviving AI let’s look at how each aspect of EI is important to project management and can help you thrive as a PM; differentiating yourself from human and/or robot competition alike.



Self-awareness: Introspection and Motivation

You may think you have a good idea of who you are as a manager and how you are regarded by your project team members. However, deeming you treat your team fairly and that you are a just and respected manager is not necessarily cutting it. Truth be said, these qualities are not beyond a machine's capabilities; not to mention that a machine is innately "fair."

But being truly self-aware is a human characteristic. Having the necessary introspection and understanding to give us the character needed to lead with purpose, trust, authenticity and openness makes it easier to understand other people and detect how they perceive you in return. As a project manager, the capacity of self-improvement gives the example and can motivate a team.

Let your PM tool and AI deal with learning from past mistake patterns and figuring out "why" things may not have gone as planned; in turn, you can concentrate on "what" can be done to improve for the future as a team leader.

Self-management: Initiative and Accountability

This characteristic usually can be broken down into initiative, organisation and accountability. In this day and age, it's probably best to rely on digital help for organisation. After all PM and AI tools were designed to take this menial burden off you so you have more time to concentrate on things that really matter. Project task, deadline and document organisation is more than effectively automated so no need to dwell so much on it. Initiative and accountability, however, are what you should be focused on to stand out.

As a project leader it's not only important you show initiative but encourage your project team to do so. Without initiative we are as good as "programmed" to do as told; therefore, it's important to be responsive to changes/modifications/glitches which are bound to occur during the duration of a project. If you spot a bottleneck arising, or if a project looks set to go off schedule (for unmeasured reasons like personnel issues, changes in management, current events...), take action first and try to prevent or reduce the effects; or communicate to stakeholders beforehand to avoid major surprises. Avoiding, or minimising, crises and dealing with problems proactively is an important part of successful projects and project leadership.

Accountability is also key, as initiative without accountability may classify as recklessness. Taking responsibility is one of the bigger challenges human team members must face. Being an accountable leader will not only make others trust you but will make you less likely to fall into the habit of blaming defenceless programs for an unexpected negative outcome while taking credit for all positive ones. It's important to use tools to help us be more efficient but not blindly rely on them to the extent we become complacent. Try explaining that to the stakeholders.

Social-awareness: Empathy

Part of what makes project management what it is, is team collaboration. Working with people is tricky; managing people is a challenge. So, understanding people's needs and more importantly, knowing how to react to them is an important quality for a PM.

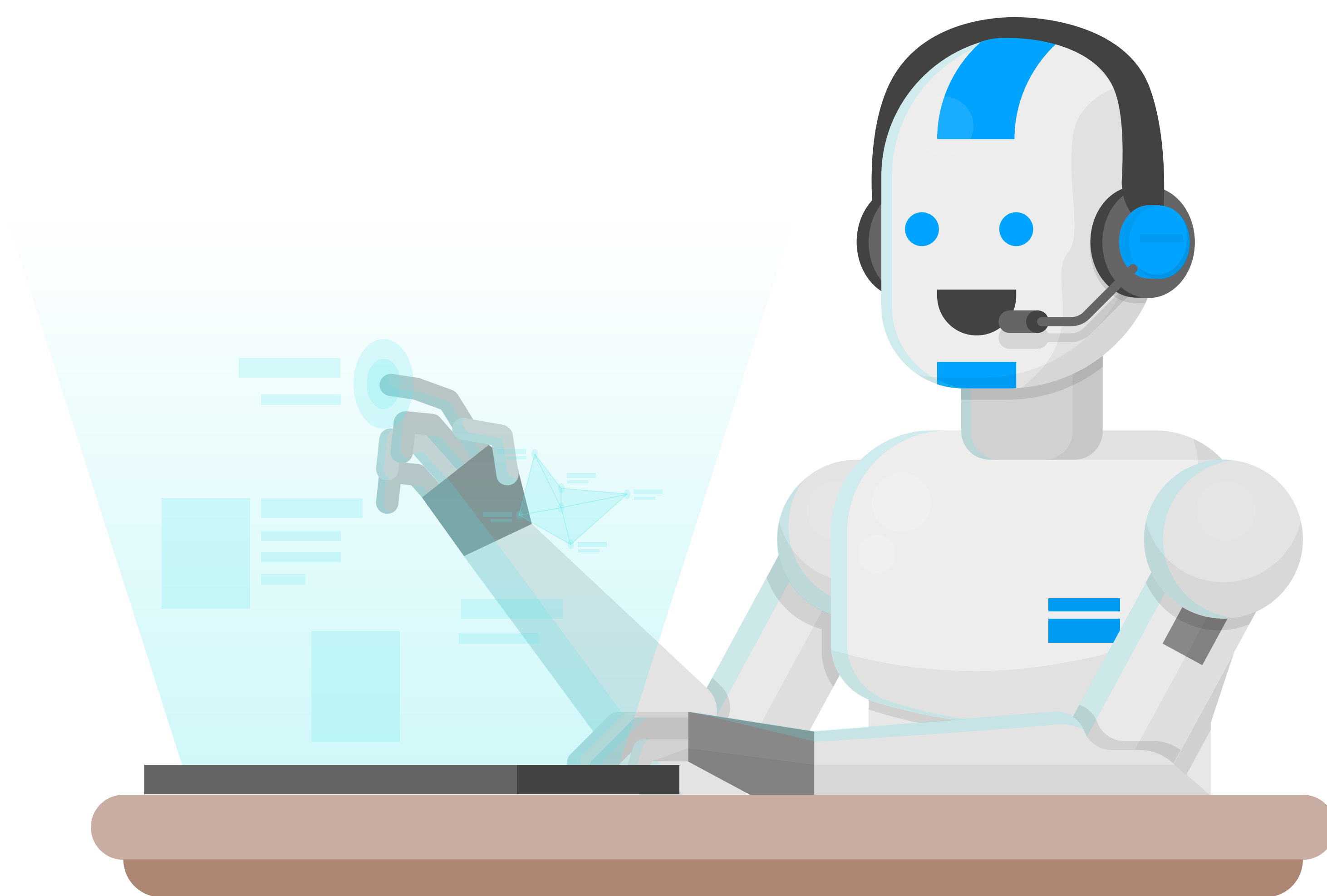
Going beyond project collaboration and taking the time to learn about and empathise with the members of your team can motivate teams as a whole and make them more committed. Understanding personal situations and realising how they can affect work and performance are something beyond machine skills today. Dealing with them, curbing them or even preventing them are all situations that will improve your project team performance and overall project success.

Machines and tools may learn to expect humans' imperfections or illogical actions, but without understanding why. Empathy is what allows you to respond better to personnel issues and get better results from your team.

Social skill

It goes without saying that communication and the ability to interact with people are key for being a successful project manager. However automated projects may be or become, or however spread out your team may be; the ability to keep communication channels open can only improve results. Humans are social creatures so although a project team may be interconnected via emails, shared timelines and tasks; these may lead to boredom and isolation. You may argue that these tools make us more efficient and cut unnecessary chit chat and unrelated conversations; and you are right. As a PM, you will need to find the right balance between a healthy and efficient communication level whether it be through interactive workshops and meetings at different stages of the project or scheduled team coffee breaks to let off steam and allow for bonding.

Use human imperfection to your advantage. There is still time to go before your entire team is replaced by robots! And open communication may actually lead to coping with these changes better.



Conclusion

Understanding and expanding our emotional intelligence can only positively affect our role and success as a project manager. In an area of processes, workflows and reports it's important to remember that projects involve people, in their initiation, their collaboration, in their outcome or all.

It's important to choose the right PM tools to help execute your projects optimally. It's also important as a PM looking towards the future, to be flexible and open to new technology, embracing the changes brought on by AI. However, it's important to realise that the added value you bring as a PM in this day in age is largely influenced by your level of emotional intelligence.

Managing technology is only part of the equation. To be a successful PM you need to bring a unique set of tools to the table – the more developed your EI the harder it will be to replace you by someone, let alone a machine; as more than ever in the age of digitalisation these characteristics are beneficial to the health of project teams and thus, companies.

So, bring your EI to the table!

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