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Using Emotional Intelligence to Identify High Potential: a Metacompetency Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to demonstrate the utility of using some indication of emotional intelligence (EI) to identify high potential in managers. Presupposed correspondences between the EI personal factors model (Bar-On, 1997) and Briscoe and Hall's (1999) metacompetency model of continuous learning are elucidated.

Design/methodology/approach – The study sample consisted of 51 high potentials and 51 "regular" managers, matched onto one another by managerial level, gender and age. All participants completed an online survey containing Bar-On's Emotional Quotient Inventory (1997), Blau's career commitment scale (1989) and a self-anchored performance item.

Findings – EQ-i subscales *assertiveness*, *independence*, *optimism*, *flexibility* and *social responsibility* appear to be "covert" high-potential identification criteria, separating between high potentials and regular managers. Furthermore, high potentials display higher levels of job performance and, supposedly, less boundaryless career attitudes.

Practical implications – Using emotional intelligence – or at least some of its subscales – in identifying high potential may well contribute to the validity of such processes. Furthermore, the importance of cultivating positive emotions at work is spelled out in relation to high-potential identification and development policies and retention management.

Originality/value – In the majority of studies on high potentials, direct supervisors serve as research samples or a non-empirical, rather normative approach is taken to the matter. The empirical study presented in this paper is rather unique since it departs from the viewpoints of high-potential individuals, thus delivering added value to the study domain.

Keywords – Emotional intelligence, Metacompetency, High potential, Protean careers, Career commitment, Self-reported performance

Paper type – Research paper

Using Emotional Intelligence to Identify High Potential: a Metacompetency Perspective

In today's rapidly changing business environment driven by human capital, knowing which qualities to look for in future leaders is undoubtedly a key competitive advantage (Buckingham and Vosburgh, 2001). Competency frameworks, designed to meet this need – and to some extent, suitable instruments for doing so (Bournois and Rousillon, 1998; Briscoe and Hall, 1999; Quinn *et al.*, 1990) – might suffer from (predictive) validity issues if they originate from a *selection perspective* alone (McCall, 1998). In this view, employees either "have it or not", implying that young talent should be able to demonstrate competencies similar to those of successful executives, be it in a seminal form. As such "talent detection" competencies are based on past successes rather than on future challenges, their value for early high-potential identification may however be limited (Briscoe and Hall, 1999; Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997).

Alternatively, Spreitzer *et al.* (1997) argue for taking a *development perspective* to high-potential identification. They posit that executive potential is best predicted by the ability to learn from experience. Research has demonstrated that learning agility is, indeed, strongly related to advancement potential (e.g. Lombardo and Eichinger, 2000). In a similar vein, Briscoe and Hall (1999) speak of *metacompetencies* – competencies so powerful that they affect an individual's ability to develop the competencies they will need in the (unpredictable) future. Contemporary careers demand *adaptability* from employees, that is, the ability to self-correct in response to new and unfamiliar demands from their environment, "without waiting for formal training and development from the organization" (Hall and Moss, 1998, p.31).

Emotional intelligence and continuous learning

Strikingly, it appears that the multidimensional construct of emotional intelligence as defined by Bar-On (1997) – frequently referred to as *trait EI* or the *EI personal factors model*

(Dulewicz and Higgs, 2004) – describes the attributes individuals need to be able to engage in such continuous and generative learning. According to Bar-On (1997), emotional intelligence (EI) is "an array of noncognitive capabilities, competencies and skills that influence one's ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures" (p. 14). The author defines five factors of EI, which he believes contribute to success in life: *intrapersonal functioning* (self-awareness and self-expression), *interpersonal skills* (social awareness and interpersonal relationships), *adaptability* (change management), *stress management* (emotional management and regulation) and *general mood* (self-motivation) (Bar-On, 1997; Bar-On, 2005).

The idea that emotional intelligence may underlie certain practical skills is not new. Some previous studies have focused on the link between EI and emotional competency (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000; Goleman, 2001), a concept that was operationalized by a set of 20 competencies. Conversely, Briscoe and Hall (1999) describe no more than two metacompetencies: *adaptability learning* (the ability to react to change through learning) and *identity learning* (the ability to self-reflect and assimilate what is learned). Table I demonstrates possible correspondences between the metacompetency model and the EI personal factors model. Bar-On's (2005) description of the skills and competencies assessed by each scale of the EQ-i (Emotional Quotient Inventory) proved useful for matching his EI scales (1997) to the behavioral descriptions of Briscoe and Hall's metacompetencies (1999). However, the correspondences exhibited in Table I are tentative and serve merely to demonstrate the probability of a connection between emotional intelligence (as measured by the EQ-i) and the potential for continuous learning.

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take in Table I

The current study explores the "potential" of the EI personal factors model for predicting high potential in employees. Spreitzer *et al.* (1997) observed: "Though the literature has provided evidence that job experiences can be a stimulus for learning, it has also suggested that not all people learn equally well from the same kinds of experiences. As such, the identification of executive potential would likely be enhanced through knowledge of the variation in people's ability to acquire needed skills, that is, their ability to learn from experience." (p. 9). This paper hypothesizes that, ideally, high potentials are those with high levels of emotional intelligence – and consequently, of learning agility (Lombardo and Eichinger, 2000). In order to look into this proposition, an empirical study was set up to contrast a group of high-potential managers with a group of regular managers.

Two possible outcomes are anticipated:

(1) On average, high-potential managers display higher EQ-i scores than regular managers (irrespective of functional level). If this is so, then emotional intelligence must have played some role in the identification of these high potentials. As it is unlikely that organizations explicitly assess EI as part of their high-potential selection and development policies (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000), it follows that EI must be some sort of covert identification criterion. Two facts seem to support this proposition.

First, several overt high-potential identification criteria (i.e. performance, competencies) appear to be associated with EI. McClelland (1998) found that a wide range of emotional competencies (and only a narrow range of cognitive ones) allow for *workforce segmentation* – i.e. for distinguishing between top performers and average ones. More recently, these emotional competencies (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000; Goleman, 2001) were shown to display significant overlap with competencies commonly used in organizations to identify potential. For instance, Gowing *et al.* (2006) demonstrated how the EI competencies defined

by Boyatzis *et al.* (2000) can be aligned with existing competency frameworks in organizations, departing from their behavioral definitions.

Second, EI has often been conceptually linked to models of effective or transformational leadership. Goleman (1998a), in his seminal article on emotional intelligence, stated that IQ and technical skills are merely threshold capabilities for being an effective leader, while EI is the sine qua non. Dulewicz and Higgs (2003, 2005) ascertained that the various dimensions of the concept of emotional intelligence also appear in models of authorities in the field of leadership. Others have found that EI is able to positively predict transformational leadership (Barling *et al.*, 2003; Brown and Moshavi, 2005; Gardner and Stough, 2002; Rosete and Ciarrochi, 2005; Sosik and Mergerian, 1999), leadership effectiveness (Dulewicz *et al.*, 2005; Goleman *et al.*, 2002; Rosete and Ciarrochi, 2005) and career advancement (Dulewicz and Higgs, 2000; Rosete and Ciarrochi, 2005). Consequently, as high potentials are defined as ". . . those individuals within the organisation who are recognised, at that point in time, as the organisation's likely future leaders" (Cope, 1998, p.15), their identification should be to some extent related to their emotional intelligence.

(2) High potentials at higher functional levels exhibit higher EQ-i scores than regular managers and high potentials at lower functional levels. Several authors have come to the conclusion that emotional intelligence – and interpersonal skill in particular – becomes increasingly important (compared to IQ and technical skills) as individuals advance within their organizational hierarchies (Dulewicz *et al.*, 2005; Goleman *et al.*, 2002; Hall, 1999). It is evident that as job demands shift, so should the jobholder's skills and behaviors. *Career derailment* is, then, "the failure of fit of the individual with the evolving demands of the job over time" (Leslie and Van Velsor, 1996, p. 36) – the authors note that this definition can also be applied to more "boundaryless" career tracks. Could it be that a lack of emotional intelligence is a covert cause of high-potential derailment (rather than high levels of EI

covertly leading to high-potential identification)? If this is the case, then the high potentials who have "arrived" at the highest functional levels would be those who have displayed above-average levels of emotional intelligence; those at lower functional levels, however, need not necessarily excel in this respect since strong EI-driven competencies do not become crucial until later in the career.

The inability to evolve from an independent (autonomous) to an interdependent (team-oriented) job actor is generally recognized as the number-one cause of derailment (Frankel, 1994; Kovach, 1986). Actually, it appears that nearly all recurrently reported causes of derailment are somehow related to a lack of emotional intelligence (apart from the inability to meet business objectives). Most frequently mentioned are problems with interpersonal relationships, arrogance and insensitivity to others, the inability to build a team and the inability to develop or adapt (Daft, 1999; Hall, 1999; Hogan and Hogan, 2001; Kovach, 1989; Leslie and Van Velsor, 1996; McCall and Lombardo, 1983; Van Velsor and Leslie, 1995).

Linking performance and commitment to EI and high-potential status

In addition to examining the EI-high potential link, this paper will look into the (frequently reported) relationships between job performance, career commitment, the EI personal factors model and high-potential status (i.e. the binomial variable high potential/non-high potential).

Empirical research on individual job performance (Côté and Miners, 2006; Daus and Ashkanasy, 2005; Goleman, 1998a, 1998b; Rosete and Ciarrochi, 2005; Van Rooy *et al.*, 2005) as well as group or team performance (Daus and Ashkanasy, 2005; Jordan and Troth, 2004; Offerman *et al.*, 2003) and even organizational performance (Goleman, 1998a; McClelland, 1998; Williams, 1994) has uncovered that these variables are all positively related to emotional intelligence. In addition, amongst the criteria used for identifying high potential in organizations, job performance is probably the pivotal one. An employee who

does not consistently receive "exceeds expectations" performance ratings, is very unlikely to be considered for entering any high-potential program (Cope, 1998; Pepermans *et al.*, 2003).

As for career commitment, i.e. "one's attitude toward one's profession or vocation" (Blau, 1985, p. 20), academic literature has demonstrated its relationships with several factors relevant to career success (Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997). Employees with higher career commitment display higher levels of willingness to make sacrifices for their organizations (Randall *et al.*, 1990), are less likely to leave their organizations (Lee *et al.*, 1992), and display higher performance (Aryee *et al.*, 1994; Bashaw and Grant, 1994). Moreover, some researchers claim that career commitment is influenced by emotional intelligence (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Carson and Carson, 1998; Matthews *et al.*, 2002), especially when individuals are faced with highly complex managerial work which can lead to high levels of stress. According to Carmeli (2003), emotional intelligence enables people to control their stress levels effectively and thus prevent these from having negative effects on their career-related attitudes. Finally, strong commitment to a profession, a job, or an organization have all been put forward as crucial criteria for identifying high potential (Bennis and Nannus, 1985; McCall, 1994; Woodruffe, 1993).

The hypotheses of the study presented in this paper are listed below. Hypothesis *1* links *high-potential status* to *emotional intelligence*; hypotheses *2a* and *2b* look into the relationships between *job performance*, high-potential status and emotional intelligence; and hypotheses *3a*, *3b* and *3c* examine the connections between *career commitment*, job performance, emotional intelligence and high-potential status.

H1. High-potential managers display higher levels of emotional intelligence than their "regular" peers.

H2a. Emotional intelligence is positively related to individual job performance.

H2b. High-potential managers display higher job performance levels than their regular peers.

H3a. Career commitment is positively related to individual job performance.

H3b. Emotional intelligence is positively related to career commitment.

H3c. High-potential managers display higher levels of career commitment than their regular peers.

Method

Participants

A total of 133 managers participated in the study. Fifty-one of them had been, at that time, identified as high potentials by their organizations; the remaining 82 were regular managers. Managers were matched onto high potentials by relative functional level (i.e. their current functional level, l_i, relative to the highest possible functional level in the organization, l_{max}, producing a fraction with 1 as a maximum). Through this matching procedure, four sample categories were created: managers at lower managerial levels (M_l), managers at higher managerial levels (M_h), high potentials at lower managerial levels (HP_l) and high potentials at higher managerial levels (HP_h). Participants were then further matched by gender. Finally, a randomized number generator was used to decide which of the managers to eliminate from the sample, and so attain equal sample sizes per category. Table II provides an overview of sample size, gender distribution, and age descriptives per sample category. Note that the data gathered from the 31 "no-match" managers were not included in this study.

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take in Table II

The matching procedure described above served internal validity purposes, i.e. reduced the probability of unobserved bias in the cause-effect relationships under study

(Trochim, 2000). Splitting the sample by functional level allowed for testing of the propositions on EI and derailment (cross-sectionally). Matching participants by gender ruled out potential differences in EI between male and female participants that might bias the study's findings. An independent-samples *t*-test exposed that, in this sample, women scored significantly higher than men on the EI-subscales *empathy* ($t(100) = -2.23$, $p < .05$) and *interpersonal relationships* ($t(100) = -2.04$, $p < .05$), but not on the EQ-i overall. Similar results have been reported by Bar-On (2000) and Eagly and Johnson (1990). As the man-to-woman ratio is almost equal across the four sample categories (79-21% for lower managerial levels and 78-22% for higher managerial levels), however, no internal validity issues should arise when studying male and female participants together as one group. Finally, age – a typical correlate of EI (Mayer *et al.*, 1999) – can be discarded as a "contaminating" factor in this study as the sample categories were found not to differ significantly in age ($F(3,97) = 1.88$, *ns*).

Procedure

An online survey study was set up. HR directors from 69 organizations known to engage in high-potential identification and development were addressed by e-mail and follow-up telephone calls, requesting their participation. Only three organizations, from the financial, insurance and telecom sector respectively, eventually agreed to let their managers partake in the study – which demonstrates the ongoing discretion about high potentials in organizations. In order to reduce the chance of inter-organizational heterogeneity affecting the study results, the study's definition of the concept *high potential* (Cope, 1998) was stressed in the initial mailings; organizations with deviant definitions were not allowed to participate.

The participating organizations received an e-mail with enclosed two quasi-identical URLs: one containing the letter *a* in its character string, to be sent out to managers who had been identified as high potentials; the other containing the letter *b* in its character string, to be

sent out to regular managers. The URLs lead to identical surveys but data were routed to two separate databases (in the stage of data analysis, these were merged and high potentials were coded 1 whilst regular managers received code 0). The URLs were sent out by each organization's HR director following the above guidelines, together with an email stating that the organization had decided to participate in a study on emotional intelligence, that participation was voluntary, and that personalized EI profiles could be obtained after termination of the study granted that participants provide their e-mail address. The utility of such profiles within the context of personal development was briefly addressed.

This procedure ensured participants' anonymity since no names or contact data were disclosed outside of their organizations, unless if they themselves chose to do so. Furthermore, as all participants received identical instructions and surveys, no information on high-potential status was revealed to employees. This latter intervention was very important to the participating organizations – mostly out of fear of frustrating the non-high potentials.

After closing the data collection, all raw data were sent to PEN Psychodiagnostics in the Netherlands – the association that is responsible for distribution of the EQ-i in the Netherlands and Belgium. After being standardized against a Dutch-speaking norm population of approximately 1100 individuals, the data was then returned to us in the form of *t*-scores. EQ-i scores are reported as *t*-scores with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15, as is also the convention for IQ (Bar-On, 1997). Note that all analyses reported in this paper were performed using these *t*-scores, *not* the raw scores.

Materials

EI. In order to measure participants' emotional intelligence, Bar-On's EQ-i (1997) was administered. This self-report measure is widespread and has been extensively validated (Bar-On, 2000). Several studies have demonstrated reasonable levels of internal consistency, test-retest reliability and predictive, convergent and discriminant validity (Bar-On, 2000;

Dawda and Hart, 2000; Hedlund and Sternberg, 2000). All 133 EQ-i items require a response on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *very seldom or not true to me* to *very often true of me or true of me*. Scales and subscales of the EQ-I are listed in Table I.

Recently, several authors have made the case for using the ability rather than the personal factors models of EI (Côté and Miners, 2006; Daus and Ashkanasy, 2005; McEnrue and Groves, 2006; Rosete and Ciarrochi, 2005). Common criticism on the EQ-i is that the model on which it is based is too broad – i.e. includes dimensions and components not included in the original definition of emotional intelligence – and that the fifteen-factor structure is often not found in replication studies (Daus and Ashkanasy, 2005; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Furthermore, some research suggests considerable overlap between the EQ-i measure and established measures of personality, like the NEO-PI-R and the 16 PF (Dawda and Hart, 2000; McEnrue and Groves, 2006). However, other authors (Mayer *et al.*, 2000; Shulman and Hemenover, 2006) emphasize that when studying "new" constructs such as EI, being able to predict even small amounts of additional variance over known variables (i.e. personality) may be considered substantial advances. Moreover, the rationale behind the MCSEIT, the most frequently employed measure of the EI ability model, is not irrefutable either. Freudenthaler and Neubauer (2005) observed: "Although emotional knowledge about the effectiveness of emotion-related behavior can be regarded as a 'maximum-performance' indicator of an individual's emotional management ability (assessing what an individual is capable of when highly motivated), it should not be neglected that managing emotions effectively does not only require the availability of such knowledge but also to behave according to it." (p. 571).

In any case, this paper wishes to steer clear of "or-or" discourse and subscribes to the vantage-point of Van Rooy *et al.* (2005) who argue that both models of EI have utility depending on the context in which they are used. The authors posit that, considering its broad

reach, the personal factors model of EI is valuable mainly in selection contexts – as is the case in this paper.

Job performance. An indication of individual job performance was obtained by a single item, i.e. "When comparing yourself to co-workers who hold similar jobs, how would you rate your own performance (supposing that 0 is the performance of your worst performing co-worker and 10 that of your best performing co-worker)?" Choosing to assess performance through self-report, although subject to self-enhancement bias (Campbell and Lee, 1988), allowed for the entire survey to be self-reported. An empirical study such as this, departing solely from the viewpoints of the high-potential individuals themselves, most certainly delivers added value to the study domain. In the majority of studies on high potentials, direct supervisors serve as research samples or a non-empirical, rather normative approach is taken to the matter (Pepermans *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, having participants self-anchor their responses to the job performance item should enhance its validity (Kilpatrick and Cantril, 1960)

Career commitment. Career commitment was measured with Blau's 7-item scale (1989). All items of this measure are scored on a 5-point Likert scale anchored from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Sample items include, "I definitely want a career for myself in this profession" and "I like this vocation too well to give it up". Blau (1985, 1989) demonstrated the scale's reliability and distinctness from related constructs such as job involvement and organizational commitment. He reported scale internal consistencies of around .87 and a test-retest reliability of .67 over a seven-month period (Blau, 1985). The coefficient alpha for this measure in the present paper was .80.

Demographics. Participants were asked to indicate l_{max} and l_i with a single figure (minimum 1), relying upon objective data (e.g. organizational diagrams). Finally, age and gender were surveyed.

Results

Overall EQ-i scores and subscale scores were analyzed. As EQ-i scores are reported as *t*-scores with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15 (and no raw data were available, neither for the study sample nor for the norm population), means and standard deviations were examined for each sample category before testing the hypothesized relations between emotional intelligence, self-reported job performance, career commitment and high-potential status. Only HP_hs' total EQ-i score exceeded 115 (M = 115.89, SD = 13.66). Total EQ-i scores for the other sample categories were all higher than 100 but lower than 115, thus within the "average" range. On a subscale level, M_l and M_h displayed below-average scores on optimism (M = 88.13 and 89.22 respectively), and HP_l and HP_h on social responsibility (M = 92.96 and 97.26 respectively). HP_l also scored below average on empathy (M = 97.75) and impulse control (M = 99.54) and HP_h scored considerably above average on flexibility (M = 120.11).

H1: EI – high-potential status

No significant differences were found between high potentials' and regular managers' total EQ-i scores ($t(100) = -.44$, *ns*). Figure 1 depicts the observed means for all four sample categories. Note that HP_h do display the highest EQ-i scores, although differences with M_l, M_h and HP_l are not significant ($F(3,97) = 1.78$, *ns*). HP_l, contrary to expectations, exhibit the lowest EQ-i scores.

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take in Figure 1

When considering the data at a subscale level, several significant differences were observed. High potentials display higher levels of assertiveness ($t(100) = -2.38$, $p < .05$), independence ($t(100) = -2.28$, $p < .05$), optimism ($t(100) = -3,29$, $p < .01$) and flexibility

($t(100) = -2.18$, $p < .05$). On the subscale social responsibility, however, managers were found to demonstrate significantly higher scores ($t(100) = 2.28$, $p < .05$) than their high-potential counterparts. It thus appears that the aforementioned propositions on EI being a covert high-potential identification criterion were only partially supported.

MANOVA generated differences in flexibility, happiness and interpersonal relationships between the four sample categories (Figure 2). Only flexibility ($F(3, 97) = 2.72$, $p < .05$) shows the expected pattern; on the subscales happiness ($F(3,97) = 4.36$, $p < .01$) and interpersonal relationships ($F(3,97) = 4.25$, $p < .01$), M_l show the highest scores of all sample categories. Remarkably, for overall EQ-i as well as for happiness and interpersonal relationships, high potentials' scores increase with functional level, while managers' scores decrease. The implications of these findings for the EI-derailment connection posited earlier in this paper will be discussed below.

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take in Figure 2

H2a: EI – job performance

Linear regression analysis revealed that total EQ-i score does not significantly predict self-reported job performance ($\beta = 0.09$, *ns*). On a subscale level, optimism ($\beta = 0.94$, $p < .01$) and emotional self-awareness ($\beta = .15$, $p < .05$) were found to be positive significant predictors of job performance; interpersonal relationships ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .01$) and reality testing ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .01$) were found to be negative significant predictors, indicating that higher scores on these EI subscales led to lower self-reported performance ratings. Together, these four predictors accounted for 82% (adjusted R^2) of variance in the job performance score, providing some support for *H2a*.

H2b: job performance – high-potential status

Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between self-reported job performance and high-potential status. High potentials were found to display significantly higher levels of individual job performance than did managers ($t(100) = -4.14$, $p < .01$). When comparing the four different sample categories, HP_h were found to report significantly higher job performance scores than M_l ($F(3, 97) = 2.72$, $p < .05$) and M_h ($F(3, 97) = 2.72$, $p < .05$). *H2b* may thus be accepted.

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take in Figure 3

H3a: career commitment – job performance

The career commitment scale score did not significantly predict self-reported performance ($\beta = 0.09$, *ns*), leading us to reject *H3a*. Note that separate regression analyses were conducted for *H2a* and *H3a*. Putting career commitment and emotional intelligence in one predictive model of job performance proved ineffective because of the multicollinearity between the two constructs (see also *H3b* below).

H3b: EI – career commitment

Total score on the EQ-i significantly predicts career commitment ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$) in the total sample. As for the 15 subscales of the EQ-i, all subscales but the three included in the adaptability scale (problem solving, reality testing and flexibility) were significant predictors, making up a model with an explanatory power of 28% (adjusted R^2). *H3b* was thus, for the most part, supported.

H3c: career commitment – high-potential status

Finally, the possibility of distinguishing between HP and M based on participants' career commitment scores was examined. Differences between HP and M were not significant for the career commitment scale score ($t(100) = -.14$, *ns*). At item level, HP rated "If I could

get another job and be paid the same amount, I would probably take it" significantly lower ($t(100) = 2.36$, $p < .05$). No significant differences were found between the different sample categories (Figure 4). Thus, it appears that the evidence for *H3c* is weak.

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take in Figure 4

Discussion

This paper attempts to demonstrate the utility of using some indication of emotional intelligence to identify high potential in managers. As has been demonstrated in Table I, all 15 subscales of the EI personal factors model (Bar-On, 1997) can be mapped across onto the metacompetency model proposed by Briscoe and Hall (1999). It was therefore hypothesized that, in today's fast-moving business environment, possessing high emotional intelligence – and, consequently, high potential for continuous learning – should be a criterion in high-potential identification.

Using EI to distinguish between high potentials and regular managers

A first indication of the accuracy of the proposed hypotheses emerged as findings revealed that high potentials at high managerial levels (HP_h) display an EQ-i score of 115.89, which is more than one standard deviation above average (Bar-On, 1997), while the other sample categories (M_l, M_h and HP_l) exhibit scores within the average range. However, differences in total EQ-i score were not significant. Support for *H1* was found at the subscale level.

Assertiveness, independence, optimism, flexibility and social responsibility appear to be covert high-potential identification criteria, separating between the group of HP and non-HP. Strikingly, these attributes fit very nicely into the definition of the *protean career*, which highlights continuous learning, self-direction and choices based on personal values (Briscoe

and Hall, 2006). *Independence* allows for autonomous action ("…without waiting for formal training and development from the organization", Hall and Moss, 1997, p. 31, see earlier). Employees who are independent are self-reliant and thus able to take their career into their own hands. Furthermore, they show themselves as leaders, not followers, from early on in their career, as they make decisions based on their own personal value system – which is, alongside self-direction, a core feature of protean careers (Briscoe and Hall, 2006). *Assertiveness* helps HP express their aspirations and ambitions to significant others within their organizations. Employees who are assertive are not afraid to display initiative, achieve in ways that may be labeled competitive by others and certainly not to "stand out from the crowd". Creating visibility in one's organization from early on in the career is a prerequisite for being identified as a high potential (Capowski, 1994; Feild and Harris, 1991). *Flexibility* is probably the most evident facet of Briscoe and Hall's (1999) metacompetency framework. HP_h display an average score of 120.11 on this subscale (which is significantly higher than M_l and M_h), demonstrating how essential being flexible is for high potentials. Being able to adapt to changing circumstances is, by far, the most crucial competency of the 21st century (Briscoe and Hall, 1999, Tett *et al.*, 2000). *Optimism* denotes always looking ahead without being easily demotivated. Optimists tend to turn problems into learning opportunities and inspire others with their ability to put things into perspective (Rottinghaus *et al.*, 2005). Finally, *social responsibility* distinguishes between high potentials and regular managers – however, it is the group of managers that scores significantly higher on this subscale. It appears that high potentials show more *Machiavellism* than other managers do ("the end justifies the means"). Probably, the competitive aspect of organizational high-potential policies plays a part in this finding, as individualism may be encouraged. Furthermore, since high potentials are considered separate from regular managers from early on in the career (receiving different

treatment, training and benefits), it may be no surprise that identification with co-workers is low (Dubouloy, 2002).

However, HP_l who aspire to be HP_h someday may be recommended to develop their *interpersonal skills*. An examination of the EI differences between the four sample categories revealed that high potentials at lower managerial levels display lower levels of interpersonal skills than managers, but this relationship is inverted at higher managerial levels. A possible explanation may be that HP_l prioritize individual performance over interpersonal aspects of work while M_l experience less pressure from higher management and longer socialization periods. Furthermore, as M_l rate their own job performance lowest of all sample categories, relationship management (e.g. networking) may be a way of compensating for average job performance (Luthans *et al.*, 1985). At higher managerial levels, HP report better interpersonal skills than do managers (M_h display the lowest scores). A reference to derailment literature seems appropriate here. Although conclusions should be interpreted with caution (as the study design is cross-sectional, not longitudinal), it appears that the high potentials at the higher managerial levels are those with the better interpersonal skills (or: those that have learned to prioritize teamwork over individualism and competitiveness). A possible explanation for the fact that M_h demonstrate the lowest interpersonal skills scores of all four sample categories may be that these managers' working relationships are frustrated because they do not get the same opportunities as do their high-potential peers (Cope, 1998). Alternatively, the M_h group may well consist of experts who have received promotions as a result of their expertise, but will never be considered HP due to their lack of interpersonal skills. The M_l group, on the other hand, may contain some managers who could be identified as high potentials yet. *Happiness* exhibits similar patterns with high potentials scoring lower than regular managers at lower managerial levels and higher at higher managerial levels. Research by Dubouloy (2002) uncovered that high potentials often feel lonely and insecure as

a result of the lack of feedback they receive and the ambiguous expectations their organizations hold towards them. It is possible that such negative feelings diminish as high potentials grow accustomed to their special statuses and all the "pros and cons" that go with it. The inversion of the happiness-HP status relationship at higher levels may, again, be attributed to frustrations on the side of M_h. Another possible explanation lies in the fact that high potentials generally make different lifestyle choices (or at least set different priorities) than non-high potential peers and, therefore, suffer less of imbalances between work and private life (Judge *et al.*, 1994).

The roles of job performance and career commitment

High potentials were found to rate their own performance significantly higher than regular managers did, at lower as well as at higher managerial levels. Much can be said about having survey participants rate their own performance; however, these findings do raise some interesting questions. First of all, if social desirability or self-enhancement bias really plays such a big part in self-report performance ratings (Campbell and Lee, 1988), why would managers, then, rate their performance significantly lower than high potentials? There is no apparent reason why self-enhancement bias would affect high potentials more than managers. It seems more plausible that the self-reported performance ratings in this study are either a proxy of objective data available to employees (such as the feedback they get during a performance appraisal process), or a reflection of the perceptions the study participants have of themselves owing to their knowledge of their HP status. Another angle from which to look at these findings is based on *cognitive dissonance theory* (Festinger, 1956). As it is commonly known that job performance is the "overriding" high-potential identification criterion (Cope, 1998; Pepermans *et al.*, 2003; Quinn, 1988), employees might use information on HP status to infer how well they perform compared to peers. When conclusions are negative, they might solve the resulting psychological discomfort by instilling in themselves the mindset of

prioritizing interpersonal relationships over performance – which is a possible explanation for the fact that M_l report higher scores on interpersonal skills than do HP_l.

With regard to the relationship between EI and performance, results indicated that reality testing, optimism and emotional self-awareness make up a significant model. The less realistic and the more optimistic, it appears, the higher one's job performance rating. Reasons for this may be twofold: first, it is possible that "unrealistic optimists" overrate their own performance when asked to self-report on it; second, it may well be that these attributes enable them to "think outside the box" and come up with creative, innovative solutions that their more conservative peers would never have considered (Rottinghaus *et al.*, 2005; Schneider, 2001). Such innovative ideas would be much valued in today's business environment and result in higher performance ratings (Luthans *et al.*, 2004). Finally, higher emotional self-awareness might lead to higher self-reported performance ratings as employees who are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses might benefit from this knowledge to "market" themselves as high performers – acting on their strengths and drawing attention away from their weaknesses (Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997).

Career commitment does not strongly impact self-reported job performance; only at item level, higher performance rates were found in those participants who gave low ratings to "If I could get another job and be paid the same amount, I would probably take it" and "If I could do it all over again, I would not choose to work in this profession". It seems that those who have once made a very conscious choice for the current profession, report the highest performance ratings, a finding that makes obvious sense (Aryee *et al.*, 1994; Bashaw and Grant, 1994).

In the current study, all subscales of the EQ-i, except for those in the adaptability scale are significantly related to the career commitment scale. Furthermore, high potentials differ from managers in this respect for the item "If I could get another job and be paid the same

amount, I would probably take it", which they rated lower than managers did. Some reference to the literature on boundaryless and protean careers seems relevant here. High potentials seem to experience protean, but not per se boundaryless careers. Briscoe *et al.* (2006) argue that protean and boundaryless careers are independent but related constructs: people can display protean attitudes but not prefer cross-boundary collaboration and vice versa. They found that being protean and boundaryless in terms of career attitudes is not synonymous with job mobility preference (as it is often depicted in literature) and that, consequently, mobility should not be used as the primary proxy for either boundaryless or protean career attitudes or outcomes. The possibility of a connection between career commitment and traditional (non-boundaryless) career attitudes is supported by the fact that the EI subscales within the adaptability scale are those that would, logically, be expected to relate most to boundaryless career attitudes.

Implications for practice

Drawing from the findings in this paper, it appears that using emotional intelligence (as conceptualized by Bar-On, 1997) – or at least some of its subscales – in identifying high potential may well contribute to the validity of such processes. Concluding that assertiveness, independence, optimism and flexibility are attributes high potentials should possess to an above-average extent is, perhaps, not very new or shocking. However, the heart of the matter is, *are these attributes really assessed in organizations today?* Briscoe and Hall (1999) described the competency models they encountered in their in-depth study of 31 leading North American organizations as "too complex" and drowning "in overly detailed competency definitions" (p. 48). The authors found that not one of these companies assessed learning ability in any way, even though most of them admitted to the paramount importance of a continuous learning approach to the success of their organizations in the future. A similar discourse is found in Spreitzer *et al.* (1997). The EQ-i might help organizations and

individuals alike assess the potential they have for continuous learning in a very simple manner. If nothing more, the EI profiles that emerge can provide valuable input into the high-potential identification process as well as into individuals' personal development plans. Many organizations probably do have competencies labeled *independence* or *flexibility* in their competency models. However, looking deeper into the definitions of such competencies, their ad hoc nature is generally revealed. Such "micro-competencies" are mostly unrelated to the meanings of independence and flexibility in the metacompetency approach (Briscoe and hall, 1999).

Another important implication for practice is that organizations must, very carefully, separate high *potentials* from high *performers*. Potential for promotion and job performance have been found to be correlated in previous studies, but correlation coefficients did not exceed .40 (Fields, 2002). Although an excellent performance is and should be a prerequisite for being identified as having high potential, organizations must beware of *Halo effects* in their performance appraisal processes, causing assessors to align potentiality ratings with performance ratings (Fields, 2002). As is seen in the data presented above, a too great focus on performance may cause high potentials to pay little attention to the development of interpersonal skills, which is a typical cause of derailment (Leslie and Van Velsor, 1996; Van Velsor and Leslie, 1995). Organizations need to be proactive in this respect, making sure that high potentials do not get isolated in the beginning of their careers, fostering individualistic and competitive mindsets that will be difficult to "unlearn" later. Furthermore, in light of retention management, paying sufficient attention to employees' emotional states (e.g. happiness, frustration) might benefit organizations more than focusing on compensation and benefits. This point is demonstrated by the finding that high potentials rate the item "If I could get another job and be paid the same amount, I would probably take it" low, implying that pay is not their primary motive for staying with the organization – and that their career

preferences are perhaps not as boundaryless as some literature suggests (Viney *et al.*, 1996). Also, abovementioned findings about high potentials' "unhappiness" and non-high potential frustrations are manifestations of the risks inherent to HP identification policies based on a system of *peer comparison* or *forced ranking* appraisal (Cope, 1998). The relevance of cultivating positive emotions at work is further supported by the finding that optimism and (a low score on) reality testing show a significant relationship with individual job performance.

Limitations and directions for further research

Despite the contributions of the current study to the literature on high-potential identification, it is not without limitations. First of all, the small sample size per sample category (N= 24, 24, 27, 27) affected the power of our study, which was between .3 and .4 (depending on sample size) for the MANOVA analyses and around .6 for the *t*-tests (N = 51, 51). Generally, .8 is accepted as a standard for adequacy (Cohen, 1988). Furthermore, using data from high potentials coming from different organizations may have introduced some additional variance in the data (which enhances the chance of chance capitalization and thus might decrease the power of the study). However, if we would have restricted data collection to only one organization, we would have had even smaller samples. We have tried to reduce the chance of inter-organizational heterogeneity regarding what "high potential" means by explicitly communicating to organizations that they could only participate in the study if their definition of high potential matched that of Cope (1998). However, this particular research population is very difficult to reach. Our study was a first attempt to study a high-potential sample in comparison to a non-high-potential sample in a way that would not compromise discretion within organizations. It is, by our knowledge, the first study that surveys the high-potential population itself. However, in the future, we hope to be able to collect data from larger samples, in order to obtain higher power. Further research must then reveal if the effects that were found can, in effect, be replicated. It would be interesting to see if follow-up

studies on larger high-potential samples (and with a higher power) would yield similar results, especially with respect to effect size, which was around .4 for all EQ-i subscales (this is a rather small effect size, see Cohen, 1988). However, even weak effects may be of empirical importance (Garamszegi, 2006) – but again, follow-up studies using high potentials as study participants would allow researchers to build a much stronger case about the link between emotional intelligence and high potential.

Second, we have not applied a Bonferroni correction to our data even though the study incorporates multiple comparisons. As our study explored a novel topic by means of a survey (where study variables are more complex and interrelated than in experimental designs), such a correction would be too conservative. Anderson (1961) advocated that pilot studies should focus on maximizing their power, whilst Perneger (1998) argues that the Bonferroni method and the concept of study-wide error rate applies only to the "general" or "universal null hypothesis", i.e. that all null hypotheses are true simultaneously, which is not really of interest to us in this study, as we wanted to assess each subscale in its own right. Furthermore, applying corrections for multiple comparison increases the likelihood of Type II errors (i.e. concluding that there are no significant differences between the different groups in the study when in fact, there are), leading to a "sacrificial loss of power" (Garamszegi, 2006).

Third, both performance and emotional intelligence scores were assessed using self-report measures, which run a higher risk of inducing self-enhancement bias. We wanted to incorporate some indication of performance in our study, and using a measure that was not self-reported would have hindered our data collection even more (as we would have needed to link archival data or supervisory ratings to our anonymous participants). Therefore we opted for a self-report measure, even though this was not an ideal solution. However, we do feel that the results section of this paper offers an interesting discussion of data on high potentials' versus regular managers' performance scores – although we cannot be sure that the construct

that was measured was actually "performance", which somewhat limits the usefulness of our findings. Furthermore, in the EQ-i, there is some control over "fake good" behaviour as the inventory has two additional validity factors built into it: the Positive Impression (or PI) scale and the Negative Impression (or NI) scale which control for desirable inclinations or impressions that people project. The conversion of raw EQ-i data sets into standardized *t*-scores (by the publisher) takes these two validity factors into account. An "Inconsistency Index" is calculated for each data set and the EQ-i *t*-scores are adjusted statistically (downward or upward) taking into account the values of PI and NI – these adjusted *t*-scores then make up the final data set that is returned to researchers. We believe that this is a valid method for reducing the chance of self-enhancement bias affecting the results.

In the current study, emotional intelligence as measured by the Bar- On's EQ-i (1997) served mainly as a proxy for Briscoe and Hall's metacompetency model (1999). As a result, the interpersonal aspect of EI was underplayed in this paper. Even though interpersonal skills are extremely important in high-potential careers (as the primary cause of career derailment is a lack of these skills), a broader scope was applied in the current study. The EQ-i, although not without disadvantage – see earlier for a discussion of common criticism on the measure – is a very broad instrument in nature and fit this scope very well. Aside from the apparent overlap of Bar-On's EI personal factors model (1997) with identity and adaptability metacompetencies (Briscoe and Hall, 1999), using the EQ-i as a proxy for learning agility (and letting participants rate their own performance) allowed for the entire study to be self-reported. Typically, the viewpoint of the individual tends to be neglected in research on high-potentials and self-report studies are very uncommon due to the fact that this particular population is quite hard to reach (Pepermans *et al.*, 2003). Obviously, the study domain would benefit from more empirical findings coming from the side of high-potential individuals.

It might be interesting to validate the EQ-i against other proxies or measures of learning agility and so find support for the findings in this paper. Additionally, more research needs to be done on the capacity of learning metacompetencies to identify leadership potential. Finally, an important question in research on high-potential identification is to which extent certain attributes (in this case, EI traits) are predispositions or skills that can be developed (e.g. Dulewicz and Higgs, 2004). Further research needs to be done in order to confront this question.

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Table 1

Presupposed Correspondences between Subscales of the EI Personal Factors Model and Adaptability and Identity Metacompetencies

The EI Personal Factors Model[a]			
EI scales	EI subscales		Adaptability and Identity Metacompetencies[b]
1. Intrapersonal functioning	1. Emotional self-awareness	I	Self-assessment
	2. Assertiveness	A	Dialogue skills
	3. Self-regard	I	Being willing to modify self-perceptions as change occurs
	4. Self-actualization	A	Eagerness to accept new challenges in unexplored territory
		I	Engaging in a variety of personal development activities
	5. Independence	I	Exploring, communicating and acting on personal values
2. Interpersonal skills	6. Empathy	A	Openness to new and diverse people and ideas
	7. Interpersonal relationships	I	Actively seeking out relationships that evoke learning
	8. Social responsibility	I	Rewarding subordinates for personal development work
3. Adaptability	9. Problem solving	I	Seeking, hearing and acting on personal feedback

	10. Reality testing	A	Exploration
	11. Flexibility	A	Flexibility
4. General mood	12. Happiness		
	13. Optimism	I	Being open to diverse people and ideas
5. Stress management	14. Stress tolerance	A	Comfort with turbulent change
	15. Impulse control		

Note. A = Adaptability metacompetency. I = Identity metacompetency.

[a] From "Emotional Quotient Inventory: Technical Manual," by R. Bar-On, 1997, Toronto: Multi-Health Systems.

[b] From "Grooming and Picking Leaders Using Competency Frameworks: Do They Work? An Alternative Approach and New Guidelines for Practice," by J.P. Briscoe and D.T. Hall, 1999, *Organizational Dynamics*, *28*, p. 37-52.

Table 2

Sample Size, Gender Distribution and Means and Standard Deviations of Age per Sample Category

		High potentials (HP)			Managers (M)			
		n	*M* age	*SD* age	*n* match	*M* age	*SD* age	*n* no match
Lower managerial levels (l)[a]	Men	19	39,26	5,52	19	38,38	5,92	13
	Women	5	39,00	3,08	5	39,00	3,32	5
	Total	24			24			18
Higher managerial levels (h) [b]	Men	21	39,29	2,78	21	41,33	3,44	9
	Women	6	38,83	2,93	6	42,00	3,74	4
	Total	27			27			13
Total		51			51			31

[a] $Li/Lmax < .5$ [b] $Li/Lmax \geq .5$

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Means Plots of EQ-i Scores for Different Sample Categories (HPl, HPh, Ml, Mh)

Figure 2. Means Plots of Flexibility, Interpersonal Relationships and Happiness Scores for Different Sample Categories (HP_l, HP_h, M_l, M_h)

Figure 3. Means Plots of Self-Reported Job Performance Scores for Different Sample Categories (HPl, HPh, Ml, Mh)

Figure 4. Means Plots of Career Commitment Scores for Different Sample Categories (HPl, HPh, Ml, Mh)

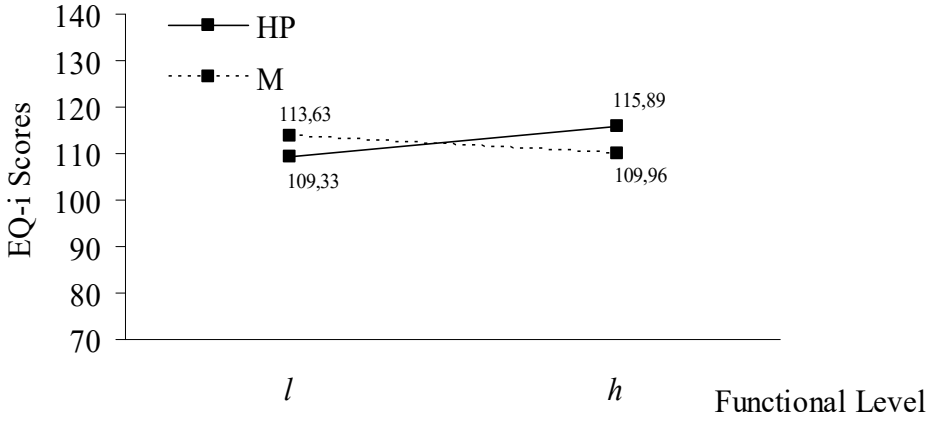
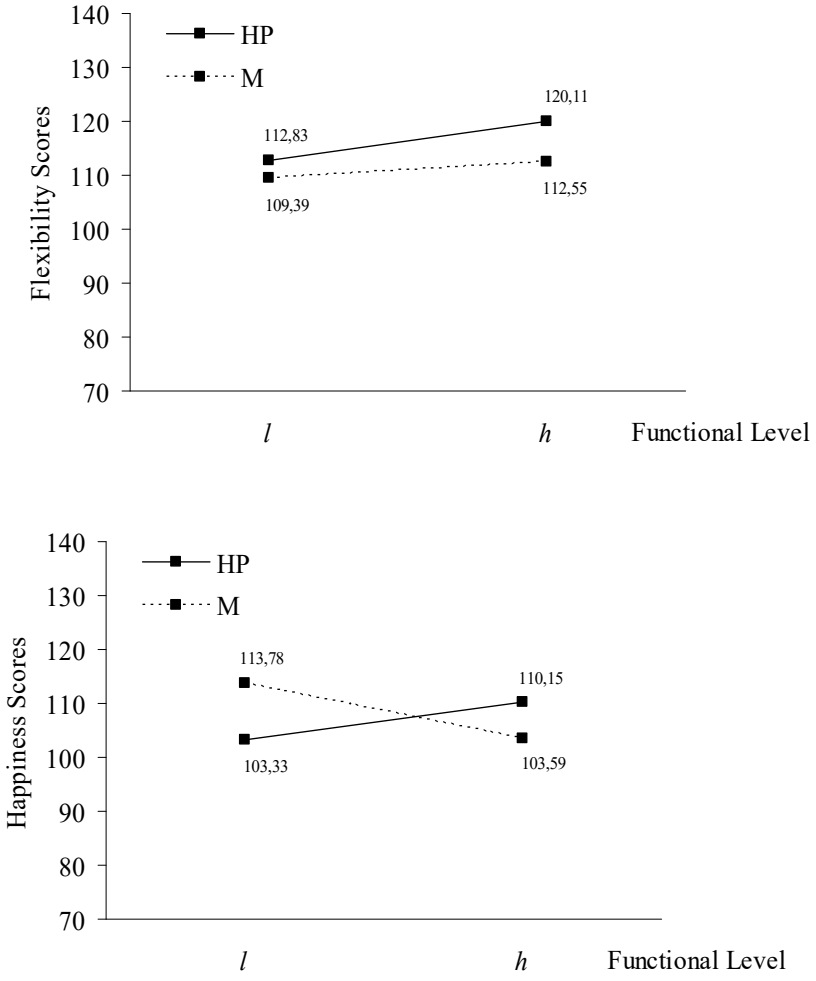
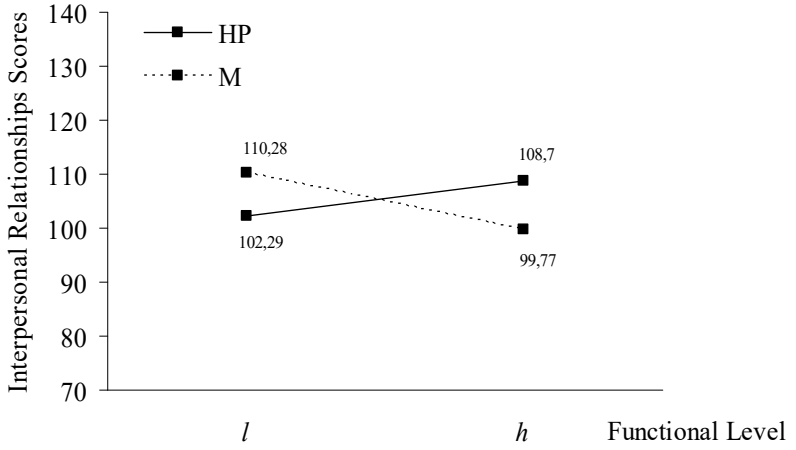

140
130
120
110
100
90
80
70
EQ-i Scores
HP
M
113,63
109,33
115,89
109,96
l
h
Functional Level

Figure 1


HP
M
Flexibility Scores
140
130
120
110
100
90
80
70
112,83
120,11
109,39
112,55
l
h
Functional Level


HP
M
Interpersonal Relationships Scores
140
130
120
110
100
90
80
70
110,28
108,7
102,29
99,77
l
h
Functional Level

HP
M
Happiness Scores
140
130
120
110
100
90
80
70
113,78
110,15
103,33
103,59
l
h
Functional Level

Figure 2

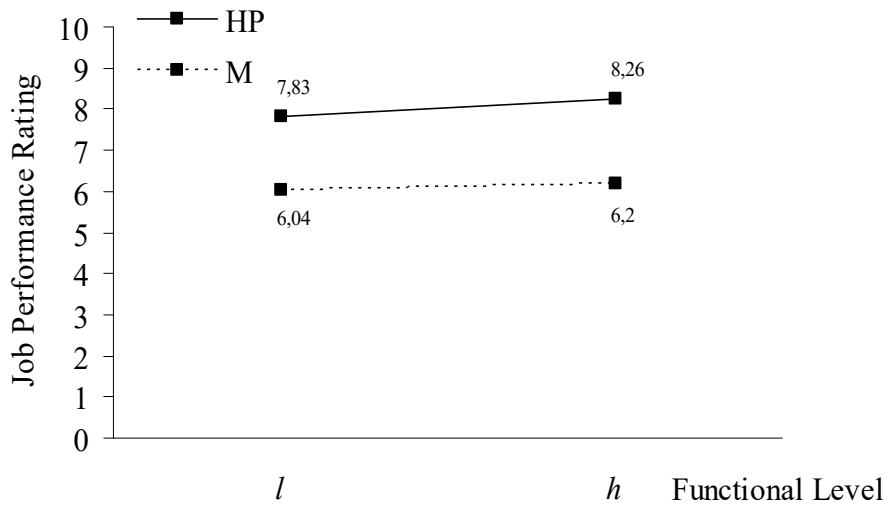

HP
M
Job Performance Rating
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
7,83
8,26
6,04
6,2
l
h
Functional Level

Figure 3

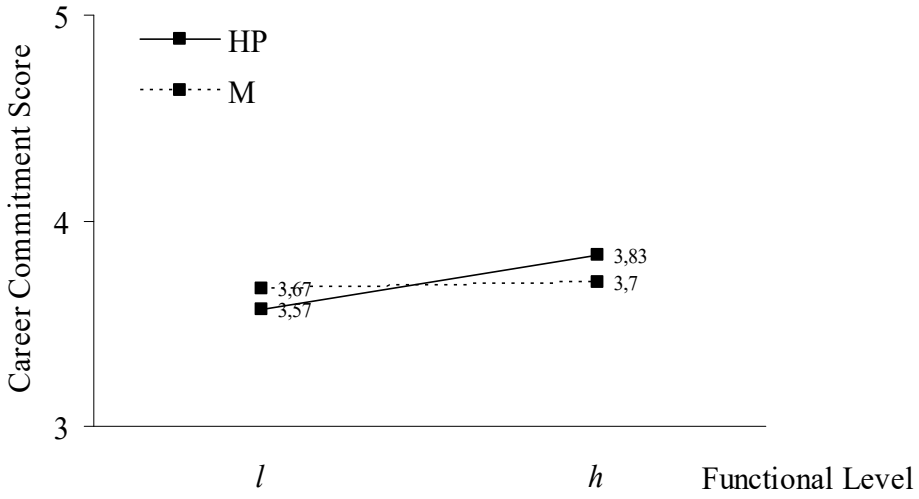

5
4
3
HP
M
Career Commitment Score
3,67
3,57
3,83
3,7
l
h
Functional Level

Figure 4

Author biographies

Nicky Dries is a doctoral student at the Department of Work, Organisational and Economic Psychology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium. Her primary research interests include high potentials (especially the assessment and identification of potential in employees), contemporary careers and career success, and (meta-) competency assessment and development.

Roland Pepermans is a professor of Organizational Behaviour at the Department of Work, Organisational and Economic Psychology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium. His recent international publications deal with topics such as stress, mentoring, high potentials and non-profit management. Roland has co-authored books on top potentials and retention management.

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