The Emotional Recession: global declines in emotional intelligence and its impact on organizational retention, burnout, and workforce resilience - Frontiers

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Executive Summary

This study investigates longitudinal changes in emotional intelligence (EQ) from 2019 to 2024 in response to the psychological disruptions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors argue that global EQ has undergone a sustained decline they term an 'Emotional Recession,' defined as a measurable erosion in emotional and relational capacities with consequences for organizational wellbeing, engagement, and resilience. Using the Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence Assessment (SEI), a proprietary 77-item self-report instrument, the study analyzed a stratified sample of 28,000 adults across 166 countries. Results show a 5.79% decline in global EQ scores (Cohen's $d = 0.22$), with statistically significant decreases across all eight competencies ($p < 0.001$). The steepest declines occurred in Drive-related competencies — Engage Intrinsic Motivation, Exercise Optimism, and Pursue Noble Goals. Success Factors including Effectiveness, Relationships, Quality of Life, and Wellbeing declined by 4.39–6.45%. Individuals with higher EQ were 10.18 times more likely to report strong overall life outcomes (OR = 10.18). The authors conclude that declining EQ represents a systemic organizational risk, applying the Job Demands–Resources model to frame EQ loss as resource depletion contributing to burnout, disengagement, and reduced workforce resilience.

Key Insights

1. Global EQ scores declined by 5.79% between 2019 and 2024, with statistically significant decreases across all eight SEI competencies ($p < 0.001$), representing what the authors define as an 'Emotional Recession.'

2. The largest declines occurred in Drive-related competencies — Exercise Optimism (Cohen's $d = 0.23$), Engage Intrinsic Motivation (Cohen's $d = 0.22$), and Pursue Noble Goals (Cohen's $d = 0.19$) — which the authors link to elevated burnout risk and disengagement.

3. Individuals classified as high-EQ were 10.18 times more likely to report strong outcomes across all four SEI Success Factors (OR = 10.18, 95% CI [9.64, 10.76]), indicating a strong associative relationship between EQ and self-reported life effectiveness, relationships, quality of life, and wellbeing.

Practical Takeaways

• Organizations observing elevated burnout, disengagement, or turnover in post-pandemic workforces may find that these outcomes correlate with measurable declines in intrinsic motivation and optimism, suggesting that emotional capacity is a trackable organizational variable, not merely an individual trait.

• The study's findings indicate that Wellbeing was the lowest-scoring Success Factor and that Drive-related competencies showed the sharpest declines, pointing to future-orientation and internal motivation as the most eroded capacities in the post-pandemic workforce cohort examined.

Frameworks Mentioned

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model — A foundational organizational psychology theory developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) that links burnout to an imbalance between workplace demands and available personal and organizational resources; applied here to frame declining EQ competencies as resource depletion.

Six Seconds Model of Emotional Intelligence — A mixed-model EQ framework operationalized through the SEI instrument, measuring eight competencies grouped into developmental strands (Know Yourself, Choose Yourself, Give Yourself) and four life outcome Success Factors: Effectiveness, Relationships, Quality of Life, and Wellbeing.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The study employs a large, stratified cross-national sample (28,000 participants, 166 countries), uses established statistical methods (MANOVA, ANOVA, Tukey's HSD, odds ratios with confidence intervals), reports effect sizes with confidence intervals, and addresses a genuine gap in longitudinal EQ research during and after COVID-19. The repeated cross-sectional design allows year-over-year trend analysis across a meaningful six-year window. Limitations and biases: The most significant limitation is that both the measurement instrument (SEI) and the 'Emotional Recession' conceptual framework are proprietary products of Six Seconds, the organization conducting and publishing the study. This creates a structural commercial conflict of interest — findings that validate EQ decline directly support demand for Six Seconds' assessment and training products. The SEI is a self-report instrument measuring self-perceived emotional skills, which introduces social desirability bias and limits claims about actual emotional capacity. The study uses a repeated cross-sectional design rather than a true longitudinal panel, meaning different individuals are measured each year, which constrains causal inference about individual-level change. The exclusion of non-binary gender respondents due to sample size is noted but not resolved. Cronbach's alpha values as low as 0.64 are marginal for some scales. The odds ratio of 10.18 is extremely large and warrants scrutiny given the binary categorization method used (above/below mean), which may inflate the association. The study does not address selection bias inherent in the assessment population, which consists entirely of individuals already engaged in coaching, training, or organizational development programs — a non-representative global population.

Organizational Practice

The SEI assessment is described as used in applied settings including coaching, leadership development, organizational training, education, healthcare, military, and nonprofit sectors. Data were collected retrospectively from participants who completed the assessment as part of these applied programs. The study describes organizational practices around psychological safety, affective commitment, and employee engagement as mediating constructs between EQ levels and organizational outcomes such as retention and burnout.

Strategic Implications

The findings suggest that post-pandemic erosion of intrinsic motivation and optimism may constitute a systemic, measurable risk to organizational cultures dependent on employee engagement and discretionary effort. The association between EQ and outcomes across effectiveness, relationships, quality of life, and wellbeing points to emotional capacity as a potentially trackable dimension of organizational health alongside conventional performance metrics. The concept of an 'Emotional Recession' frames workforce emotional decline as a macro-level trend analogous to economic cycles, implying that organizational resilience strategies may benefit from considering population-level emotional capacity data alongside financial and operational indicators. The study's framing through the JD-R model connects individual-level EQ erosion to systemic burnout and disengagement risk, suggesting that resource-depletion dynamics in the post-pandemic period may extend beyond workload and into the domain of emotional and motivational resources.

Validation Status: passed
