Global Scientific JOURNALS

GSJ: Volume 9, Issue 5, May 2021, Online: ISSN 2320-9186
www.globalscientificjournal.com

The Effects of Emotional Intelligence Among Project Stakeholders in the Digital Age

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Abstract: *This research set out to examine the effects of emotional intelligence (EI) among project stakeholders in the digital age. A structured questionnaire was administered to 42 project practitioners of one of operating construction companies, in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. In total, 32 (76%) questionnaires were returned, constituting valid responses used for data analysis. The respondents comprised the project manager, project coordinator, and team members of the project. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were adopted. The results revealed that there is a statistically significant, large, positive correlation between EI and performance of project practitioners. The findings also indicated that self-awareness and social awareness lead to better self-management and improved quality relationships with others. The study concluded that the adoption of high EI by project practitioners would enhance the performance of the entire team in which they work.*

Keywords: *Emotional intelligence, project stakeholders, project management, digital age, sustainable project success.*

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1. Introduction & background

After more than 50 years of developing and deploying information systems, projects continue to fail. While technologies are constantly evolving and changing the way things are done both in our personal and professional lives, one factor remains consistent: people. People are the greatest asset to project success. It is therefore the people to whom the *Project Management Book of Knowledge* (PMBOK) (2017) refers to as the project stakeholders who largely influence the success or the failure of a project. Year after year, project success has been measured by whether a project meets the scope, time, budget, and ultimately, the specified quality standards of the project. However, *people* estimate, control, and ultimately determine the success or failure of those projects (Oosthuizen & Venter, 2018). Project management education has predominantly focused on teaching hard skills, such as time and scope estimation, requirements elicitation, how to build Gantt charts, and more recently, how to incorporate smart technologies while managing projects. Evidently, very little attention has been given to soft skills, such as how to work in teams and manage stakeholders at multiple levels of the organisation with high level emotional intelligence (EI) (Oosthuizen & Venter, 2018). Even the Project Management Institute's (PMI) PMBOK (2017) acknowledges that soft skills are fundamentally important in managing projects, but has little room for it. This is affirmed by the sixth edition of the PMBOK with the inclusion of the knowledge area for stakeholders. To improve the chances of project success, Lahin (2016) suggests that better trained project practitioners are needed. Achieving this requires improved interpersonal soft skills and EI. Lahin (2016) substantiates this further by stating that while this goal is important, it requires a more holistic approach to project management education. In this paper, the author presents a review of the relevant literature and explores the strategies that can be adopted to achieve the aim of this research.

1.1 Aim & objectives

This research aimed to determine the effects of EI among project stakeholders in the digital age with a view to proffer EI as an effective competence that will enhance project practitioners' performance.

To achieve this, the following objectives were observed:

1) To assess the level of project practitioners' EI competencies.
2) To examine the level of the adoption and effectiveness of EI in project management.
3) To determine the relationship between EI and performance of project management practitioners.

1.2 Research hypotheses

In order to achieve the aim of this research, the following sets of hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There is a significant relationship between EI among project stakeholders and project success in the digital age.

H2: There is an increased demand for comprehensive EI among project stakeholders for sustainable project success in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

Riahi (2017) Suggest that sufficient research exists to explain what skills project practitioners need and what skills lead to more successful projects. The most successful project managers plan and communicate efficiently with all the stakeholders within the projects they undertake (Oosthuizen & Venter, 2018). Oosthuizen and Venter (2018) explain that communication and the ability to prioritise tasks are considered soft skills. These acute skills are demanded in agile teams, even more so in the digital era where clients are more directly involved in product development (Akinwamide & Bello, 2019).

The question then becomes, how can project practitioners develop these skills? For the most part, project management education tends to focus on the PMBOK material, which could be attributed to soft skills being difficult to measure with standardised tests (Akinwamide & Bello, 2019). Additionally, EI skills are difficult to teach through the traditional education systems (Akinwamide & Bello, 2019).

2.1 Examining emotional intelligence and its correlation to project management

Salovey (1990) and Mayer (1997) published the first definition of EI as: "…the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to differentiate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions". This definition shows that emotions can be used to guide logical thinking and goal-oriented actions. In addition, it shows that emotions have the ability to enhance rationality. Thus, emotionally intelligent individuals accurately perceive their emotions and use integrated, sophisticated approaches to regulate them as they proceed toward important goals. According to Cumberlander (2017), people who have developed skills related to EI understand and express their own emotions, recognise the emotions of others, are able to regulate affect, and use moods and emotions to motivate adaptive behaviours. Birt and colleagues (2016) express that the emergence of the concept of EI in the last decade of the 20th century caused many controversies in the scientific community. These authors further support their statement by suggesting that this is due to the merging of two seemingly mutually exclusive psychological concepts, namely: *intelligence* and *emotions* (Birt et al., 2016). Before, emotions were perceived as something that prevents rational thought and makes quality work harder. Connolly and Reinicke (2017) claim that a vast number of studies have shown that emotions, if properly managed, can support rational thinking, enable proper decision-making, and direct individuals to appropriate behaviour. Such findings aroused much interest among management practitioners.

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Pacagnella Júnior, Porto, Pacífico and Salgado Júnior (2015) report that extensive changes in the business environment over the last two decades has given rise to the need for managers with capability to make an emotional connection with team members and motivate them to continuously achieve higher goals. This kind of behaviour and capabilities are based on the characteristics of EI. Riahi (2017) suggests that there is a great potential that EI can provide in the field of work, management, and leadership. Additionally, Riahi (2017) highlights the importance and role of EI in the long-term by stating that good interpersonal relationships within organisations increase creativity and critical problem-solving skills, as well as help influence the overall profitability and success of an organisation. Birt et al., (2016) concur stating that an analysis of the impact of EI on the overall success of an organisation indicates relevant facts and benefits that an organisation can accomplish if the importance of project employees' EI is recognised and developed through appropriate training and workshops as one of the employee priority strategic objectives. Bounfour (2016) confirmed the positive correlation between project managers' EI and their business success and educational level.

2.2 The importance of soft skills in complementing the hard skills for a more effective project management

According to Cumberlander (2017), the skills that define the most successful project managers would be categorised as soft skills, whereas project management education and practice measures more of what is generally known as hard skills, or skills and knowledge in a very specific area (Vasanthakumari, 2019). Although hard skills and soft skills represent different types of knowledge, they need to be balanced to be effective. Hard skills are often aligned more clearly, though not exclusively, as explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge can be recorded and disseminated more easily via text than its counterpart – tacit knowledge (Vasanthakumari, 2019). Soft skills are more aligned with tacit knowledge, though again, not exclusively. Tacit knowledge is generally harder to convey via text. Tacit knowledge must frequently be acquired by doing, rather than by reading, and this problem extends well beyond academia (Vasanthakumari, 2019). The difference and difficulty in capturing and conveying tacit knowledge has been noted both in the literature and knowledge management (Alberani, 2015). Soft skills are as critical to project management as hard skills, but unlike hard skills, instruction of soft skills is most effective when taught in context in a more holistic way.

2.3 Project stakeholder management

Today, almost every project takes place in a context where stakeholders play a major role in the accomplishment of the project tasks. Often the project is sensitive to actions and decisions taken by the stakeholders (Silvius & Schipper, 2019). A project stakeholder is defined in the PMBOK (2017:98) as "an individual, group, or organization who may affect, be affected by or perceive itself to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of a project". Silvius and Schipper (2019) argue that in project management, more attention should be paid to the stakeholders. Matthias, Balve and Spang (2017) report that emotions are at the centre of making analytical decisions, and the ability to make right decisions all the time is one of the key skills of leaders. According to Wenche and colleagues (2017), how a project team behaves within the team determines the success or failure of a project. One of the most effective ways to get the project team to do all that is required to meet the project's requirements is to have a positive, motivated, conducive, and committed environment (Wenche et al., 2017). Alvarez-Dionisi, Turner and Mittra (2016) maintain that effective project managers create such a team environment where all workers collaborate to achieve the project's objectives by handling their emotions as well as that of the teams. Akinwamide and Bello (2019) argue that project practitioner's need to make their emotions visible. The same authors express that some people in the workplace choose to completely hide their

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emotions, making sure that their outward behaviour does not reflect their inner emotional state, while others openly display their emotions through outbursts in an uncontrolled manner. Both extremes are not effective ways of managing emotions. Various practical experiments have shown that effective management of emotions in the workplace leads to improved decision-making and the ability to achieve results as an individual as well as team. Savoia, Stefanovic and Fragassa (2016) assert that an outward display of angry emotions is considered a weakness, but emotionally intelligent individuals can effectively exhibit controlled anger expressions to achieve desired outcomes. Lahin (2016) expresses that negotiating is another area that leaders/project managers need to deal with regularly. It is particularly pertinent in areas where resources and timelines/schedules need to be negotiated. These involve communicating, influencing, and debating with other people. For effective negotiations, the most critical human trait needed is empathy. Empathy refers to the ability to put oneself in the shoes of another and see things from their perspective (Lahin, 2016). Cumberlander (2017) postulates that emotionally intelligent people are generally empathetic – a trait that makes them more successful in negotiations. Self-confidence is another personal emotional skill that to a large extent defines how an individual behaves under a different emotional state or constraint.

According to Lahin (2016), a self-confident person tends to think rationally – in a controlled emotional manner – under stressful and unpleasant situations, which aids in making well-informed and well-judged decisions. Lahin (2016) avers that an individual who is not self-confident can suffer under pressure, which may seriously impede his/her rational thinking ability and decision-making. Pacagnella Júnior et al., (2015) contend that relationship management is the most critical team and organisational skill for project success. Savoia et al., (2016) articulate that a project or an organisation is not made up of one person but a group of people trying to achieve a common goal. Although all human, everyone is unique in one way or another, and this factor accounts for the conflicts and differences of opinion of how common goals can be achieved (Savoia et al., 2016). High EI among the project team, therefore, has the ability to aid in ensuring that all project stakeholders work as a collaborative team with trust in each other to achieve the common goal. Matthias et al., (2017) reports that organisations tend to hire people based on their experiences and qualifications; however, it is their EI that determines whether or not they will be effective in their appointed role. According to Van der Waldt and Fox (2015), projects are, by their nature, uncertain and complex. This makes it of utmost importance that project managers and their teams possess EI competencies. Another noteworthy aspect of projects is that they are always temporary; they have a commencement date, run for a certain period of time, and then end (Van der Waldt & Fox, 2015). This characteristic of project management requires the project manager to rapidly develop the project team's trust and commitment. In other words, build effective interpersonal relationships. This no doubt requires the project manager to have social competence and relationship management skills (Silvius, 2016). It also requires the ability to understand the emotions of others and predict mood fluctuations under different circumstances. This skill necessitates the project manager to have more tactful and effective communication with the team, so as to influence and inspire the team to work towards the common goal (Silvius, 2016). According to Savoia et al., (2016), leaders who have the skill to read emotional signals from others can adapt their communication style and body language as they appraise the emotions of others in the team, in the best interest of all parties involved. Team effectiveness is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

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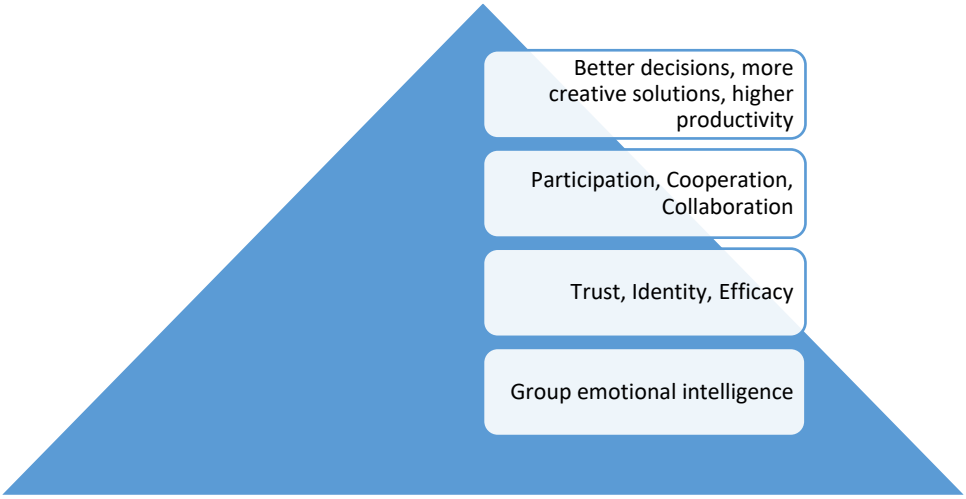

Figure 1. Model of Team Effectiveness
Adapted from Lahin (2016) and Druskat and Wolff (2001)

2.4 Project management in the digital age

Digitalisation and the phenomenon of digital transformation is rapidly and fundamentally changing existing businesses and organisations alike (Collin, Hiekkanen, Korhonen, Halén, Itälä & Helenius, 2015). Although considered a prime challenge for leaders of complex and changing organisations, research in the combined fields of digitalisation and EI remains sparse, and yet executives and managers are tasked with the responsibility of leading people in the rapidly digital transforming business market (Collin et al., 2015). Due to accelerated technological development, the debate regarding the effects of digitalisation and digital transformation on the workforce has once again re-emerged in science, general business reviews, and among contemporary business scholars (Bounfour, 2016; Degryse (2016). Rogers (2016) describes digitalisation as the long economic wave that not only changes production processes and possibilities, but also the way of being. The terms 'digitalisation' and 'digital transformation' are often understood as overall encapsulating expressions to describe the larger technically induced changes occurring in society (Prakash, 2019). Xu, David and Kim (2018) further describe digitalisation as a process of information conversion from the physical to the digital plane. Digital transformation, therefore, concerns the global accelerated process of technical adaptation by individuals, businesses, societies, and nations, which comes as a result of digitalisation (Collin et al., 2015). Schelenz and Schopp (2018:16) argue that in contemporary literature, digitalisation is defined as a "global megatrend that is fundamentally changing existing value chains across industries and public sectors". Terms such as mobile apps, Big Data, Machine-to-Machine, Internet of Things, Industrial Internet, and Industry 4.0 are commonly employed to describe this phenomenon.

According to Degryse (2016), existing business models operate as part of global digital business ecosystems in which interrelated business-units with shared goals and values collaborate and co-create value and ecosystem-advantage. Bounfour (2016) has further analysed digital transformation through five interrelated perspectives and key trends, namely: (1) *Strategic trends*: disruptive changes in the business climate have inevitably led to networks, communities and as well as financial markets to change and engage in major transformation. (2) *Societal and ethical trends*: current relations within societies will differ as they are evolving and adapting to the continued development of information technology (IT) – shifting future norms of conduct. (3) *Organisational trends*: the previous structure of companies, groups, and societies are shifting in the form of their structures, processes, and standards toward more fluid forms of organisations. (4) *Technological trends*: as informational artifacts have become commonplace within the digital and physical sphere, rapid development within IT and innovation technology have become crucial elements to

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consider. (5) *Regulatory trends*: as new standards and regulations emerge, considerable preparation is needed to ensure that the transition towards new regulatory structures is set in place (Bounfour, 2016).

Prakash (2019) reviewed digital transformation in regard to its effects on business models, encouraging leaders to focus on two complementary activities, namely: (i) using digital technology for greater customer collaboration and interaction, and (ii) the reshaping of current customer value propositions in order to transform the whole operating model. Bengtsson (2014: 64) reports that "digitalisation means that digital communication and interaction between people, organisations and things becomes an obvious occurrence". The possibility to collect, interpret, apply and develop larger quantities of data digitally allows for developmental possibilities in almost every sector. Bengtsson (2014) asserts that virtually no organisation will be able to shelter itself from digital transformation and the competitive disruption that follows adopting new digital technologies and business models.

2.4.1 Leading the digital change

Rogers (2016) suggests that intersection between leadership studies and digitalisation involves the reshaping of the very context and structure of organisations. This has strong implications on human interactions in terms of the abilities and capabilities of how the change is managed without disregarding human emotions. Henke and colleagues (2016) suggest that digital masters – companies with significantly higher drivers of performance and productivity – are rare. Most companies fail to become digital masters, and those who succeed do so by their ability to lead this digital transformation and change while effectively managing human interactions (Henke et al., 2016). Alvarez and colleagues (2016) highlight two important areas in order for organisations to succeed with digital transformation, namely: (1) Leadership capabilities, and (2) the operationalisation and implementation of digital transformation. Alvarez-Dionisi et al., (2016) suggest that organisations engage the workforce and set new behaviours in order to create momentum and evolve the whole organisation for an innovative and balanced corporate culture. In sustaining the transition, scholars such as Andervin and Jansson (2016) developed a digital maturity matrix in order to help corporate organisations to lead and manage the digital transformation of their sectors by managing stakeholders, designing the operational model, and developing talent.

3. Research Methodology

The sample of this study comprised 32 project practitioners from a construction project management company in Durban. Data was collected by means of a structured questionnaire using a purposive sampling strategy. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015), the main objective of a purposive sample is to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population, which was the case in this study. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to conduct both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses on the data obtained. Descriptive statistics such as percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to measure the effects of EI on project stakeholders in the digital age.

4. Discussion of Findings

The respondents' demographic data is presented in Table 1 below. The data shows that 59% of the respondents were male, and 41% female. Their ages ranged between less than 20 and 40 years, which accounts for (91%) of the respondents the remaining (9%) comprised of ages from 41 to 60 rage. Altogether, a fair percentage (21.9%) of the practitioners had a matric qualification only, while the majority (37.5%) had a National diploma, the remaining (42%) of the population had BTech/Honours, Masters and or other qualifications. which is

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considered a sufficient academic background. Thus, the respondents had the required adequate knowledge to yield reliable data.

Table 1: Demographic Data of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency (F)	Percentage (P)	Age	F	P	Academic qualification	F	P
Male (M)	19	59.4	< 20 years	4	12,5	Matric	7	21,9
Female (F)	13	40.6	20-30 years	16	50	National diploma	12	37,5
			31-40 years	9	28,1	BTech/Honours	6	18,6
			41-50 years	1	3,1	Masters	2	6,3
			51-60 years	1	3,1	Other	3	9,4
			> 60 years	1	3,1			
Total	**32**	**100**	**Total**	**32**	**100**	**Total**	**32**	**100**

The participants of the study were asked several questions, the responses to which are discussed in more detail below. To begin, they were asked to indicate whether they are able to acknowledge their own or a colleague's anger in a manner that seeks constructive resolution. Thus, the researcher posed the following question to measure the level of anger management among the project stakeholders:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): When my project manager/team members have made me angry, or I have made them angry, I am able to acknowledge what is going on and seek constructive resolution.

Table 2: Anger Management

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly agree	6	18.8	18,6
Agree	12	37.5	56,3
Neutral	4	12.5	68,8
Disagree	8	25	93,8
Strongly disagree	2	6.3	100
Total	**32**	**100**	

Based on the results presented in Table 2, 56.3% of the respondents agreed with the above statement, while 12.5% indicated neutrality. The remaining 31.3% of the respondents disagreed to being able to navigate anger in a manner that is constructive. These findings provide clear indication of the need for better management of self-emotions and that of others. It alludes to the fact that an understanding of the relationship between these two variables by all project team members would change the status quo of the work relationships in this company.

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RQ2: My team members genuinely trust me enough to even talk to me about their personal problems.

Table 3: Trust

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly agree	3	9,4	10.7	10,7
Agree	6	18,8	21.3	32
Neutral	14	43,8	50	82
Disagree	5	15,6	18	100
Total	28	87,5	100	
Missing	4	12,5		
Total	**32**	**100**	**100**	

The statistics presented in Table 3 above show that 32.% of the respondents agree to being trusted by their team members. A larger proportion (50%), however, indicated uncertainty to the statement, while the remaining 17.9% disagreed to being trusted with personal information by their team members. These results indicate a link between the literature reviewed in this study, which both convey that trust is one of the much needed commodities to build meaningful and cooperative relationships.

RQ3: I listen to and really try to understand my team member's feelings.

Table 4: Listening Skills and Empathy

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly agree	16	50	53.3	53,3
Agree	5	15,6	16.7	70
Neutral	8	25	26.7	96,7
Disagree	1	3,1	3.3	100
Total	30	93,8	100	
Missing	2	6,2		
Total	**32**	**100**		

Accordingly, 70% of the respondents indicated that they are attentive listeners to their team members, while 26.7% revealed impartiality to the statement above (see Table 4). However, a minority (3.3%) replied that they do not listen nor try to understand other project team members. Therefore, it can be concluded that even though the result shows a positive indication of listening skills in the organisation under study, there is still room to improve empathy.

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RQ4: When I begin a difficult task, I am motivated more by the thought of success than by the thought of failure.

Table 5: Self-motivation

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly agree	3	9,4	9,4	9,4
Agree	6	18,8	18,8	28,1
Neutral	2	6,3	6,3	34,4
Disagree	11	34,4	34,4	68,8
Strongly disagree	10	31,2	31,2	100
Total	**32**	**100**		

As shown on Table 5, 28.1% of the respondents affirmed the statement above, while 6.3% indicated neutrality. A large proportion (65.6%) disagreed to being motivated by success rather than fear when approaching a difficult task. Evidently, the project practitioners in the organisation under study are motivated by negative emotions rather than positive emotions.

RQ5: Even when I encounter personal difficulties, I complete my tasks and meet my obligations on schedule.

Table 6: Commitment

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly agree	3	9,4	10,3	10,3
Agree	8	25	27,6	37,9
Neutral	3	9,4	10,3	48,3
Disagree	15	46,9	51,7	100
Total	29	90,6	100	
Missing	3	9,4		
Total	**32**	**100**		

According to Table 6 above, 37.9% of the respondents indicated that they are able to complete their tasks and meet their obligations on schedule, while 10.3% were undecided. The majority (61.1%) of the participants disagreed with the above statement. This finding implies that project practitioners need to increase their ability to manage their work, even under stressful situations, to ensure productivity and progress of work.

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RQ6: The more devices are connected, the less humans are.

Table 7: Human Interaction in the Digital Space

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Yes	24	75	75	75
No	8	25	25	100
Total	32	100	100	
Total	**32**	**100**		

As demonstrated in Table 7, 75% of the respondents affirmed the above statement that 'the more devices are connected, the less humans are'. However, 25% of the respondents disagreed. These answers attest to the need for soft skills and EI upskilling among project practitioners as the world moves further into digitalisation.

RQ7: I am an open, honest with myself and others.

Table 8: Openness and Honesty

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Yes	31	96,875	100	100
No	0			
Total	31	96,875	100	
Missing	1	3,125		
Total	**32**	**100**		

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The statistics in Table 8 above show that all the respondents, that is, exactly 100%, indicated being open and honest with themselves and as well as with other team members. These results suggest that people are open and honest, which is a good quality for EI.

5. Contribution

This study contributed to the overall body of knowledge on the topic by addressing the knowledge gap that exists on understanding the relationship between digitalisation and EI. By focusing on a particular organisation in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, the research affirms the fundamental importance of soft skills and EI in project management in the digital age. The insights obtained herein highlight the need for project organisations to prioritise their focus on the acquisition of tacit skills and EI, as these are not as straightforward as increasing standard skill sets. Furthermore, it is recommended that the findings of this study be used to inform the future strategies of such organisations to increase their employees EI in the recruitment processes. Additionally, this research paves the way for institutions to incorporate teaching strategies that will develop EI skills into the curriculum. This will improve the EI of future project practitioners as the business market is moving further into digital transformation. As the global business market is inevitably becoming more digitalised and connected, the understanding of psychology and technology is required to guide organisational interactions.

6. Conclusion

Project management is one of the fastest growing industries across the globe. Organisations need employees to possess problem-solving skills and to work with clients' abilities. Understanding human emotions in the digital age requires the adoption of high EI to improve the performance of project practitioners in the digital age. This research has found that the project practitioners who possess high levels of EI have a considerably good level of empathy, social skills, and motivation competencies to execute work, manage themselves, and develop and sustain good working relationships with other team members. This research, therefore, contributes to the body of literature by providing information on the importance of and relationship between EI and project success.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study are also acknowledged. First, the sample selected for this study was limited to 32 respondents. Future studies should use a larger sample so that the results can be extended to other contexts. A second limitation is that skills were identified in the literature review and could be validated through an additional Delphi process. Future empirical studies should take this study further and develop theoretical and practical knowledge. An interesting research avenue is to identify and analyse the processes that can be used to improve the required skills to meet the demands of the digital age. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study makes an invaluable contribution by recognising the relevant business skills needed for the digital age.

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