

Can Emotional Intelligence Really Be Trained at Work? A Major New Meta-Analysis Says Yes

What the researchers wanted to know

We hear a lot about emotional intelligence in the workplace but does investing in training programmes to develop it actually work? And if so, does it work equally for everyone, or only for certain types of roles?

This study set out to answer those questions rigorously, pulling together the best available evidence on workplace emotional competency training into a single, comprehensive analysis. It's the first meta-analysis of its kind to focus specifically on workplace settings and to bring together three closely related constructs - emotional intelligence (EI), empathy, and emotion regulation - under one review.

How it was done

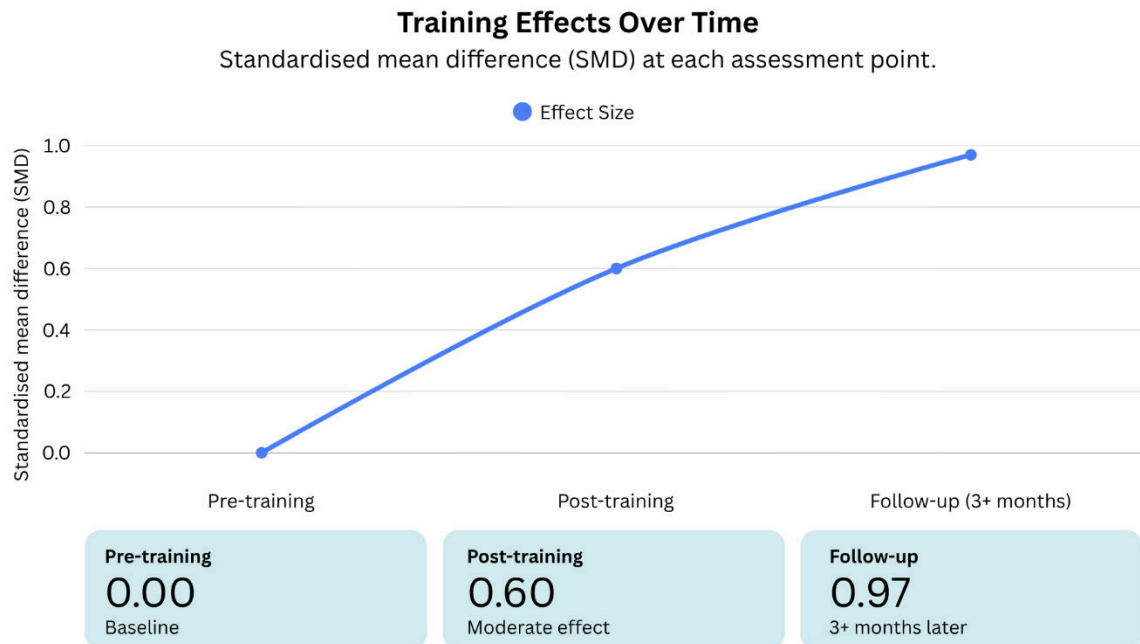
The research team conducted a systematic search across five major academic databases, identifying 2,569 studies in total. After applying strict inclusion criteria (employed adults only, validated outcome measures, sufficient data to calculate effect sizes), 50 studies involving 3,233 participants were included in the primary analysis. A separate analysis of the 27 studies that included a control group was also conducted, to give a more rigorous test of whether training itself (rather than the passage of time or other factors) was driving the improvements.

Studies spanned multiple countries and professional groups including teachers, healthcare workers, managers, and others. Training programmes ranged from one day to two years in length, with the most common methods being in-person lectures, group discussions, role play, and EI strategy practice.

What they found

The headline finding is very clear: workplace emotional competency training works, and the effects are meaningful.

Both analyses returned moderate effect sizes — a standard measure of how much change the training produced. In plain terms, participants showed genuinely noticeable improvements in their emotional competencies after completing training. Crucially, these gains held up when tested more than three months after the training ended, suggesting that the learning translated into real and lasting change, not just a temporary boost.



Based on the 11 studies within the meta-analysis that included a follow-up assessment. The follow-up was conducted on average 26 days after training end, with some studies extending beyond three months.

A few findings in particular stand out:

It works for everyone, not just certain professions. Whether participants were nurses, teachers, managers, or in other roles, the improvements were statistically equivalent. There were no significant differences between professional groups and the researchers suggest this finding reflects the fact that managing emotions and navigating relationships is a universal feature of working life, regardless of job title.

The type of training didn't significantly change the outcome. Programmes focused on emotional intelligence, empathy, or emotion regulation all produced similar results. This points to a common core of underlying skills being developed across different training approaches, rather than each construct requiring its own distinct intervention.

Shorter programmes were slightly more effective than longer ones in the controlled trial analysis, though both produced positive results. This is a useful practical finding for organisations thinking about design and resource allocation.

Effects didn't keep growing on their own. While gains persisted at follow-up, they didn't continue to increase without further input. This suggests that one-off training, while valuable, is most effective when supported by ongoing practice, reflection, or refresher sessions.

What to keep in mind

The researchers are transparent about the limitations of the evidence base. A significant proportion of the included studies had methodological weaknesses — most notably a lack of randomisation and a heavy reliance on self-report measures, which can be influenced by social desirability. Only 2 of the 50 studies were rated at low risk of bias overall, and there was also evidence of publication bias.

These caveats don't undermine the findings, but they do call for some caution in interpretation. More high-quality, randomised controlled trials are still needed.

Why it matters

For HR professionals, L&D teams, and organisational leaders, this research provides evidence that emotional competency training is a worthwhile investment and that the benefits extend well beyond the leadership tier. The researchers' own recommendation is that organisations should consider incorporating emotional competence training into employee and leadership development programmes routinely. Not as a one-time initiative, but as a sustained and embedded feature of how people are supported to grow at work.

Full reference: Mehler M, Balint E, Gralla M, Pößnecker T, Gast M, Hölzer M, Kösters M & Gündel H (2024). Training emotional competencies at the workplace: a systematic review and meta-analysis. BMC Psychology, 12, 718. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-02198-3>