

GILE Journal of Skills Development

Emotional Intelligence as Enacted Employability in AI-Mediated Intercultural Consulting Workplaces

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Abstract

In AI-mediated intercultural consulting workplaces, professionals collaborate across cultural and functional boundaries while navigating complex interpersonal demands. In such environments, employability, particularly for early-career professionals, depends on emotional intelligence as a workplace competence enabling constructive cross-functional and cross-cultural collaboration. Despite its recognised importance, empirical research examining emotional intelligence as an enacted employability capability in consulting contexts remains limited. This mixed-methods study investigates the association between self-reported emotionally intelligent behaviour and cross-functional collaboration within a multinational professional services workplace characterised by international teams. The sample comprised 37 professionals across analytical, consulting, and managerial roles. Correlation and regression analyses examined whether self-reported emotional intelligence relates to reported collaboration. Results indicate a statistically significant positive association ($r = .38$, $p = .022$), with emotional intelligence explaining 14% of the variance in collaboration. Given the single organisational context and sample size, findings are interpreted as exploratory and context-specific rather than generalisable. Semi-structured interviews explored how professionals enact emotional intelligence in everyday workplace interaction and AI-mediated communication. Participants highlighted emotional self-regulation, empathy, and adaptive communication as supporting intercultural understanding and willingness to speak up. AI-assisted tools were experienced as supportive preparation mechanisms rather than substitutes for relational competence. The findings suggest that emotionally intelligent behaviour may function as an enacted employability capability, particularly relevant for early-career development, supporting psychologically safe collaboration in AI-mediated intercultural consulting workplaces.

Keywords: early-career professionals, emotional intelligence, employability, intercultural teams, skill development, artificial intelligence

1. Introduction

In today's digital economy, early-career professionals are increasingly expected to work across cultural, functional, and organisational boundaries. In consulting, technology, and project-based services, often operating as virtual network organisations, collaboration regularly involves colleagues from different professional backgrounds, national cultures, and time zones, often under time pressure and changing client demands. These environments, frequently characterised as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, place demands not only on technical competence, but also on communication, emotional regulation, and the ability to collaborate effectively under pressure. As a result, employability is increasingly understood as a set of transferable capabilities that include interpersonal and relational skills alongside domain knowledge (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023), a perspective that directly informs the present study's focus on emotionally intelligent behaviour in collaborative consulting contexts.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been conceptualised in multiple ways within organisational and psychological research. According to Mayer and Salovey (1997), EI consists of interrelated skills involved in perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions in oneself and others. In contrast, Goleman (1998) proposes a mixed model emphasising competencies such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills in workplace interactions. Subsequent organisational research has linked EI to leadership effectiveness, team functioning, and interpersonal dynamics in groups (e.g., Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Truninger et al., 2018). However, much of this research relies on self-report or competency-based measures, leaving limited insight into how emotionally intelligent behaviour is enacted in everyday, cross-functional and intercultural work contexts.

At the same time, contemporary work practices in consulting and professional services are increasingly shaped by digital collaboration and AI-assisted tools. Platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, and shared project management systems structure daily communication, coordination, and documentation in distributed teams. More recently, AI-assisted features embedded in productivity software, including automated text drafting, summarisation, and tone-support tools, have begun to influence how professionals prepare and frame communication (Bankins et al., 2023). Prior research suggests that these technologies not only support efficiency and clarity, but also shape workplace communication dynamics, trust, and interpersonal experience in collaborative work settings (Van Quaquebeke & Gerpott, 2024). This shift is particularly relevant for early-career professionals, whose participation and sense of psychological safety may be influenced by how communication is mediated and emotionally managed in digitally supported team environments.

Psychological safety provides a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. Edmondson (1999) defines psychological safety as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, allowing individuals to speak up, ask questions, and express concerns without fear of negative interpersonal consequences. Empirical research shows that psychologically safe environments support learning behaviour, voice, and collaboration, particularly in complex and interdependent team settings (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017). In intercultural and cross-functional contexts, psychological safety is closely linked to how emotions are regulated, how feedback is delivered, and how interpersonal interaction is handled in practice.

Against this background, the present study examines emotionally intelligent behaviour as an employability-relevant capability in intercultural consulting teams. Using a mixed-methods design, it investigates the relationship between emotional intelligence and cross-functional collaboration, and explores how emotionally intelligent behaviour and AI-assisted tools are experienced in relation to communication practices and psychological safety at work. The study pays particular attention to early-career professionals operating in digitally mediated, intercultural environments and aims to contribute applied insight into how emotional and relational skills support collaboration, participation, and skill development in contemporary professional settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Emotional Intelligence as a Behavioural Capability in Intercultural Work

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been conceptualised in multiple ways within organisational and psychological research. According to Mayer and Salovey (1997), EI refers to interrelated abilities involved in perceiving, understanding, using, and managing emotions in oneself and others. Goleman (1998) extended this perspective by emphasising emotionally intelligent behaviour in workplace interaction, including self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills. More recent organisational research frames EI as a behavioural capability enacted through observable practices rather than as a fixed trait, linking emotional competence to collaboration, learning, and performance in team-based settings (Gerbeth et al., 2022; Paik et al., 2019).

From a skills development perspective, EI is increasingly understood as a practical and learnable capability. Emotional competencies are expressed through managing reactions under pressure, responding constructively to feedback, and adapting communication to contextual cues (Melita Prati et al., 2003; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005). Such practices support coordination and reduce interpersonal friction in collaborative work (Rezvani et al., 2018; Stubbs Koman & Wolff, 2008). Importantly, emotionally intelligent behaviour is not confined to leadership roles; peers and junior team members also shape communication norms and relational dynamics through everyday interaction (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2018).

For early-career professionals, emotionally intelligent behaviour is particularly salient. Limited positional authority and heightened evaluative pressure increase the importance of emotional self-regulation and interpersonal awareness. Research indicates that EI supports early-career professionals in managing uncertainty, engaging constructively with senior colleagues, and developing confidence in complex organisational contexts (Chen, 2025; Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023). EI has also been linked to proactive career engagement and adaptability (Pirsoul et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023), reinforcing its relevance as an employability-relevant capability in dynamic work environments.

Recent research on employability and skills management further emphasises that interpersonal and emotional capabilities are central to sustained participation in knowledge-intensive work (Clarke, 2018; Donald et al., 2019; Knight & Yorke, 2003). Skills development is increasingly understood as an ongoing process shaped through workplace interaction and feedback rather than formal instruction alone (Donald & Ford, 2023). Within this perspective, emotionally intelligent behaviour functions as a foundational capability supporting collaboration, inclusion, and professional growth.

Employability research further shows that early-career professionals entering international and intercultural work environments often encounter implicit differences in working styles and expectations. In some educational and organisational contexts, individuals are accustomed to

detailed guidance, explicit instruction, and close supervision. When transitioning into European consulting and professional service environments, where autonomy and self-directed problem-solving are more strongly emphasised, these expectations can shift abruptly. Such differences reflect variation in prior learning environments and professional socialisation rather than skill deficits. Research on digitally ready soft skills highlights the importance of adaptive communication and intercultural awareness in navigating these transitions (Shtaltovna & Muzzu, 2021). Related work suggests that these adjustments are especially salient in intercultural employment contexts (Jackson et al., 2022; Tomlinson, 2017). Navigating such transitions often requires emotional self-regulation, adaptive communication, and the confidence to seek clarification or take initiative in the absence of explicit direction.

2.2. Communication, Collaboration, and Psychological Safety

Effective communication and collaboration are core demands in project-based and intercultural environments. Research shows that communication quality shapes task coordination, information sharing, and the integration of diverse perspectives (Faraj et al., 2018; Salas et al., 2015). In cross-functional and intercultural teams, differences in professional norms and expectations increase the risk of misunderstanding, making respectful interaction and adaptive communication central to sustained collaboration (Hajro et al., 2017).

Psychological safety provides a useful framework for understanding these interactional dynamics. Defined as a shared belief that individuals can speak up without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999), psychological safety has been linked to learning behaviour, voice, and team effectiveness (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017). In diverse and interdependent teams, psychologically safe environments support participation and constructive disagreement (Rødsjø et al., 2024).

For early-career professionals, psychological safety is closely connected to employability. Limited authority heightens perceived interpersonal risk, particularly in hierarchical and intercultural contexts (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Emotionally intelligent behaviour, including self-regulation and empathy, can function as a mechanism supporting psychologically safe communication and cross-functional collaboration.

2.3. AI-Assisted Tools and Emerging Skill Demands

Digital collaboration platforms and AI-assisted tools increasingly shape professional interaction. In consulting and project-based contexts, AI-supported drafting, summarisation, and communication tools influence how messages are prepared and delivered. Rather than replacing interpersonal interaction, these technologies alter the conditions under which communication occurs.

Research on AI-enabled work suggests that such tools function as contextual enablers whose impact depends on user competence and organisational practices (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). While AI may support efficiency and clarity, social and relational aspects of work remain central. From an Industry 5.0 perspective, Rasool (2025) argues that technological advancement must be aligned with emotional, social, and ethical forms of intelligence to avoid marginalising human judgement in digitally mediated environments.

For early-career professionals, AI-assisted tools may support preparation and emotional regulation in situations involving uncertainty or perceived interpersonal risk. However,

unreflective reliance on technological mediation may limit experiential learning if not embedded in supportive communication practices (Andersson et al., 2020). The growing integration of AI therefore reinforces rather than diminishes the importance of emotional and relational capabilities (Behn et al., 2024).

Despite extensive research on emotional intelligence, collaboration, and psychological safety, limited empirical work has examined emotionally intelligent behaviour as an employability-relevant capability within intercultural consulting environments shaped by AI-mediated communication practices. This study addresses that gap by examining how emotionally intelligent behaviour relates to cross-functional collaboration and psychological safety in contemporary consulting contexts.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a sequential mixed-methods design to examine the role of emotionally intelligent behaviour and AI-assisted tools in intercultural consulting teams. The design combines quantitative survey analysis with qualitative interviews to address the following research questions:

- a) RQ1: How is emotionally intelligent behaviour associated with cross-functional collaboration in intercultural consulting teams?
- b) RQ2: How is emotionally intelligent behaviour experienced in relation to communication and psychological safety in intercultural consulting teams?
- c) RQ3: How are AI-assisted tools perceived in shaping communication practices and psychological safety in these team contexts?

To address RQ1, quantitative survey data were collected and analysed. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to examine the empirical structure of the emotional intelligence items and to inform construct operationalisation. Based on the factor structure and internal reliability analysis, emotional intelligence was operationalised as a single composite construct representing emotionally intelligent behaviour as an integrated, employability-relevant capability. Cross-functional collaboration was measured using a single item capturing respondents' reported frequency of working with colleagues across functional boundaries in project settings. Pearson correlation and simple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the association between self-reported emotional intelligence and cross-functional collaboration.

Following the quantitative analysis, the qualitative phase was designed to explore and contextualise the observed association between emotional intelligence and cross-functional collaboration. Interview questions were informed by the survey findings and focused on how emotionally intelligent behaviour was enacted in practice, particularly in relation to communication dynamics, psychological safety, and AI-supported interaction.

To address RQ2 and RQ3, qualitative data were collected through four semi-structured interviews. Three interviews were conducted with professionals working in intercultural, cross-functional consulting teams at different levels of seniority, and one interview was conducted with an AI coach advising organisations on AI-supported collaboration. The interviews focused on emotionally intelligent behaviour, communication practices, collaboration dynamics, and the perceived role of

AI-assisted tools in shaping psychological safety. Psychological safety was examined qualitatively as an experienced team climate, inferred from participants' accounts of speaking up, managing uncertainty, and navigating interpersonal risk in everyday team interactions.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

Two complementary data sources were used to address the study's research questions: a quantitative survey examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and cross-functional collaboration (See Appendix A), and qualitative interviews providing contextual insight into workplace communication, psychological safety, and the use of AI-assisted tools (See Appendix B). This mixed-methods design enabled both statistical examination of associations and in-depth exploration of how emotional intelligence is enacted in organisational practice.

The quantitative instrument consisted of researcher-developed self-report items designed to capture observable emotionally intelligent behaviour in workplace contexts. The items were theoretically informed by established emotional intelligence frameworks (Goleman, 1998; Mayer & Salovey, 1997) and were constructed to reflect practical workplace behaviours rather than trait-based assessments. Item content aligned with core EI dimensions identified in the literature, including emotional awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and emotionally intelligent communication. The internal structure of the items was examined using exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and internal reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

Cross-functional collaboration was measured using a single self-report item capturing respondents' reported frequency of working with colleagues across functional boundaries in project settings. Given the exploratory case-based design, a single-item operationalisation was selected to capture a clearly defined indicator of cross-functional interaction within an organisational survey context.

The quantitative sample consisted of 37 professionals working in intercultural, cross-functional consulting teams within a multinational professional services organisation. Roles ranged from analyst and consultant positions to managerial and senior leadership roles, indicating a mixed-seniority organisational context rather than an exclusively early-career population. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents' current roles.

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS' CURRENT ROLES

Role	Frequency	Percentage
Analyst/Junior Consultant	10	27%
Consultant/Associate	12	32%
Manager/Project Lead	9	24%
Senior Manager/Director	4	11%
Other	2	5%

Source: own survey data

Participants were recruited through an internal organisational mailing list distributed to consultants working within an innovation-focused consulting unit of a large multinational professional services firm. The organisational unit specialised in innovation and digital transformation projects within a European-based multinational professional services context. Early-career professionals within this study were defined as individuals within approximately the first five years of full-time professional experience.

The invitation was sent to approximately 85 eligible professionals, all working within the same innovation-oriented consulting unit, of whom 37 completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 43.5%. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. In order to preserve anonymity within a relatively small organisational subunit, demographic variables such as gender or detailed functional specialisation were not collected. The sample therefore reflects a shared organisational and intercultural workplace context rather than stratified demographic categories. The survey included Likert-scale items measuring emotional intelligence and reported cross-functional collaboration. Data were collected digitally and analysed using PSPP.

The qualitative component comprised four semi-structured interviews: three with consulting professionals from different seniority levels and one with an AI coach specialising in AI-supported collaboration. The consulting participants included one early-career analyst, one mid-level project manager, and one senior manager with cross-functional team leadership experience, all working in intercultural consulting contexts. The AI coach had experience advising organisations on AI-enabled communication practices and team development. Interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. A voluntary non-probability sampling approach was used for the survey, and purposive sampling was applied for the interviews.

3.2.1. Measures

The survey initially included ten Likert-scale items rated on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). Eight items were designed to capture emotionally intelligent behaviour in workplace interactions, including emotional awareness, regulation, empathy, and emotionally informed communication. One item measured reported cross-functional collaboration in project settings, and one additional reverse-worded item reflecting perceived functional barriers was included for exploratory purposes.

Prior to factor analysis, the barrier item was excluded, as it did not conceptually represent emotionally intelligent behaviour. Exploratory factor analysis was then conducted on the eight emotionally intelligent behaviour items and supported a single-factor structure. Internal reliability was acceptable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.81$), and an overall emotional intelligence score was calculated as the mean of these eight items.

The cross-functional collaboration item did not load with the emotional intelligence items and was retained as a separate behavioural outcome variable in correlation and regression analyses.

Given the exploratory case-based design and limited sample size, measurement decisions prioritised parsimony and clarity over scale complexity. The use of a single behavioural item for cross-functional collaboration should therefore be interpreted as an exploratory proxy rather than as a comprehensive multidimensional measure of collaborative effectiveness.

Psychological safety was not measured quantitatively. Instead, it was examined qualitatively as an experienced team climate, inferred from interview accounts related to speaking up, managing uncertainty, and navigating interpersonal risk in team interactions.

3.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted using PSPP. The analytical process included reverse-coding of negatively worded items, scale construction, and internal reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha. Exploratory factor analysis using principal component extraction was conducted to examine the structure of the emotional intelligence items and inform construct operationalisation. Given the exploratory design and limited sample size, principal component extraction was selected to identify dominant variance patterns rather than to confirm a predefined latent structure. No rotation was applied due to the emergence of a single interpretable factor. Correlation analysis and simple linear regression were used to examine the correlation between self-reported emotional intelligence and cross-functional collaboration.

Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were reviewed line by line, and initial open codes were assigned to segments related to emotionally intelligent behaviour, communication practices, collaboration, AI-assisted tools, and psychological safety. Coding was primarily inductive, while informed by the study's research questions. Codes were iteratively refined and grouped into higher-order categories, resulting in three overarching themes: (1) emotional self-regulation under pressure, (2) empathy, hierarchy, and voice, and (3) AI-assisted tools as preparation support. Themes were reviewed for internal coherence and cross-case consistency across participants. Coding was conducted manually and involved two iterative cycles. Initial open coding was followed by thematic grouping and cross-case comparison to ensure conceptual consistency. Reflexive memoing was used to document analytical decisions and enhance transparency in theme development.

The interview with the AI coach was analysed alongside the other interviews as part of the same thematic dataset. Its contribution is treated as expert-informed contextual insight rather than as direct evidence of lived experience. Quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated at the interpretation stage and discussed in the Discussion section.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Participation in both the survey and interviews was voluntary. Interview participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and survey responses were collected anonymously. All interview data were anonymised using participant identifiers (A–D), and identifying organisational details were removed to protect participant confidentiality.

4. Results

4.1. Sample Characteristics

4.1.1. Survey Respondents

The quantitative sample consisted of 37 professionals working in intercultural, cross-functional consulting teams. All respondents reported involvement in projects related to organisational change, transformation, or cross-functional delivery.

Demographic data were limited to professional role and functional contribution in order to preserve participant anonymity within a single organisational context. Age, gender, and nationality were not collected.

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents' primary area of contribution. Business Strategy and Change Enablement / Communication were the most frequently reported areas (n = 12 each). Operations / Process Improvement accounted for seven respondents, while Technology / Product Delivery and User Research / Design were less represented. One respondent selected "Other".

This distribution reflects the cross-functional nature of consulting work, in which strategic, operational, and change-oriented roles interact within shared project environments.

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS' PRIMARY AREA OF CONTRIBUTION

Area of Contribution	Frequency	Percentage
Business/Strategy	12	32%
Change Enablement/Communication	12	32%
Operations/Process Improvement	7	19%
Technology/Product Delivery	3	8%
User Research/ Design	2	5%
Other	1	3%

Source: own survey data

4.1.2. Interview Participants

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted. Three participants worked in intercultural, cross-functional consulting teams at different levels of seniority, and one participant was an AI coach with professional experience advising organisations on AI-assisted collaboration.

Table 3 provides an overview of the interview participants and their professional context.

TABLE 3. INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Role / Level	Professional Context
A	Consultant	Intercultural consulting teams
B	Manager	Cross-functional consulting projects
C	Senior Manager	Consulting leadership and delivery
D	AI Coach	AI-assisted tools in team settings

Source: own compilation

4.2. Quantitative Results

4.2.1. Exploratory Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted on eight items capturing emotionally intelligent behaviour in workplace interaction. A reverse-coded item reflecting functional barriers to collaboration was excluded prior to analysis, as it did not represent emotionally intelligent behaviour conceptually.

A principal component-based extraction identified a single dominant factor (eigenvalue = 3.53) accounting for 44.1% of the variance. All eight items loaded positively onto this factor, and no secondary interpretable dimensions emerged. Given the clear one-factor structure, emotional intelligence was operationalised as a single composite variable (EI_mean), calculated as the mean of the retained items.

Internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$).

Cross-functional collaboration was measured separately using a single behavioural item and was retained as a distinct outcome variable.

4.2.2. Descriptive Statistics

EI_mean had a mean score of 4.95 (SD = 0.78) on a seven-point scale, indicating generally high self-reported emotional intelligence. Cross-functional collaboration showed a mean of 5.62 (SD = 1.28), indicating frequent coordination across functional boundaries.

Both variables demonstrated sufficient variance and fell within expected scale ranges. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 4.

TABLE 4. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	Mean	SD
Emotional Intelligence	4.95	0.78
Cross-functional collaboration	5.62	1.28

Source: own compilation

4.2.3. Association Between Emotional Intelligence and Cross-Functional Collaboration

Pearson correlation analysis indicated a moderate positive association between self-reported emotional intelligence (EI_mean) and self-reported cross-functional collaboration ($r = .38$, $p = .022$, $N = 37$). Given the single organisational setting and limited sample size, this association is interpreted as context-specific rather than generalisable.

A simple linear regression with EI_mean as the predictor and cross-functional collaboration as the outcome variable was statistically significant, $F(1, 35) = 5.79$, $p = .022$, explaining 14% of the variance ($R^2 = .14$). Self-reported emotional intelligence emerged as a statistically significant positive predictor ($\beta = .38$, $p = .022$). The regression results are presented in Table 5.

These findings confirm a statistically significant positive association between self-reported emotional intelligence and cross-functional collaboration. No causal inference is implied.

TABLE 5. LINEAR REGRESSION PREDICTING CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION FROM EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Predictor	β	p
Emotional Intelligence	0.38	.022

Note. N = 37. R² = .14.

Source: own compilation

4.3. Qualitative Findings

Three overarching themes emerged from the qualitative analysis. These themes relate to emotional self-regulation under pressure, empathy, hierarchy, and voice, and the perceived role of AI-assisted tools in communication preparation. Findings are illustrated through selected interview excerpts (Table 6).

TABLE 6. INTERVIEW EXCERPTS BY THEME

Theme	Interview Excerpt	Participant
Emotional self-regulation under pressure	“If someone senior gets visibly frustrated, the whole room changes. People stop talking, even if they have something useful to say.”	Consultant (A)
Emotional self-regulation under pressure	“In stressful situations, people look at how you react. If you stay calm, it gives the team permission to keep thinking instead of panicking.”	Senior Manager (C)
Empathy, hierarchy, and voice	“When seniors actively ask for input and really listen, juniors speak up more.”	Manager (B)
Empathy, hierarchy, and voice	“If feedback feels dismissive, you learn very quickly what not to say next time.”	Consultant (A)
AI-assisted tools and preparation	“People use AI to rehearse difficult messages or check tone before sending something sensitive.”	AI Coach (D)
AI-assisted tools and preparation	“It helps you pause before responding, but it doesn’t replace the conversation.”	Senior Manager (C)

Source: own interview data

Across themes, emotionally intelligent behaviour was experienced as shaping whether team interactions remained open and collaborative under pressure. Emotional self-regulation and empathy influenced participation across hierarchical and functional boundaries, while AI-assisted tools were described as supplementary supports for communication preparation rather than substitutes for human interaction.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting Emotional Intelligence in Cross-Functional Collaboration

The quantitative results indicate a statistically significant positive correlation between self-reported emotional intelligence and self-reported cross-functional collaboration within the present sample. Higher self-reported emotional intelligence was associated with more frequent reported

collaboration across functional boundaries. Given the sample size and single organisational setting, this finding is interpreted as exploratory and context-specific rather than generalisable.

This pattern is broadly consistent with prior research linking emotional intelligence to interpersonal effectiveness and collaborative performance in organisational settings (Carmeli, 2003; Melita Prati et al., 2003). In innovation-oriented consulting workplaces, collaboration is often shaped by intercultural communication norms, shifting client expectations, and rapid coordination across expertise domains. Within such contexts, self-reported emotional intelligence may function as a workplace competence that supports employability by enabling consultants to communicate constructively, manage interpersonal demands, and maintain coordination under time pressure (Faraj et al., 2018; Hajro et al., 2017).

Importantly, emotional intelligence is interpreted here as a workplace-relevant capability expressed through interactional practices rather than as a stable psychological trait. This interpretation aligns with conceptualisations locating emotional intelligence in everyday communication, emotion regulation, and social awareness (Goleman, 1998; Truninger et al., 2018). The effect size observed in this study suggests that emotional intelligence may operate as one enabling condition among several, alongside organisational structures, leadership practices, and project constraints.

Because the survey items were developed to reflect workplace-relevant expressions of emotional intelligence, the quantitative score should be understood as an indicator of perceived competence in emotionally intelligent workplace interaction. Within intercultural consulting environments, such competence may be particularly important for employability because it supports collaboration across different communication styles and role expectations.

5.2. Psychological Safety as an Interactional Outcome

The qualitative findings suggest that psychological safety is experienced as emerging from everyday interaction rather than as a formally designed condition. Participants described emotionally intelligent behaviour, particularly emotional self-regulation and empathy, as shaping whether communication felt safe during moments of pressure or disagreement.

Remaining calm, moderating tone, and responding deliberately were described as preventing escalation and sustaining dialogue. These behaviours align with Edmondson's (1999) conceptualisation of psychological safety as a shared belief that interpersonal risk-taking does not lead to negative consequences. In consulting environments characterised by hierarchy and evaluative pressure, such interactional practices may be especially salient.

Empathy and perspective-taking appeared to support voice and participation in intercultural and cross-functional contexts. Acknowledging differing constraints reduced misattribution of intent and facilitated constructive engagement. This resonates with research on diverse teams, where empathy supports inclusive participation and learning behaviour (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Psychological safety in this context was not associated with the absence of disagreement, but with the ability to navigate disagreement without fear of exclusion.

5.3. Emotionally Intelligent Practices in Hierarchical and Intercultural Contexts

In hierarchical settings, emotionally intelligent practices among senior team members appeared particularly influential. Emotional reactions from leaders were described as shaping the tone of team interaction and influencing the broader emotional climate. Inviting input and

acknowledging uncertainty were perceived as reducing perceived power distance and supporting participation from junior members. These observations are consistent with leadership research linking inclusive behaviours to voice and engagement (George, 2000), particularly in professional service and consulting contexts.

In intercultural teams, emotionally intelligent practices appeared to facilitate coordination by supporting interpretation of emotional cues across differing communication norms. Rather than eliminating cultural differences, such practices may enable teams to manage them more constructively through adaptive interaction.

5.4. AI-Assisted Tools as Contextual Influences

Although AI-assisted tools were not a central focus of the practitioner interviews, digital communication tools such as drafting and tone-adjustment systems were referenced in relation to workplace communication practices. These references suggested that such tools may support preparation and clarity, particularly in high-pressure or cross-functional contexts.

More extensive reflection on AI-mediated communication emerged in the specialist interview. The expert emphasised that the developmental value of AI systems depends on their capacity to balance support, challenge, and reflection. Systems that primarily reinforce user assumptions may risk over-supporting behaviour while limiting opportunities for critical reflection. In contrast, tools that prompt perspective-taking or encourage reconsideration may scaffold emotionally intelligent interaction when used deliberately.

Within this organisational setting, psychological safety appeared to remain grounded in human interaction rather than technological augmentation. AI-assisted tools functioned as contextual supports embedded within existing communication norms rather than as independent drivers of relational trust.

These findings suggest that the impact of AI in consulting workplaces is shaped less by technological capability alone and more by how such tools are integrated into emotionally intelligent and psychologically safe interactional cultures.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined how self-reported emotionally intelligent behaviour relates to cross-functional collaboration and experienced psychological safety within a single intercultural consulting context, while considering the contextual role of AI-assisted tools. By combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interview insights, the study provides applied insight into how emotional, relational, and digital practices may interact in contemporary consulting work, particularly in relation to employability and early-career skill development.

The quantitative findings indicate a statistically significant, moderate positive **correlation** between self-reported emotionally intelligent behaviour and self-reported cross-functional collaboration ($r = .38, p = .022$), with emotional intelligence explaining 14% of the variance in reported collaboration. Within this sample, emotionally intelligent behaviour may function as one enabling condition for collaboration rather than as a sole determinant, supporting coordination in complex project environments.

Qualitative findings complement this result by illustrating how psychological safety was described as emerging through everyday interaction. Participants reported that emotional self-regulation, empathy, and adaptive communication shaped whether individuals felt able to speak up and engage constructively under pressure. Psychological safety was described by participants as developing through repeated interpersonal exchanges rather than through formal structures alone.

With regard to AI-assisted tools, findings suggest an indirect and context-dependent role. AI-supported drafting and communication preparation were described as helpful for reflection and emotional regulation, particularly in sensitive interactions. However, psychological safety remained grounded in human judgement, trust, and emotional conduct, with AI tools acting as supplementary supports rather than substitutes for emotionally intelligent behaviour.

6.1. Practical Implications

For organisations operating in consulting and knowledge-intensive environments, the findings suggest that collaboration and psychological safety are unlikely to be achieved through digital tools or formal processes alone. Supporting emotional self-regulation, empathy, and adaptive communication may contribute to collaboration in intercultural and cross-functional teams. Training, coaching, and reflective learning practices could help embed these capabilities in everyday work.

For early-career professionals, self-reported emotionally intelligent behaviour appears associated with participation and collaboration in digitally mediated environments. As AI-assisted tools become more prevalent, professional effectiveness may increasingly depend on integrating emotional, relational, and technological capabilities in a reflective and responsible manner.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to limitations, including a relatively small and context-specific quantitative sample and a cross-sectional design that does not permit causal inference. Both emotional intelligence and cross-functional collaboration were measured using self-reported survey items, and collaboration was captured through a single-item measure. Insights into AI-assisted tools were informed primarily by expert and senior perspectives, limiting representativeness across career stages.

The study also reflects certain underlying assumptions. It assumes that self-reported emotionally intelligent behaviour provides a reasonable approximation of how such behaviour is enacted in practice, and that reported frequency of cross-functional collaboration captures meaningful aspects of collaborative work. These assumptions influenced the study's measurement choices and interpretation. In addition, the focus on a consulting population reflects the expectation that emotionally intelligent behaviour is particularly relevant in high-pressure, cross-functional environments, which may limit transferability to other occupational contexts.

Future research could also examine whether emotionally intelligent behaviour develops differently across career stages, and whether AI-assisted tools moderate the relationship between emotional regulation and psychological safety in digitally mediated teams.

Overall, the study highlights the continued relevance of emotionally intelligent behaviour in shaping collaboration and psychological safety within the examined consulting context. While AI-assisted tools may support communication practices, their influence appears dependent on

how emotional and relational skills are enacted in everyday work, reinforcing employability as a primarily human capability in digitally mediated environments.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument

Participants completed an anonymous online survey. Unless otherwise specified, items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale:

1 = Strongly disagree

7 = Strongly agree

Emotional Intelligence Items (Exploratory Scale)

Participants indicated their agreement with the following statements:

The project team I worked with adapted communication based on emotional tone or team dynamics.

I remained emotionally composed and focused when the project became stressful.

Team members were aware of how their behaviour or mood affected others during the change project.

Project routines (e.g., planning, reviews, syncs) included input from diverse functional stakeholders.

I felt confident bridging communication gaps between technical, business, and strategy stakeholders during the project.

Leaders involved in the change initiative made a conscious effort to connect emotionally with the team.

Emotional resistance to change was addressed through empathy and open dialogue.

Team members actively supported one another when someone faced personal or work-related challenges.

An overall emotional intelligence score was calculated as the mean of these eight items following exploratory factor analysis (see Section 3.2.1).

Cross-Functional Collaboration Item (Exploratory Scale)

Participants responded to the following item:

I regularly collaborated with colleagues from different functions (e.g., tech, design, operations, product) on the change project.

Reverse-Worded Item (Excluded from Factor Analysis) (Exploratory Scale)

Differences in language, priorities, or goals between functions made collaboration more difficult.

(This item was reverse-coded and excluded from the emotional intelligence factor as described in Section 3.2.1.)

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to contextualise the quantitative findings and to explore how emotional intelligence is enacted in cross-functional collaboration and AI-mediated workplace communication. Two interview streams were conducted: (1) practitioner interviews with consulting professionals and (2) a specialist interview with an AI coaching expert.

Part A: Practitioner Interviews (Consulting Professionals)

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with consulting professionals across different levels of seniority within intercultural consulting teams. Interviews explored emotional intelligence as a workplace competence, cross-functional collaboration, psychological safety, and AI-mediated communication practices.

Workplace Context and Interactional Demands

Participants were invited to reflect on:

- a) Key challenges encountered in digital or innovation-driven initiatives
- b) Experiences of cross-functional coordination under time pressure
- c) Examples of difficult collaboration situations
- d) Routines or practices used to align stakeholders across teams

These prompts served to situate participants within their organisational context before exploring interactional dynamics in greater depth.

Cross-Functional Collaboration and Communication

Participants were asked to describe:

- a) Factors that helped or hindered communication between technical, business, and strategy roles
- b) Communication breakdowns or misunderstandings across functions
- c) The influence of terminology, expertise level, hierarchy, or cultural background on collaboration
- d) Communication formats or routines that supported alignment

Probing questions explored how participants navigated differences in goals, language, and professional background.

Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Safety

- a) How does emotional regulation influence collaboration during high-pressure situations?
- b) In what ways does empathy or perspective-taking affect cross-functional teamwork?
- c) How do leaders' emotional responses influence team climate or participation?

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- d) What makes team members feel willing or unwilling to speak up?
 - e) How is disagreement navigated constructively within teams?

These prompts were used to explore emotional intelligence as enacted practice rather than as an abstract trait.

AI-Assisted Communication Practices

Participants were invited to discuss:

- a) How AI-assisted tools were used in daily workplace communication
- b) Situations in which AI tools supported clarity, preparation, or alignment
- c) Situations in which AI tools were perceived as insufficient or potentially limiting
- d) Whether AI tools influenced participation, reflection, or confidence in communication

Discussion of AI typically emerged in relation to concrete project examples rather than as abstract evaluation.

Part B: Specialist Interview – AI Coaching Expert

A separate semi-structured interview was conducted with an AI coaching specialist to explore the developmental implications of AI-mediated communication.

The expert interview was guided by prompts relating to:

- a) Features of AI-assisted tools that enhance or reduce communication clarity in diverse teams
- b) The role of support, challenge, and reflection in AI-mediated interaction
- c) How AI systems may influence emotional and social competencies
- d) Potential effects of AI tools on voice, accountability, and participation among early-career or lower-status professionals

This interview provided socio-technical and developmental perspectives complementing practitioner accounts.

Declaration Statements

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study can be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

AI Use

AI-based tools were not used for data collection, analysis, or interpretation. Limited use of AI-assisted tools was restricted to language editing and formatting support during manuscript preparation. The

author affirms that all cited sources are real, accurately referenced, and have been verified. Full responsibility for the content and integrity of this article remains with the author.

Ethics Statement

Participation in the survey and interviews was voluntary and based on informed consent. All responses were collected anonymously, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. The study complied with standard ethical guidelines for social science research.

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