EI Training and Sales Performance During a Corporate Merger

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Abstract

Purpose: To examine statistically the efficacy of an emotional intelligence training program on sales performance and emotional intelligence in a group of salespeople.

Design/methodology/approach: An experimental, repeated measures/between-groups design was used (training group ($N = 29$) and a control group ($N = 21$)). The dependent variables were sales performance, self-report EI and rater-report EI. The data were analysed based on a series of split-plot ANOVAS.

Findings: Rater-reported EI correlated with sales performance at $r = .32$. The EI training group also demonstrated increases in both self and rater-report EI equal to approximately a Cohen's $d = -.45$, in comparison to the control group. Finally, the EI training group outperformed the control group by approximately 9% ($p<.05$) in sales performance.

Research limitations/implications: The long-term beneficial effects of the EI training program on sales performance are not known.

Practical Implications: Human resource practitioners and coaches may consider implementing an EI training program to facilitate performance in sales people.

Originality/value: This is the first study to examine the effects of an EI training program using a rigorous experimental methodology and an objective measure of sales performance.

Commercial organisations rely, in part, upon the quality of their sales personnel to effect organisational sales revenue targets. Consequently, organisations typically expend a substantial amount of effort toward the identification of competitive advantages that will facilitate sales revenue. In addition to factors related to role, skill, motivation, and organisation/environment, a number of personal and aptitude factors have been found to have an impact on a sales success (Churchill, Ford, Hartley, Walker, 1985). For example, self-efficacy beliefs have been found to correlate positively with sales performance (Barling & Beattie, 1983). Also, the personality attribute conscientiousness has been found to correlate with supervisory ratings of performance (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1993). Furthermore, career stage has also been found to relate to the performance of sales professionals (Cron & Slocum Jr., 1986).

One psychological factor that has only rarely been examined in the context of sales performance is emotional intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence (EI) may be defined as set of skills that define how effectively we perceive, understand, express, reason with and manage our own and others' feelings (Palmer, Gignac, Ekermans, & Stough, 2008). In this paper, we report the full results of a study that examined the possibility that experimentally enhanced levels of EI in salespeople would be associated with concomitant increases in objective sales performance. A preliminary report based on these data was published by Jennings and Palmer (2007), which included only three months of data (this investigation includes 12 months), rater-report EI (this investigation includes both self- and rater-report data), and results for the most part tested non-statistically. Additionally, the fact that the time period over which the data were collected corresponded to a corporate merger was neither mentioned nor discussed in Jennings and Palmer (2007).

Sojka and Deeter-Schmelz (2002) detailed from a theoretical perspective how EI would be expected to facilitate sales performance. Sojka and Deeter-Schmelz (2002) argued that the contemporary sales process is no longer based substantially on communicating product/service differentiation, because the consumer is now provided with more choice, which makes it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between products. Consequently, consumers may be expected to experience confusion and decision paralysis (Drummond, 2004; Schwartz, 2004). Instead, an emerging critical factor in the sales processes is the development and maintenance of long-term business relationships (Sojka & Deeter-Schmelz, 2002). As emotions play a crucial role in inter-personal relationships (Schutte, Malouff, Bobik, Coston, Greeson, Jedlicka, Rhodes, & Wendorf, 2001), the case for EI in the sales processes may be argued to be likely important. Based on a series of interviews (i.e., a qualitative investigation), Deeter-Schmelz and Sojka (2003) reported preliminary evidence to support a positive association between EI and sales performance.

To-date, only a small amount of empirical research has examined the association between EI and sales performance. Sjoberg, Littorin, and Engelberg (2005) examined the association between EI and sales performance in a sample of 45 salespeople within a telecommunications company. Sjoberg et al. reported a non-significant correlation of $r = .25$ between EI and sales performance. Controlling for socially desirable responding, the non-significant correlation of $r = .25$ was reduced to $r_{partial} = -.03$. Thus, Sjoberg et al. (2005) failed to find support for an association between EI and sales performance. However, the Sjoberg et al. (2005) investigation may be suggested to be limited, as individual differences in EI were represented by a combined score of attributes such as self-actualisation, alexithymia (a personality attribute relevant to a lack of emotional expression and a lack of fantasy life), and

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hardiness. Although these constructs may be related to EI, it is questionable whether they are theoretically congruent representations of EI as defined by Palmer et al (2008). Another limitation of the Sjoberg et al investigation is related to the sales performance measure. Although not described in Sjoberg et al., it is postulated, here, that sales performance was measured via self-report rather than objectively (e.g., actual revenue generated). That is, the correlation between EI and sales performance decreased controlling for socially desirable responding, which implies that socially desirable responding was correlated positively with both EI and sales performance. It is highly unlikely that socially desirable responding would correlate positively with a sales performance indicator assessed objectively.

Although the demonstration of an association between EI and sales performance measured objectively is an important effect to be observed in the establishment of the utility of EI in the workplace, the association does not imply that there is a direct or causal connection between EI and sales performance. Such an effect may be argued to be only clearly demonstrated using an experimental design, which includes both an EI training group and a control group. Although many EI training programs are promoted in the public, there are few empirical investigations that have been published in the literature supporting their validity (Clarke, 2006). In one investigation, Grant (2007) examined the impact of a 13-week coaching skills training program on EI as measured by the Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS; Schutte, Malouff, Hall, Haggerty, Cooper, Golden, & Hornheim, 1998) in a group (N = 23) of postgraduate students studying coaching as part of a degree programme in management and psychology. Based on the means and standard deviations reported in Grant (2007), the skills training program increased self-report EI equal to a Cohen's *d* of -.39, indicating a moderate effect size (Cohen, 1992).

Unfortunately, the Grant (2007) investigation did not have a proper control group. Furthermore, EI scores were measured only via self-report. Arguably, evidence for the efficacy of an EI enhancement program would be more impressive based on rater-report, as such scores would be likely less affected by response biases (Dunning, Heath & Suls, 2004).

In addition to facilitating sales through inter-personal relationship building, EI may be expected to help salespeople cope with the stresses of the working environment unrelated to their client relationships or sales delivery. For example, EI may help sales employees adapt to the stresses associated with substantial organisational change, which may be expected to facilitate motivation to engage in sales. In Fry and Matherly's (2008) study, significant organisational change resulted in a culture of fear and employees feeling underappreciated, which subsequently resulted in reduced performance by sales-focused staff. One type of organisational change that has been investigated empirically as source of stress is a corporate merger (e.g., Fugate, Kinicki, & Scheck, 2002; Terry, Callan, & Satori, 1996). Consequently, one may expect to observe a decline in sales performance during a difficult corporate merger, although the effects of an EI enhancement program may help militate or totally counteract those negative effects.

In summary, the purpose of this investigation is threefold: (1) to examine the association between EI scores (self-report and rater-report) and objectively determined sales performance; (2) to examine the effects of an EI training program on EI scores; and (3) to examine the effects of an EI training program on sales performance during a corporate merger. The three specific hypotheses are:

Hypothesis 1: Both self-report and rater-report EI scores will be positively correlated with sales performance.

Hypothesis 2: Salespeople in an EI training group will exhibit increases in both self-report and rater-report EI scores, whereas salespeople in a control group will not.

Hypothesis 3: Salespeople in an EI training group will exhibit increases in sales performance, whereas salespeople in a control group will not.

Method

Sample

Data were available for 50 Australian resident pharmaceutical sales representatives (47% male). The mean age of the participants was 38.9 (SD = 9.4) and the four most common educational levels attained were Bachelor degree (46.6%), Masters degree (13.8%), High School Certificate (12.1%), and Senior Secondary (8.6%). The two most frequently common levels of annual salary (Australian dollars) corresponded to $40,000 to $59,999 (26%) and $60,000 and $79,999 (64%). The EI training group consisted of 29 participants and the control group consisted of 21 participants. A series of contingency table analyses failed to identify any statistically significant differences between the EI training group and the control group with respect to the demographic variables.

Measures

Emotional intelligence was measured with the workplace version of the self-report Genos EI Inventory (Gignac, 2008). Self-report measures of EI have been categorised as a trait-based measures of EI, because they measure a mix of skills and trait-based attributes (Petrides & Furnham, 2000). However, Genos EI has been

argued to be better conceptualised as a measure of typical EI performance, rather than a mixed-model or trait-based measured of EI, as Genos EI consists of items relevant only to the frequency (1 = Almost Never to 5 = Almost Always) with which individuals display emotionally intelligent behaviours (Gignac, 2008; Palmer, Stough, Harmer, Gignac, 2009). In addition to a Total EI score, Genos EI also consists of seven subscales: (1) Emotional Self-Awareness (ESA), (2) Emotional Expression (EE), (3) Emotional Awareness of Others (EAO), (4) Emotional Reasoning (ER), (5) Emotional Self-Management (ESM), (6) Emotional Management of Others (EMO), and (7) Emotional Self-Control (ESC). In this investigation, the original 64-item version of Genos EI was utilised, which has been found to correlate .93 with the revised 70-item version of the inventory (Gignac, 2008). The Cronbach's alpha reliability associated with the Total EI scores in this sample was equal to .95. The subscale score reliabilities corresponded to: ESA = .45, EE = .66, EAO = .89, ER = .75, ESM = .87, EMO = .80 and ESC = .70. Further information relevant to the reliability and validity of the scores of the Genos EI Inventory can be found in Gignac (2008).

The sales performance indicator was represented by the quarterly 'performance to budget' results for each employee. Performance to budget in this investigation refers to the percentage of sales revenue each sales representative achieves relative to sales expectation. Sales expectations differ across employees, as they are responsible for different regions, which are associated with varying degrees of sales opportunities (Cron & Slocum, 1986). The data were made available by the participating organisation for each month of the calendar year. Monthly data were averaged to create four quarterly sales performance indicators.

Procedure

Participants selected for the intervention group consisted of 20 sales managers and a further 29 sales representatives (pharmaceuticals). Only the results for the sales representatives are reported in this study. Sales managers completed a pre- and post-intervention multi-rater EI assessment (Genos EI). The intervention consisted of one four-hour workshop that introduces the concepts of EI and a series of seven one-on-one and small group (i.e., 5-6 participants) coaching sessions. At the conclusion of each coaching session sales managers were required to conduct a structured EI-development focused coaching conversation with 1-2 members of their sales teams (i.e., sales representatives). The coaching intervention methodology utilised for sales managers and sales representatives in the present study was based principally upon on a cognitive-behavioural approach (see Jennings & Palmer, 2007, for complete details).

Sales representatives (the focus of the present study) completed a pre- and post-intervention multi-rater EI assessment (Genos EI). Sales representatives received a one-on-one debrief (60 minutes) pre- and post-intervention. Furthermore, each sales representative participated in an EI training intervention which consisted of a series of three 2.5 hour workshops that focused upon the application of EI in the sales process. Specifically, the workshops focused on: (1) identifying the effective and ineffective EI characteristics of sales personnel; (2) micro-skills training for establishing and building rapport with a client, identifying positive buying signals and understanding a client's sales objections; and (3) planning and conducting emotionally intelligent sales meetings with clients. A total of 10.5 hours of training was provided to each sales representative over approximately a 3 month period (see Jennings & Palmer, 2007, for further details).

Results

To test the hypothesis that EI scores would correlate positively with performance, two Pearson correlations were performed between Total EI scores (self and rater) and sales performance in the first quarter. The self-report EI correlation was estimated at $r = .09$, $p = .276$. The rater-report correlation was estimated at $r = .32$, $p = .014$. Thus, higher EI scores as estimated by raters were associated higher levels of sales performance. Furthermore, based on a correlation of .32, it may be said that 10.2% of the variance in sales performance was accounted for by rater-report Total EI scores.

To test the hypothesis that an EI enhancement program would improve sales performance, a 4*2 split plot ANOVA was performed, whereby the four calendar quarters represented the within-subjects factor and group members (EI training versus control-group) represented the between-subjects factor. Prior to conducting the ANOVA, the assumption of sphericity (equality of the variance/covariance matrix) was tested and the null hypothesis was rejected (Mauchly's $W = .17$, $\chi^2(5) = 73.78$, $p<.001$). Thus, the sphericity assumption was not satisfied. Consequently, the statistical significance of the ANOVA was based on the Greenhouse-Geisser corrected degrees of freedom. Based on the split-plot ANOVA, the group by calendar quarter interaction (Greenhouse-Geisser corrected) was statistically significant, $F(3, 64.89) = 3.09$, $p = .033$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .067$. As can be seen in Figure 1, the trend of the means was in expected direction. More specifically, it can be observed that the two groups yielded approximately comparable levels of performance in the first and second quarters, however, by the third and fourth quarters, the EI training group's performance increased, while the control group's performance decreased. As can be seen in Table 1, by the fourth quarter, the EI training group outperformed the control

group by 9.4% ($F(1, 43) = 3.35$, $p. < .05$). A visual appreciation of the effects can be obtained by viewing Figure 1.

To test the hypothesis that the EI enhancement program increased self-reported and rater-reported EI, a series of 2*2 split-plot ANOVAs was performed, whereby pre-training and post-training was the within-subjects factor (two levels) and group (EI training vs. control) was the between-subjects factor (two levels). In the event that a statistically significant within-subjects by between-subjects interaction was observed, and the direction of the means was such that the EI training group exhibited an increase in EI and the control group did not, support for the efficacy of the EI training was considered indicated.

With respect to self-reported EI, it can be observed in Table 2 that Total EI scores in the EI training group increased from 209.68 to 216.64, which corresponded to a Cohen's $d = -.44$. In contrast, the Total EI scores decreased numerically in the control group from 219.05 to 215.10, which corresponded to a Cohen's $d = .18$. The split-plot ANOVA associated with the Total EI scores was statistically significant, $F(1, 48) = 6.17$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .116$. This result implies that the -.44 and .18 Cohen's d values were statistically significantly different from each other. Stated alternatively, the EI training program had a statistically significant positive effect on self-reported Total EI scores. At the subscale level, it can be observed in Table 2 that the EI training program had statistically significant effects on the EAO, ER, and EMO dimensions.

With respect to rater-reported EI, it can be observed in Table 3 that Total EI scores in the EI training group increased from 200.01 to 205.57, which corresponded to a Cohen's $d = -.48$. In contrast, the Total EI scores decreased numerically in the control group from 204.19 to 203.74.10, which corresponded to a Cohen's $d = .03$.

The split-plot ANOVA associated with the Total EI scores was marginally statistically significant, $F(1, 48) = 2.42$, $p = .064$, $\eta^2 = .048$. This result implies that the -.48 and .03 Cohen's d values were marginally statistically significantly different from each other. Stated alternatively, the EI training program had a marginally statistically significant positive effect on rater-reported Total EI scores. At the subscale level, it can be observed in Table 3 that the EI training program had statistically significant effect on the EMO dimension.

Discussion

The results of this investigation demonstrated that rater-report, but not self-report EI, correlated statistically significantly with sales performance ($r = .32$). The EI training group demonstrated increases in both self and rater-report EI equal to approximately a Cohen's $d = -.45$. Finally, the group of salespeople who received the EI training program outperformed a corresponding control group by approximately 9% ($p<.05$) with respect to sales performance.

EI has been demonstrated to correlate with a number of interesting criterion variables, such as leadership, organisational commitment, trust and teamwork (e.g., Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003; Gantt & Agazarian, 2004; Jain & Sinha, 2005; Rozell, Pettijohn & Parker, 2004). However, it may be argued that the vast majority of investigations which have examined the validity of EI have used a self-report measure of EI and a self-report measure of some type of dependent variable. Such studies may be suggested to suffer from the possibility of response bias. That is, socially desirable responding may be causing the association between the EI and criterion variables. To our knowledge, this is the first EI investigation to use both self-report and rater-report EI, in conjunction with an objectively determined dependent variable (sales performance).

Although the self-report Total EI correlation was not statistically significant (r = .09, p = .276), it was in the hypothesised direction. Unfortunately, this investigation did not include a measure of socially desirable responding, which would have afforded the opportunity to control for the effects of SDR on self-reported EI. In this case, as SDR would likely not have been correlated with the objectively determined sales performance variable, the inclusion of SDR in a partial correlation analysis would likely have been that of a suppressor effect (see Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004), which may have increased the self-reported EI and sales performance correlation to statistical significance. Alternatively, it may be the case that rater-report EI scores are more valid indicators of EI than self-report EI scores.

In contrast to the self-report EI variable, the rater-reported Total EI scores did correlate statistically significantly with sales performance (r = .32). Given the significant split-plot ANOVA for the EI sub-scale of EMO ($F(1, 48) = 3.58$, p = .033), the findings of the present study suggest that it may be a sales representative's capacity to influence the moods and emotions of others that is likely to play the greatest role in the successful sales. Future research based on larger sample sizes may help test such a hypothesis, statistically.

EI may not only act to enhance sales performance, but it may also act as a buffer to stressful situations. In a study based on a 122 nurses, Brand (2007) found that Genos EI scores interacted with the association between work stress and depersonalisation. More specifically, the correlation between work stress and depersonalisation was much higher (r = .51) in those individuals who scored relatively lower on Genos EI, in comparison to those individuals who scored relatively higher on Genos EI (r = .23). Thus, higher levels of EI may help reduce the chances that the experience of work stress will develop into the more serious

psychological state of depersonalisation. Understanding more precisely how an EI enhancement program facilitates job performance is an interesting theoretical question to be addressed in future research. From a practitioner perspective, however, knowing that the program will enhance sales performance by, on average, 9% may be sufficient.

Participants involved in this study were also involved in a well publicised corporate merger at the time of the study's EI intervention. Media reports of the merger process indicated that it was problematic. Given this broader context, the result of this study are even more telling of the value of EI in the workplace. Previous literature examining corporate mergers and employee well-being indicates overwhelmingly a negative association. For example, Länsisalmi, Peiró and Kivimäki (2004) identified the key outcomes of organisational mergers to be 'collective stress'. In a second example examining the impact of a corporate merger on the employee psychological contract, undertaken by Linde and Schalk (2008), the results indicate mergers have the potential to breach the psychological contract, which impacts an employee's obligations to the organisation at three important levels: (1) performance; (2) extra-role behaviour; and (3) ethics. More specifically, poorly conducted corporate mergers tend to result in reduced employee performance, lower levels of employee discretionary effort, and lower levels of trust shown towards the employer by the employee. The results of the present study suggest that 'performance to budget' by the control group reduced from the 2nd to 4th quarters (refer to Figure 1). Given the organisational dynamic at the time of this study, this result is not particularly surprising. Conversely, the intervention group was found to increase its 'performance to budget' in the 4th quarter of the time period over which performance data were collected. It is plausible to suggest that the EI training may have countered any

violation in the psychological contract for those involved in the intervention, which resulted in improved sales performance.

Limitations

Perhaps the most significant limitation associated with this investigation is related to the fact that there were no long-term data to evaluate whether the EI training program had any long-term benefits. Ideally, the sales representatives would have been followed up 6 or 12 months after the training program to determine whether the beneficial observed effects were robust over time. A second limitation is relevant to the absence of a measure of socially desirable responding, which may have been useful in adjusting or partialling self-report EI scores within the statistical analyses. Perhaps the self-report EI and performance correlation would have been larger and statistically significant, controlling for individual differences in socially desirable responding. Finally, a larger sample size would have afforded the opportunity to examine the individual EI subscale effects on performance. It is possible that certain EI dimensions have a greater impact on sales performance than others.

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Table 1

Means, standard deviations (in parentheses), and Pearson correlations associated

with the performance to budget (%) dependent variable across all four quarters

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	EI Training	Control Group	$F_{(1,43)}$
1st	1.0				99.32 (8.12)	100.37 (5.41)	.27
2nd	.54*	1.0			99.22 (9.29)	100.36 (9.82)	.16
3rd	.56*	.81*	1.0		100.18 (10.24)	98.60 (10.17)	.27
4th	.21	.07	.39*	1.0	105.72 (18.17)	96.32 (16.22)	3.35*

Note. *$p<.05$ (one-tailed); *F* values correspond to between-group *F* tests associated
with the difference between the EI Training and Control Group performance to budget
means.

Table 2

Genos EI means, standard deviations and pre-post statistical analyses: Self-report

| | EI Training Group | | | Control Group | | | Split-Plot ANOVA | | |
| | Pre | Post | | Pre | Post | | | | |
η^2	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Cohen's d	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Cohen's d	$F(1,48)$	p	η^2
Total EI	209.68 (16.77)	216.64 (14.63)	-.44	219.05 (23.42)	215.10 (19.98)	.18	6.17	.009	.116
ESA	8.36 (1.06)	8.36 (.83)	.00	8.38 (1.53)	8.10 (1.09)	.21	.76	.194	.016
EE	18.50 (2.63)	19.21 (1.85)	-.31	21.10 (3.21)	21.00 (2.47)	.03	1.23	.131	.027
EAO	73.29 (6.70)	76.04 (6.10)	-.43	76.14 (8.16)	74.48 (10.15)	.18	7.67	.004	.140
ER	21.11 (2.94)	22.04 (3.11)	-.30	21.33 (3.20)	21.05 (2.87)	.09	3.06	.044	.061
ESM	39.50 (4.42)	40.43 (4.31)	-.21	41.33 (6.08)	40.24 (4.86)	.20	2.37	.065	.048
EMO	33.86 (3.70)	35.18 (2.97)	-.39	35.62 (5.34)	34.86 (4.03)	.16	3.58	.033	.071
ESC	15.07 (2.09)	15.39 (1.77)	-.16	15.14 (2.46)	15.38 (2.38)	-.10	.02	.446	.000

Note. EI training group $N = 29$; control group $N = 21$; the split-plot ANOVA statistics refer to the group (EI Training vs. Control Group) by time (Pre Post) interaction; the corresponding p values were divided by two to reflect the directionality of the 2*2 ANOVA statistical hypotheses tested in this investigation (see Levine & Banas, 2002, for a discussion relevant to 'one-tailed' F-tests).

Table 3

Genos EI means, standard deviations and pre-post statistical analyses: Rater-report

	EI Training Group			Control Group			Split-Plot ANOVA		
	Pre	Post		Pre	Post				
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Cohen's *d*	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Cohen's *d*	$F(1,48)$	*p*	η^2
Total EI	200.01 (11.53)	205.57 (11.43)	-.48	204.19 (12.25)	203.74 (16.98)	.03	2.42	.064	.048
ESA	7.61 (.56)	7.88 (.49)	-.56	7.50 (.65)	7.72 (.60)	-.35	.09	.385	.002
EE	18.81 (1.58)	19.27 (1.52)	-.30	18.88 (1.53)	18.69 (1.80)	.11	1.89	.088	.038
EAO	68.69 (4.09)	70.52 (3.69)	-.47	68.82 (5.68)	69.02 (7.20)	-.03	1.13	.147	.023
ER	20.13 (1.47)	21.20 (1.63)	-.69	20.10 (1.87)	20.49 (2.19)	-.19	2.00	.082	.040
ESM	37.77 (3.35)	38.11 (3.72)	-.10	39.66 (4.12)	38.97 (4.52)	.16	.96	.166	.020
EMO	32.26 (2.24)	33.43 (2.05)	-.54	33.58 (2.45)	33.36 (3.27)	.08	3.62	.032	.070
ESC	14.74 (1.55)	15.16 (1.70)	-.25	15.64 (1.64)	15.48 (1.50)	.10	1.90	.088	.038

Note. EI training group $N = 29$; control group $N = 21$; the split-plot ANOVA statistics refer to the group (EI Training vs. Control Group) by time

(Pre Post) interaction; the corresponding *p* values were divided by two to reflect the directionality of the 2*2 ANOVA statistical hypotheses

tested in this investigation (see Levine & Banas, 2002, for a discussion relevant to 'one-tailed' *F*-tests).
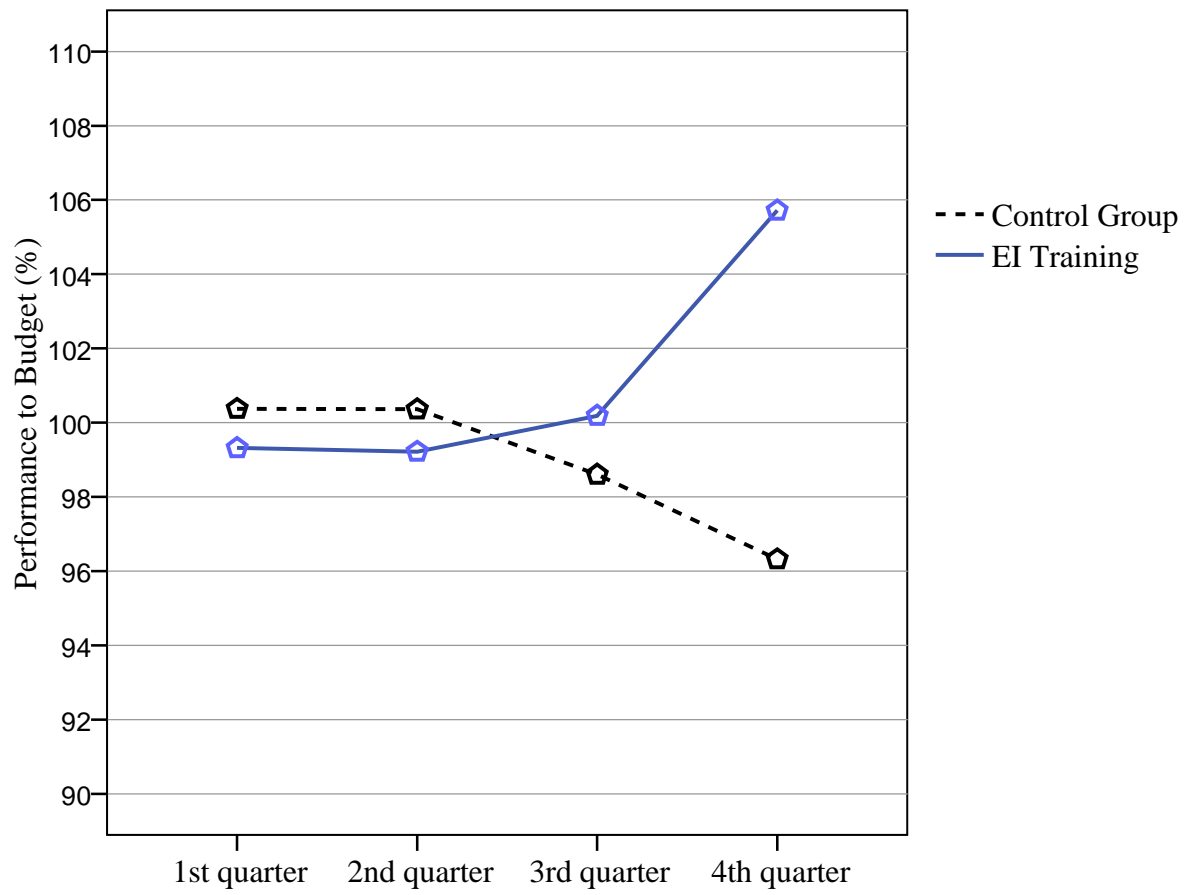
Figure 1

Sales performance to budget across the calendar year