



The prediction of task and contextual performance by political skill: A meta-analysis and moderator test[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Political skill is a relatively newly articulated construct. Despite its novelty, it has been investigated in a variety of contexts, showing promise not only as a descriptor of several organizational phenomena, but also as a predictor of job performance. Given this status, it seems appropriate to review the empirical literature to this point for political skill's overall viability as a predictor of job performance (i.e., task and contextual performance), as well as to investigate one potential moderator of the political skill-to-performance relationship, namely, the interpersonal and social requirements of occupations. We present a brief review of political skill. We then describe juxtaposed theoretical positions from which are derived two very different patterns representing the relationship between the social requirements of occupations and the strength of the political skill-to-performance ratings correlation. Next, we meta-analyze known studies that link political skill scores to ratings of task and contextual performance to test these differing predictions. Results indicate that on-the-average political skill is a valid predictor of both task and contextual performance ratings. However, as the interpersonal and social requirements of the occupations increased, so did the strength of the positive relationship between political skill and task performance ratings. Also as hypothesized, political skill was found to be a better predictor of contextual performance than task performance. Implications for personnel selection and training practices are discussed, and future research directions are suggested.

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Political skill, according to Ferris, Perrewé, and Davidson (2006), may be one of the most critical competencies for individuals, especially leaders, to possess in the modern work environment. The effective use of political skill seems especially advantageous in occupations that require interpersonal skills, networking abilities, and social influence tactics. Political skill appears to be an increasingly important employee characteristic in work environments where working with others and through others are essential to job and organizational success (Perrewé, Ferris, Frink, & Anthony, 2000).

Research on political skill is grounded in the view of organizations that describes them as inherently political arenas, where competing interest groups, scarce resources, coalition building, and the exercise of power and influence characterize such environments and the way things get done (Mintzberg, 1985). In line with this view, recent research suggests that success and effectiveness are in part a function of being intuitively savvy concerning what behaviors are effective to exhibit in particular situations (Ferris, Perrewé, Anthony, & Gilmore, 2000), and being savvy in this manner is an integral part of political skill. Thus,

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some researchers have asserted that employee political skill should be positively correlated with employee job performance (e.g., Ferris, Treadway, et al., 2005; Jawahar, Meurs, Ferris, & Hochwarter, 2008).

Although political skill is often useful for predicting employee performance, observed correlations between political skill and job performance range from strong and positive (e.g., Jawahar et al., 2008, Study 2) to near-zero or zero (e.g., Kolodinsky, 2002) to even negative (Treadway, Ferris, Duke, Adams, & Thatcher, 2007). Given such diversity in the strength of the relationship between political skill and performance, it may be time to empirically investigate potential boundary conditions of political skill (see Bacharach, 1989; Whetten, 1989) to more clearly specify the applicability of this construct to the prediction of performance. Therefore, the purpose of the current work is to (a) briefly review previous research on political skill, (b) specify and hypothesize a potential boundary condition or moderator of political skill's applicability to the prediction of job performance ratings, that of the extent to which an occupation is socially laden and requires interpersonal skills and social influence tactics, (c) describe juxtaposed theoretical positions from which are derived two different patterns representing the relationship between the social requirements of occupations and the strength of the political skill-to-performance ratings correlation, (d) examine the variance in political skill's validity with respect to predicting task and contextual performance ratings, and (e) meta-analyze political skill's validity coefficients to determine if the extent to which an occupation requires interpersonal and social skills does indeed moderate the strength of the relationship between political skill and ratings of employee job performance.

Further, we also examine whether type of performance (i.e., task vs. contextual, Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994) moderates the validity of political skill. Given that task performance is defined as the accomplishment of core, technical job duties, and contextual performance is defined as the generation of prosocial interpersonal and organizational behaviors that facilitate task accomplishment and organizational functioning, there are reasons to believe that political skill should be a better predictor of contextual performance than task performance (Jawahar et al., 2008). As detailed later, we posited that the political skill-to-task performance relationship would strengthen as social requirements increased across jobs, whereas the political skill-to-contextual performance relationship would be more stable and have no such relationship with these job requirements. Prior to addressing these theoretically based hypotheses we first briefly review the research on political skill.

1. Research on political skill

Ferris, Treadway, et al. (2005, p. 127) defined political skill as “the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives.” Political skill is a multidimensional construct made up of several interrelated dimensions: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity (Ferris, Treadway, et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2000). Blass and Ferris (2007) described socially astute individuals as those who are diligently observant of others and keenly perceptive of even subtle social situations, and thus adjust their behaviors accordingly. Interpersonal influence is defined as the ability to produce desired changes in other people (Leary, 1995). These individuals use a subtle, convincing style to exercise influence over others (Ferris et al., 2006). Networking ability is defined as an informational and control asset that stems from access to social networks (Burt, 1997). Individuals high in political skill identify those persons who have useful resources or connections and develop social networks with them. Last, individuals high in political skill are perceived as possessing a high degree of integrity and sincerity (Blass & Ferris, 2007). Due to their apparent sincerity, their actions are not perceived as manipulative and therefore others perceive them as trustworthy (Blass & Ferris, 2007).

Overall, politically skilled individuals should possess the ability to attract others just by their sense of self-confidence and personal security. These both highly self-aware and situationally focused individuals have a certain style that allows them to easily influence others and readily adapt their own behaviors to fit various situational demands in order to achieve desired goals (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005). The politically skilled are also likely to position themselves and their followers effectively in order to create and take advantage of opportunities through networks and social capital. Consequently, politically skilled people fit naturally in executive positions (Frink, 2009). In contrast, less politically skilled executives are likely to experience frustration, attempt to use methods of intimidation to influence followers, or simply ignore situations that politically skilled executives view as opportunities to achieve desired objectives (Perrewé et al., 2000).

The four dimensions of political skill can be measured with the 18-item Political Skill Inventory (PSI) developed by Ferris, Treadway, et al. (2005). The PSI is generally administered in a self-report fashion, in which respondents use a 5-point Likert-type response scale to indicate their level of agreement with 18 items that describe, in the first person, various behaviors, attitudes, and abilities that are indicative of political skill. For a relatively new measure the PSI has been researched extensively and has demonstrated construct validity, including discriminant and convergent validity (e.g., Ferris, Treadway, et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2007). Additionally, the PSI has demonstrated (a) appropriate convergent validity with the social effectiveness constructs of self-monitoring, leadership self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence, and yet (b) incremental validity above and beyond all three of these constructs in tandem in the prediction of managerial job performance (Semadar, Robins, & Ferris, 2006). Consequently, political skill and the PSI which measures it are not overly redundant with other social effectiveness constructs.

To date, much of the research on political skill has focused on detailing the nomological net around political skill, with an emphasis on its antecedents and outcomes (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007; Liu, Ferris, Zinko, Perrewé, Weitz et al., 2007), and thus its role as a mediator between its antecedents and important organizational outcomes such as job performance, tenure, and job stress. In general, findings consistently support main effects of political skill on these dependent variables, in particular the positive relationship between political skill and task performance. However, given the diverse findings with respect to the strength of the relationship between political skill and performance, a meta-analysis of the research on political skill seems warranted. In

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