A Predictive Investigation of Reputation as Mediator of the Political-Skill/Career-Success Relationship

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Career success is determined by a number of factors, including some combination of specific competencies and a performance record, along with network development, organizational politics, and reputation building. Theory and research suggest that employees' political skill predicts their career success, and that this relationship is mediated by employees' reputation in the workplace. These hypotheses were tested in a predictive study, collecting 2 waves of data from 135 career employees, covering a 1-year timeframe. Political skill at Time 1 predicted hierarchical position, income, and career satisfaction at Time 2. Furthermore, reputation mediated the relationships between political skill, hierarchical position, and career satisfaction. Contributions, implications, limitations, strengths, and future research directions are discussed.

Career success in organizations has been actively investigated for years. It has been found to be determined not only by many traditional factors, including job-related skills and performance record, but also by networking, politics, and social effectiveness competencies (for a review, see Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Indeed, political perspectives on organizations (e.g., Ferris et al., 2002; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981) have argued that performance, promotions, compensation, and other factors known to be manifestations of career success are strongly affected by organizational politics, a proposition that has received consistent empirical support (e.g., Judge & Bretz, 1994; Wayne, Liden, Graf, & Ferris, 1997).

Today's competitive environment has magnified the importance of social effectiveness competencies that facilitate effective interpersonal interactions,

\textsuperscript{1}The authors express their gratitude to the German Research Foundation (DFG), which supported this research (Az: Bl 385, 6-2).

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performance, and career progression. One such pattern of competencies is reflected in the construct of political skill, which has been defined 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” (Ferris, Treadway et al., 2005, p. 127).

Theory and research on political skill argue that individuals high in political skill possess social awareness, which is combined with an ability to adjust and calibrate behavior to different situations in a genuine and sincere manner. This competency inspires the support, confidence, and trust of others and influences their attitudinal and behavioral responses toward these politically skilled individuals (Ferris et al., 2007). As such, political skill has been theorized to influence performance and career-success evaluations by decision makers through intermediate linkages, such as reputation (e.g., Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005; Ferris et al., 2007).

Liu et al. (2007) suggested that political skill shapes the perceptions and impressions that raters form of employees—with specific reference to others’ impressions of trust, confidence, and credibility—all of which go into the formation of reputation. In a four-study investigation, Liu et al. provided evidence of the mediating influence of reputation on the political-skill/job-performance relationship. However, although the process dynamics of this reputation-mediating process have been argued to operate similarly for political-skill/career-success relationships (Ferris et al., 2007), these important relationships have not been examined to date, and are in need of empirical verification.

The primary purpose of the present investigation is to examine the nature of the relationship between political skill and career-success indicators of hierarchical position, income, and career satisfaction. Second, employee reputation is investigated as a potential mediator of the relationships between political skill and career success. We test the proposed relationships in a predictive study involving two waves of data collection over a 1-year timeframe.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Personal reputation plays a pivotal mediating role in the conceptualization tested in the present study to help explain the relationship between political skill and career outcomes. As such, it seeks to contribute to both the political-skill and the reputation literatures. More specifically, this investigation examines how employees can leverage their political skill to build positive personal reputations through their interactions with others. Bromley (1993) argued that the development of reputations typically involves pur-
poseful action, whereby individuals are motivated to manage impressions in order to achieve goals of reputation creation in the eyes of others, which then contributes to the prevention of punishment and acquisition of rewards (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997). Furthermore, Ferris and Judge (1991) suggested that individuals may attempt to manipulate reputational signaling to their advantage through social and political influence efforts.

The personal reputations built by politically skilled individuals tend to be effective because they make use of proactive network-building activities and situationally appropriate influence tactics to transmit signals that establish a favorable image to their constituencies. Politically skilled individuals possess a high degree of social astuteness, which allows them to be flexible and adaptive in their interpersonal influence attempts. They know exactly how to exhibit their behavioral repertoire in ways that transmit the desired favorable image (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007). Additionally, such signal transmission by politically skilled individuals likely spreads rapidly because of their established connections with influential people.

Thus, we suggest that politically skilled individuals form strong, positive relationships with their supervisors in order to attain the rewards typically associated with positive personal reputations. As a result, such supervisor/decision makers who observe these politically skilled individuals’ situationally appropriate behavior are expected to reciprocate their efforts from a social-exchange perspective (e.g., Blau, 1964) and evaluate them favorably, assigning them positive personal reputations and allocating disproportionately greater rewards.

Theoretical Foundations

The present investigation draws on signaling and social-exchange theories, in addition to Ferris et al.’s (2007) conceptualization of political skill (which draws on social influence theory) to explain how politically skilled individuals develop their personal reputations through interactions with others. Politically skilled individuals can read situations and people well, which allows them to adjust their behavior to best fit the situation. According to Ferris et al., those high in political skill “combine social astuteness with the capacity to adjust their behavior to different and changing situational demands in a manner that appears to be sincere, inspires support and trust, and effectively influences and controls the responses of others” (p. 291). This mutually reinforcing set of competencies tends to transmit a calm sense of self-confidence that influences others’ perceptions of the individuals’ competence and credibility (Ferris et al., 2007). This is similar to the performance and character dimensions of personal reputation at work discussed by Zinko, Ferris, Blass, and Laird (2007).
Spence (1973) argued that signaling conveys information about the actions of individuals and their intentions and abilities to others. He argued that individuals send signals in order to transmit information, reduce ambiguity, or influence observers’ beliefs. The characteristics, behaviors, and actions signaled tend to reduce environmental perceptual uncertainty and serve to distinguish reputation in the eyes of observers, making reputation more salient by promoting attentional focus. By developing strong relationships with their supervisors, politically skilled individuals signal their effective work performance and personal character to other organizational members. As such, these signals should affect observers’ perceptions of politically skilled individuals in desired and intended ways.

In addition to signal transmission, these behaviors may help politically skilled individuals develop social-exchange relationships with their supervisors and coworkers, which, in turn, should facilitate the establishment of positive personal reputations. Social exchange involves a series of interactions that generate obligations (e.g., Blau, 1964), implying that supervisors who benefit from positive behaviors associated with high-quality work relationships will reciprocate by awarding politically skilled employees positive personal reputation assessments, as well as favorable career outcomes measures they control (e.g., pay increases, promotions).

Political Skill and Career Success

Political perspectives on organizations have been prevalent and influential in organizational theory and research for more than a quarter century (e.g., Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981). Fundamental to this view about organizations is that reality often is enacted and socially constructed between individuals. Employees’ political activities play an important role in shaping others’ perceptions and assessment of their characteristics, performance, and potential. In turn, these perceptions influence the degree to which individuals are successful in their careers, as indicated by their ability to obtain organizational resources and rewards, such as pay and positions (Ferris, Fedor, & King, 1994; Ferris & Judge, 1991).

Over the past couple decades, considerable empirical evidence has been accumulated to support this notion. For example, career success has been linked with tactics of influence (e.g., Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Wayne et al., 1997), political behaviors (e.g., Wolff & Moser, 2009), as well as political knowledge and skill (Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). Indeed, the political side of human-resource decisions is so prevalent that it has led some to suggest that perceptions of raters necessarily exhibit at least as much, if not
more, influence on decisions than the objective conditions of target employees’ behaviors and aggregate contribution (e.g., Ferris, Munyon, Basik, & Buckley, 2008).

Viewed through this lens of organizational politics, careers can be seen as political campaigns (Inkson, 2004), involving contact hunting (Granovetter, 1974), self-promotion (Higgins et al., 2003), impression management (Bolino & Turnley, 2003), and use of influence tactics (Judge & Bretz, 1994). The success of such campaigns depends critically on individual competencies (e.g., political skill) that enable the effective management and projection of positive images across different work environments, especially for images that influence the assessment of performance and career potential.

Ferris et al. (2007) characterized political skill as “a comprehensive pattern of social competencies, with cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations” (p. 291). Theory and research on political skill have suggested that this set of competencies enables individuals to astutely diagnose contexts and to effectively calibrate and adapt their behavior and influence to various situational and interpersonal demands (Ferris et al., 2007). Ferris, Treadway and colleagues (2005) suggested that a major benefit of political skill is the ability to navigate effectively between multiple constituencies in creating and managing positive perceptions made by observers. In organizations today, this suggests that those high in political skill are capable of managing divergent interests in a manner that inspires consistently positive ratings of performance, promotability, and compensation from multiple constituencies or evaluators.

To date, empirical research has reported strong, consistent, and positive predictability of political skill on job performance ratings (e.g., Ferris, Treadway et al., 2005; Jawahar, Meurs, Ferris, & Hochwarter, 2008; Kolodinsky, Treadway, & Ferris, 2007; Liu et al., 2007; Semadar, Robins, & Ferris, 2006). Theory and research in this area would argue that similar patterns of relationships exist between political skill and career-success measures. In recent meta-analyses, political knowledge and understanding have been shown to be related to salary, promotion, and career satisfaction (Ng et al., 2005). Yet, this research was limited in scope and has not focused on the particular construct of political skill.

In the present study, we focus on three typical manifestations of career success, including position attainment, income, and career satisfaction (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999; Wayne et al., 1997). These variables capture both the objective (i.e., position attainment and income) and subjective (i.e., career satisfaction) dimensions of career success (e.g., Ng et al., 2005). Advancement opportunities or promotions are widely considered to be among the most political decisions made in organizations (Ferris & Judge, 1991). In addition, salary and salary progression both have substan-
tive and symbolic meanings to individuals (Ferris, Blass, Douglas, Kolodinsky, & Treadway, 2003) and often are used by individuals to evaluate their careers (Judge & Bretz, 1994).

Further, career satisfaction is one of the most frequently used indicators of subjective career success (Ng et al., 2005). Ferris et al. (2007) suggested that political skill influences one’s self-evaluation. Individuals high in political skill develop a sense of personal security because of their ability to read people and situations well, and to act on that knowledge to achieve interpersonal effectiveness. In addition, because political skill generates positive perceptions and behavioral reactions in others (Ferris et al., 2007), it also may enhance individuals’ subjective judgments about their career attainments, such as job and career satisfaction (Ng et al., 2005). Thus, enhanced sense of efficacy, together with positive regard by others, give individuals who are high in political skill a sense of career satisfaction. Based on the previous arguments, we formulate the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** Political skill at Time 1 will predict hierarchical position attained at Time 2 (1 year later).

**Hypothesis 2.** Political skill at Time 1 will predict income at Time 2 (1 year later).

**Hypothesis 3.** Political skill at Time 1 will predict career satisfaction at Time 2 (1 year later).

**Reputation as a Mediator of Political-Skill/Career-Success Relationships**

Reputation. Ferris and colleagues (2003) defined personal reputation as a “complex combination of salient personal characteristics and accomplishments, demonstrated behavior, and intended images presented over some period of time” (p. 213). Thus, reputation is a proxy for individuals’ observable attributes, past behavior, and performance. Also, because it is a collective perception by others, it can be construed as a socially constructed reality. Reputation often is formed based on a consistent pattern of past behaviors (Ching, Holsapple, & Whinston, 1992; Raub & Weesie, 1990). Because reputation takes both time and effort to build—and is costly but easily damaged by inconsistent behaviors—individuals tend to behave in ways that are consistent with their reputations (Baumeister, 1982). Thus, reputation often is used by observers as a proxy for true ability to predict future behavior and performance (Whitmeyer, 2000).

Importantly, reputation is formed both directly through observation and indirectly based on information shared by third parties (Becker, 1982;
Emler & Hopkins, 1990; Raub & Weesie, 1990). Bromley (1993) suggested that reputation is “a nucleus of interconnected impressions shared and expressed by a high proportion of members of a defined social network” (p. 42). Thus, the formation of widely held reputations involves extensive social sharing of information and, therefore, may depend on the focal person’s ability to transmit information effectively that conveys their reputations within their social networks.

**Political skill and reputation.** The development and maintenance of reputation often involves deliberate actions (Bromley, 1993). Bozeman and Kacmar (1997) argued that people are motivated to manage their impressions because they have a goal of creating and maintaining a certain identity that they find rewarding or useful. Furthermore, Ferris and colleagues (Ferris, Hochwarter, Buckley, Harrell-Cook, & Frink, 1999; Ferris & Judge, 1991) suggested that individuals may use political maneuvering to manipulate reputational signaling advantageously.

Individuals with political skill are at a vantage point of building their personal reputations because they transmit signals conducive to a favorable image to the public through their proactive networking activities, and the use of influential and situationally appropriate influence tactics (Liu et al., 2007). Tsui (1984) suggested that the most reputationally effective individuals are those who are able to meet the expectations of multiple constituents within a role set. With the social astuteness and adaptive approach to interpersonal influence (Ferris et al., 2002; Ferris, Treadway et al., 2005), it appears that politically skilled individuals are precisely those who will skilfully meet these various expectations, and thereby, form favorable reputations for themselves. Reputation-related signals of politically skilled individuals also are likely to spread quickly because of well established connections with influential people in their social networks. Finally, in a qualitative investigation, Smith, Plowman, Duchon, and Quinn (2009) found in their field interviews and observations of high-reputation plant managers from 11 manufacturing plants that effective political skill enabled them to influence subordinates in ways that contributed positively to organizational outcomes.

**Reputation and career success.** A favorable reputation is conducive to beneficial career outcomes for a number of reasons. First of all, individuals with favorable reputations may, in fact, perform better. The sponsored-mobility model of career success (Turner, 1960) suggests that early impressions by decision makers are very important in advancement or promotion decisions. Those who are able to create favorable impressions in their early career stages receive greater attention and career sponsorship from the elites in their organization, which help them to gain competitive advantage in the career tournament, eventually leading to career success (Cooper, Graham, & Dyke, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1989; Wayne et al., 1997). Thus, it is reasonable to
expect that favorable reputations will make individuals stand out from other employees, and receive career sponsorship and career success.

Moreover, reputable individuals also are perceived as being more powerful, capable, and attuned to the workings of the organization (Ferris et al. 2003; Gioia & Sims, 1983). Their manifestation of power may propel others to react positively to their appeals for help or assistance in the hope of immediate or future interpersonal rewards. Consistently, Pfeffer (1992) suggested that the powerful image that reputable individuals portray in the eyes of observers over time helps them to gain more power and influence, which permits them to accomplish things with less effort, thus resulting in higher performance and effectiveness.

However, besides its performance-enhancing function, reputation also benefits individuals through performance-irrelevant mechanisms. It has been suggested that performance evaluation and organizational reward allocation involve complex cognitive, affective, and social processes that are characterized by a great deal of ambiguity and uncertainty (Ferris, Judge, Rowland, & Fitzgibbons, 1994; Ferris et al., 2008). From the cognitive perspective, because of limited personal and cognitive resources typically allocated to performance-evaluation and reward-allocation decisions (Judge & Bretz, 1994), as well as lack of complete information (Spence, 1973), decision makers often depend on salient—but non-performance-related—cues to assist decisions (Allen & Rush, 1998; Spence, 1973).

With its origin in the field of economics, signaling theory argues that decisions such as hiring and promotions often are made with incomplete information, and decision makers must rely on cues, or signals, that convey information about the ratee’s intentions or abilities (Spence, 1973). Zinko et al. (2007) suggested that a principal aspect of reputation’s value to raters is that the intended images presented over some period of time by employees tend to result in the formation of more stable, consistent perceptions, which reduce ambiguity about expected future behavior. Thus, reputation reduces uncertainty and ambiguity for decision makers through the important signaling function that it serves.

From the affective perspective, raters react to perceived information about focal employees with emotions, which further influence decision making (Ferris & Judge, 1991). Information about focal employees is stored in memory with different emotion labels, which tends to be recalled automatically when making performance-related decisions (cf. Schwarz, 2000). This affective information regarding the focal employee that is retrieved will, in turn, influence raters’ perceptions and evaluations regarding the attributes and qualities of these focal employees (cf. Isen, 2000). In addition, good reputations likely generate good feelings about individuals, such as interpersonal liking (Johnson, Erez, Kiker, & Motowidlo, 2002), which have been
shown to predict positive reactions to individuals, including favorable
performance ratings and reward allocation (e.g., Cardy & Dobbins, 1986;
Judge & Ferris, 1993; Kolodinsky et al., 2007).

From the social perspective, when making human-resource decisions
(e.g., pay raises, promotions), decision makers frequently are pressured to
justify their decisions among multiple constituencies. Because future perfor-
mance of employees always involves uncertainty, selecting reputable indi-
viduals may help justify decision makers’ choices, and reduce their potential
liability for making wrong decisions when the person chosen fails to deliver
effective performance (Bok, 1993).

Besides obtaining pay-raise and promotion opportunities, reputation
may contribute to career satisfaction because it indicates one’s success in
building a desirable image (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Doby & Caplan,
1995). Further, because reputation ultimately is “given” by others (e.g.,
Bromley, 1993), favorable reputation also reflects social inclusion and
acceptance (de Cremer & Tyler, 2005), as well as others’ respect and grant-
ing of status and power (Gioia & Sims, 1983). Thus, gaining reputation also
helps satisfy individuals’ needs for belonging and power, which likely con-
tribute to a sense of career satisfaction. Thus, based on the previous argu-
ments, it is proposed that reputation will serve as a mediator of the
relationships between political skill and career success. More specifically, we
hypothesize the following:

\textit{Hypothesis 4.} The relationship between political skill and posi-
tion attainment 1 year later will be mediated by reputation.

\textit{Hypothesis 5.} The relationship between political skill and
income 1 year later will be mediated by reputation.

\textit{Hypothesis 6.} The relationship between political skill and career
satisfaction 1 year later will be mediated by reputation.

It is important to note that although income/salary, position attainment,
and career satisfaction have been found to represent conceptually distinct
aspects of career success (Ng et al., 2005), these various indicators are not
totally independent of one another. Because it is quite common for some of
the same individuals to be responsible for making decisions about perfor-
mance ratings, promotability, and salary for a particular individual, it is
inevitable that there will be cross-decision biases, driven by the same
political-skill competencies that help manage effective reputation percep-
tions. Objective and subjective dimensions of career success also tend to be
significantly correlated (Ng et al., 2005). However, it seems to be the case that
the higher an individual’s political skill, the greater will be the reputation
perceived by evaluators and, thus, the greater will be the attainment of
different career outcomes. Therefore, we propose the following:

_Hypothesis 7_. The career-success indicators of position attainment,
income, and career satisfaction will be significantly
interrelated.

Method

_Research Design, Sample, and Procedure_

The present study was conducted predictively, with a time span of 1 year
involving two waves of data collection. We contacted 338 employees in
Germany. The participants were sent questionnaires and prepaid return
envelopes. In Wave 1, the employees were asked to report on their political
skill and to indicate their age and gender. One year later (Wave 2), the
participants of Wave 1 were contacted again and were asked to report on
their reputation at work and to indicate their current hierarchical position,
income, and career satisfaction.

In the first wave, 202 employees returned their questionnaires, while in the
second wave, 180 employees returned their questionnaires. We had complete
data over both waves from 135 employees. The Wave 2 sample did not differ
(t tests) from the sample in Wave 1 with respect to age and gender proportion
(χ² test). The final sample was composed of 135 employees (99 males, 36
females). Participants’ age was 35.2 years (SD = 5.3).

_Measures_

_Political skill_. Political skill was measured with the German translation
(Blickle et al., 2008) of the Political Skill Inventory (PSI; Ferris, Treadway
et al., 2005). The scale is comprised of 18 items. Sample items are “At work,
I know a lot of important people and am well connected,” and “I understand
people very well.” Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging
from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In the present study, Cron-
bach’s alpha (α) reliability for the PSI was .76.

_Career success_. To measure career success, in Wave 2 the employees were
asked to report their current hierarchical position within their present
company on a scale ranging from 0% (bottom) to 100% (top). Additionally,
you were asked to report their current annual gross income in Euros. Such
self-reports have been shown to correlate highly with archival company
records (e.g., Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). Career satisfaction was assessed using the method employed by Weymann (2001), with 14 items reflecting satisfaction with various aspects of career, such as fit between job content and education, rank attained, and current income. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Coefficient alpha of the career satisfaction scale was .84.

Reputation. As in previous research (e.g., Hochwarter, Ferris, Zinko, Arnell, & James, 2007; Liu et al., 2007), we used a self-report measure of reputation. This is appropriate because individuals gain knowledge and understanding of their own reputations by the way others behave toward them (Emler & Hopkins, 1990). Prior research has demonstrated that self-reports of personal reputation are significantly related to peer reports (Hochwarter et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2007). Therefore, we measured reputation with four items of Eby, Butts, and Lockwood’s (2003) Marketability Scale, because these items reflect the collective perceptions of others at work. A German version of the items was generated and back-translated to American English. The back-translation was then compared with the original items by an American professor of management. No discrepancies were detected. A sample item of the scale is “My company views me as an asset to the organization.” Items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha of the reputation scale was .75.

Control variables. Previous research has shown gender (Bowen, Swim, & Jacobs, 2000) and age (i.e., Waldman & Avolio, 1986) to have an impact on career success. Therefore, gender and age served as control variables in the present analyses.

Data Analyses

We tested the hypotheses with hierarchical regression analyses (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). In order to test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, hierarchical position, income, and career satisfaction in Wave 2 were regressed on political skill (entered in Step 2) with the effects of gender and age controlled (entered in Step 1).

We used standard procedures for mediation analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Cohen et al., 2003; Sobel, 1982) to test Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6. To test these mediation hypotheses, we added reputation in Step 3 of the aforementioned regression models. If reputation explains additional variance and the beta weight of political skill drops significantly in the Step 3, then an important condition for mediation is fulfilled (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Then, we
tested additionally whether political skill predicted reputation and whether reputation predicted the different measures of career success (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

When the aforementioned conditions for mediation were met, we conducted Sobel (1982) tests. The existence of mediation is established if all of these analyses turn out to be significant. Complete mediation exists if the beta weight of political skill at Step 3 is no longer significant; while partial mediation exists if the beta weight of political skill at Step 3 has dropped significantly but remains significant (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Regression Analyses

Means and correlations of the variables are presented in Table 1. All of the correlations were consistent with the prediction and mediation hypotheses. Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 postulated that political skill in Wave 1 would predict hierarchical position, income, and career satisfaction in Wave 2. As Table 2 (Step 2) shows, political skill in Wave 1 indeed predicted hierarchical position ($\beta = .37, p < .005$) 1 year later after controlling for gender and age. This confirms Hypothesis 1. As shown in Table 2 and as expected, political skill in Wave 1 also predicted income ($\beta = .25, p < .005$) 1 year later. This confirms Hypothesis 2. Finally, as shown in Table 2, political skill in Wave 1 also predicted career satisfaction ($\beta = .25, p < .005$) 1 year later. This confirms Hypothesis 3.

Mediation Analysis

Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 postulated that reputation would mediate between political skill in Wave 1 and hierarchical position, income, and satisfaction in Wave 2. As seen in Table 2 (Step 3), the reputation variable predicted hierarchical position ($\beta = .21, p < .05$), income ($\beta = .25, p < .05$), and career satisfaction ($\beta = .29, p < .005$). The beta weight of political skill predicting hierarchical position dropped from $.37 (p < .005)$ to $.28 (p < .005)$; the beta weight of political skill predicting income dropped from $.25 (p < .005)$ to $.14 (p > .05)$; and the beta weight of political skill predicting career satisfaction dropped from $.25 (p < .005)$ to $.13 (p > .05$; see Table 2). This is in line with the mediation hypotheses.

Additionally, political skill significantly predicted reputation and reputation significantly predicted the different measures of career success (Baron &
Table 1

**Means, Coefficient Alpha Reliabilities, and Correlations of Study Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender, Wave 1</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.44</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Age, Wave 1</td>
<td>35.21</td>
<td>5.27</td>
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<td>3. Overall PSI, Wave 1</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Reputation, Wave 2</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Income, Wave 2</td>
<td>62557.61</td>
<td>26741.99</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>6. Position, Wave 2</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Satisfaction, Wave 2</td>
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<td>0.56</td>
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Note. N = 135. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female.

*p < .05 (two-tailed). **p < .01 (two-tailed tests).
### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Income, Wave 2</th>
<th>Career satisfaction, Wave 2</th>
<th>( \Delta R^2 )</th>
<th>( \Delta R^2 )</th>
<th>Sobel test</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.024†</td>
<td>.153†</td>
<td>.070*</td>
<td>.059†</td>
<td>( Z = 2.21^* )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.142</td>
<td>.134***</td>
<td>.248**</td>
<td>.195**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.189*</td>
<td>.250**</td>
<td>.180**</td>
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<td>.142</td>
<td>.142***</td>
<td>.248**</td>
<td>.284**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political skill, Wave 1</td>
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<td>.284**</td>
<td>.284**</td>
<td>.248*</td>
<td>.293**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>.169</td>
<td>.169*</td>
<td>.051*</td>
<td>.195**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>.142</td>
<td>.142***</td>
<td>.248**</td>
<td>.180**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.127</td>
<td>.189</td>
<td>.189*</td>
<td>.250**</td>
<td>.180**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political skill, Wave 1</td>
<td>.284**</td>
<td>.248*</td>
<td>.248*</td>
<td>.293**</td>
<td>.293**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation, Wave 2</td>
<td>.212*</td>
<td>.248*</td>
<td>.248*</td>
<td>.293**</td>
<td>.293**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>.195***</td>
<td>.284**</td>
<td>.284**</td>
<td>.293**</td>
<td>.293**</td>
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Note. \( N = 135 \). Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female. Income was measured in Euro (€). *p < 0.05, **p < 0.005, ***p < 0.0005 (all two-tailed).
Kenny, 1986; see Table 1). Finally, the Sobel tests for hierarchical position
\((Z = 2.21, \ p < .05)\), income \((Z = 2.48, \ p < .05)\), and satisfaction \((Z = 2.74, \ p < .05)\) were significant. Thus, the results support a partial mediation by
reputation between political skill and hierarchical position and a complete
mediation by reputation between political skill and income, and between
political skill and career satisfaction.

Structural Equation Modeling

In an additional statistical analysis, we integrated all variables
simultaneously in one structural equation model (Jöreskog & Sörbom,
2002). That is, instead of calculating for each dependent variable one
mediation analysis, we calculated a conjoint mediation analysis for all three
dependent variables by controlling for the measurement errors and the
interdependencies between the dependent variables (Bollen, 1989). In order
to have two indicators for each construct, the PSI scale, the reputation
scale, and the career satisfaction scale were each cut into two halves, one
with the odd-numbered items and one with the even-numbered items.
Income and position were used as indicators for the construct of extrinsic
career success. Thus, our latent constructs were political skill, reputation,
career satisfaction, and extrinsic career success. We started from a covari-
ance matrix of the variables and use maximum likelihood parameter
estimates.

As expected, in the two-predictor model (PSI, reputation), political skill
neither predicted career satisfaction nor extrinsic career success, whereas
reputation predicted both significantly. The overall model fit parameters
(Spector, 2001) were as follows: \(\chi^2(19) = 35.52, \ p = .01\); root mean square
error of approximation (RMSEA) = .08. In the mediation model, political
skill significantly predicted reputation (\(\beta = .59\)), and reputation predicted
career satisfaction (\(\beta = .47\)) and extrinsic career success (\(\beta = .88\)). The
overall model fit parameters were as follows: \(\chi^2(21) = 38.59, \ p = .01;\)
RMSEA = .08.

Because the mediation model has two more degrees of freedom, it is more
parsimonious (Bollen, 1989). Because the decrease of the chi-square value,
\(\Delta \chi^2(2) = 3.07\), in the more restricted two-predictor model was not a signifi-
cant improvement over the more parsimonious model, the more parsimoni-
ous model should be preferred (Bollen, 1989). The partial mediation model
had the same overall fit as did the two-predictor model. In addition, in the
partial mediation model, PSI neither significantly predicted career satisfac-
tion nor extrinsic career success. In sum, these structural equation modeling
results additionally provide support for our hypotheses.
Discussion

The political view of organizations has generated a considerable amount of research in the past few decades. The recognition of organizations as a political arena reveals the important role of individual competencies (e.g., political skill) in individuals’ career advancement and success. Using data that followed participants’ careers over a period of 1 year, the current study demonstrates convincing evidence that political skill helps individuals to obtain early career success in its extrinsic, objective, and intrinsic dimensions.

Contributions of the Present Study

The study makes important contributions to the literature. This investigation tested some central predictions from the meta-theoretical framework of political skill by Ferris et al. (2007), and theory and research on reputation in organizations (Ferris et al., 2003; Zinko et al., 2007). In support of Ferris and colleagues’ (2007) theoretical framework of political skill, the present results suggest that political skill is an effective predictor of the subsequent career-success measures of hierarchical position, income, and career satisfaction attained. To our knowledge, this is the first study that has examined the main effects of political skill on career outcomes using a predictive design, which adds to the knowledge base of both the organizational-politics and the career-success literatures.

Based on their meta-analysis, Ng and colleagues (2005) pointed out that future research on career success should consider variables that reflect the political reality of promotion decision making, including building network ties and individual characteristics that help increase one’s visibility within the organization. Political skill appears to represent such a variable that helps reveal the political factor in human-resource decisions within organizations. The finding that political skill appeared to make a difference over time provides strong support for the political metaphor of careers that views careers as political campaigns (Inkson, 2004).

Moreover, in support of Ferris and colleagues’ (Ferris et al., 2003; Zinko et al., 2007) theoretical framework of reputation in organizations, the present results suggest that reputation mediated the effects of political skill on all three career-success measures studied (i.e., hierarchical position, income, career satisfaction). The fact that reputation, as a socially constructed reality, explained the relationships between political skill and career outcomes reflects the notion proposed earlier by Ferris and colleagues (e.g., Ferris et al., 1994) that the essence of organizational politics is about the creation and management of shared meaning. However, although part of the political-
skill/hierarchical-position relationship was mediated by reputation, there was also a direct influence of political skill on hierarchical position attained 1 year later, demonstrating that promotion decisions are not only influenced by reputation, but also directly by political activity in organizations.

Finally, the present investigation has contributed to the emerging literature on reputation in organizations by examining the contribution of political skill in the formation of reputation. The results of our study provide evidence that political skill plays a vital role in developing a favorable personal reputation, unveiling the political nature of reputation and confirming the prior notion that reputation building involves deliberative effort (e.g., Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Bromley, 1993).

Limitations and Strengths of the Present Study

One limitation of this study is the self-reported nature of the variables of interest. However, self-reports have been shown to correlate highly with archival company records (Judge et al., 1995; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). For example, Liu et al. (2007) found that self-reports of reputation at the workplace and assessments by two other persons from the same workplace exhibited a great level of agreement ($0.72 \leq ICC2 \leq 0.73$).

Another limitation of the present study is that the mediator variable was measured at the same time as the criteria. In an ideal study, it would have been preferable to measure the mediator variable at an intermediate point in time between the predictor and the criteria. However, all statistical mediator analyses were consistent with a mediator interpretation of the data.

This study also exhibited several strengths that increase confidence in the validity of the findings. First, the study had an accepted and solid theoretical foundation. Second, the predictor and criteria variables were separated by 1 year to help mitigate potential consistency bias.

Directions for Future Research

The mechanisms through which political skill influence performance and career outcomes require continuous investigation. Besides reputation, other factors, such as network position (Ferris et al., 2007), personal power (Pfeffer, 1992), and access to information (Jawahar et al., 2008) also have been suggested to be influenced by political skill. The relationships between these potential mediators with political skill and its outcomes deserve scholarly attention.

The role of political skill in reputation building and maintenance also can be examined further. Drawing on the branding literature in marketing,
Ranft, Zinko, Ferris, and Buckley (2006) discussed how reputable CEOs of large corporations, like celebrities, build with the help of media “brands” for themselves that are so unique and strong representing “deep brands” that no longer need to promote themselves. If this branding metaphor applies to all political actors on the within-organization platform, how these actors choose their branding target, media, and branding tactics to build a strong and favorable brand image is an interesting question to explore. Finally, a potentially fruitful area for future research is studying the underlying mechanisms that explain how reputation delivers its impact on career-related outcomes; for example, whether reputation enhances career success through greater objective performance, or primarily through performance-irrelevant cognitive, affective, or social mechanisms discussed earlier.

**Practical Implications**

The most obvious implication of the study is that it is important for individuals pursuing career success to develop their political skill and reputation at work. It appears that in their early careers, individuals high in political skill not only obtain pay increases and promotions faster than do others, they also enjoy better reputations and a higher sense of career satisfaction. Prior research has suggested that political skill is an individual competency that can be enhanced through training (Ferris, Davidson et al., 2005). Thus, individuals may consider improving their political skill through mentoring or training, and by navigating more proactively their social environment at work, so that they enrich their political knowledge and understanding, and learn to deliver interpersonal influence more effectively.

From the organization’s perspective, the present study—along with many others that indicate the existence of rater bias—provides a point of caution for organizational decision makers. The fact that political skill and reputation influenced raters’ reward decisions regarding focal employees suggests that biases are likely an inherent part of human-resource decisions. Therefore, it is critical that decision makers become aware of the potential impact of their perceptions, affect, and social concerns in their evaluations, and be diligent to avoid these elements from unfairly affecting employees’ ability to obtain rewards they deserve.

The present study suggests that political skill predicts hierarchical position, income, and career satisfaction over time. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the relationships between political-skill and career-success outcomes were mediated by employees’ reputation in the workplace. We hope that this study will generate more research interest in the political perspective on organizations, and on issues regarding the role of politics and political skill in job and career success.
References


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