Political Skill and Career Success: A Review and Directions for Future Research

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Abstract: The determinants of career success have been widely investigated in the extant literature. This paper aims to review the empirical studies on the role of political skill in determining career success. Major data bases like science direct, emerald insight, sage and springer were searched for finding out the relevant studies. The findings of each empirical study along with the context and brief methodological information have been given. Through this review, it was surfaced that the underlying mechanisms in the political skill-career success relationship need to be explored further, and the dimensional analysis of political skill should be conducted.

Key words: Political skill; Career success; General review

INTRODUCTION

Mintzberg termed organizations as political arenas[1] and thus opened a new window of political perspective to look at organizations and individuals' interactions with each other in the working environment. Keeping in view the political and inherently social nature of organizations[2], it is a sine qua non for organizational members to be socially and politically skilled in order to influence others. Mintzberg had approached the political skill primarily from the perspective of formal power within organizations, however later on it was considered to be an effective influencing skill in informal settings[3]. Behavioral scientists have defined political skill in different ways which almost convey the same concept. According to Ferris et al, political skill is "an interpersonal style construct that combines interpersonal perceptiveness and astute social awareness with the capacity to adjust one's behavior to different situational demands in a genuine and sincere manner, resulting in the building of social capital and in the effective influence and control of the responses of others"[4]. The most widely used definition of political skill in the previous studies is "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"[5, 6]. Political skill is considered to be one of the most important social competencies which is reflected through cognitive, affective and behavioral manifestations, and has implications for both individual and group[7]. Political skill has been investigated in association with stress management, leadership effectiveness, job performance and career success. This article focuses on reviewing the empirical studies on the relationship between political skill and career success, and directions for future research are highlighted.

POLITICAL SKILL AND CAREER SUCCESS

Career success is defined as "the positive psychological or work-related outcomes or achievements one accumulates as a result of work experiences"[8]. Career success has been conceptualized and operationalized from two major perspectives i-e, objective career success and subjective career success. The objective career success concerns with an external perspective or reference point, like salary, promotion etc[9, 10], while subjective career success focuses on the overall reactions of individuals towards their careers. The role of organizational politics in determining career success has been argued in the extant literature[11-13]. Career success can be perceived as a political campaign characterized by impression management, self-promotion, contact-hunting and reputation building[14]. Politically skilled individuals are more likely to succeed in such campaigns through their social networks and strong interpersonal skills.

Social capital theory[15] has been widely used to explain the role of political skill in determining career success. Coleman[16] has defined social capital as "any aspect of social structure that creates value and facilitates the actions of individuals within that social structure". Social capital is the result of the changes in human relations in a way that leads to favorable outcomes. Borrowing support from social capital theory, Blickel et al[17] conducted a survey on alumni of German business schools to examine the role of self-initiated mentoring and networking behavior in determining employees' career success. In this longitudinal survey spanning two years, they found that income and hierarchical position were affected positively by mentoring through networking behavior which was operationalized as networking ability dimension of political skill. The findings also revealed that networking behavior was a strong predictor of career

success as compared to mentoring. Similarly, blickel et al[18] in their three year predictive field study found that networking proved to be a strong determinant of objective career success while mentoring proved to be a strong predictor of career satisfaction. Seibert et al,[19] tested a social capital based model of career success in a sample of 448 employees from diverse organizations. They confirmed that network structure had a positive relationship with social resources, which in turn positively affected career success through access to resources, access to information and career sponsorship. Fugate et al,[20] introduced the construct of employability and argued that social capital was an important dimension of this construct besides human capital, adaptability and career identity. They further elaborated that, social capital plays a vital role in identifying and realizing employment opportunities at every level of one's career. Wolff and Moser[21] in their 3 years longitudinal study reported that networking was related to existing salary as well as with the growth rate in salary over time. They also found that networking was positively related to concurrent career satisfaction, thus the positive effect of networking on both objective and subjective career success was substantiated. Wei et al,[22] probed into the role of political skill in the development and utilization of network resources on a sample of 281 supervisor-subordinate dyads. Their findings established that, political skill assists in improving performance and career growth potential. The moderating role of political skill between network resources and the two career-related outcomes (performance and career growth potential) was also confirmed.

Another theoretical base for explaining the political skill-career success relationship is provided by social exchange theory[23]. Social exchange theory's main focus is the obligations and reciprocity among social entities. Politically skilled people tries to develop quality relationship with their supervisor and significant others in the workplace. The quality of these relationships and the benefits obtained by supervisors in the form of positive behaviors facilitates individuals in obtaining desirable career related outcomes. Wei et al[24] investigated the role of political skill in establishing guanxi (indigenous Chinese social effectiveness construct) with supervisors and its impact on career development. The results of the study confirmed that, the strength of subordinate-supervisor guanxi depends on subordinate's political skill and the strength of guanxi in turn influence supervisor rated career development potential. Sibunruang et al,[25] in their 2-study investigation examined the moderating role of political skill in the relationship between ingratiation and promotability in a sample from diverse industries like banking, education and hospitality. It was reported that, supervisor rated promotability and ingratiation tactic were strongly related for politically skilled as compared to politically low-skilled. Similarly, shi et al,[26] carried out a survey by utilizing a sample of 296 subordinates and 53 supervisors in a construction management company in southern china to examine the association between subordinate's political skill and supervisor's reward recommendation. They reported that political skill was positively associated with the frequency of interaction with supervisor, which in turn was strongly associated with supervisor's reward recommendation. Personal reputation is considered to be an important ingredient for career success. Laird et al[27] tested the direct and indirect relationship between political skill and personal reputation on sample of 145 triads in a manufacturing firm in Midwestern USA. They reported that political skill had direct positive influence on building reputation, as well as had an indirect influence through citizenship behavior and quality of relations. The main strength of their study was the others reported measure of personal reputation, as in previous studies self-reported measures were widely used.

Generally, the empirical studies have proven a positive relationship between political skill and career success. Based on social influence theory[28] and model of personal control[29] Todd et al[30], investigated the relationship of political skill with five career outcomes including, career satisfaction, life satisfaction, perceived external mobility, total promotions and total compensation. The findings of their study revealed that political skill was strongly associated with four of the career outcomes except total compensation. They also went for dimensional analysis of the political skill construct and found that, networking ability dimension of it was strongly related with the career outcomes as compared to social astuteness, interpersonal influence, and sincerity/genuineness. On the basis of Holland's theory of work environments[31], Blickle et al[32], studied the relationship between work councilors' political skill and their career success. They found that politically skilled work councilors were ahead in having memberships at different levels of the councils than their politically unskilled counterparts. They mentioned further that, as the work of councilors is primarily political in nature, therefore political skill has much relevance in determining career success in such contexts. Two years later Blickle et al[33], investigated the role of job type as a contextual moderator in the relationship between political skill and job performance. They proved that political skill was a strong determinant of career success in enterprising job context like insurance selling. Ferris et al,[34] in their two-study investigation reported that political skill was positively associated with job satisfaction and hierarchical position, although the relationship between political skill and gross annual income was insignificant. Participants of a leadership development program were studied by Gentry et al[35] in order to examine the impact of political skill on promotability assessments from multiple raters. They found that, political skill had a positive relationship on managers' promotability, but the magnitude of the relationship varied with the source of the assessment. The relationship was stronger for boss-rated and peer-rated promotability than self-reported promotability. Munyon et al[36] in a recent meta-analysis on political skill and career outcomes confirmed the positive association between political skill and various outcomes like career satisfaction, hierarchical position, income and overall career success. Huang et al[37] in their two-study investigation reported that the chances of managerial promotion were greater for politically skilled than politically unskilled. They also found that, funding for a new venture was positively associated with the fund seeker's political skill. Snell et al[38] attempted to establish the incremental validity of political skill construct over other managerial skills. They also added impression management as another dimension to the political skill construct and found that, interpersonal influence and impression management were the most important determinants of managerial effectiveness. Drawing from self-determination and self-concept based theories sun et al,[39] examined the role of political skill in determining subordinate's promotability in a sample of 330 subordinate-supervisor dyads. Their findings revealed that, political skill not only moderated the supervisory mentoring and promotability relationship directly, but as well as the indirect relationship through organizational based self-esteem and psychological empowerment was also moderated. Thus, high politically skilled were more likely to be promoted when provided with supervisory mentoring as compared to low politically skilled individuals. Moeller et al,[40] in their conceptual study proposed that, inpatriate managers' political skill will mitigate the stigmatization experienced by them from the home country personnel, which will result in increase in the level of acceptance and integration in the headquarter. Liu et al,[41] tested a model of political behavior through a sample of 283 subordinate-supervisor dyads. It was revealed that

political behavior and political skill had interactive effect on career growth potential. Those who were involved in political behavior were having a high career growth potential through enhanced personal power provided, their political skill was also high. The positive relationship between high performance and increased personal power was also confirmed by treadway et al,[42] for the politically skilled employees only.

Individual level moderators of the political skill-career success relationship have rarely been focused by empirical studies. Grounded in socio-emotional selectivity[43] theory the study by treadway et al,[44] examined the interactive effect of political skill and future time perspective on determining career-based and community-based networking behavior. It was revealed that, those politically skilled individuals who had a deep future time perspective were more likely to be involved in career-related networking. On the other hand, those who were politically skilled but had a shallow future time perspective were more likely to be involved in community-related networking. Thus, the political skill and career success relationship depends on the individual's perception about his/her career prospects.

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The existing studies on the impact of political skill on career success rely on signaling theory, social capital theory and social exchange theory. However, empirical evidences have been provided on the basis of these theories, but the underlying influencing mechanisms are yet to be confirmed. There is a dearth of dimensional and mediational analysis that can add to our comprehension of political skill and its impact on different outcomes like leadership effectiveness and career success. In order to address this issue, we suggest that a range of mediators need to be investigated that how political skill effect career related outcomes. Besides this, the dimensional analysis should be focused in future studies, as all the dimensions are not equally significant for different kinds of outcomes. The potential mediators in the political skill-career success relationship may include quality of relationship, network structure, access to information, high visibility, frequency of interaction with supervisor and reputation. Organizational and individual level moderators can also be explored in order to understand the boundary conditions. For example, future studies can look into the moderating role of career motivation in the relationship between political skill and career success. Most of the empirical studies on political skill-career success nexus have relied on cross-sectional data, therefore it is suggested that longitudinal data should be used to confirm the causal relationships.

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