

# Self-Ratings of Political Skill in Job Application: A within- and between-subjects field experiment

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**Political skill is the ability to understand others and use that knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives. The Political Skill Inventory (Ferris et al., 2005) assesses this talent, and has potential for use in personnel decision making. However, central organizational stakeholders are concerned about the distortion of self-rating scores in job application; consequently, we examined the effects of a job application situation on self-ratings of political skill in a field experiment with 205 job incumbents. The findings showed consistently that the relationship of self-ratings of political skill and job performance ratings by supervisors ( $p = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were not distorted in job application. Implications and limitations are discussed.**

## 1. Introduction

Nearly three decades ago, organizational scholars suggested that political skill is important for getting ahead and along successfully in organizations (Allen & Porter, 1983). However, the political skill construct was not analyzed at that time, and has been more fully conceptualized in the last 5 years (Ferris et al., 2005).

Political skill is 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 et al., 2005, p. 127). Political skill is measured with the Political Skill Inventory (PSI; Ferris et al., 2005). Recent research has provided evidence for the construct validity of the PSI (e.g., Ferris et al., 2005; Ferris, Munyon, Basik, & Buckley, 2008). Additionally, political skill predicts managerial job performance better than self-monitoring, emotional intelligence, and leadership self-efficacy (Semadar, Robins, & Ferris, 2006). Moreover, political skill significantly predicts overall job performance ratings after controlling for general mental ability and the Big Five personality variables in both cross-sectional and predictive formats (Blickle et al., 2011). In addition, political skill predicts income, hierarchical position, and career satisfaction (Ferris et al., 2008). Furthermore, political skill attenuates

the influence of social stressors on job satisfaction, somatic well-being, and blood pressure (Perrewé et al., 2004).

Blickle and Schnitzler (2010) recently used the PSI as a selection tool in personnel decision making. Many organizational stakeholders (e.g., organizational decision makers and the legal system) believe that job applicants or employees can and do fake their responses on questionnaires (Birkeland, Manson, Kisamore, Brannick, & Smith, 2006; Dilchert, Ones, Viswesvaran, & Deller, 2006).

Blickle and Schnitzler (2010) used a between-subjects design with experienced job incumbents to study the issue of potential response distortion on the PSI. They found minimal differences in mean scores on the PSI in the job application condition and in the honesty condition. Likewise, the PSI showed equal construct validity in both conditions, that is, in both conditions political skill was positively correlated with extraversion and conscientiousness and negatively correlated with neuroticism. Finally, PSI scores predicted current yearly gross income in both conditions, and had incremental validity beyond Big Five personality traits and educational level as a proxy for intelligence.

However, personnel assessment tools should primarily predict job performance (Schmitt, Cortina, Ingerick, & Wiechmann, 2003). Supervisors' ratings of job performance

are a key criterion measure in personnel selection (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). In addition, the between-subjects design is widely regarded as inferior to the within-subjects design, because the within-subjects design also controls for individual differences. Therefore, within-subjects designs are presumed to reveal the upper limits of response distortion (Dilchert *et al.*, 2006). However, pure within-subjects designs are susceptible to testing effects (Hausknecht, Trevor, & Farr, 2002). For this reason, the within order of experimental conditions should be balanced using an additional between-subjects experimental condition. Therefore, the present study assessed the impact of job application on the political skill–job performance relationship in a mixed within- and between-subjects design.

The present study contributes to the existing body of research in several ways. First, we manipulated self-presentation in a within-subjects design to reveal the upper limits of response distortion, which is scientifically desirable but seldom done in research (Dilchert *et al.*, 2006). Second, instead of using income as a criterion – because it is often contaminated by extraneous factors (e.g., seniority) – we used the PSI to predict performance ratings by supervisors, because these ratings are a key criterion measure in personnel selection. Third, to control for testing effects (Hausknecht *et al.*, 2002), we presented the sequence of the within-subjects manipulation (answer honestly vs. answer like a job applicant) in a randomized between-subjects condition.

### 1.1. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

In the comprehensive model of job performance suggested by Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, and Sager (1993), both distal and proximal constructs influence job performance. Declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, motivation, and skills are proximal constructs with direct effects on job performance. The distal nature of cognitive ability tests and personality trait ratings suggests that political skill, as the more proximal variable, should explain significant performance variance beyond intelligence and personality.

Because most jobs exist in a social context, social effectiveness measures should predict performance in a wide variety of jobs, even those that do not seem to require much interaction with others (Ferris *et al.*, 2008). In addition, Guion (1998) argued that we need to consider a broad set of selection instruments to account for changing organizational contexts (less hierarchy, more empowerment, new information and communication technologies; cf. Blickle & Witzki, 2008).

Political skill may also assist in acquiring and managing resource pools (Hobfoll, 1998). This can give politically skilled individuals a sense of self-confidence that inspires confidence and builds trust. In addition, individuals high in

political skill also tend to be adaptable, which is increasingly important in organizations today. Momm, Blickle, and Liu (2010) demonstrated that political skill predicts emotional cue learning from faces and voices. Capable of adjusting their actions to the proper level, politically skilled individuals are better able to meet the demands of most environments within which they operate.

Subsequent research supports this view. Political skill predicts managerial job performance better than self-monitoring, emotional intelligence, and leadership self-efficacy (Semadar *et al.*, 2006). Additionally, political skill significantly predicts employees' overall job performance ratings after controlling for general mental ability and the Big Five personality variables, in both cross-sectional and predictive (Blickle *et al.*, 2011) research designs.

*Hypothesis 1:* Political skill is positively associated with supervisors' ratings of job performance.

The PSI is often used in a self-report format. Dilchert *et al.* (2006) argue that all high-stakes assessments are likely to elicit deception from assesseees. Social desirability scales were used to detect such response distortions (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996), and research demonstrated that, in personnel selection, socially desirable responding increases compared with low-stakes conditions (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1998; Viswesvaran & Ones, 1999).

Blickle and Schnitzler (2010) found only a slight difference between the mean scores of the PSI in the fake good and the honesty condition ( $\eta^2 = .01$ ). However, they used a between-subjects design. What is needed, therefore, is a within-subjects design that holds inter-individual differences constant, tests for intraindividual differences, and thus has the statistical power to detect situational differences in employees' behavior (Winer, 1970). Thus, we expected that the intraindividual manipulation of the mean of the PSI would be influenced by the selection context.

*Hypothesis 2:* The mean of the PSI in an intraindividual manipulation is higher under personnel selection conditions than under conditions when participants have no external incentives to distort.

Ones *et al.* (1996) found that social desirability does not attenuate the criterion-related validity of personality variables. The incentives to distort change the means of the respective variables but not their relationship with the performance criteria. The Blickle and Schnitzler (2010) experimental field study on the relationship between political skill and income replicates this finding. The correlation between the PSI and income was positive both under a selection condition and a nonselection condition. Consequently, we hypothesized that the criterion-related validity of PSI scores do not differ intra- and interindividually between personnel selection

conditions and conditions where participants have no incentives to distort.

These are predictions in the direction of the null hypothesis, which one cannot test in the traditional statistical manner (Winer, 1970). However, structural equation modeling (Bollen, 1989) allows testing of such a null hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 3:* The associations between political skill and job performance ratings do not vary (except for measurement errors) intra- and interindividually between conditions of personnel selection and conditions when participants have no external incentives to distort.

## 1.2. Plan of the research

We conducted a  $2 \times 2$  field experiment to test the hypotheses. Participants were full-time employees with at least 3 years of employment. Job performance was assessed by supervisors' ratings.

One experimental factor was an intraindividual manipulation of the incentives for enhanced self-presentation. In the self-presentation condition, we asked participants to respond as if they were applying for an attractive job; in the honesty condition, we asked them to respond as honestly as possible. The advantage of an intraindividual manipulation is that all aspects of the individual participant are held constant (i.e., e.g., sex, age, intelligence, personality traits, level of education, type of job, occupational status, time of employment experience, time of job experience, number of weekly working hours, yearly gross income, etc.). Thus, intraindividual differences on the dependent variables are due only to the experimental manipulation.

The second experimental factor manipulated between-subjects the order of the response demands, to control for testing effects in the intraindividual condition: in one condition, the order was enhanced self-presentation followed by honest self-presentation; in the second condition, the order was honest self-presentation followed by enhanced self-presentation. Participants were chosen randomly for one or the other between-subjects condition.

Data were collected on the PSI. In addition, controls were collected (sex, age, level of education, type of job, occupational status, time of employment experience, time of job experience, number of weekly working hours, and yearly gross income) in order to check the equivalence of the two randomized between-subjects groups.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The study was conducted in Germany. We targeted participants who had been employed full time for at least 3 years because we assumed that political skill was a

social competency that evolves at the work place and is affected by dispositions, training, practice, and experience. If employees agreed to participate, they received a package with two questionnaires and prepaid return envelopes. One questionnaire was to be completed by the employee and sent back to university by mail. The second questionnaire was the performance evaluation. We asked employees to give it to their immediate supervisor. When the supervisor completed the performance assessment, she or he returned it to the university by mail. Both employees and supervisors were guaranteed full anonymity. The employee-questionnaire and the supervisor-questionnaire were matched by a common randomly generated code.

We contacted 564 employees, and 205 employee-supervisor dyad data sets were returned by mail, which is a return rate of 36%. In the study, 118 females (57.6%) participated. The mean age of the employees was 40.84 years ( $SD = 10.63$  years). The mean of weekly working hours was 41.2 hr ( $SD = 5.4$  hr). The mean of job tenure was 10.6 years ( $SD = 9.8$  years). The mean of total years already employed in jobs was 18.23 years ( $SD = 11.8$  years). The mean of the yearly gross income was €42,689 ( $SD = €20,112$ ).

### 2.2. Experimental manipulations

The within-subjects instructions were taken from Blickle and Schnitzler (2010) and Blickle *et al.* (2009). The wording was: 'Please, imagine you were applying for a personally very attractive job. And as part of the selection procedures you were asked to complete the following questionnaire the results of which inform the selection decision of your potential employer. You will find the questionnaire on the following page. Please, complete the following questions in the same way as you would do it if you were in a personnel selection situation. (This sentence was also underscored in the written instruction.) Please, present yourself based on your gut feelings how you would be most successful in getting this job by impressing the selecting persons most successfully.'

The wording in the honesty conditions was: 'On the following page you will find some statements concerning your own person. Please, complete the following questions as sincerely as possible. (This sentence was also underscored in the written instruction.) Please do not try to make good impressions but respond based on your gut feelings in a way which you feel is appropriate for you!'

To control for testing effects, in the between-subjects manipulation, one randomly selected group started with the job application condition and the other started with the honesty condition. It was expected that due to the randomized assignment of the participants to the two between-subjects groups of the experiment, there should be no differences between the two groups concerning

gender distribution, age, education, tenure, job experience, job type, status, and income.

We expected (Hypothesis 2) that if the experimental manipulations were successful, the means of the PSI would be higher in the job application conditions than in the honesty conditions, both between subjects and within subjects.

## 2.3. Measures

### 2.3.1. Political skill

We used the German version (Blickle *et al.*, 2008) of the PSI to assess political skill (Ferris *et al.*, 2005). The PSI contains 18 items in a 7-point Likert-type scale format. Scores ranged between 1 = *low* and 7 = *high*. Sample items include 'I always seem to instinctively know the right things to say and do to influence others,' and 'I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others.' The scale score is the mean score of the 18 items.

### 2.3.2. Job performance

Supervisors evaluated job performance using an overall job performance measure developed and validated by Blickle *et al.* (2008), Blickle, Momm, Schneider, Gansen, and Kramer (2009). The scale taps task performance, adaptive performance, and contextual performance with two items for each dimension. The rating anchors ranged from 'a great deal better than other persons in a comparable position' (1) to 'much worse than other persons in a comparable position,' (−1) with 'better than,' (.5) 'as good as,' (0) and 'worse than' (−.5) as intermediate anchors.

The performance scales contain the following items: '1. How fast does this person usually complete her tasks? 2. How is the quality of this person's performance altogether? 3. How successful is this person in dealing with unforeseen and/or unexpected events (disturbances, interruptions, losses/deficiencies, crises, stagnations) in her job activity generally? 4. How well does this person adjust herself to changes and innovations? 5. How sociable does this person act in co-operation with others? 6.

How reliably does this person meet work-related commitments and agreements?' Items 1 and 2 reflect task performance, items 3 and 4 capture adaptive performance, and items 5 and 6 represent contextual performance.

Because performance demands sometimes differ within the same domain from job to job, we directly assessed the importance of each performance facet for the supervisors. The rating anchors were 'very important in this job,' (1) 'important in this job,' (.75) 'in part important in this job,' (.05) 'less important in this job,' (.25) and 'not important in this job,' (0). The rating of how well a job incumbent performed in a given domain was weighted multiplicatively by the importance rating of the respective aspect ranging from 0 (irrelevant) to 1 (highly relevant). The weighting was done at the level of each of the six facets. Subsequently, the weighted ratings were averaged for each employee. Thus, the job performance score is the mean score of the six weighted items.

### 2.3.3. Controls

Participants were asked to report gender, age, specific job experience (in years), and years of overall job experience. Additionally, we asked participants to report their educational level and social status. Additionally, we used the Umwelt-Struktur-Test and Environmental-Structure-Test (Bergmann & Eder, 1992) to measure Holland's (Holland, 1973) six occupational environment characteristics (R-I-A-S-E-C). Finally, we asked the employees for the number of their weekly working hours, and their yearly gross income.

## 3. Results

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, correlations, and the internal consistency reliability estimates in all four experimental conditions. In the between-subjects group that started with the job application condition, 104 questionnaires were returned, and in the group that started with the honesty condition, 101 questionnaires were returned. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s ranged between .84  $\leq \alpha \leq$  .91.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations in the four experimental conditions

First						Second					
Group 1: first: job application						Group 1: second: honest self-report					
	N	M	SD	CA	PSI		N	M	SD	CA	PSI
PSI self	104	5.15	.75	.91		PSI self	104	4.71	.83	.91	
JP supervisor	103	0.41	.26	.84	.25*	JP supervisor	103	0.41	.26	.84	.25**
Group 2: first: honest self-report						Group 2: second: job application					
	N	M	SD	CA	PSI		N	M	SD	CA	PSI
PSI self	101	4.82	.75	.90		PSI self	101	5.57	.66	.90	
JP supervisor	101	0.41	.27	.84	.28**	JP supervisor	101	0.41	.27	.84	.27**

Note. CA = coefficient  $\alpha$ ; JP = job performance ratings; PSI = Political Skill Inventory; self = self-reports; supervisor, supervisor ratings. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

### 3.1. Equivalence of between-subject groups

The between-subjects groups did not differ significantly concerning the distribution of educational level and occupational status tested by  $\chi^2$  tests ( $p > .05$ ). Additionally, the two groups did not differ concerning the means of age, job experience, overall time of employment, working hours per week, occupational environment characteristics, and income tested by  $t$  tests (all  $p > .05$ ). However, the distribution of gender was unequal ( $\chi^2 = 4.07$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In the between-subjects group which started with the job application condition, there were proportionally fewer males and in the group which started with the honesty condition, there were proportionally more females. Therefore, we used gender in the analyses of variance as a control variable.

### 3.2. Manipulation check

Hypothesis 2 proposed that the mean of the PSI scores would be higher in the personnel selection condition than in the condition where participants have no incentive to distort. As can be seen in Table 1, in one experimental group, the mean of the PSI was  $M = 5.15$  ( $SD = .75$ ) in the job application condition and  $M = 4.71$  ( $SD = .83$ ) in the honesty condition. In the other experimental group, the mean of the PSI in the honesty condition was  $M = 4.82$  ( $SD = .75$ ) and  $M = 5.57$  ( $SD = .66$ ) in the job application condition. As predicted by Hypothesis 2, the interaction effect between the *order of the within-manipulation* factor and the *within-manipulation* factor was significant ( $F = 167.07$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $201$ ;  $MSQ = 34.47$ ,  $MSE = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .45$ ). The partial  $\eta^2$  of .45 also indicates a large effect size. Additionally, the contrasts within each group and between the two groups at the first and the second condition were also significant ( $t$  tests,  $p < .01$ ). These differences confirmed Hypothesis 2 and indicate that PSI scores are also susceptible to impression management and faking.

### 3.3. Political skill and job performance ratings

Hypothesis 1 postulated that PSI scores would be positively correlated with supervisors' ratings in all four conditions. Additionally, Hypothesis 3 postulated that these correlations would be equal except for measurement errors.

As can be seen from Table 1, the political skill–job performance correlation was  $r = .25$  ( $p < .05$ ) in the job application condition first and the honesty condition second; it was  $r = .28$  ( $p < .01$ ) in the honesty condition first and  $r = .27$  ( $p < .01$ ) in the job application condition second. These findings confirmed Hypothesis 1: the political skill – job performance correlations were all significantly positive.

To test Hypothesis 3 that the associations in all four conditions were equal except for measurement errors, we specified a multigroup analysis with structural equation modeling (Bollen, 1989; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2002). In each of the four groups, we split the PSI scores and the performance ratings in two halves using odd- and even numbered items. Our analyses started from the four covariance matrices, or the correlation matrices, in the four experimental conditions. Parameters were estimated with maximum likelihood estimates.

There are several indicators of fit. The analysis reported the following fit indices when starting from the covariances matrices:  $\chi^2 = 30.63$ ,  $df = 31$ ,  $p = .48$ ;  $GFI = .946$ ;  $NFI = .966$ ;  $NNFI = .999$ ;  $CFI = .999$ ;  $RMSEA = .00$ . When starting from the correlation matrices, the fit parameters were even better:  $\chi^2 = 13.08$ ,  $df = 31$ ,  $p = .998$ ;  $GFI = .991$ ;  $NFI = .966$ ;  $NNFI = 1.000$ ;  $CFI = 1.000$ ;  $RMSEA = .00$ . These findings confirmed Hypothesis 3: the PSI – performance rating correlations were equal in all four groups implying that self-presentation on the PSI does not distort criterion validity, i.e., relationship between PSI scores and supervisors' ratings. The estimate for the correlation between political skill and job performance corrected for measurement errors in both the predictor and the criterion was  $\rho = .29$  ( $p < .01$ ) when we started from the covariance matrices and  $\rho = .30$  ( $p < .01$ ) when we started from the correlation matrices.

## 4. Discussion

The PSI (Ferris et al., 2005) is a measure of social effectiveness for which there is strong evidence of construct and incremental criterion-related validity (job performance ratings, income, hierarchical position, coping with stress at work, career satisfaction) (Blickle et al., 2011; Ferris et al., 2008; Perrewé et al., 2004; Semadar et al., 2006). Because many people believe that the validity of such measures is undermined by faking, the effects of response distortion on the PSI need to be addressed – especially if the PSI is used for personnel selection.

Recent research by Blickle and Schnitzler (2010) addressing these concerns found that under both conditions (job application vs. honest reporting), the construct- and criterion-related validity of the PSI was equal in both conditions. However, Blickle and Schnitzler (2010) used a between-subjects design that is widely regarded to be the inferior to a within-subjects design, because the within-subjects design also controls for individual differences (Dilchert et al., 2006). However, pure within-subjects designs are susceptible to testing effects (Hausknecht et al., 2002). Therefore, the present research addressed the problem of potential response distortion on the PSI in job application situations using a within- and between-subjects field experiment and supervisors' ratings as criterion.

The results of the present research confirm that the PSI is susceptible to self-presentation. At average, the mean of PSI scores rose .92 SD between the honesty and the application conditions. However, this increase had no effect on criterion-related validity. A multisample structural equation model confirmed that the relationship between PSI scores and supervisor's ratings was the same in the honest and job application situations. In sum, there was evidence for faking, but the criterion-related validity of PSI was not undermined by faking.

#### 4.1. Implications

Consistent with past experimental research using students, this paper shows, using employed adults, that when asked, some people can improve their scores on a questionnaire. But, as Hogan, Barrett, and Hogan (2007) show most real job applicants do not try to improve their scores. Among the few that do, about half improve their scores and the other half reduce their scores. Thus, faking is not an issue with real job applicants. The present study also shows that, even if job applicants strongly faked, this does not undermine criterion-related validity of PSI.

We found a corrected estimate of  $\rho = .29$  (.30 when using correlations for estimate) for the PSI–job performance relationship. As we sampled experienced incumbents from a wide range of jobs, this correlation reflects the fact that most jobs exist in a social context and that social skill is important in jobs that might not seem to require much interaction with others. However, some jobs require more social skill than others. Thus, Blickle et al. (2009) found that Enterprising jobs (Holland, 1973) moderate the relationship between social skill and job performance, so that the PSI is more valid in jobs with high Enterprising demands. Typical Enterprising jobs are management, public relations, advertising, and sales. Enterprising jobs have uncertainty and ambiguous demands. They are characterized by tasks that place a premium on verbal facility to direct or persuade other people. These tasks typically require extensive talking and listening, and the ability to relate to a wide range of individuals across a variety of situations.

However, we recommended the PSI for selection in all types of job, because research shows that political skill attenuates the influence of social stressors on job satisfaction, somatic well-being, and blood pressure (Perrewé et al., 2004). Thus, political skill is an important resource in successfully coping with stress at work in all types of jobs.

#### 4.2. Strength and limitations

The present research has some strength and some limitations. One strength is that the study successfully simulated a personnel selection situation from the per-

spective of the employees. Second, the study used a combined within- and between-subjects design. The within-subjects manipulation revealed the upper limits of response distortion. In addition, the design controlled for both individual differences and testing effects. Third, the study used supervisory performance ratings that are considered to be the gold standard of job performance assessments (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). We also controlled for participants' gender, age, education, time of specific job experience, time of overall job experience, number of working hours, position, and income.

One limitation of the current study is that it was cross-sectional and not predictive. Another limitation is that it was not a real personnel selection context but simulated it experimentally. Future research should address these concerns.

### 5. Conclusion

The PSI has potential for use in personnel decision making. However, many people seem concerned about faking; thus, we examined the effects of a job application situation on PSI scores. The present findings show that the relationship between PSI scores and supervisors' performance ratings is not distorted by impression management. These findings demonstrate the applicability of the PSI as a part of practical personnel decision making.

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