

# The Roles of Recruiter Political Skill and Performance Resource Leveraging in NCAA Football Recruitment Effectiveness

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*The recruitment and selection of human resources represent the most important activities in which organizations of all types engage. However, there is much scholars still need to know about the predictors of recruitment effectiveness. Using a sample of Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) university football coaches (N = 175) and their recruiting outcomes, the authors hypothesized that recruiting effectiveness is specifically affected by the individual qualities of the recruiters, in addition to the past performance of the team under the current head coach. The results supported the hypothesis, demonstrating that the interaction of recruiter political skill and head*

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*coach performance explained significant variance in recruitment effectiveness. Implications of these results and directions for future research are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *political skill; recruiting; recruiting effectiveness; reputation*

Organizations compete for top talent, and the recruitment of high-quality human resources can reflect a critical competency that can allow such firms to gain a sustainable competitive advantage over time (e.g., Barney, 1991). The investment organizations make in recruitment of human resources is substantial, spending \$58 billion on advertising alone for U.S. organizations (Research and Markets, 2008). Although a substantial research base exists on various aspects of the recruitment process, Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Prasentin, and Jones (2005) identified two areas in which our understanding is woefully deficient: utilizing the actual "job choice" made by job candidates (i.e., as outcome variables in research) and the simultaneous investigation of both recruiter characteristics and contextual aspects that might independently and/or interactively combine to explain variance in recruitment outcomes.

In competitive labor markets, recruitment theory and research suggests that effectiveness is a function of both the characteristics of recruiters and characteristics of the organization contexts and their leaders (e.g., Berkson, Ferris, & Harris, 2002; Breugh & Starke, 2000; Rynes, 1991). The effective performance record of organizations tends to be a very favorable feature that influences and attracts customers, investors, and talented employees. However, although the performance record of individuals, groups, and organizations transmits a powerful message, by itself such positive performance may be insufficient to ensure favorable outcomes (e.g., obtaining the top recruits). More specifically, the past performance might need to be packaged, made salient, and communicated to recruits in ways that demonstrate the unique and personally beneficial aspects of that performance context.

In the recruitment context, we argue that past performance (i.e., as an important attribute of the organization context) needs to be effectively presented and leveraged as a resource to convince recruits to commit. Furthermore, we argue that it is the political skill of recruiters that vests them with the skill and competency to package, present, and sell performance to recruits in influential ways, resulting in recruit commitment to the program and, thus, recruitment effectiveness. In so doing, we borrow from Pfeffer's (1992, 2010) theoretical notions focusing on performance resource leveraging.

Political skill theorists (e.g., Ferris et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2007; Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, & Munyon, 2012; Pfeffer, 1992, 2010) have argued that political skill vests individuals (i.e., recruiters in the present case) with the ability to effectively present and leverage past performance (i.e., of head coaches of the football team) in ways that exercise influence over their targets and thus result in goal attainment. Applying these notions, we argue that politically skilled recruiters achieve their objectives by making salient and transmitting information to recruits through leveraging performance resources, which by themselves might not be perceived in the same attractive manner.

As such, this investigation is responsive to Chapman et al.'s (2005) call for more research on actual recruits obtained (i.e., instead of simply recruit intentions to accept) and also to further consideration of recruiter characteristics and organization context features as they

explain recruitment effectiveness, independently and/or interactively. Recruitment of high school football players by Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) college football programs was the context of this investigation. FBS university football programs and their coaches were studied, whereby it was hypothesized that recruitment effectiveness is a function of the individual qualities and characteristics of the coaches doing the recruiting, in addition to the past performance of the head coach.

This study provides several contributions to social/political influence theory in organizations. Specifically, the Ferris et al. (2007) conceptualization of social/political influence in organizations is utilized in this study and examines political skill as a theoretical lens that complements discussions of performance as a contextual resource and recruitment effectiveness. Consequently, the results of the present investigation potentially allow for a more comprehensive interpretation of the relationship between past organization performance and recruitment effectiveness, relying on social/political influence theory and research. The present research also makes a theoretical contribution to the literature by extending the Ferris et al. (2007) framework to consider performance not only as an outcome of effective influence implementation but also as a resource to be deployed and leveraged, thus contributing to goal attainment.

## Theoretical Foundations and Hypothesis Development

### *Organizational Politics and Political Skill*

The term *organizational politics* has been studied for decades in the organizational sciences, and from a number of different perspectives, for example, micro and macro, positive and negative perspectives (e.g., Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011). Most characterizations of organizational politics have been cast in a pejorative sense, as self-interest maximizing behavior, even if it works to the simultaneous benefit of organizations (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011). Distinctive from the organizational politics construct is that of “political skill,” which was initially introduced briefly by Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983), working independently on their political perspectives on organizations, and further developed and made empirically measurable in more recent years by Ferris and his colleagues (Ferris et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2007; Ferris et al., 2012). Collectively, Pfeffer, Mintzberg, and Ferris all characterized political skill as a set of competencies that allowed one to be effective at work in navigating organizations as political environments. Because some scholars have defined organizational politics as “the management of shared meaning” (Ferris & Judge, 1991), political skill is reflective of the social effectiveness competencies that allow one to actually manage shared meaning effectively.

Thus, the difference between politics and political skill, quite simply, is the difference between understanding what political behaviors to demonstrate (i.e., organizational politics) and the skills to effectively execute them successfully (i.e., political skill). Indeed, political skill was what Jones (1990) was referring to when he said that after decades of studying politics, influence, and impression management, we know a lot about the actual behaviors, but almost nothing about the style and social competency to pull it off genuinely and convincingly.

### *Social and Political Influence Theory*

This investigation draws on the political skill conceptualization provided by Ferris et al. (2007), which is interwoven with social influence theory. This integrative theoretical perspective is used to explain how politically skilled recruiters select and present organization context and performance information as part of their influence strategy in seeking to maximize their recruitment goals. Social influence theory and research has been developed and advanced through the contributions of scholars such as Tedeschi (1981), Jones (1990), Leary (1995), and Higgins, Judge, and Ferris (2003).

Social influence theory specifies the precise nature of social influence mechanisms, and considerable research has been generated in efforts to investigate these conceptual arguments. Unfortunately, however, social influence theory and research failed to account for the delivery, style, and execution of influence attempts, which largely explains the success of such efforts (Jones, 1990). Individuals with political skill accurately diagnose and situationally adapt and select appropriate influence methods and tactics, which increase the effectiveness of influence attempts through its effective execution and delivery (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007). As such, and as noted above, political skill appears to represent the missing piece in social influence theory called for by Jones (1990).

Politically skilled individuals possess the ability to adjust their behavior to best fit the situation because they understand themselves and others in social interactions. They “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” (Ferris et al., 2007: 291). Politically skilled individuals convey a calm sense of self-confidence and humility that influences how others view individuals’ competence and credibility.

Employing an understated, humble, yet genuine and convincing style, in the effective execution of situationally appropriate behaviors, politically skilled individuals present, make salient, and transmit important contextual qualities and information to others (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). The effective presentation of organization context information serves to distinguish specific features of that context in the eyes of recruits, which promotes attentional focus, thus rendering this information more salient. Ultimately, such information salience should affect observers’ perceptions of politically skilled individuals in desired and intended ways, thus helping them to present and leverage critical features of the organization context in ways that increase recruits’ interest, attraction, and commitment to accepting offers.

Politically skilled individuals are effective at leveraging features of their organization contexts for recruits because they transmit information that establishes favorable images to others through their proactive network-building activities and the use of situationally appropriate influence strategies. Politically skilled recruiters know precisely how to select and demonstrate their behavioral repertoire to develop desired images and achieve their goals and objectives, through their social astuteness and flexible, adaptive approach to interpersonal influence (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007).

### *Organizational Context, Recruiter Political Skill, and Effectiveness*

*Overview of recruitment research.* The process by which organizations attract a large pool of potentially qualified job candidates, from which some reduced set is selected, is what most individuals refer to as human resources recruitment (e.g., Breaugh, 1992; Rynes, 1991). Research by Alderfer and McCord (1970) represents some of the initial efforts to connect recruiter characteristics to recruitment outcomes (e.g., organization attractiveness, job intentions), and subsequently more research has focused on this area, but examining only a limited set of recruiter characteristics (Chapman et al., 2005). In more recent research, Chapman et al. reported that informativeness, personableness, and trustworthiness all have been found to reflect recruiter characteristics that explain significant criterion variance in recruit job offer decisions. Furthermore, Chapman et al. suggested that the consensus among scholars is that more research is needed on the impact of recruiter characteristics.

*Role of organization context information in recruitment effectiveness.* In the present study, we argue that the organization context represents a broad term that includes information about the performance of the football program under its head coach. Furthermore, we suggest that politically skilled recruiters know precisely how to select, present, and make salient for recruits key pieces of information drawn from the organization context to increase recruit commitment and eventual decision to accept an offer (i.e., scholarship to play football at that school).

Research examining the impact of team performance on recruiting effectiveness is scarce, but there is some evidence to suggest that the performance of a football team can contribute to recruiting effectiveness. Langelett (2003) found that team performance during recruits' high school years was positively and significantly related to obtaining top recruiting classes. More recently, Dumond, Lynch, and Platania (2008) found that recruits' decisions were determined by a small number of primary factors, such as the geographic distance between the recruit and the college, the college's recent football ranking (i.e., measure of team performance), and whether the school was a member of one of the six Bowl Championship Series (BCS) conferences. Unfortunately, neither of these two studies (i.e., Dumond et al., 2008; Langelett, 2003) considered the role played by the characteristics of the recruiter, and thus the way such recruiters might package and leverage head coach and team prior performance when persuading recruits.

Furthermore, because the previous performance record of the team at universities recruiting these talented high school athletes can be driven largely by the head coach who has been running that football program, head coach performance has become a very prominent focal issue within the college football landscape. Indeed, media reports often make reference to a program's success as virtually driven by the person who has served as the head coach during that particular period of time (e.g., Oriard, 2009; Rosenberg, 2008). Therefore, in the present investigation, we use head coach performance (i.e., as operationalized by head coach winning percentage) as the focal performance factor that coach/recruiters seek to leverage in efforts to maximize recruitment effectiveness.

Pfeffer (1992, 2010) argued that performance can serve as a resource that provides individuals with an opportunity to achieve their work-related goals, and therefore presenting

information on the past performance of the head coach represents an important component of the recruiting process. However, we argue that being able to leverage successful performance as a resource requires political skill by the recruiter. In further recognition of the multifaceted nature of the organization context, Berkson et al. (2002) suggested that recruitment interview processes can be characterized as vehicles to actively promote important and attractive features of the organization context by skilled recruiters. How well that resource (i.e., past performance of head coach and team) is managed will determine whether performance actually translates into subsequent recruitment effectiveness.

*Recruiter political skill and recruitment effectiveness.* There have been a multitude of studies and several thorough reviews of the organizational recruitment literature in the past two decades (e.g., Breaugh & Starke, 2000; Rynes, 1991). Despite the scholarly contributions compiled over the years, the title of the Breaugh and Starke review article appears to hold more relevance than ever: "So Many Studies, So Many Remaining Questions." In fact, one basic recruiting question that persists is, How do we (i.e., the respective organizations) improve recruitment effectiveness? The present study argues that a more extensive evaluation of recruiter skill may be an important answer to this question.

In their discussions of recruiter influence and persuasiveness characteristics, Berkson et al. (2002) identified individuals who are socially aware, can understand people and contexts well, and seem to know naturally the behaviors to exhibit to elicit desired responses from recruits. Thus, they seemed to be making reference to political skill, which has been argued (and found) to demonstrate both main and interactive effects on important work outcomes (Ferris et al., 2007), rendering influence attempts more effective (Harris, Kacmar, Zivnuska, & Shaw, 2007; Treadway, Ferris, Duke, Adams, & Thatcher, 2007).

Political skill allows individuals to calibrate their behavior in ways that fit the person and the situation with which they are dealing and to effectively package and transmit contextual information. Furthermore, politically skilled recruiters are adept at performance resource leveraging (Pfeffer, 2010); thus, they should be more successful at securing commitments from athletes to play football at their schools, through presentation of important performance-related organization context information.

We argue that politically skilled recruiters are adept at developing and executing an influence strategy in the recruitment process, through selective and astute selection and presentation of key pieces of information, thus maximizing recruitment effectiveness. The effective presentation of organization context information serves to highlight head coach performance in the eyes of recruits, which promotes attentional focus, thus making this information more salient. Ultimately, these signals should affect observers' perceptions of politically skilled individuals in desired and intended ways, thus helping them to present and leverage such critical features of the organization context in ways that increase recruit interest, attraction, and commitment to the university.

Politically skilled recruiters know precisely how to select and demonstrate their behavioral repertoire to develop desired images and achieve their goals and objectives, through their social astuteness, flexible/adaptive approach to interpersonal influence, connections/friendships/networking (i.e., social capital accrued over time), and the sincere and engaging style of execution they convey (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007). Thus, they should be able

to leverage contextual performance information, as a resource, in ways that are attractive and influential to recruits and result in maximizing recruitment effectiveness. Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis:* There will be a significant interaction of head coach performance and recruiter political skill on recruitment effectiveness (i.e., a composite of the quantity and quality of recruits signed). For recruiters high in political skill, increases in head coach performance will be associated with increases in recruitment effectiveness. For recruiters low in political skill, increases in head coach performance will demonstrate no relationship with recruitment effectiveness.

### *Present Study*

Effective recruitment is extremely important in college football, where early February of each year marks considerable activity nationwide as FBS college football coaches compete for top-quality high school football talent leading up to National Letter of Intent Signing Day. National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) FBS college football, formerly known as Division I-A, is the only NCAA-sponsored sport without an organized tournament to determine the national champion. Schools in the FBS compete in postseason bowl games, with the champions of six conferences receiving automatic bids to the BCS to determine the national champion.

In 2007, the median FBS football program spent \$632,600 on recruiting, with the Southeastern Conference spending a combined \$13,129,700 on recruiting (Sanders, 2008). Anecdotal evidence, observational studies (e.g., Feldman, 2007), and sports media (e.g., television coverage on ESPN, newspaper coverage, and radio and television sports talk shows) converge to suggest that college football recruitment is a major capital- and labor-intensive process, leveraged by a combination of institutional context information and recruiter qualities and characteristics, as they relate to the characteristics of the recruits.

It seems inconsistent, due to the ever-increasing attention high school athletes are currently receiving (e.g., *ESPN Rise Magazine*, recruiting websites, etc.), that almost nothing is known about the specific personal attributes of athletic department recruiters (e.g., Cooper, 1996), particularly in light of the high cost and ever-increasing size of recruitment budgets in athletic departments (Sanders, 2008). Our research perspective assumes intense competition for top talent, and the performance record of teams/head coaches and recruiter political skill as characteristics to interactively predict recruitment effectiveness.

## **Method**

### *Sample and Procedure*

The initial sampling frame for the current study included the entire football coaching population in FBS of the NCAA as of January 2008. Due to the transitional nature of college football coaching careers, there were several coaching changes during the 2008–2009 offseason. Given our concern with coach and recruiting performance, surveys were sent to



coaches who were resident in their positions at the beginning of the data collection. A total of 998 surveys were sent to coaches at 102 FBS schools, of which 175 were completed and returned (17.5% response rate). At least one response was received from 82 schools (80.4% school response rate) and from each FBS conference sampled. In addition, a relatively equal distribution of responses from Automatic Bowl Championship Series Qualifying Schools (46.9%) and non–Automatic Bowl Championship Qualifying Schools (53.1%) was received. Analysis of the nonresponding coaches indicated they did not differ in relation to their school tenure or minority status.

Constructs relating to coaches' prior playing and coaching statistics were compiled through a combination of Rivals.com, ESPN.com, CBSsports.com, NCAA.com, and NFL.com. Those five sites, as well as Covers.com and the individual schools' websites, were used to establish the proxies used in the current study. The information on the quality and quantity of the players being recruited was gathered from Rivals.com. Generally, Rivals.com is recognized as the most complete source of NCAA recruiting information and includes recruiting rankings, the universities specific players are considering, the coaches who are responsible for recruiting certain players, and how likely a player currently feels that he is to choose a particular school. This database has been used in previous published research conducted on behalf of the NCAA (e.g., Eilat, Keating, Orszag, & Willig, 2009).

## Measures

*Head coach performance.* Head coaching winning percentage at the current school (i.e., which is perhaps the most prominent piece of organization contextual information) was used as our measure of head coach performance. We argue that game winning percentage is the reason coaches are hired and retained and, as such, tends to be viewed as the ultimate objective measure of success in the college football ranks (e.g., as indicated by this quote from former University of Michigan athletic director Don Canham: "Canham told the coaches they probably had five years to build a consistent winner. If the coaches failed . . . they would all be fired."; Rosenberg, 2008, p. 4).

*Recruiter political skill.* Recruiter's political skill was assessed using the 18-item Political Skill Inventory (PSI), which was developed by Ferris et al. (2005). This scale consists of items such as "I spend a lot of time and effort at work networking with others," "I am able to communicate easily and effectively with others," "I understand people very well," and "I try to show a genuine interest in other people," which represent the construct's four dimensions of social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity, respectively. Employee responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). This scale demonstrated acceptable reliability in the current sample ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

Political skill is measured with the PSI, and the construct is composed of four distinct dimensions: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Previous validation studies of the PSI found evidence in support of the four-factor



structure, but only using self-reports. Furthermore, no efforts have been made to also identify a single, higher-order factor solution through second-order factor analysis. However, Ferris et al. (2008) expanded on prior research and reported on a two-study investigation of both the construct validity and antecedents and consequences of the political skill construct. The results of Study 1 confirmed both a four-factor and a single higher-order factor solution of the political skill construct, thus supporting our hypothesis. Study 2 constructively replicated the Study 1 factorial validity results. Theoretical work has argued that political skill consists of four correlated underlying dimensions. Yet empirical research largely has ignored this feature of political skill in favor of investigation of the overall composite construct. Therefore, the factorial validity results from Study 1 are particularly noteworthy because the theoretical four-factor structure of political skill was obtained, thus supporting conceptual arguments for the four related, but distinct, dimensions. In addition, a second-order analysis demonstrated that the four factors also can be adequately represented by a single higher-order dimension. These results essentially confirm both strategies employed in empirical research, which is that it is permissible to study political skill at either the overall composite construct level or the specific dimension level.

*Recruitment effectiveness.* A composite index of recruitment effectiveness was created by standardizing and summing the quantity and quality of recruits signed by each school. The quantity of recruits is simply the number of recruits a particular coach has brought in that recruiting year (i.e., which is not to be confused with the combined number of recruits the entire school is bringing in that year). The information regarding the quantity of recruits signed was derived directly from the Rivals.com website. The quality of recruits, on the other hand, is the average number of “stars” of the recruits that an individual coach has signed in a recruiting year. Rivals.com assigns a rating of one to five stars for each high school football player being recruited in a given year, with five stars being the highest. A player with a higher number of stars is more apt to be recruited by a larger number of top football programs and thus is more of a prize for a coach to lure to his respective campus. Thus, recruitment effectiveness is the sum of the standardized quantity and quality measures.

*Control variables.* There were four control measures used in the data analyses for this study. First, in recognition of the advantage that BCS schools have over non-BCS schools in relation to prestige and resources (Dumond et al., 2008), we utilized BCS status as a control. Second, the length of time a coach/recruiter had been at the school was controlled to negate the advantage that extra time might allow to develop a better overall reputation, as well as gain more contacts in the regional high school coaching field. Third, the impact of the football program’s success needed to be controlled for in the analysis, using the number of conference championships won by the team as proxy for football program success. This measure recognizes that recruiters may benefit from the storied histories of their programs that often operate separately from the current coaching staff’s performance or skill. Finally, we controlled for whether the coach being analyzed was a head coach or not. Typically, but not always, head coaches are not assigned specific recruits within the Rivals.com recruiting database.

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations**

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. School tenure	4.73	5.35						
2. Head coach <sup>a</sup>	0.06	0.24	.18*					
3. BCS <sup>a</sup>	0.47	0.50	.13	-.01				
4. Conference titles	5.44	5.01	-.07	-.23**	-.12			
5. Recruiter political skill	5.77	0.59	-.01	.08	.18*	.00		
6. Head coach performance	0.50	0.18	.27**	.11	.17*	.02	.02	
7. Recruiter effectiveness	0.00	0.93	.00	-.24**	.45**	-.06	-.06	.26**

Note: *N* = 155–175.

a. 1 = yes, 0 = no.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

### *Data Analyses*

We conducted hierarchical regression analysis (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) to examine the moderating role of recruiter political skill on the relationships between head coach performance and recruitment effectiveness. All continuous predictors were centered before being entered into the analyses. Control variables were entered on the first step of the regression analyses, and the main effect terms were entered in the second step. In the third and final step, the head coach performance  $\times$  recruiter political skill interaction term was entered. A significant change in  $R^2$  in the final step offers evidence of an interaction effect between predictor variables (Cohen et al., 2003).

## **Results**

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of all variables are presented in Table 1. The correlations indicate that, as expected, head coach winning percentage is positively correlated with recruiter effectiveness, as is the school's membership in an automatic BCS conference. In addition, the correlations indicate that head coaches are less likely to be rated highly on the recruiter effectiveness variable. This is to be expected, as head coaches usually are directly involved in the recruitment of only the most elite athletes. Recruiters with high political skill appear to be able to gain more prestigious jobs at BCS schools. Finally, although head coach performance was positively correlated with recruiter effectiveness, conference championships was not significantly correlated with these outcomes. We suggest that this indicates the prominence of the head coach as a symbol of the football program, and thus suggests that their performance should be a salient recruiting tool.

The analyses demonstrated that the control variables predicted a significant amount of variance in recruitment effectiveness ( $\Delta R^2 = .19, p < .001$ ). Particularly, being a head coach was negatively related ( $\beta = -.22, p < .10$ ), and employment at a BCS school was positively

**Table 2**  
**Hierarchical Regression Results of Head Coach Performance  $\times$  Recruiter Political Skill on Recruitment Effectiveness**

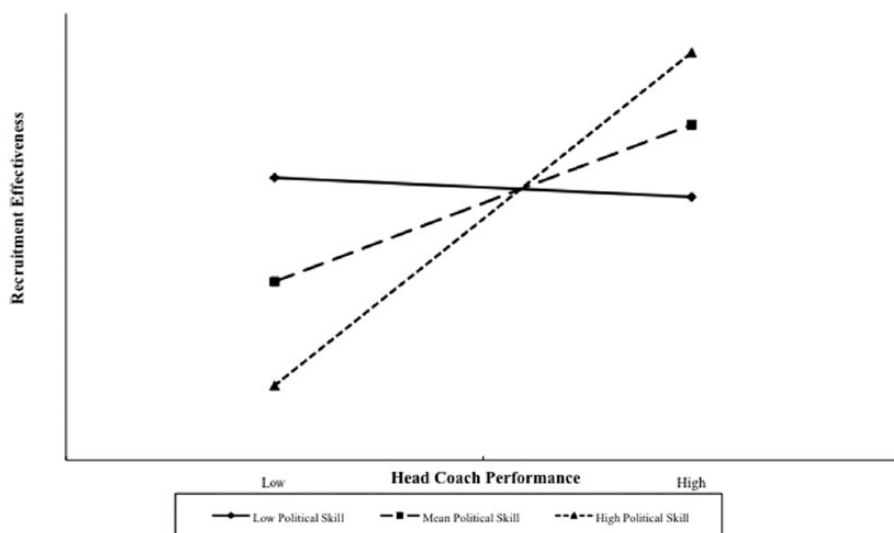
Model and Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Model 1: Control variables				
BCS	1.35***	0.34	.39	
Tenure at school	0.00	0.03	.00	
Conference titles	0.02	0.06	.03	
Head coach	-1.38 <sup>†</sup>	0.81	-.22	.19***
Model 2: Main effects				
BCS	1.27***	0.34	.36	
Tenure at school	-0.02	0.03	-.06	
Conference titles	0.01	0.06	.01	
Head coach	-1.45 <sup>†</sup>	0.82	-.23	
Head coach performance (A)	2.05*	0.92	.22	
Recruiter political skill (B)	-0.18	0.28	-.06	.07 <sup>†</sup>
Model 3: Interaction term				
BCS	1.17***	0.34	.33	
Tenure at school	-0.02	0.03	-.07	
Conference titles	-0.01	0.06	-.01	
Head coach	-1.49 <sup>†</sup>	0.81	-.23	
Head coach performance (A)	1.98*	0.90	.21	
Recruiter political skill (B)	-0.26	0.28	-.09	
A $\times$ B	3.63*	1.60	.21	.04*

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

related ( $\beta = .39, p < .001$ ), to recruitment effectiveness. The main effect block of variables was also a significant predictor of recruiter effectiveness, albeit at the  $p < .10$  level ( $\Delta R^2 = .07, p < .10$ ). In this block of variables, head coach performance demonstrated a significant and positive relationship with recruitment effectiveness ( $\beta = .22, p < .05$ ), but recruiter political skill did not ( $\beta = -.06, ns$ ). The hypothesis predicted an interaction between head coach performance and recruiter political skill on recruitment effectiveness. This interaction explained significant incremental variance in the dependent variable, beyond the control and main effect variables ( $\beta = .21, \Delta R^2 = .04, p < .05$ ), and the results supported the hypothesized interaction. These results are presented in Table 2.

To display the form of the significant interaction, we conducted a slope test in accordance with past research (Aiken & West, 1991; Stone & Hollenbeck, 1989), whereby high, medium, and low levels of recruiter political skill were plotted across the range of recruitment effectiveness. As shown in Figure 1, head coach performance was associated with increased recruitment effectiveness when recruiter political skill was high ( $t = 3.56, p < .001$ ). However, this effect did not reach significance when recruiter political skill was low ( $t = .82, ns$ ). Thus, strong support was found for the hypothesis.

**Figure 1**  
**Interaction of Head Coach Performance x Recruiter Political Skill**  
**on Recruitment Effectiveness**



## Discussion

### *Contributions of the Study*

The present investigation examined the interaction of the head coach past performance feature of the organization context and recruiter political skill on recruitment effectiveness, utilizing the context of college football recruiting. The results were supportive of the hypothesis that politically skilled recruiters are able to leverage information about head coach past performance into recruitment effectiveness (i.e., emphasizing both the quantity and quality of recruits obtained). Specifically, politically skilled recruiters were more likely to increase the quality and quantity of recruits signed to scholarship offers when their head coach's performance was strong. In contrast, recruiters lower in political skill were unable to leverage head coach performance effectively to secure top-level recruits.

As the missing piece in social influence theory, political skill has demonstrated that not just anyone can initiate influence attempts and see them result in effective outcomes (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007). Instead, it depends on the situational diagnosis to select the proper type of influence tactic or strategy, as well as the interpersonal style and savvy to execute the influence attempt in properly calibrated ways so that the influence execution results in the desired outcomes (e.g., Higgins et al., 2003; Jones, 1990). Although promising, this research has been limited to the leadership and performance

appraisal contexts. The present study positioned political skill as a mechanism by which recruiters can increase the quantity and quality of recruits that enter their organizations, through the leveraging of valuable organization resources (i.e., head coach performance).

This investigation drew on the convergence of social influence (e.g., Ferris et al., 2002; Jones, 1990) and political skill (Ferris et al., 2007) theories to explain the processes by which recruiters can achieve their recruitment effectiveness goals. Thus, the results make important contributions to theory by demonstrating that politically skilled individuals, because of their astuteness at reading contexts (i.e., people and situations) and effective leveraging of head coach performance information, secure more and better recruits. This was not the case for recruiters low in political skill. Thus, politically skilled individuals possess the ability to present performance information in an engaging, favorable, and influential manner, thus inspiring confidence, trust, and commitment in recruits.

We propose that political skill equips individuals with the ability to present and position critical resource information in effective ways (i.e., as noted by Pfeffer, 1992, 2010), which leads others to form favorable perceptions and take intended actions (i.e., in this case, football scholarship offer acceptance). We found that politically skilled recruiters deployed and leveraged the performance of the head coach in influential ways that led to recruitment effectiveness. Thus, in support of Pfeffer's theoretical notions, we are building a greater collective understanding of the importance of political skill in the utilization and transmission of personal and contextual resources to obtain desired and favorable work outcomes.

Politically skilled recruiters transmit and manage the presentation and salience of organization context information much like individuals use influence tactics to manipulate others' impressions. As such, results are consistent with previous research that has reported politically skilled individuals' influence tactics operate more effectively. Ferris et al. (2007) argued that political skill played such a role in demonstrating an influence facilitating effect. Some prior research has demonstrated evidence in support of this role when combined with particular tactics of ingratiation (Treadway et al., 2007), as well as other impression management tactics (Harris et al., 2007). So this research responds to appeals by Jones (1990) to develop a more complete understanding of social influence theory and dynamics by identifying the astuteness, style, and execution of influence to make sense of the inconsistent effects of influence attempts on outcomes in prior research (e.g., Higgins et al., 2003).

The results of the present investigation go beyond conventional influence tactics' effectiveness due to political skill and demonstrate that political skill also can strategically posture, present, and leverage key information regarding the organization context in persuasive ways that lead to recruitment effectiveness. This is clearly a contribution to political skill and social influence theory, as well as to recruitment theory and research, and suggests that research consider the investigation of political skill's facilitating effects on other resources individuals might possess in their influence portfolios, and use to their advantage in organization contexts.

Embedding the effects of political skill within the recruitment context also offers further evidence of the importance of recruiter characteristics and recruitment success. Connerley and Rynes (1997) found that applicants' impressions of interviewer effectiveness were predicted by the concern the interviewer showed toward the applicant. Given that

politically skilled individuals are more capable of engaging in socially appropriate influence behavior, interacting with others in a nonthreatening manner (Ferris et al., 2007), and presenting contextual information effectively, it is likely that recruiter political skill drives applicant impressions of interviewer effectiveness, and ultimately their willingness to accept job offers.

Furthermore, top recruits are likely to have more opportunities than the “average” or less skilled recruits. Because top recruits have more offers, direct organizational performance effects may be neutralized and recruiter political skill may be a crucial factor in recruiting effectiveness. Specifically, when the competition among top-performing organizations for top recruits is intense, recruiter political skill may be the tipping point that makes the difference.<sup>1</sup>

### *Strengths and Limitations of the Study*

The present study benefits from using data collected from different points in time and multiple sources of data. Specifically, the conclusions drawn from the current study are strengthened by our ability to capture data reflecting measures over time. We used archival data on team winning percentage, survey data on recruiter political skill, and third-party evaluations of recruitment effectiveness (i.e., composite measure incorporating both the quantity and quality of recruits). This effort overcomes the problems associated with common method bias frequently encountered in survey research. In a related sense, political skill was measured as self-report from the recruiters’ perspective, which might be criticized as contributing to self-serving bias and consequent validity concerns.

However, recent research demonstrated in three studies, and utilizing both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs, that employee political skill, measured from the perspective of one of the employee’s supervisors, significantly (i.e., and positively) predicted job performance rated by another of the employee’s supervisors. Furthermore, and vice versa, it was shown that employee political skill measured by the employee’s second supervisor significantly predicted job performance ratings made by the employee’s first supervisor (Blickle et al., 2011). This adds to the results of prior research demonstrating that individuals’ self-reports of political skill are significantly related to both supervisor reports of individuals’ political skill (Semadar, 2004) and to peer reports of individuals’ political skill (Liu, 2006).

Because college football recruiting has various rules and policies regarding when and how much recruiters may contact student-athletes, and when these student-athletes can accept scholarship offers from the universities, this context allowed for a controlled sequence of events that both elevated the competitive nature of the recruiting process and mimicked the decision-making stages of applicants in the broader work environment. Furthermore, the present study focused on the prediction of actual “job choice,” or recruit behavioral acceptance of offers. This helps to address a major limitation of previous recruitment research, where most work has investigated recruit intentions to accept an offer, and not actual job choice (Chapman et al., 2005).

As with any research, the strengths of the present study must be evaluated in light of its limitations. The first concern is that while this study benefits from the uniqueness of the

sample, it also could call into question the generalizability of the study. We acknowledge this admission, but suggest that at least anecdotal evidence suggests that “big-time” college athletics operates as an independent profit center on most campuses. Indeed, many coaches are viewed as CEOs of their programs as much as they are seen as just football strategists. Thus, while this may be an imperfect representation of the broader business community, the use of collegiate football recruiters does provide a setting in which the recruiting process is as important to success as it is in business organizations. Furthermore, as recently noted by Bamberger and Pratt (2010), leaders exist in all types of organizational contexts, and examining unconventional samples is necessary to move us forward in the organizational sciences.

Another set of issues relate to the potential distinctions or boundary conditions of the present results. Specifically, there are distinctions or boundary conditions of this sample relative to other organizations facing recruitment issues. First, performance in the present study is measured using the same metric, which is clear and easily obtained. Organizations do not utilize the same metric for organizational or employee performance. A second distinction concerns the applicant population in the present research; they are all young males who likely have little experience with recruiters or colleges. Organizations are dealing with a much more diverse applicant pool containing individuals with a wide array of experiences. Furthermore, the “offer acceptance” is short term in nature when it comes to football recruiting because these recruits do not have long tenure with their chosen college. Organizations have a much larger variation for employee tenure. Finally, the applicants’ offer acceptances represent a stepping stone to other “employment,” whether in professional sports or other careers following college. In other words, the employment is not an end in itself. These may be important boundary conditions that limit the generalizability of the findings.<sup>2</sup>

As highlighted in the present study, the context, indeed, is quite important. Furthermore, many things make up the organization context, and prominent features of such contexts are reflected in the behavior and performance of the prominent and very visible individuals associated with such organizations, particularly its highly placed leaders (Williamson, King, Lepak, & Sarma, 2010). For example, many firms are “known” based on the visibility of their chief executive officers (CEOs), which has stimulated a recent stream of research on “celebrity CEOs” (e.g., Wade, Porac, Pollack, & Graffin, 2006). Lee Iacocca led the major turnaround of a failing Chrysler Corporation and became the face of the organization, and a celebrity CEO.

It can be argued that such well-known top executives can be attractions for recruits, and this can be seen quite clearly in college sports, where many football programs achieve fame based heavily on the notability of the head coaches. Indeed, “an athletic program is always a reflection, and sometimes an extension, of the personality of the coach” (Lanning, 1979, p. 263). Furthermore, such notable coaches typically did have quite distinguishable personalities, but it was their performance records that gained them national fame and visibility.

The information transmitted to the marketplace by such celebrity CEOs can reflect very favorably on the organization. Using one of the above examples, Bobby Bowden (i.e., as former head coach of the Florida State University football team) sent highly positive information to the recruitment marketplace that he reflects on Florida State University as a place that emphasizes both performance (i.e., two national championships in football, and



top three in most wins by a coach in Division I football history) and integrity (i.e., he is a person of great principles and spirituality). Furthermore, such images and information today are promoted frequently by the media, thus more widely transmitting such information.

The broadness, extensiveness, and pervasiveness of media outlets and coverage, used in conjunction with the past successes of strong university athletic programs and their most prominent individuals (e.g., famous head coaches), are used by athletic departments to influence a number of favorable outcomes, including recruitment of athletes (e.g., Bialik, 2009). As such, we suggest that head coach performance represents an important and attractive feature of the organization context, and thus can be promoted and leveraged by skilled athletic department recruiters (i.e., assistant coaches) to increase recruitment effectiveness.

We contend that although CEOs' performance is rated on their shareholder yield, football coaches are hired and fired for winning football games (e.g., Rosenberg, 2008). Thus, although perhaps not complete, this representation approximates the dominant manner in which coaches gain prestige and advance their careers. Furthermore, football programs, like organizations, gain visibility and prominence based on past performance, and although such notoriety is difficult to attain, it is also relatively slow to erode.

An additional concern within the current study centers on the potential for team-level effects that were not captured in the current analysis. It is true that head coach performance may operate as a higher-order construct on which individual recruiter performance may vary. That being said, the sample in the current study was not appropriate for analysis using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) because of the high percentage of teams that were represented by either one (34.1% of the sample) or two (29.3% of the sample) coaches. Thus, despite having an appropriate number of Level 2 teams, the current study did not have the appropriate number of Level 1 recruiters to maintain the statistical power necessary for the HLM tests (see Raudenbush & Liu, 2000, for a discussion of power issues related to HLM). Moving forward, future research should seek to replicate this study by using samples in which greater control over participants can be exerted, and thus higher response rates can be achieved. Furthermore, research could then add other relevant individual traits of recruiters and develop a more expansive model of individual attributes in the recruiting process.

### *Directions for Future Research*

To the degree that research has evaluated the role that organization context plays in making organizations more or less attractive to potential applicants, it has assumed that the applicants have perfect knowledge of the quality and facets of organizations' contexts. However, our results support Berkson et al.'s (2002) assertion that it is the persuasive communication of organizations' context by recruiters that leads to the acceptance of job offers by recruits. Although this is an important expansion of previous research on recruitment, it suggests that recruiters in start-up or emerging organizations may encounter significant difficulties in obtaining high-quality recruits due to deficits in how well they are known. With this in mind, future research would benefit from more closely evaluating recruiting in the small business context, as these companies are less likely to reflect the notoriety of larger and more well-established firms.

Another interesting finding from our study deals with the interplay of organizational context with target perceptions of political skill. An unhypothesized finding in the study was that when head coach performance was poor, recruiters with high political skill were actually less effective than those with low political skill. One potential interpretation of this finding is that in the low performance context, recruits may perceive political skill enactment as self-serving rather than mutually beneficial recruiting behaviors.<sup>3</sup> Such an interpretation should be explored as part of subsequent political skill research.

Although the argument that politically skilled recruiters are more capable of evaluating the needs of applicants and matching the salient aspects of the organization's context to these needs is supported by political skill theory (Ferris et al., 2007), the present study did not directly assess the range of organization characteristics from which recruiters made their choices. Moving forward, qualitative assessments of recruiters' decision-making processes would extend the current research, and add much to a broader understanding of recruiter behavior and ability. In addition, this would provide further empirical evidence of the theoretical underpinnings of the political skill construct.

Although the unique context of our investigation prevented us from evaluating these underlying processes, the present study makes a significant contribution in the area of political skill. While political skill often has been assessed in HRM contexts (i.e., performance appraisal), it has not been evaluated in the recruiting context. More expansively, previous work on political skill in HRM contexts has almost exclusively evaluated the role of the subordinate's political skill. While important, this approach demonstrates only the role of political skill from the less powerful member of the dyadic relationship. Influence behavior varies based on the formal power that the target of such behavior holds. Therefore, there is much to be learned from expanding our knowledge about HRM decision making by investigating how the political skill of supervisors affects their ability to interpret the influence behavior of their subordinates, as such, and base their ratings on more objective criteria.

This recognition of power differentials in dyadic relations implies that the results of the present study have implications for the study of leadership in organizations. Galvin, Balkundi, and Waldman (2010) suggested that leader charisma was communicated to distant audiences through the behavior of their surrogates. While we agree with this reasoning, these authors neglected individual differences in ability that would make this process more or less effective. Political skill theory (Ferris et al., 2007) and the results of the present study suggest that politically skilled surrogates are more likely to be able to assess the environment and engage in behaviors in a manner that influentially communicates the attributes of the organization, which are likely to improve the perceptions of the leader to nonconnected others or, in the case of the current context, potential recruits.

Finally, future research needs to consider the potential contributions to recruitment effectiveness of the specific dimensions of political skill. Future research needs to investigate the individual dimensions of political skill (i.e., social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity), and how they might differentially predict important work outcomes. Although very little research has investigated the separate dimensions of political skill, some work has found social astuteness, interpersonal influence, and networking ability to be significant predictors of job performance and career outcomes (Ferris et al., 2012). Therefore, expanded theory is needed with respect to the specific

dimensions of political skill (i.e., Ferris et al., 2007, do not really clearly formulate specific dimension-related predictions), followed by empirical research in this area.

### *Practical Implications and Conclusion*

Politically skilled recruiters possess a greater ability to develop important and extensive professional connections and networks. Through their social astuteness, once these connections are developed, they then appropriately adjust their actions to match the needs of both the individuals and the situations in which they have been placed. Also, the present study provides evidence of how politically skilled recruiters are better at performance resource leveraging, that is, making salient and transmitting key aspects of the organizational context (i.e., head coach performance, as won-loss record) when interacting with recruits.

As Schneider (1987) so aptly noted, "The people make the place." However, the talent of these human resources first must be assessed and subsequently pursued by recruiters who can exhibit influential effects on these applicants' offer acceptance decisions (Rynes, 1991). This investigation explained how the political skill of recruiters significantly and positively affect their strategies for influencing recruits, and their ability to more effectively deploy organization context information to increase recruitment effectiveness. Thus, we contribute to our understanding of recruitment, as well as the characteristics of recruiters that can contribute to recruitment effectiveness. Hopefully, this work will stimulate further research in this important area of inquiry.

### **Notes**

1. The authors would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this alternative explanation for our results.
2. The authors would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for the insight into generalizability considerations.
3. The authors thank an anonymous reviewer for noting this finding.

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