

Political Skill: An Antidote in the Role Overload–Strain Relationship

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Political skill is characterized by social perceptiveness and the ability to adjust one's behavior to different and changing situational needs to influence others. The authors argue that politically skilled individuals enjoy a sense of personal security that allows them to perceive interpersonal control over the process and outcomes of interpersonal interactions within organizations. The authors examine the buffering effects of political skill on the perceived role overload–strain relationship, with strain operationalized as job tension, job (dis)satisfaction, and general anxiety. Results support the hypothesized moderating effects of political skill such that greater political skill reduces the negative effects of role overload on all types of strain. The contributions and limitations of the study are discussed, as are directions for future research.

Keywords: political skill, role overload, job tension, job satisfaction

Labeled as “the epidemic of the eighties” (Cryer, McCraty, & Childre, 2003), job stress has continued to grow, costing organizations billions of dollars in employee disability claims, employee absenteeism, and lost productivity (Spector, Chen, & O’Connell, 2000; Xie & Schaubroeck, 2001). Furthermore, this trend shows no sign of diminishing any time soon. In fact, the overall percentage of worker stress increased by 10% between August 2001 and May 2002 (see Cryer et al., 2003). Because job stress is of major significance to both organizations and workers, it is important to continue searching for mechanisms that can reduce the negative effects of job stressors (Perrewé et al., 2004).

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of political skill, which we conceptualize as providing a unique type of control (i.e., interpersonal control), in the stressor–strain relationship. We focus on one type of job stressor—role overload—and examine how political skill can attenuate its negative influences. Additionally, we build on Karasek’s (1979) theory of control and job strain and propose that political skill helps one to effectively cope with the high job demands imposed by role overload. By examining the role of political skill, we seek to theoretically extend the concept of control in Karasek’s job demands–control (JD-C) model to include perceived control over interpersonal interactions.

Conceptual Background and Hypothesis

Karasek’s Job Demands–Control Model

According to Karasek’s (1979) JD-C model, psychological strain is the result of the joint effects of the demands of a work situation and the range of decision-making freedom available to an employee. When the individual perceives a lack of decision-making freedom or skill discretion, demands generate stress, manifested as psychological and physio-

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logical strains (Fox, Dwyer, & Ganster, 1993). Alternatively, when high job demands are accompanied by the skills and abilities to cope actively with such demands, appropriate behavior patterns emerge, enhancing one's ability to cope with challenges.

This combination of challenge and requisite skills reflects "active jobs" (Karasek, 1979). In such jobs, despite high demands, only an average amount of psychological strain will occur because much of the energy aroused by the job's stressors are translated into direct action—effective problem solving—with little residual strain. Thus, the central implication of the model is that perceived control, assessed as both decision authority and decision latitude (Karasek, 1979), positively influences one's ability to cope with job demands.

The JD-C model has provided the theoretical foundation of numerous studies in stress research, and studies have consistently reported that high job control can reduce the negative consequences of high job demands (for a review, see Karasek & Theorell, 1990). However, studies have been less consistent in finding the anticipated interaction (e.g., Fox et al., 1993; Ganster & Fusilier, 1989; Jones & Fletcher, 1996). Furthermore, most of the research has focused on objective job demands exerted by the organization, as well as the amount and type of job control provided to employees in the forms of job decision latitude, empowerment, and so forth (De Rijk, Le Blanc, & Schaufeli, 1998).

This approach has ignored individual differences in perceptions of, and reactions to, organizational practices, as well as individual styles of adaptation to particular features of the work environment that influence the work stress process (De Rijk et al., 1998; Parker & Sprigg, 1999). This gap in the literature offers one possible explanation for the discrepancy in results regarding the interactive effects anticipated by Karasek (1979).

To address this omission in the literature, some researchers have called for an exploration of the role of individuals' perceived control in the stress-strain relationship (Ganster, 1989; Smith, Tisak, Hahn, & Schmieder, 1997), which has been linked to important personal outcomes (Ganster, 1989). In his original work, Karasek (1979) suggested that individual differences may play a role in the function of job control, and subsequently, researchers have empirically tested this possibility, examining a variety of personality traits, including locus of control (Parkes, 1991; Rahim & Psenicka, 1996), proactive personality (Parker & Sprigg, 1999), self-efficacy (Schaubroeck, Jones, & Xie, 2001; Schaubroeck & Merritt,

1997), Type A trait (Froggatt & Cotton, 1987; Lang & Markowitz, 1986), and alienation and perfectionism (Lang & Markowitz, 1986).

Despite the considerable amount of research conducted using the JD-C model, prior research has paid little attention to the role one's *interpersonal style* plays in these relationships (Perrewé et al., 2004). This is an important omission because although personality traits help explain an individual's predisposition to react to people and work events, they do not explain how individuals handle the situations. Nonetheless, how individuals handle interpersonal interactions significantly influences their work life.

Interpersonal Control

A diverse body of research in social capital, emotional intelligence, positive psychology, and knowledge management has indicated that interpersonal relationships are critical to one's performance at work and career success (Ferris, Perrewé, Anthony, & Gilmore, 2000; Fredrickson, 1998; Kogut & Zander, 1992). Positive interpersonal relationships enhance individuals' psychological well-being and generate tangible benefits, including faster recovery from negative affective experiences, increased creativity, and improved performance (Fredrickson, 1998). Therefore, the ability of individuals to form positive interpersonal relationships should leverage their ability to cope with stressful job demands (Perrewé, Ferris, Frink, & Anthony, 2000). In our study, we refer to this ability as *political skill*, which is discussed next.

Political Skill

Over two decades ago, Pfeffer (1981) argued for a political perspective on organizations that introduced "political skill" as a necessary competency for effectiveness in the ambiguous and often turbulent environments of political organizations. About the same time, Mintzberg (1983, 1985) independently suggested that organizations could be characterized as political arenas, and that success and survival in such arenas necessitated the possession of "political will and political skill." Mintzberg made reference to political skill as the exercise of influence using negotiation, manipulation, and persuasion. However, neither Pfeffer nor Mintzberg extended the conceptual or empirical development of the political skill construct. It was nearly 15 years after their work that Ferris et al. (1999) made an initial attempt to more fully conceptualize, establish the construct domain,

and empirically assess political skill. Therefore, building on this early work by Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983), who coined the term *political skill*, and in an effort to capture the essence of their characterizations of the construct as well as the work of Ferris et al. (1999), the next sections provide information on the definition and construct validity of political skill.

Definition and derivation. Political skill 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” (Perrewé et al., 2004, p. 142), and it is characterized by social perceptiveness and the ability to adjust one’s behaviors to different and changing situational needs (Ferris et al., 1999, 2005). Although related to social, emotional, and practical intelligence, as well as “savvy” and “street smarts” (Ferris, Perrewé, & Douglas, 2002), research has demonstrated that political skill is a distinct construct with respectable psychometric properties (Ferris et al., 1999, 2005; Perrewé et al., 2004).

Issues pertaining to the derivation of political skill are concerned with whether this construct reflects a skill, an ability, or a trait, and therefore whether it is a learned competency or innate. We conceptualize political skill as involving a constitutional predisposition, but which also then can be shaped and developed. This view is not unlike contemporary thought regarding adopting an integrative dispositional–situational approach, which has been applied to both personality (e.g., Murtha, Kanfer, & Ackerman, 1996) and social effectiveness (e.g., Buck, 1991).

Construct validity. Because political skill originally was designed to focus on interactions in work organizations, we see it as conceptually unique in contrast to other social effectiveness constructs typically characterized as more general competencies affecting social interactions in a broad array of everyday contexts (e.g., Ferris, Perrewé, & Douglas, 2002). There is some natural overlap of the construct domains of political skill and some other social effectiveness measures. Therefore, we would expect to find modest relationships between political skill and particular personality characteristics that tend to focus on social interactions, as well as with some other social effectiveness measures.

Ferris et al. (1999) argued that politically skilled individuals develop an intuitive savvy, and they reflect positive interpersonal effectiveness that might relate to other social effectiveness constructs, as well as to some personality characteristics. Ferris et al. (1999) reported that political skill was modestly re-

lated to self-monitoring ($r = .13$ and $.21, p < .01$, in two samples), positive affectivity ($r = .36, p < .001$), extraversion ($r = .28, p < .01$), empathy ($r = .28, p < .01$), and conscientiousness ($r = .25, p < .01$). They also argued that politically skilled individuals enjoy a sense of personal security and self-confidence from prior experience in, and mastery over, their work environments and the individuals with whom they interact.

Such personal security and self-confidence contribute to politically skilled individuals experiencing reduced stress and strain at work. Such individuals appear to be more resistant to the potentially dysfunctional consequences of work-related stress (Perrewé et al., 2000). This would suggest an inverse relationship between political skill and stress/strain, and recent evidence has been provided in support of this relationship. Perrewé et al. (2004) found significant negative relationships between political skill and both cognitive anxiety ($r = -.30, p < .01$) and somatic anxiety ($r = -.23, p < .01$).

Regarding discriminant validity, the main challenge is to demonstrate that political skill is not correlated with intelligence or cognitive ability. In psychology and the organizational sciences, cognitive ability has dominated the category of individual differences, regularly explaining substantial variance in personnel selection contexts and concerning other work outcomes. Consequently, some scholars would argue that political skill (and other measures of social effectiveness) could be effectively subsumed under cognitive ability and that the two constructs are highly correlated. Research across several samples now has shown that there is a zero correlation between political skill and cognitive ability, thus demonstrating support for its discriminant validity (Ferris et al., 1999, 2005).

Although there has been a proliferation of social effectiveness constructs in recent years, and there is the need to theoretically and empirically distinguish among them, it is perhaps most important to demonstrate the lines of demarcation between political skill and social skill, primarily because these two constructs sometimes have been used interchangeably and regarded as so similar as to be redundant. However, in the research literature, scholars have made clear distinctions between social skill and political skill (Luthans, Hodgetts, & Rosenkrantz, 1988; Peled, 2000). Peled argued that social skill refers to “the ease and comfort of communication between leaders and their employees, peers, superiors, and clients” (p. 27). Alternatively, Peled suggested that political skill refers to “the manager’s ability to ma-

nipulate his or her interpersonal relationships with employees, colleagues, clients, and supervisors to ensure the ultimate success of the project" (p. 27).

Because both political skill and social skill have their roots in the early work on social intelligence (Thorndike, 1920), there is bound to be some similarity in the two constructs, and perhaps reflected by modest correlations. However, we see these as two distinct constructs with different derivations and uniqueness in their own right.

With an ability to perceive others and the situation accurately, politically skilled people have an intuitive savvy and understanding of people and events in organizations (Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, & Ammeter, 2004). The tacit knowledge derived from such understanding helps to effectively regulate interpersonal interactions. Consequently, politically skilled individuals enjoy a sense of personal security and increased feelings of control (Ferris et al., 1999, 2005; Perrewé et al., 2004) over the process and outcomes of interpersonal interactions.

Political skill and strain reduction. Political skill reinforces individuals' belief, at a given point in time, in their ability to act as a causal agent to effect change in the intended direction on their environment (Greenberger & Strasser, 1986) and achieve what they desire (Perrewé et al., 2004). In sum, political skill makes interactions more predictable, thus reducing the pressures caused by uncertainty, and in turn, enhancing perceived control over events (Ferris et al., 1999). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that, when experiencing overload, politically skilled people will experience less strain than less politically skilled individuals, because they expect to find ways to solve the immediate problem (e.g., too much to do) or at least determine how to "get by" (i.e., cope).

Politically skilled individuals not only are successful at regulating interpersonal interactions but also know exactly *how* to exert such influences in a manner that facilitates interpersonal relationships characterized by confidence, trust, and sincerity (Ferris, Hochwarter, et al., 2002). Politically skilled people view interpersonal interactions as opportunities (vs. threats), facilitating the establishment of friendships, connections, and alliances, which in turn ensures a favorable social identity in their network (Perrewé et al., 2000). A positive identity in one's social network generates significant and tangible benefits (Baron & Markman, 2000).

For example, politically skilled individuals may enjoy network centrality, enabling them to gain access to important information. Moreover, the confidence and trust placed in politically skilled individ-

uals likely increase cooperation from others in the network. Therefore, in addition to contributing to a greater sense of *perceived* control, political skill, and the accompanying interpersonal influence, may enable individuals to gain *actual* control over events, thus helping individuals cope with job demands.

Collectively, the literature suggests that political skill provides a unique type of control in work settings, that is, interpersonal control. With their social perceptiveness and the ability to productively use insights gained, politically skilled individuals are at a vantage point in controlling the outcomes of interpersonal interaction, enhancing their ability to cope with job demands. Through effective regulation of interpersonal interactions, political skill may act as a coping resource, thereby attenuating the negative effects of job stress. In fact, Perrewé and her colleagues found that political skill served as an antidote for the negative influences of role conflict on strain (Perrewé et al., 2004). Although this is an important finding, more studies are needed to examine the extent to which such influences are present in other types of stressor-strain relationships.

Hypothesis

In this study, we focus on a common stressor in today's fast-paced and downsized organizations, role overload, the degree to which the environmental demands exceed an individual's capabilities for meeting them (Karasek, 1979). Consistent with Karasek's (1979) prediction, past research has found role overload significantly contributes to strains, including elevated blood pressure (Friedman, Rosenman, & Carrol, 1958), psychiatric symptoms (Rahim & Psenicka, 1996), increased psychological strain (French & Caplan, 1972), greater emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Cordes, Dougherty, & Blum, 1997; Fogarty, Singh, Rhoads, & Moore, 2000; Zohar, 1997).

As discussed, studies also have found that greater control provided by the organization to employees (e.g., decision latitude) reduces strains. Nevertheless, researchers have suggested that although many studies use objective indexes of subjective latitude, the construct of most importance in the JD-C model is "an individual's personal belief in his or her control over a work situation" (Fox et al., 1993, p. 291). Political skill is conceptualized as individuals' beliefs that they control their interpersonal work environment. Therefore, we hypothesize the following: The relationship between perceived role overload and strain is moderated by political skill such that higher

political skill attenuates the negative relationship between role overload and psychological strain (i.e., increased job tension, job dissatisfaction, and general anxiety).

Method

Sample

Surveys were distributed to 282 full-time employees and completed by 230 employees from three large oil companies in Brazil over a 15-month period for a response rate of 82%. Participation in the study was voluntary. The sample was predominantly male (72.6%) and married (69%). The average number of years of work experience on the current job was approximately 11 years, and the average age of the respondent was 39 years old. The questionnaire, which we designed, was translated from English to Portuguese and back-translated by two English teachers fluent in both languages. The two translators worked independently. Only a few minor discrepancies in wording emerged, which were resolved by the translators as they talked through the differences.

Data were collected from each participant at two points in time as part of a large stress-related program sponsored by the companies. Each respondent completed a questionnaire containing demographic, dispositional, and stressor items at a professional biofeedback clinic. In an effort to reduce concerns about common method variance for our survey items, the respondents returned to the clinic approximately 1 week later and completed questionnaires that measured the job tension and general anxiety experienced in their lives as well as their job satisfaction.

Measures

Political skill. Respondents' political skill was measured using six items developed by Ferris et al. (1999) that utilizes a 5-point Likert-type format, with item responses ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Responses to the six items were averaged into a composite with higher scores indicating greater political skill. The definition of political skill includes the understanding of others at work and the use of that knowledge to influence others. Understanding others is captured in the items: "I understand people well" and "I find it easy to envision myself in the position of others." The use of the knowledge about others for influence purposes is captured in the items: "I am able to make most people feel comfortable and at ease around me," "I am good at getting others to respond positively to me," "It is easy for me to develop good rapport with most people," and "I usually try to find common ground with others." The coefficient alpha internal consistency reliability estimate was .71.

Perceived role overload. Three items developed by Seashore, Lawler, Mirvis, and Cammann (1982) were averaged to measure role overload. Respondents used a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* to indicate their agreement with the items regarding their jobs. The items were "I have too much work to do to do everything well," "The amount of work I am asked to do

is fair" (reverse-scored), and "I never seem to have enough time to get everything done." Higher scores indicate greater perceived role overload. The coefficient alpha reliability estimate was .64, similar to the original reliability estimate of .65 (Seashore et al., 1982).

Job tension. We measured job tension with a seven-item measure developed by House and Rizzo (1972). Sample items include "I work under a great deal of tension" and "If I had a different job, my health would probably improve." Participants were asked to provide information using a 7-point scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, and higher scores indicate greater tension. The coefficient alpha reliability estimate was .80.

General anxiety. We measured respondents' anxiety using a scale developed by Lehrer and Woolfolk (1982). Using a 7-point format, with endpoints of *never* and *extremely often*, respondents indicated how often they feel the way the statement describes. This measure examines three dimensions of anxiety, specifically, somatic (16 items), cognitive (11 items), and behavioral (9 items). Because of the high multicollinearity of the dimensions, these dimensions were collapsed into one general anxiety measure. The coefficient alpha reliability estimates was .93.

Job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was measured using a three-item scale of the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979). A sample item is "All in all, I am satisfied with my job." The 7-point scale had a response format that ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The coefficient alpha reliability estimate was .76.

Control variables. To conduct a more conservative test of the hypothesis in this study, we controlled for several demographic characteristics: total years of work experience, age, gender, and education level. Furthermore, to make clear that political skill represents something beyond mere general self-efficacy, we statistically controlled for this construct. Respondents' general self-efficacy was measured with 10 items developed by Riggs, Warka, Babasa, Betancourt, and Hooker (1994). Using a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, respondents indicated the degree to which they possess confidence in their skills and abilities. Six items are reverse-coded, and higher scores indicate greater general self-efficacy. The coefficient alpha reliability estimate was .71.

Results

Dimensionality of Political Skill

Several studies have empirically validated the claim made by Ferris et al. (1999) that the six items developed to assess political skill were represented by a single dimension or factor (Ahearn et al., 2004; Ferris et al., 1999; Koldinsky, Hochwarter & Ferris, 2004). A principal-axis factor analysis was conducted, using the Kaiser-Guttman criterion (i.e., eigenvalues greater than 1.0) for factor retention, and unidimensionality was demonstrated (eigenvalue = 2.60; percentage of variance explained = 43.39%). Means, standard deviations, correlations, and coeffi-

cient alphas for the study variables are shown in Table 1.

Moderated Regression Results for Hypothesis Test

To test the hypothesis that the relationship between perceived role overload and strain is moderated by political skill (i.e., such that greater political skill reduces strain experienced because of overload), we centered variables and conducted moderated multiple regression analyses, with the control variables role overload (RO), political skill (PS), and the interaction term (RO × PS) entered for each of the three dependent variables. As can be seen in Tables 2 and 3, the interaction term significantly predicted job tension ($p < .05$), job satisfaction ($p < .05$), and general anxiety ($p < .05$) beyond the variance accounted for by the main effect and control variables. To conduct the most rigorous assessment of moderating effects of political skill, we repeated the moderated regression analysis, similar to Perrewé et al. (2004), this time examining the moderating role of general self-efficacy on the role overload–strain relationships, after controlling for political skill. The results of these analyses demonstrated that the Role Overload × General Self-Efficacy interaction term was not significant for any of the strain outcomes, thus revealing that it is political skill, and not self-efficacy, that triggers the neutralization of role overload as a stressor.

To examine the nature and form of the interactions more closely, we plotted them, using procedures by Aiken and West (1991). The interactions, graphically illustrated in Figures 1, 2, and 3, offer evidence across the criterion variables to support the hypothesis that political skill attenuates the negative effects of role overload. As can be seen, the negative effects of role overload are more dysfunctional for individuals low in political skill as compared with those high in political skill. These graphs depict the level of strain (i.e., job satisfaction, job tension, and general anxiety) under conditions of high versus low political skill and high versus low role overload. The graphs do not depict relationships over time. For example, Figure 1 graphically illustrates that the positive relationship between role overload and job tension increases at a higher rate for those low in political skill. A simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) was conducted on each relationship, at one standard deviation below and above the mean, using the low and high values of the moderator. The simple slopes were

Table 1

Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	38.60	9.00	—									
2. Gender	1.27	0.45	-.07	—								
3. Education	3.43	0.80	.21**	.29***	—							
4. Work experience	11.69	7.60	.58***	-.03	.05	—						
5. General self-efficacy	5.16	0.93	.19**	-.10	.11	.02	—					
6. Role overload	4.42	1.37	-.17**	.19**	.13*	-.12*	-.21**	(.64)	—			
7. Political skill	3.76	0.62	.03	.14*	.11*	.06	.29***	.07	(.71)	—		
8. General anxiety	3.06	0.93	.04	.20**	.09	.03	-.34***	.20**	-.25***	(.93)	—	
9. Job tension	3.64	1.30	.06	.12*	.09	.05	-.36***	.27***	-.14*	.62***	(.80)	—
10. Job satisfaction	5.66	1.22	.09	-.03	.02	-.04	.34***	-.15*	.27***	-.40***	-.47***	(.76)

Note. Listwise $N = 230$. Cronbach alphas are listed along the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Regression Analysis for Tension and Job Satisfaction

Variable	Job tension			Job satisfaction		
	β (Step 1)	β (Step 2)	β (Step 3)	β (Step 1)	β (Step 2)	β (Step 3)
Age	.13*	.15*	.14*	.09	.09	.11
Gender	.07	.06	.05	.02	.01	.01
Work experience	-.02	.01	.01	-.09	-.12	-.13*
Education	.08	.05	.06	-.03	-.03	-.04
General self-efficacy	-.39***	-.32***	-.31***	.34***	.25***	.24***
Role overload (RO)		.22**	.23***		-.11*	-.12*
Political skill (PS)		-.09	-.12*		.21**	.24***
RO \times PS			.12*			-.11*
<i>df</i>	5, 224	7, 222	8, 221	5, 224	7, 222	8, 221
<i>F</i>	8.56***	8.27***	7.79***	6.43***	6.54***	6.15***
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.14	.18	.19	.11	.15	.15
ΔR^2	.16***	.05**	.01*	.13***	.05**	.01*

Note. Significance levels reflect a one-tailed test.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

significantly different from zero for each outcome variable. Results for low and high values of the moderator were, respectively, job tension: $t = 2.59$, $p < .05$ and $t = 2.31$, $p < .05$; job satisfaction: $t = -1.88$, $p < .05$ and $t = -1.83$, $p < .05$; and general anxiety: $t = 2.24$, $p < .05$ and $t = 2.19$, $p < .05$. The degree of freedom is (8, 221) for all t tests.

Discussion

Job stressors and individual characteristics can interact to influence employees' psychological well-

being and job attitudes. Following Perrewé and colleagues (Perrewé et al., 2000, Perrewé et al., 2004), we identified an individual's political skill as an important moderator in the stressor-outcome relationship. Specifically, we hypothesized that political skill moderates the relationship between role overload and job tension, job dissatisfaction, and general anxiety.

As predicted, political skill attenuated the dysfunctional effects of role overload for three of the strain criterion measures. We believe these results contribute to the current body of research and provide interesting implications for practice. Below, we discuss the key contributions and limitations of the study, directions for future research, as well as its practical implications.

Table 3
Regression Analysis for General Anxiety

Variable	General anxiety		
	β (Step 1)	β (Step 2)	β (Step 3)
Age	.12	.10*	.10
Gender	.16**	.18**	.17**
Work experience	-.03	.01	.01
Education	.06	.05	.06
General self-efficacy	-.35***	-.26***	-.25***
Role overload (RO)		.15*	.17**
Political skill (PS)		-.22***	-.25***
RO \times PS			.13*
<i>df</i>	5, 224	7, 222	8, 221
<i>F</i>	8.59***	8.17***	4.51***
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.14	.19	.21
ΔR^2	.16***	.06**	.02*

Note. Significance levels reflect a one-tailed test.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Contributions to Theory and Research Directions

This study attempts to integrate political skill as providing a form of interpersonal control in Karasek's (1979) JD-C model. By doing so, the study makes several contributions to the literature. First, prior research (e.g., Parker & Sprigg, 1999; Parkes, 1991; Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997) has examined the moderating role of individual traits in the proposed relationships in the model. Our study extends this work by examining political skill as a different type of individual difference. By integrating individuals' perceived ability to control interpersonal interactions (i.e., political skill) into the JD-C model, this

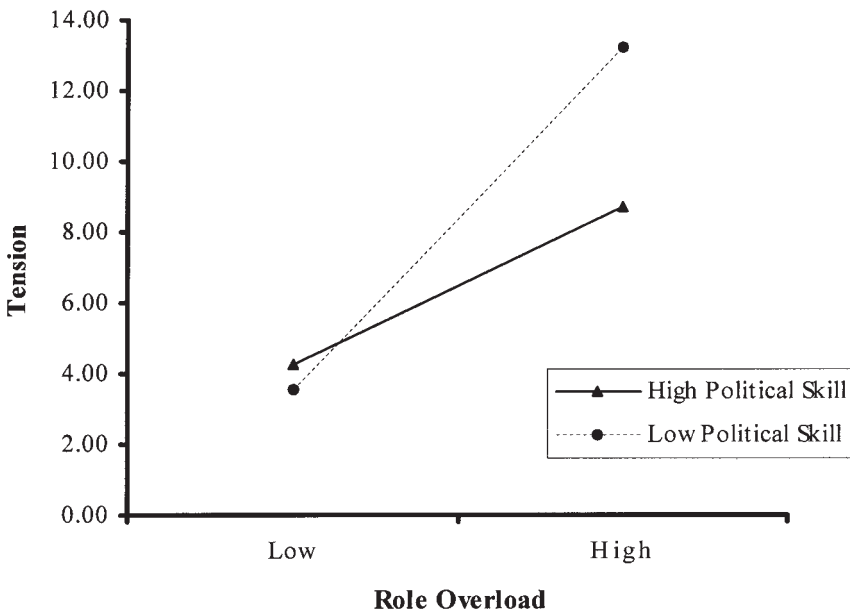


Figure 1. The moderating effect of political skill in the relationship between role overload and job tension.

study offers further insight as to why some individuals may perceive a demanding situation as a challenging job environment and, thus, do not exhibit typical strain reactions. This is important knowledge because political skill is a resource that can be developed, unlike personality traits (e.g., negative affectivity) known to affect strain, which are difficult, if not impossible, to change (Perrewé & Spector, 2002). Thus, political skill, as a unique type of coping resource that provides interpersonal control, deserves more research attention.

Second, by integrating political skill, this study provides support for the JD-C model as it applies to the context of interpersonal control. Prior research on the JD-C model has primarily focused on control provided to employees at the discretion of the organization. In comparison, researchers have neglected examining perceived interpersonal control as essential in coping with demands and accomplishing work goals. The results of this study suggest that political skill may provide individuals with the interpersonal control that may be utilized to address the negative influences of job stressors. In this light, our results are consistent with Parker and Sprigg (1999), who reported that the beliefs and actions taken by an individual with a proactive personality significantly influence strains predicted by the JD-C model.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the study need to be noted. First, although role overload has been well documented as a leading stressor, we examined only one stressor. To some extent, we were constrained by limitations imposed regarding the amount of data that could be collected. Furthermore, whereas our measure of role overload is widely used in stress research and the reliability of the measure was similar to the original reliability estimate (Seashore et al., 1982), it was not as high as we would have preferred. For future research, we recommend using a broader set of job stressor variables in conjunction with political skill and examining different types and measures of overload.

Another limitation is that because both political skill and social skill have their roots in the early work on social intelligence, there is some overlap between the two constructs. However, we see these as two distinct constructs with different derivations and uniqueness in their own right. The six-item measure used in this study should be viewed as only preliminary and should be developed further to better differentiate political skill from social skill.

A third limitation is that our measure of political skill relied exclusively on self-reports, which raises

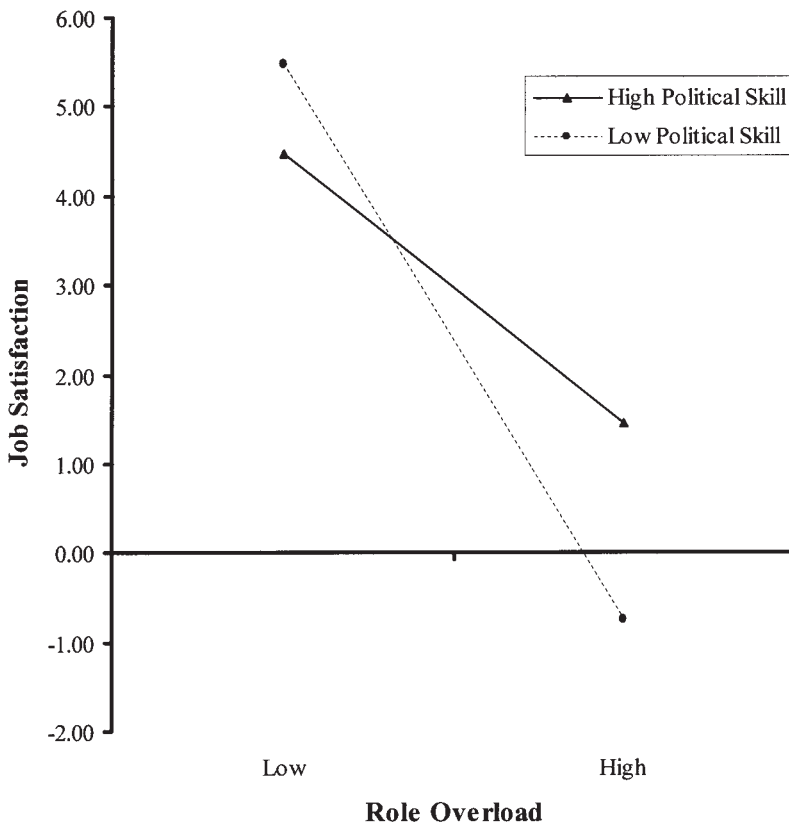


Figure 2. The moderating effect of political skill in the relationship between role overload and job satisfaction.

two potential concerns. One issue is that our reliance on self-report data raises the possibility that common method variance may artificially inflate the relationships noted here. However, we attempted to minimize potential method variance effects by separating by 1 week the data collection of the control and independent variables from the data collection of the dependent variables. James, Gent, Hater, and Corey (1979) noted that claims of common method variance are potentially problematic only if there appears to be a general and pervasive influence that is operating systematically to spuriously inflate observed relationships. Observation of the correlation matrix identifies a number of significant correlations between study variables. However, as shown in Table 1, there does not appear to be an overwhelming number of correlations that one would consider high given the theoretically proposed relationships outlined earlier.

A second issue pertaining to the use of a self-report

measure of political skill relates to the inherent questions raised about construct validity. Although this is a very early point in the development and evolution of the political skill measure, and more definitive determinations of construct validity necessarily wait the test of time and future empirical studies, we provide two types of evidence currently that the self-report political skill measure is not reflective of self-serving bias and does covary with other assessments of the construct. The self-serving bias issue is addressed by the program of research on political skill, and the phases of development of the scale used to measure it, reported by Ferris and his colleagues (Ferris et al., 1999; Ferris et al., 2005). Developed and validated across more than five samples, they reported zero correlations between the self-reported political skill score and a measure of social desirability. The “other” assessment relationship with self-reported political skill was addressed recently by

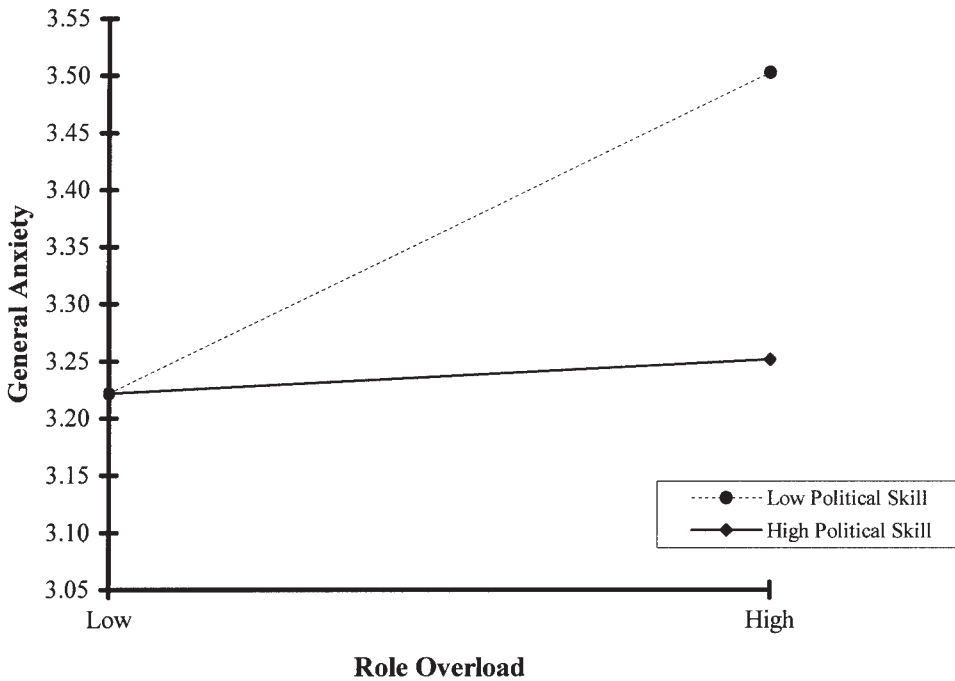


Figure 3. The moderating effect of political skill in the relationship between role overload and general anxiety.

Semadar (2004). He collected self-reported political skill data (using the Ferris et al. measure) as well as political skill assessments about those individuals reported by their supervisors. The correlation between the self- and other-reported measures of political skill was statistically significant ($r = .36, p < .01$). Although we are not arguing for supervisory or other assessments of the target person's political skill to replace self-assessments of political skill, it is clear that there is significant overlap.

Furthermore, and of some concern, are the effect sizes observed in this research. Although the variances explained by the role overload and political skill interaction for the outcomes in this investigation were small (1%–2%), these effect sizes are within the 1%–3% range of effect sizes typically observed for moderator effects tested on field survey data (McClelland & Judd, 1993). In addition, statistically significant moderator effects are quite difficult to detect with field survey data, and it has been suggested that statistically significant moderator effects in field studies be considered important, even if they explain as little as 1% of the variance observed (McClelland & Judd, 1993). Finally, we relied on self-report mea-

asures of political skill. Future research that uses an assessment of an individual's political skill by peers or supervisors should be able to provide more objective insights into the construct.

Practical Implications

Karasek's (1979) seminal piece on job demands and control and numerous empirical studies indicate that if workers feel some control over their environment, they are likely to feel less stress associated with demand overload. Based on Karasek's model, organizations have been advised to engage in job redesign, empowerment, and increased participation in decision making to increase amounts of control provided to workers. Yet, all these practices are limited in their assumption that individuals perceive and react to management practices similarly. Therefore, organizations need to focus not only on the objective control that is made possible by management practices but also on the subjective, interpersonal control that is perceived by individual employees.

The results of this study suggest a way for organizations to facilitate employees' subjective sense of

interpersonal control, that is, to enhance their political skill. A number of process-focused training programs have been proposed to develop employees' political skill, ranging from drama-based training, developmental simulations, to behavior modeling (Ferris, Anthony, Kolodinsky, Gilmore, & Harvey, 2002). Such training and development efforts are complex and require careful monitoring and evaluation. Nevertheless, once they are successfully implemented, they may contribute to an increased sense of interpersonal control, thus mitigating feelings of anxiety, tension, and job dissatisfaction.

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