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Is Political Skill "The New Black?"

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Abstract:

Political skill, an individual's ability to understand and motivate others in a work environment, has been a prevalent topic among organizational researchers over the past decade. This study aims to determine whether political skill has an attenuating effect on role overload in an efficient job environment.

Over the past decade, political skill has become a hot topic among researchers. Political skill is defined as "the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ferris et al., 2007). According to recent research, individuals who possess political skill are more likely to experience higher job satisfaction and less physiological strain than their coworkers (Munyon et al., 2015). However, no research has been done on whether political skill can alleviate the negative impact of role overload in the relationship between job efficiency and job satisfaction. Furthermore, the relationship between political skill and psychological strain equivocates, suggesting the presence of additional boundary conditions in this relationship. In this thesis, I consider political skill as a moderator of the relationship between job efficiency and job strain. Although job efficiency is commonly sought by organizations because of its positive impacts on productivity, ever-increasing demands for efficiency theoretically represent a stressor on employees because of their effects on role demands. Thus, my thesis asks the following question: *Does political skill help individuals manage the role requirements of their work, lessening the negative impact of greater efficiency and resulting in lower job tension?* To test this question, I incorporated a field-study survey of employed adults from a wide variety of occupations.

Job Tension

In previous research, job tension measures the extent subjects are bothered by stressful conditions (Bohan, 1990: Steffy et al., 1990). This is related to, but different than, the extent individuals perceive stress in their work (Macon, 1994). Job tension has been included in many studies of the workplace as an element of the stress phenomenon (see a review by Klenke-Hamel, 1990).

Job tension and dissatisfaction have been consistently found to be related to role stresses and to one another (e.g , Lyons, 1971; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Job tension scales, however, are predominantly composed of items that measure the extent to which respondents are "bothered" by role stressors, including ambiguity and conflict (Kahn et al., 1964; Indik, Seashore, & Slesmger, 1964; Lyons, 1971). Because of this conceptual and operational overlap between role stresses and job tension, it is not surprising that role stresses are strongly related to job tension scales. This, combined with the assumption that dissatisfaction is a causal outcome of role stresses, means it is possible that job tension and satisfaction are not psychological strains that simultaneously result from the social or work role, but are directly and causally related to one another within the social context (Bateman & Strasser 1983).

Job Efficiency

While job efficiency is generally considered a desired trait for managers, recent research has discovered a possible trade-off between job efficiency and job satisfaction. Work design remains important as organizations strain to achieve multiple outcomes, such as efficiency and satisfaction, for employees. There are four widely recognized models of work design: mechanistic, motivational, perceptual, and biological. Perhaps the most obvious trade-off occurs between the mechanistic and motivational models of work design (Campion, 1988; Campion & McClelland, 1991, 1993; Campion & Thayer, 1985). The mechanistic model originated in industrial engineering and encourages specialization, specification, and repetition, while the motivational model is founded in organizational psychology and supports variety, autonomy, and participation (369).   Campion et al. found that following the motivational model can increase satisfaction but reduce efficiency, whereas following the mechanistic model can increase efficiency but reduce satisfaction (Campion et al., 1993).

Recent research on job redesign shows that while several work redesign practices increase job satisfaction, they can also negatively affect employee health. Often, enriched jobs require employees to exert themselves further, requiring more difficult and time consuming work while investing personal responsibility. Strain, effort, fatigue, and overload are common results (Campion & McClelland, 1991, 1993). Redesigning jobs to make them more challenging and stimulating for employees can not only increase job satisfaction, but also physical strain (Campion & Mc-Clelland, 1993).

Hypothesis 1: There is a negative relationship between job efficiency and tension.

Role Overload

Role overload exists in the workplace when an individual has too many tasks or assignments to complete and not enough time to meet these demands (Coverman 1989). Unlike role conflict, which occurs when an individual attempts to fulfill multiple roles at once and the demands from each role clash, role overload pressures the individual to choose which demands to meet. This often results in an unsatisfactory completion of those tasks deemed less important (Hecht 2001). Role overload leads to role conflict only when the demands of one of the multiple roles make it difficult to fulfill the demands of another role. Role overload more likely leads to role conflict in a situation in which no alternative mechanisms exist to help persons fulfill adequately their various roles (Coverman 1989). Role overload is a very prevalent, complex form of conflict that combines "aspects of person-role and inter-sender conflicts" (Kahn et al., 1964). Overall, as a form of person–role conflict, role overload amounts to a perception that role demands are overwhelming relative to available resources. In complex task environments, such as in boundary spanning roles, role overload is also frequently manifested as a form of inter-sender conflict, in which individuals are expected to meet the expectations of multiple role

senders (House, 1980; Kahn et al., 1964; Singh, 2000). Whereas any one of these expectations might be reasonable by itself, collectively, they require more than the individual's available resources to satisfy (Kahn et al., 1964). Although role overload may be regarded as a threat because it represents an overwhelming demand on employees that exceeds their abilities or coping resources, it can also result from employees taking on more responsibilities or challenging tasks in order to develop or grow (Gilboa et al., 2008).

Previous research has linked role overload to increased psychological strain (French & Caplan, 1972) as well as greater emotional exhaustion and burnout (Cordes, Dougherty, & Blum, 1997). A study conducted by Shultz, Wang, and Olson, found a high correlation between role overload and several detrimental physical health outcomes, including conditions such as stress, overall fatigue, backache, and sleeping problems (Shultz et al., 2009). A separate study conducted by Jones discovered that role overload derails effective self-regulation and goal pursuit by attenuating positive antecedent effects and breaking the linkages of self-efficacy and goal level to performance (Jones & Leigh, 2005).

> *Hypothesis 3:* Role overload moderates the relationship between job efficiency and job tension such that job tension increases when role overload is high and job tension decreases when role overload is low.

Political Skill

Although organizational politics have intrigued scholars for decades, not much was known about competencies individuals use to navigate politics in the workplace until a few decades ago. The term "political skill" was first introduced to scholarly literature by Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983), who advocated a political perspective on organizations and identified political skill as necessary for individuals working in political environments to be

effective. No additional research on political skill was conducted until a decade ago, when Ferris and his colleagues established a program of research aimed at understanding and measuring political skill as a social construct (Ferris et al., 1999; Ferris, Treadway, et al., 2005).

According to Ferris, Treadway et al., 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" (2005). Ferris et al. went on to characterize political skill as "a comprehensive pattern of social competencies, with cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations, which have both direct effects on outcomes, as well as moderating effects on predictor–outcome relationships"(2007). Individuals with political skill possess a unique social perceptiveness and are able to modify their behaviors to different and changing situational needs (Ferris et al., 1999, 2005). Ferris and colleagues established the four dimensions of political skill, which remain distinct constructs while relating to each other: apparent sincerity, social astuteness, interpersonal influence, and networking ability (Ferris, Treadway et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2007).

Munyon et al. extended the meta-theoretical framework established by Ferris et al. and found through meta-analysis that political skill is positively related to self-efficacy, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work productivity, organizational citizenship behavior, career success, and personal reputation, and negatively related to physiological strain (2015). Ferris et al. argued that politically skilled individuals experience personal security and self-confidence in their work environments, resulting in reduced stress and strain at work (1999). In a recent study, Perrewe et. al found that political skill moderates the relationship between role overload and job tension, job dissatisfaction, and general anxiety (2005).

Hypothesis 4: Political skill attenuates the negative effect of role overload in the job

efficiency / job tension relationship.

Theory

Since individuals with political skill are able to gain a deeper understanding of their

coworkers, they can influence others to behave in ways that accomplish their own personal or

organizational goals. By influencing others' behavior, politically skilled individuals can

experience a sense of control over their coworkers. Ferris et al. theorized that politically skilled

individuals are aware of their ability to understand others and knowingly influence over others

and as feel self-confidence as well as personal security as a result (1999). For individuals with

high political skill, these feelings of self-confidence and control over others decrease feelings of

anxiety and job-related stress (Perrewé, 2000). Previous research by Perrewé et al. found that

high-political-skill individuals see interpersonal interactions as opportunities, while low-

political-skill individuals see these interactions as threats. High-political-skill individuals also

interpret environmental stimuli differently than their peers. (Ferris et al., 1999; Perrewé et al.,

2000).

Although political skill can influence individuals' interactions with a variety of stressors,

this study examines job efficiency as a stressor and the attenuation of political skill in a

relationship between job efficiency and job tension moderated by role overload. Traditional work

redesign approaches aim to make jobs more efficient, as higher efficiency results in higher

productivity. Specifically, the mechanistic model from classic industrial engineering advises

simplification and specification and has the intended benefits of human resource efficiencies

such as easier staffing and training. Jobs that are designed to make employees more efficient may

eliminate resources that assist employees in doing their jobs, resulting in additional stress. The

Job Characteristics Model, developed by Hackman and Oldham, suggests that tasks can be enriched to provide greater skill variety, task significance, task identity, autonomy, and feedback (1980). Enhancing jobs by adding skill variety, task significance, and task identity allows employees to attach meaning to their work, while autonomy gives employees a sense of personal responsibility and feedback immediately lets employees to see the results of their work (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). According to Fried and Ferris, tasks that enable employees to experience feelings of meaningfulness, responsibility, and knowledge of results also results in higher levels of job satisfaction (Fried & Ferris, 1987). Unfortunately, employees may also experience negative effects from these additional tasks. Taking on more personal responsibility for their work can lead employees to feel overwhelmed, while completing more challenging and time-consuming tasks can make employees more prone to stress in the form of strain and fatigue (Campion & McClelland, 1991, 1993).

When employees experience continuous exposure to stress and strain, job tension is often a result. According to Lusch and Serpkenci, job tension is an affective state that occurs when individuals perceive negative consequences associated with a job and work environment (Lusch & Serpkenci, 1990). If an individual experiences strain as a result of job requirements, he or she will begin to associate strain with the job and work environment and attach negative consequences to the job. Specific aspects of enriched jobs, such as increased personal responsibility, can lead to job tension. Requiring employees to maintain a higher level of accountability for their actions may cause anxiety, conflict, and overload (Frink & Klimoski, 1998, 2004).

Previous research has discovered that political skill may have a significant influence on stressor-strain relationships. Political skill can determine how individuals interpret stress and

strain in a work environment. According to Perrewé et al., there exists an inverse relationship between political skill and anxiety. Individuals with high political skill should sense fewer stressors at work. When these individuals do experience stressors at work, these stressors are less likely to result in dysfunctional consequences. (Perrewé et al., 2000). A study conducted by Munyon et al. found that political skill is negatively related to physiological strain (Munyon et al., 2015). Further research conducted by Perrewé and colleagues, political skill neutralizes the negative effects of role conflict on strain and also moderates the relationship between role overload and strain (Perrewé et al., 2004, 2005). Since political skill lessens the stress and strain caused by role conflict and role overload in these relationships, it is reasonable to conclude it may also attenuate the negative effects that result from experiencing role overload in an efficient job environment.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

Students at a mid-Atlantic high-intensity research university were asked to solicit participation from employed adults working at least thirty hours per week. This approach is used to produce generalizable data from working adults (Hochwarter, 2014), and evidence suggests that student-recruited samples provide reliable data comparable in quality to other sources (Wheeler, Shanine, Leon, & Whitman, 2014). Students received extra-credit for referring participants. In Time 1, students provided demographic data and political skill estimates. In Time 2, the referred participants were contacted by the primary researcher via email and asked to participate in a short survey, including demographic variables (for matching and quality control) and measurement of the focal variables. Participants were on average 41.72 years of age (SD = 15.15), 45% female, with an average position tenure of 12.87 years (SD = 14.09). The sample

also included a wide representation of job roles, including clerical workers (6%), educational professionals (14%), engineering professionals (3%), entertainment professionals (4%), financial services professionals (17%), healthcare professionals (17%), sales (12%), skilled trades professionals (3%), operations professionals (6%), law professionals (5%), information technology professionals (3%), and professionals from other industries (10%). Before analyzing data, quality control checks were conducted on all responses to ensure the data were independent. First, IP addresses and location of respondents were checked. In seven instances, matching IP addresses were found. We contacted these participants to ensure that individuals had conducted the survey as reported. We also contacted a randomly-selected subsample of 36 participants (35%) to ensure they had completed the survey. In each instant, respondents confirmed their participation.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, scale responses ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Scale reliability estimates are shown in Table 1. ***Job Efficiency***. Job efficiency was measured using the scale from Campion (1988). A sample item is, "My job is designed such that work is done in the most economical way possible." ***Political Skill***. Political skill was measured using the scale from Ferris, Witt, and Hochwarter (2001). Example items are, "I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others" and "In social situations, it is always clear to me exactly what to say and do." ***Workload***. Workload was measured using a 3-item scale from House, McMichael, Wells, Kaplan, and Landerman (1979). The scale frequency was anchored from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Nearly All the Time). Items include, "How often does your job require you to work very fast?," "How often does your job require you to work very hard?," and "How often does your job leave you with little time to get everything done?." ***Job***

Tension. Job tension was measured using the 7-item scale from House and Rizzo (1972). An example item is, "I work under a great deal of tension." ***Controls***. This investigation also included a number of control variables to maximize external generalizability of the findings. First, we controlled respondent age using the item, "What is your age in years." We also controlled for gender using the item, "What is your gender?" where Male (1) and Female (2) were possible responses. This thesis also controlled for factors influencing the external generalizability of results. Specifically, it controlled for the ability of the subject to perform the tasks. Performance ability was measured using a new unidimensional scale with the items, "I have received sufficient training to do my job," "I rarely have doubts about how to do my job," and "I fully understand how to do my job."

Data Analyses and Results

All scales exhibited acceptable levels of internal reliability according to established heuristics, and items were then aggregated to the scale level. The hypothesis was then tested using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2014). Hypothesis 1 predicted that workload would moderate the relationship between job efficiency and job tension, and that political skill would attenuate this impact of workload, such that politically skilled individuals experienced lower levels of job tension. Support was not found for Hypothesis 1; although, several of the study constructs predicted job tension. Specifically, workload was a significant positive predictor of job tension (β = .58, p = .02), while performance ability was a significant negative effect on job tension (β = -.22, p = .00). In total, the research model explained 31.72% of the variance in respondent job tension. Results of the regression analyses are found in Table 2.

Table 1. Study Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	41.73	15.15	1							
2. Gender	1.46	.50	.07	1						
3. Position Tenure	12.87	14.09	.07	.22*	1					
4. Performance Ability	5.54	1.40	.08	.17	.07	1				
5. Political Skill	4.09	.58	.09	-.07	.03	-.11	1			
6. Job Efficiency	3.32	.83	.00	-.01	-.06	.38**	-.01	1		
7. Workload	3.97	.70	.01	.16	-.01	.17	-.05	.08	1	
8. Job Tension	2.87	.87	.15	.06	-.04	-.24*	.03	-.01	.43**	1

* Correlation is significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (2-tailed).
** Correlation is significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed).
$n = 102\text{-}103$
Scale reliability estimates presented on diagonal as appropriate

Table 2. Regression Analyses

Model	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	4.44	2.10	2.11	0.04	0.26	8.62
Political Skill	-0.81	0.48	-1.68	0.10	-1.76	0.15
Job Efficiency	-0.96	0.60	-1.61	0.11	-2.15	0.23
Interaction 1	0.25	0.14	1.79	0.08	-0.03	0.53
Workload	0.59	0.11	5.42	0.00	0.37	0.80
Performance Ability	-0.22	0.06	-3.63	0.00	-0.34	-0.10
Age	0.01	0.00	1.85	0.07	0.00	0.02
Gender	0.04	0.15	0.24	0.81	-0.27	0.34
Position Tenure	0.00	0.01	-0.52	0.60	-0.01	0.01

R	R-sq		F	df1	df2	
0.565	0.3193	5.3	932	8	92	

Interaction 1 = Political Skill X Workload

Discussion

According to the data, role overload does not moderate the relationship between job efficiency and job tension. Political skill does not lessen the negative effects of role overload, resulting in lower job tension. It appears that workers do not actually view job efficiency as a workplace stressor. Power may be a limiting factor in this study since the interaction was marginally significant (p < .10). While this sample did not support the proposed interaction between political skill and role overload on the relationship between job efficiency and job

strain, a larger sample size may have resulted in a statistically significant interaction. Although both the student and the adult were asked to provide estimates of political skill, involving others in the evaluation process, such as coworkers, could provide a more accurate view of the adults' political skill.

However, this study did contribute to previous research on role overload and its effects on job tension as well as performance ability. Role overload can significantly increase the amount of tension employees experience at work, while performance ability can lessen this tension. This information does provide useful implications for managers. To lessen the tension employees feel at work, managers can make sure that they are not experiencing role overload. This can be done by asking employees whether they have enough time to finish all of their assignments or by managing the number of assignments each employee has to complete. Employees who have higher levels of performance ability may be more equipped to handle job related strain. If a position has the potential to be stressful, hiring candidates with higher performance ability may be a solution.

Future research should explore these connections further. If this study was conducted on a larger sample size, political skill might be proven to attenuate role overload in an efficient job environment. There may be other skills and personality traits that can alleviate or lessen the effect of role overload in an efficient job setting. Political skill may also be proven to alleviate the negative effects of other specific workplace stressors. Furthermore, political skill may decrease physiological job strain in different types of job environments.

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