

Peeling Back the Association between Salesperson Political Skill and Salesperson Performance: Evidence from the Pharmaceutical Sector

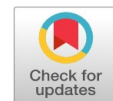
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Abstract: Existing literature on the association between salesperson personality and salesperson performance is, at best, unequivocal. This research introduces a relatively less explored personality trait (i.e., political skill) to explore additional variance in sales performance and settle inconsistencies in existing findings. Building on the conversation of the resource theory, this research proposes that frontline sales employees' political skill influences employees' sales performance, ultimately contributing to the firm's performance. The hypotheses nexuses are tested using data of 253 frontline sales employees working with national and multinational pharmaceutical firms. A paper and pencil method were used to collect data, in a two-month time interval, from the frontline sales employees. The result indicates that political skill influence frontline employees' sales performance, such that the sales employees with high political skill can not only understand the tacit needs of customers but such salespeople also effectively communicate and coordinate with internal customers, which complements salesperson while approaching their current and potential customers. These findings confirm the existing literature on political skill and also extend the concept in sales and sales management literature. Besides theoretical contributions, our study also offers insights for effective managerial interventions, particularly for employees and managers working in pharmaceutical firms. Caveats, along with future directions, are also outlined.

Keywords: COR theory, Sales employees, Political skill, Sales performance

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INTRODUCTION

Fulcrum to the growth, salesforce is regarded as one of the indispensable (David, Brennecke, & Rank, 2020; Katsikeas, Auh, Spyropoulou, & Menguc, 2018) and costliest resources to maintain (Hamdan, Bashir, & Cheaitou, 2021; Zoltners & Sinha, 2005). The sales profession is expected to face higher growth in successive decades. The need for an effective and vigilant workforce to navigate the sales transaction in the organization's favor is escalating (Hartmann, Wieland, & Vargo, 2018; Rodriguez & Boyer, 2020; Steward, Walker, Hutt, & Kumar, 2010). Including fortune 100, firms across the globe have allocated their budget's lion share - \$800 billion - to salesforce development (Inyang & Jaramillo, 2020; Zoltners, Sinha, & Lorimer, 2012). Considering the salient role of sales employee performance, scholars have outlined the individual level livers/skills that are pivotal for sales performance (Kalra, Agnihotri, Chaker, Singh, & Das, 2017). Such as adaptive selling (Charoensukmongkol, 2020), proactive listening (Bachrach, Ogilvie, Rapp, & Calamusa, 2016), emotional intelligence (Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, & Sheng, 2011), and customer-oriented selling (Schwepker Jr, 2003). Despite significant investments and a myriad of research on sales and sales force management, prior findings are at best unequivocal (Katsikeas et al., 2018; Vieira, de Negreiros, Agnihotri, & Bakeshloo, 2021) and contradictory (Cron, Marshall, Singh, Spiro, & Sujana, 2005; G. R. Franke & Park, 2006) and disappointing such that they explained only 10 to 15% of sales performance (Evans, McFarland, Dietz, & Jaramillo, 2012; Plouffe, 2018). Moreover, surprisingly, political skill has yet to receive attention in the sales literature. Only countable studies, with equivocal findings, have investigated the association between political skill and sales performance (Bolander, Saturnino, Hughes, & Ferris, 2015; Kalra et al., 2017; Munyon et al., 2021).

To advance this line of research, grounding upon the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018), the present study will use 'political skill' a highly a germane construct which is defined as "the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such

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knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" Ferris, Perrew, Anthony, and Gilmore (2003) to explain variance in salesperson performance for several reasons. First, political skill -mushroomed in management and organizational behavior literature-is high rated skill of the complex and chaotic times (Ferris et al., 2008; Munyon, Summers, Thompson, & Ferris, 2015), such as selling in the modern era. Second, Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983, 1985) have long ago explained that political skill enables an individual to secure resources and effectively influence others. Third, individuals high on this political skill, able to quickly recognize, comprehend the subtle and hidden intentions of the other party and accordingly influence them by modifying their behavior (Zettler & Lang, 2015). Forth, though salesperson's such influential tactics remained important, but still under-investigated (Evans et al., 2012) and need reexamination (Plouffe, 2018). It follows that a salesperson's success meaningfully depends on an individual's competence, such as political skill (Blickle, Oerder, & Summers, 2010). This implies the ability of the politically skilled salesperson to effectively adjust their behaviors according to the external stimuli, apparent sincerity, and strong networks all around (Ferris, Kane, Summers, & Munyon, 2011) will favorably impact their sales performance (Bolander et al., 2015; Kalra et al., 2017; Karim, Nisa, & Imam, 2021).

In sum, this study aims to fulfill the three objectives and contributes to several streams of literature. Primarily, the study will try to explain the additional variance in sales performance, which is still unclear and at best equivocal (Evans et al., 2012; Hartmann et al., 2018; Katsikeas et al., 2018; Kuvaas, Buch, & Dysvik, 2016) fulfill (Plouffe & Barclay, 2007). Secondly, the study aims to investigate the role of political skill and sales performance empirically. In so doing, our study enhances the nomological network of antecedents of sales performance (Kalra et al., 2017; Munyon et al., 2021), mainly working in the pharmaceutical sector (Ellinger, Ketchen Jr, Hult, Elmadağ, & Richey Jr, 2008). Moreover, investigating political skill as an antecedent of sales performance study also enhances the nomological network of outcomes of political skill (Munyon et al., 2015; Summers, Munyon, Brouer, Pahng, & Ferris, 2020). By highlighting the pivotal and crucial role of a salesperson's political skill, this study offers valuable insights to a salesperson, sales managers, policymakers, and sales organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political skill and Sales performance

In today's changing market landscape, the salesperson has become even more critical for an organization's success (Abeysekera & Wickramasinghe, 2013). Continuation to this, Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1979) has long defined sales performance as "behavior that has been evaluated in terms of its contribution to the goals of the organization." Scholars have persuasively linked a salesperson's performance with his/her achievement of sales target in juxtaposition to their counterparts (Babakus, Cravens, Grant, Ingram, & LaForge, 1996; Cravens, Ingram, LaForge, & Young, 1993). In contrast to the traditional sales force, now salesperson operates in an unprecedented selling environment, with growing customer expectations, hyper-competition, and disrupting technological era (Dixon & Tanner Jr, 2012; Schwepker Jr & Good, 2010). Resultantly, salesperson, on the one hand, have to navigate long sales calls in nexus buyer-seller interface (Bradford et al., 2010; Cespedes, 2014; Stevens & Kinni, 2006), and on the other hand, have to effectively maintain the strategic role of "decision-maker" (Bonney, Plouffe, & Brady, 2016; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). As a result, Dixon and Tanner Jr (2012) have redefined the sales job as "Sales is the phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals/organizations to bring about economic exchange within a value-creation context." Hence, the salesperson needs to actively manage a portfolio of relationships to navigate the sales call and close the transaction in the organization's favor; various studies have thoroughly investigated and identified different determinants of sales performance. In their seminal work, Churchill Jr et al., (1985) found that skill-related factors significantly impact salesperson performance. Amongst other, interpersonal skills are recognized as pivotal for salesperson performance (Kalra et al., 2017; Katsikeas et al., 2018). Fairly recently, Herjanto and Franklin (2019) avers that salesperson's skills will have a promising impact on their performance. For decades, scholars remained interested in identifying the association between individual traits and h/her performance (Arndt, Arnold, & Landry, 2006; Evans et al., 2012; Gabler, Vieira, Senra, & Agnihotri, 2019; Plouffe, 2018). Additionally, dynamic working structures emphasize the need to investigate interpersonal skills that may strengthen individuals to navigate the organization's social fabric (Grant, Fried, Parker, & Frese, 2010).

In continuation to this line of argument, based on several reasons, we believe that a particular proactive skill

such as 'Political Skill' will guarantee higher sales performance in modern times (Dixon, Spiro, & Jamil, 2001). Sales jobs are now more complex than in the recent past. Mintzberg (1983) have long ago indicated the importance of political skill, enabling them to gain resources and influence others to ensure effectiveness through interpersonal shrewdness. Ferris et al. (2005) have outlined the 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." Political skill is a multidimensional construct that encompasses apparent sincerity, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and, importantly, social astuteness (Ferris et al., 2003, 2007), also viewed as individuals' social effectiveness (Munyon et al., 2015). Scholars Bing, Davison, Minor, Novicevic, and Frink (2011) have endorsed the positive association between political skill and task performance. Literature in modern times has loudly pronounced that political skill is the prerequisite of success (Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, & Munyon, 2012).

In a hyper-competitive environment, the behavioral adaptability of the salesperson is one of the fundamental components of effective selling; politically skilled individuals can easily adjust their behaviors (Ferris et al., 2012). Additionally, an effective salesperson must have the ability to diagnose the customer stated and unstated demands, and political skill helps the salesperson to do it quickly (Ferris et al., 2007). Furthermore, through apparent sincerity and networking ability, the salesperson will be able to maintain long term relationships with the customer, build customer trust (Atuahene-Gima & Li, 2002), satisfaction (Gomez, McLaughlin, & Wittink, 2004), and loyalty (Román, 2003) which are the critical success factors, of modern times (Dixon & Tanner Jr, 2012; Hartmann et al., 2018; Plouffe, 2018). Therefore, based on COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018; Tett & Burnett, 2003), it is argued that politically skilled salespeople can invest their resources to interpret and access the cues of customers and tailor their behavior accordingly, and gain resources to effectively close transaction in organization's favor. Thus, it is evident that politically skilled salespeople can have good relational ties with customers and have rewarding collation and alliances that will explain additional variance in salesperson performance.

H1: Political skill is positively related to front-line employees' sales performance.

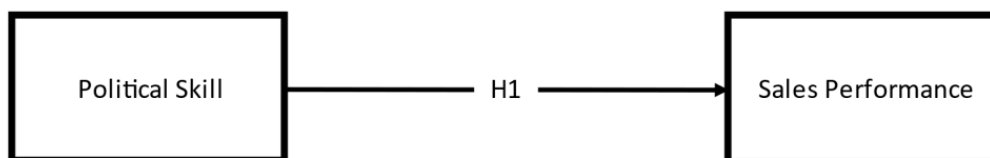


Figure 1: Research framework

METHODS

Sample and Procedure

We collected data from the frontline sales employees working in pharmaceutical firms to examine the model's hypothesized nexus. The sales employees of this sector are responsible for account opening, business development, and selling different products and services as per the need of potential clients (Ellinger et al., 2008). Our specific unit of analysis is the frontline sales employees of twin cities. Following Brislin (1970) back-translation procedure, the Urdu version of the questionnaire was used to collect the data using the paper and pencil method. With the personal and professional links of the first author with the regional managers, the final instrument was distributed to the 300 frontline sales employees. To eliminate Common Method Bias (CMB), the authors managed to collect the data from respondents in time lags of two months intervals (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). The two-month time lag is more appropriate to avoid the potential threat of CMB (Peng, 2013) and other contaminating factors (Anser, Shafique, Usman, Akhtar, & Ali, 2021), as it is neither too long nor too short. Scholars aver that the longer intervals between the data collection rounds may be prone to various factors that may contaminate the data collection exercise and the results (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Similarly, respondents can quickly recall the previous responses in too short intervals, which may not help to avoid the CMB (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). Thus, the two-months lag was deemed more appropriate for data collection.

Additionally, as data regarding the variable of interest of the study were collected from the single sources (i.e., frontline sales employees), the study also tested the full collinearity method as suggested by [Kock and Lynn \(2012\)](#) to identify any potential issue of CMB. In this method, all variables are regressed against the common variable, and the value of $VIF \leq 3.3$ indicates that the single-source data is free from any bias. Results in [Table 1](#) indicate that all the values of VIF are less than the cutoff value of 3.3, confirming that the data of the study is free from biases and suitable for further statistical analysis. Data about demographic variables and political skill was collected in the first round (i.e., T1). Responses about sales performance were collected in the second round (i.e., T2). Data were matched using the six-digit unique codes (e.g., SS1010) assigned to every survey instrument before the data collection exercises.

Table 1: Full collinearity testing

PS	SP
2.259	2.481

Note: PS = Political Skill, SP = Sales Performance

Specifically, in the first round, a survey envelope that encompasses a questionnaire and an information sheet containing a promise of confidentiality and the purpose of the present work were distributed to 300 sales employees with the help of distribution managers. After sending two reminders every two weeks apart, we received 283 completed questionnaires in the first round. In the second round, 283 enveloped survey questionnaires of sales performance were sent to the sales employees, and we received 267 completed responses in the second round. In each round, the study also includes two basic arithmetic questions as an attention check item.

The initial screening of data revealed that six responses have 50 percent of missing values, which were excluded from the data set. Similarly, eight respondents have failed to follow the instruction of attention check items, thus received the same treatment and were excluded from the final survey. Thus, the final sample of the study consisted of 253 observations with an 84% response rate. Out of the total 253 respondents, were 72% male, and 68% were at least 35 years old. About two-thirds had earned their intermediate degree, and their selling experience ranged from six months to seven years, with a mean of three years.

Measures

Measures of this study were adopted from the published literature and, in some cases, were adapted to fit the contextual requirement of the study and were ranged on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 indicates complete disagreement and 5 indicates high agreement with the statement.

Political Skill

Political skill is measured with an 18 item scale developed by a scale developed by [Ferris et al. \(2003\)](#). The scale was found reliable as Cronbach's alpha value of 0.81. For example, "I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others" was a sample item.

Sales performance

Six items scale of [Behrman and Perreault Jr \(1982\)](#) was adopted to measure the self-rated sales performance of sales employees. Prior scholars have also utilized the self-reported subjective evaluation of sales performance (see. [\(Agnihotri, Vieira, Senra, & Gabler, 2016\)](#)). The Cronbach's alpha value of 0.81, indicating the reliability of the scale. "I produce a high market share for my company in my territory" was a sample item.

Control variables

Prior studies indicate that age, gender, experience, and education can influence sales performance ([Kalra et al., 2017](#); [Peterson, 2020](#)); thus these variables were controlled.

Analysis and results

Data in survey research are often not normally distributed ([Memon, Ting, Ramayah, Chuah, & Cheah, 2017](#)); therefore, in the present study, authors used the Partial Least Squares (PLS) modeling technique which does not demand the normal distribution of data. Specifically, in the study, we employed the second-generation analysis

software (i.e., SmartPLS 3.2.8) to examine the measurement and structural model of the study. Smart pls can be best suited to test the more parsimonious yet complex models with the latent variables. Thus, grounding upon the recommendation to use 2 step approach to examine the model. In this study, we initially examined the measurement model to test the validity and reliability of the instruments based upon guidelines of [Hair, Sarstedt, and Ringle \(2019\)](#) and [Ramayah, Cheah, Chuah, Ting, and Memon \(2018\)](#). Then, hypotheses were examined using the structural model.

Measurement model

A measurement model is used to establish the convergent and discriminant validity of the study. In this study, we first examined the loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and the composite reliability to assess the convergent validity of the study. According to the literature, loading should be ≥ 0.5 , AVE should be ≥ 0.5 , and CR should be above equal or greater than 0.7. Our results (see Table 2) indicate that all the values are greater than the baseline criteria. Table 2 indicates that the loading of each item is above 0.708 ([Hair, Risher, et al., 2019](#)). Moreover, the AVE and CR values of each construct are higher than 0.5 and 0.7, respectively.

Table 2: Measurement model

Construct	Item	Loadings	AVE	CR
Political Skill	PS1	0.74	0.62	0.97
	PS2	0.79		
	PS3	0.84		
	PS4	0.81		
	PS5	0.82		
	PS6	0.74		
	PS7	0.77		
	PS8	0.77		
	PS9	0.79		
	PS10	0.77		
	PS11	0.76		
	PS12	0.80		
	PS13	0.82		
	PS14	0.82		
	PS15	0.74		
	PS16	0.79		
	PS17	0.78		
	PS18	0.81		
Sales Performance	SP1	0.87	0.78	0.96
	SP2	0.86		
	SP3	0.89		
	SP4	0.89		
	SP5	0.90		
	SP6	0.91		

Afterward, we used the HTMT criterion suggested by ([Henseler & Fassott, 2010](#); [Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015](#)) and ([G. Franke & Sarstedt, 2019](#)) to determine the discriminate validity of the constructs. They recommended that the values in the HTMT criterion should be ≤ 0.85 (as per the stricter criteria) or ≤ 0.90 (as per the lenient criteria). Table 3 indicates that the values for HTMT were all lower than the stricter criterion of ≤ 0.85 , thus it can be determined that the respondents understood that all three constructs are dissimilar from each other. Thence, the measurement items of the study are both valid and reliable.

Table 3: Heterotrait-onotrait ratio (HTMT)

	1	2
1 Political skill		
2 Sales Performance	0.75	

Structural Model

Furthermore, to test the hypothesized relationship, we proceed with the path analysis. Table 4 presents the results of path analysis. Results indicate the positive linkages between salesperson political skill and sales performance ($\beta = 0.512, p < 0.001$). Thence, H1 was supported.

Table 4: Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-values	p-values	BCI LL	BCI UL
H1	PS→ SP	0.512	0.090	5.66	$p < .001$	0.035	0.70

Note: PS= Political Skill, SP= Sales Performance

DISCUSSION

Although extant literature has outlined the myriad of salesperson skills that play a pivotal role in enhancing sales performance (Chen, Rivas, & Wu, 2017; Evans et al., 2012), particularly in the pharmaceutical sector (Butler, Armstrong, Ellinger, & Franke, 2016; Ellinger et al., 2008). However, the association between political skill and sales performance is still at the infancy stage (Kalra et al., 2017) and best equivocal (Bolander et al., 2015; Kimura, 2015; Munyon et al., 2021), thus scholars have maintained the call to further investigate the impact of political skill and auspicious outcome in the presence of other boundary conditions (Munyon et al., 2021) and by unpacking the association in different contexts (Bolander et al., 2015; Kalra et al., 2017). Thus, grounding upon the COR theory, the study at hand contributes to this stream of literature as we tested the association of political skill and sales performance in the presence of boundary conditions, by collecting the data from salespeople working in the pharmaceutical sector of the nonwestern marketplace (i.e., Pakistan). Our results are in line with the prior studies (Bolander et al., 2015; Kimura, 2015), as our investigation illustrates the support for the direct association of political skill and sales performance in the nonwestern context. Thus, it is a significant theoretical contribution to the political skill and sales performance literature; specifically, our results enhance the application of political skill in sales contexts of nonwestern markets. In so doing the study also responds to the recent call to further explore the association of Political skill and job outcomes in business to business context (Bolander et al., 2015; Kalra et al., 2017; Munyon et al., 2021).

Practical Contributions

Along with the theoretical contribution, our research also offers practical implications for the employees and managers working in the pharmaceutical sector. First, the result of the study suggests that the politically skilled salesperson can read and identify the implicit needs and wants of the customers, which helps them to close the transaction in the organizations' favor. Therefore, for sales employees to stand out of the crowd, our study records that frontline sales employees should develop and polish this learnable, tangible, and comprehensive social skill (Blickle et al., 2012; Epitropaki et al., 2016). Similarly, we advise that managers provide training to foster this social skill and foster a supportive and non-competitive environment to cultivate this interpersonal influence skill.

Moreover, the study also offers some insights for salesforce recruitment. Specifically, the study advises sales managers to gauge this social skill at the time of recruitment by assessing the components of political skill in the screening stage and providing continuous mentorship to develop this skill to attain several benefits. Furthermore, the study results indicate that organizations should remind and encourage workers to adhere to prevailing principles in day-to-day tasks. We recommend that managers should evaluate the political skill of an applicant at the time of hiring. Similarly, we also recommend that managers, to promote political skill, should give significant weightage to political skill at the time of final appraisals, as it is easier and more efficient to work with employees who showcase political skill standards because of their willingness to work hard and behave honestly and with integrity, that will enable them to build a reputation with customers and help them to close the transaction in the organizations' favor.

Caveats and Future Directions

Despite theoretical and practical contributions, our study also has some caveats. For instance, although the time lag data help us to reduce the CMB, however, we cannot draw a causal inference on such data. Therefore, we recommend scholars, employ longitudinal and experimental study designs to have more causal inferences about the associations. Moreover, the sample's responses were collected only from Pakistan, which may raise concerns about the generalizability of our model. Similarly, our study did not consider any intervening variable through which political skill impact sales performance; thus, we recommend that upcoming scholars use different inter-organizational (e.g., customer orientation, adaptive selling) or Intra organizational variables (e.g., Coworker exchanges, salesperson connectedness) to have more insights about how political skill fosters sales performance of sales employees. Similarly, researchers are also encouraged to explore different moderating variables (e.g., work centrality, Harmonious work passion) to offer more insights about when political skill leads to higher sales performance for effective managerial interventions.

CONCLUSION

The present study offers novel insights into how salespersons' political skill fosters sales performance particularly in the pharmaceutical industry of Pakistan. We found that Political skill positively affected sales performance. In so doing, the study enhances the existing body of literature by extending the nomological network of outcomes and antecedents of political skill and sales performance, respectively. Furthermore, our study offers valuable insights for effective managerial interventions, for the managers, sales employees, and policymakers of the pharmaceutical industry.

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