

# Political Skills 2.0

## *An Analysis of Success-oriented Strategic Behavior in Online Business Networks*

Henning Staar<sup>1</sup>, Pia Keyzers<sup>1</sup>, Fabian Storch<sup>1</sup>, Christian Kempny<sup>1</sup> and Monique Janneck<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>BiTS Business and Information Technology School, Iserlohn, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, University of Applied Sciences, Luebeck, Germany

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Abstract: This study investigated media competencies and political skills of users of a Business Network—namely XING—and their relation with successful use of the online platform by means of an online survey (N=182). Subjective as well as objective criteria for professional success were used. Results show that besides general media competencies, individual abilities to exert social influence are highly relevant to take advantage of Social Networks: Participants with both high media competencies and political skills enjoyed more opportunities for personal training and development and received more business offers.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Influencing other people is an important success factor in most business contexts (Blickle et al., 2008; Ferris et al., 2007). This includes e.g. impression management behavior in application processes or negotiations, building profitable networks as well as the acquisition of relevant work-related information. High levels of interpersonal social skills are seen as helpful for successful influence attempts in organizations (Ferris et al., 2002; Ferris et al., 2012) and for promoting one's own career (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Todd et al., 2009).

Besides such 'political skills', further key competencies are becoming more and more important for work-related success and career development. An increasing virtualization of business and work processes has led to a significantly higher usage of information and communication technology (ICT). To be visible on the market and to exchange business-related information the skilled usage of web-based services has become an essential business matter (Janneck and Staar, 2011).

This implies not only technical skills of how to handle different media, but sophisticated knowledge on how to communicate virtually and achieve desired effects in online communication. The knowledge of media-specific impacts on the quality of communication and, building on that, the ability to exert influence on others via electronic media is

an important part of media competencies (Elron and Vigoda, 2003; Elron and Vigoda-Gadot, 2006). As such, above-mentioned examples of career facilitating influence behavior like business-related impression management and strategic networking have to be virtually reproduced and require both persuasive social skills as well as competent handling of different media formats (McKenna et al., 2002).

A predominant form of virtualized business and work processes are Online Business Networks such as LinkedIn—which is the currently leading international career platform—or XING in Germany. The central function of such platforms is the possibility to present oneself with an online profile and to get in touch with other users on the platform. By visualizing one's network of contacts, companies as well as employees provide possibilities for tying business contacts, making acquisitions, self-marketing as well as exchanging information.

The present study explores media-related and influence-related skills of users of Online Business Networks, which are relevant to successfully use such platforms. Specifically, we investigated the use of XING, which is the leading online career network in Germany and other parts of Europe with currently more than seven million members. The paper is structured as follows: In the next section, the theoretical background and related work regarding media competencies and political skills will be introduced. In the third section the study design and

methods are presented, followed by the results of our study. The paper concludes with a discussion and suggestions for further research.

## 2 MEDIA COMPETENCIES AND POLITICAL SKILLS AS CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS IN ONLINE NETWORKS

In a virtualized world, media competencies enable individuals to take advantage of the possibilities that different media formats offer instead of simply using them (Martins et al., 2004; Greer and Jehn, 2009). Based on this perspective media competencies in general comprise the ability to use media in a critical, responsible and self-determined way and to understand as well as evaluate and design electronic media (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002).

Media usage includes the receptive skill to encode content and integrate it into existing thought and memory structures (Abele, 2011). This comprises practical technical mastery as well as the ability to use interactive content sensibly and appropriately (Janneck and Staar, 2011; Staar et al., 2013).

Communities like XING require specific behaviors and rules—adapted to the target group—as well as related communication habits among users, so-called implicit ‘codes of conduct’. Furthermore, like all Web 2.0 applications using platforms like XING require *design competencies*: Users develop and shape their own profiles and add or change content (e.g. blog or forum posts). Therefore, for an effective use members of Social Networks should know how their own actions affect other users (Van Dijk, 2013).

Meanwhile, practical literature and guidebooks on how to use online platforms for building business networks abound (e.g. Abele, 2011; Okdie and Guadagno, 2008; Wilson, 2003), usually focusing on technical settings and simple communication guidelines. However, social competencies and political skills of users have been largely unconsidered with relation to the successful use of business networks. As strategic networking and impression management behavior are core issues of such platforms, concepts of social influence or political skills should constitute important elements of successful online networking behavior.

In general, political skills can be described as informal strategies of how to successfully influence others at work in order to realize one’s own goals

and plans without relying on formal hierarchical power (Janneck and Staar, 2011; Sussman et al., 2002). Individuals with pronounced political skills possess „the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objectives.“ (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 127).

Ferris and colleagues identify four central dimensions of political skills (Ferris et al., 2005):

- *Networking Ability*: the ability to build resilient friendships and alliances quickly and easily,
- *Interpersonal Influence*: the ability to closely observe social interactions,
- *Social Astuteness*: the ability to adjust one’s own behavior to the respective situation in a flexible and instrumental way,
- *Apparent Sincerity*: being perceived as an upright, trustworthy, and authentic interaction partner.

A number of studies have shown that political skills constitute a key factor for professional success and career development (Blickle et al., 2008; Ferris et al., 2002; Zinko et al., 2012). Individuals with pronounced political skills are more likely to get promoted and enjoy a higher reputation among supervisors, colleagues, and employees. Different studies have shown a positive correlation between a person’s political skills and his/her hierarchical position, income, and career satisfaction (for an overview see Ferris et al., 2012) Besides, social skills as well as a modestly self-confident appearance promote a positive image and contribute to positive career development (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004).

However, political skills have mainly been investigated within traditional organizations. Only few studies investigate influence behavior in computer-mediated communication or within web-based business networks (e.g., Janneck and Staar, 2011; Staar et al., 2013). Nevertheless, it is feasible to assume that specific ‘virtual political skills’ and a repertoire of strategic online behaviors are an important prerequisite for successful online interactions (Spears and Lea, 1992; Weisband and Atwater, 1999).

Therefore, we hypothesize that successful use of Business Networks (e.g. in terms of successful business transactions, orders and acquisitions, successful hiring or job-seeking and so forth) is associated with the users’ political skills (see *Figure 1*). In addition, we wanted to explore whether politically skilled persons will use XING more

effectively so that their engagement at work will not be negatively affected.

In the following part the hypotheses are formulated and the methods are introduced.

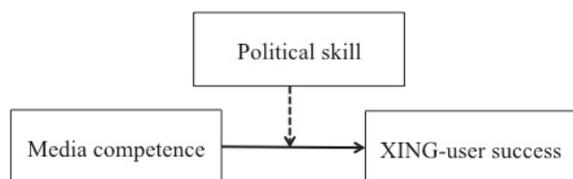


Figure 1: Relations between media competence, political skill and the XING-users' success.

### 3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

#### 3.1 Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical considerations depicted in section 2, the following hypotheses are framed:

*H1:* There is a positive correlation between XING users' media competencies and their success on the platform.

*H2:* Political skills moderate the association between media competencies and success.

*H3:* Users of XING with high values regarding political skills use XING in a more strategic way than users with low values, in the sense that they a) use XING for more career-oriented reasons, b) show different frequencies of usage and c) choose contacts in a more strategic way.

*H4:* Users with high political skills will use XING more effectively when compared to users low in political skill, in the sense that the use of XING will have a different effect on the users' engagement at work.

#### 3.2 Study Design and Sample

Data collection was carried out by means of an online survey. The survey was announced in different XING groups and distributed virally. To create a higher motivation to participate, a raffle for XING guidebooks was conducted. Furthermore, the participants were able to obtain the results of the study.

Overall, 182 persons (108 men, 58 women and 16 participants without gender information) participated in the online survey. Age ranged from 19 to 87 years. The sample consists of 69

employees, 34 self-employed persons, 15 CEOs and 19 division or project managers. Participants were mainly from the consulting sector ( $n = 38$ ), followed by IT ( $n = 27$ ), media ( $n = 15$ ) and industry ( $n = 13$ ).

#### 3.3 Instruments

Media competencies were measured by a three-item inventory using a 5-point Likert scale (sample item: "I am good at exploiting the technical opportunities of XING"), which had already been used in earlier studies (Staar et al., 2013). To measure political skills of XING users the Political Skill Inventory (PSI) was used, which includes 18 items (Ferris et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2007). The PSI is based on four dimensions: networking ability (e.g., "I spend a lot of time and effort at work networking with others"), interpersonal influence (e.g., "I am able to communicate easily and effectively with others"), social astuteness (e.g., "I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others") and apparent sincerity (e.g., "It is important that people believe I am sincere in what I say and do").

To measure successful XING use a four-item scale covering job-oriented development (cf. Welbourne et al., 1998) was used (e.g., "I gain necessary skills for my personal career by using XING"). Furthermore, a five-item scale to measure interpersonal facilitation (ibid.) was included (e.g., "I interact with other persons on XING by exchanging information openly"). In addition, we assessed the users' engagement at work as a criterion for work success with five items (e.g., "I carefully check my own work results").

Moreover, the number of transactions and offers generated through XING as well as the number of contact requests were used as an objective indicator for successful XING use.

Furthermore, we investigated the purpose of using XING (e.g., maintaining contact with friends, widening or strengthening contacts), the frequency of use of certain XING features as well as the number of contacts, the possession of premium membership or being a group moderator.

Also, socio-demographic data (age, gender, branch, professional position) were collected.

### 4 RESULTS

Data analysis showed a high correlation between political skills and the subjective degree of success in the dimensions of interpersonal facilitation ( $r =$

.39,  $p \leq .001$ ) and job-oriented development ( $r = .32$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ). There was no significant intercorrelation regarding media competencies and the frequency of use. Interestingly, significant positive correlations were found between the age of the participants and the frequency of logins ( $r = .19$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ) as well as the frequency of business transactions on XING ( $r = .23$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ). However, age did not function as a proxy for position since no significant correlations were found between these variables.

### 4.1 Media Competencies and Successful XING Use

To examine the first hypothesis a linear regression was calculated to investigate whether media competencies predict successful XING use (in terms of job-oriented development, interpersonal facilitation as well as the number of actual business offers and transactions via XING). Additionally the overall frequency of use (“How often do you login to XING?”) and the number of contacts were included in the analysis. As stated in *Table 1*, results show that media competencies predict subjective success in XING use as well as the quantity of business transactions. Thus, hypothesis 1 can be accepted. Interestingly, the frequency of use and the number of XING contacts also serve as predictors of both, subjective and objective success: Especially the positive correlation between the number of contacts and business transactions ( $r = .19$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ) demonstrates the relevance of a broad network.

Table 1: Results of the regression analysis (N=139-147).

	Job-oriented development	Interpersonal facilitation	Number of transactions	Number of offers
<b>Predictors<sup>1</sup></b>				
Media competence	$\beta = .32^{***}$	$\beta = .31^{***}$	$\beta = .07$	$\beta = .30^{***}$
Frequency of usage	$\beta = .25^{**}$	$\beta = .23^{**}$	$\beta = .15$	$\beta = .18^*$
Number of contacts	$\beta = .22^*$	$\beta = .31^{***}$	$\beta = .19^*$	$\beta = .49^{***}$

<sup>1</sup>Predictors in consideration of the control variables age and gender;  $\beta$  = Beta-weights; \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

### 4.2 Political Skill as a Moderator between Media Competencies and Successful XING Use

Four moderated regression analyses were calculated to examine a potential interaction effect between media competencies and the successful XING use,

moderated by the users’ political skills. Since all four dimensions of political skill showed considerable intercorrelations ( $r = .31$  to  $r = .75$ ) we calculated an overall index. This is a common procedure used by other scholars (cf. e.g., Kolodinsky et al., 2007). Again, the following criteria were used to measure success: opportunities for job-oriented development, interpersonal facilitation and the number of business transactions and offers via XING.

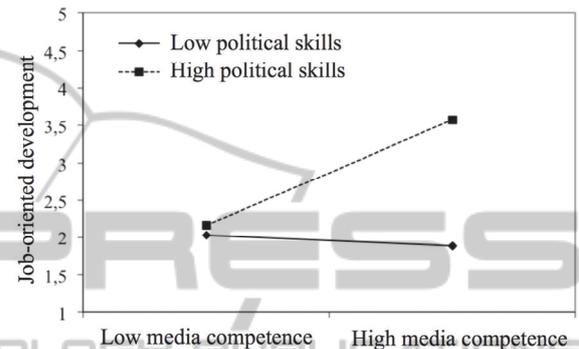


Figure 2: Interaction effects with political skill as a moderator.

Table 2: Results of the moderated regression (N=129).

Variables	B	SE	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
<b>Criterion: Number of business offers</b>				
Model 3				
Media competence (P)	.463	.267	.236*	.086
Political skill (MO)	.669	.291	.250**	.017
Media competence (P) x Political skill (MO)	1.25	.301	.341***	.104
$R = .476^{***}$ $R^2 = .226$ adjusted $R^2 = .207$				
<b>Criterion: Job-oriented development</b>				
Model 3				
Media competence (P)	.322	.152	.217*	.074
Political skill (MO)	.464	.168	.277**	.031
Media competence (P) x Political skill (MO)	.389	.144	.241**	.043
$R = .410^{**}$ $R^2 = .168$ adjusted $R^2 = .148$				
$r(P, MO)$	.57***			

$r$  = Product-moment correlation; B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = Standard error;  $\beta$  = Beta-weights;  $\Delta R^2$  = additional explained variance per model step (Model 1 = (P); Model 2 = (P), (MO); Model 3 = (P), (MO), (P) x (MO); \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ ).

The moderator analyses were calculated with centered predictor and moderator variables, as proposed in the literature (Aiken and West, 1991). All significant interaction effects are listed in *Table 2*. Results show that beta-weights for the products (media competence) x (political skill) with job-oriented development opportunities as the dependent variable are highly significant with more than ten per cent explained variance. Significant beta-weights can also be found for the criterion of business offers. Significant interactions between predictor and moderator indicate that the regression of the criterion varies in relation to the moderator (see *Figure 2*). Thus, the connection is moderated.

Taken together, the second hypothesis is partly accepted: With regard to the criteria of job-oriented development and the number of business offers, political skills enhance the success of media-competent users. However, this does not apply to the criteria of completed business transactions and interpersonal facilitation.

#### 4.3 Political Skills and Strategic XING Use

Three analyses were made to evaluate whether XING users with a higher level of political skills use the network more strategically than users with a lower level (hypothesis 3): Firstly we examined whether the first group uses XING for career-oriented reasons, secondly we tested if persons with a high level of political skills show different use patterns, and thirdly we examined whether they choose their contacts more purposefully.

**Political Skills and Use Purposes.** T-tests were computed to compare users with high and low levels of political skills, respectively. Results show that participants who used XING for building business relationships revealed significantly higher levels of political skills ( $p < .05$ ). The same is true for members who used XING as a strategic tool for client acquisition ( $p < .05$ ).

No significant differences regarding political skills were found with respect to the use of XING for the exchange of information or to stay in contact with friends, respectively.

**Political Skills and Use Patterns.** The question arises whether persons with good political skills have different use patterns on XING than persons with fewer skills. This can be assumed from a strategic point of view.

In the present study use patterns referred to the following activities: frequency of using XING in

general, contacting other users, writing or reading posts as well as using applications on events, jobs and projects.

For the analysis correlations between political skills and use patterns were calculated. However, no significant correlations were found. Thus, this part of hypothesis 3 cannot be accepted.

**Political Skills and Strategic Selection of Contacts.** We assume that users with high levels of political skills strive to enlarge their range of influence and to acquire new areas by choosing contacts in a more strategic way. To examine this assumption correlations were calculated to determine the connection between political skills and the use of different criteria for choosing contacts (hierarchical position, social position, sphere of influence, affiliation to the same sector, opportunities for information exchange, future collaboration and transactions). All seven criteria revealed significant positive correlations with political skills. The highest correlation was found for the new contact's sphere of influence ( $r = .39$ ;  $p < .001$ ), whereas affiliation to the same sector showed the lowest correlation ( $r = .18$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

#### 4.4 Political Skills, XING Use and Engagement at Work

Finally, we wanted to explore whether XING use may have a different effect on the participants' engagement at work depending on how politically skilled the users are. The rationale behind this hypothesis is that employees high in political skills will have a clear and strategic agenda on what they are doing at work. In other words, they will rather not lose sight of their work tasks when using XING because of their success- and career-oriented perspective. Accordingly, besides their beneficial activities on XING, these users are not likely to allow that their engagement at XING will keep them away from their duties at work, when compared to low-skilled users. For the latter group, XING may rather function as an amusing distraction.

Again, we used two groups of users with high and low levels of political skills respectively. We used a median split to turn this continuous variable into a categorical one. To examine hypothesis 4 we separately conducted correlations between the frequency of use and work engagement for the two groups (high and low in political skills). The results are presented in *Table 3*.

Table 3: Correlations between frequency of XING use and work engagement.

	High political skills (n = 63)	Low political skills (n = 65)
	Work engagement	
General frequency of use	r = -.18	r = -.15
Frequency of writing posts	r = .14	r = -.02
Frequency of reading posts	r = .01	r = -.11

r = Product-moment correlation.

As can be seen from *Table 3*, political skills did not have an effect on the strength of correlations between work engagement and frequency of XING use. For both groups no significant interactions could be found for the variables of interest. Accordingly, at least in our sample, XING use was not a waste of work time regardless of the employee's political skills.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The present study investigated media competencies and political skills of users of a Business Network—namely XING—and their relation with successful use of the online platform. In doing so, we provided first insights into the impact of political skills and strategic influence tactics on the usage of social networks.

The results confirm that besides general media competencies, individual abilities to exert social influence are highly relevant to take advantage of Social Networks: Participants with both high media competencies and political skills enjoyed more opportunities for personal training and development and received more business offers.

While media competencies alone constitute an important factor for successful Web 2.0 use, this study shows that additionally, the users' political skills are decisive in performing successful online activities.

Furthermore, while general use patterns did not differ between users with high and low levels of political skills, respectively, highly skilled participants used XING more purposefully for certain career-related issues. This points to the conclusion that it is not the quantity of interactions that is decisive for strategic usage, but rather the quality. Future studies should investigate strategic communication behavior in more detail.

In addition, we hypothesized that XING use at work might have a negative effect on the employee's work engagement in the sense that the user's duties at work could suffer from frequent and time-consuming XING use. Especially this should be true for individuals being low in political skills. However, in our sample this was not the case—regardless of the person's level of political skills. Instead, work engagement and frequency of XING use showed to be unrelated in our analyses. Accordingly, one could take these results as good news for employers who are afraid that spending time in Online Business Networks will keep employees from getting their job done. However, we did not collect detailed information on the proportion of XING use at work and at home respectively. On that note, these results should be taken carefully.

This study has several limitations. Especially the cross-sectional design, the unbalanced gender distribution, and the size of the subgroups can be seen critically: For further investigations, it would be interesting to include participants from specific subgroups or professions for whom different levels of political skills might be assumed (e.g. sales representatives vs. people from social services).

Thus, sector-specific differences could be investigated.

Further, we did not control for length of presence in the network. This may have impact on objective success criteria such as number of contacts or number of offers received. Future studies should integrate this information, too.

Taken together, the present study could broaden the picture of the impact of political skill on career success. Our results indicate that a virtualized business world does not only require individual media competencies. Moreover, the skilled interpersonal influence have to be conveyed through media in order to successfully build up business networks and promote one's own career.

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