



# Resolving the equivocal relationship of Machiavellianism and job performance: A socioanalytic perspective employing reputation, political skill, and five-factor Machiavellianism<sup>☆, ☆ ☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Various studies have found positive and negative associations of Machiavellianism with job performance, and the meta-analytic relationship between the two is weak. We sought to resolve these inconsistencies by comprehensively testing Socioanalytic theory, which suggests that social skill (i.e., political skill) and reputation are integral to how personality (i.e., Machiavellianism) is expressed in behavior evaluated by others (i.e., job performance). Moreover, the newly developed Five-Factor Machiavellianism scale also assisted in this clarification, because it properly characterizes Machiavellianism as strategic and shrewd, as opposed to prior measures that portrayed it as impulsive and lacking ambition. In the present study, targets ( $N = 550$ ) provided self-rated Machiavellianism and coworkers ( $N = 1127$ ) rated target political skill, reputation, and job performance. Our results demonstrated that, (only) when lacking political skill, individuals high on Machiavellianism developed poorer reputations with coworkers that result in reduced job performance assessments. Whereas, those high on political skill did not suffer such negative work consequences from their Machiavellianism, suggesting that political skill can function as a protective factor for dark personalities. The findings provide insight into the Machiavellianism – job performance relationship, and they indicate various directions for future research.

## 1. Introduction

Research on the (dark) personality trait of Machiavellianism has found weakly negative relations with job performance, and it has been suggested that it is more closely related to maladaptive work behavior (O'Boyle et al., 2012). Moreover, despite the overall negative association, Machiavellianism has related to improved performance under some circumstances (e.g., inadequate resources, Kuyumcu & Dahling, 2014). Thus, the Machiavellianism – performance relationship remains understudied (Jones & Paulhus, 2009), and scholars have called for investigations into its mediating mechanisms (Harms et al., 2011), because little prior research has done so (Spain et al., 2014).

We propose that the job performance implications of Machiavellianism can be better understood through the use of Socioanalytic theory (Hogan & Blickle, 2013), which suggests that specifically reputation mediates the personality – performance relationship and that social skill

moderates the personality – reputation relationship (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Social skill translates personality into actions observed by others that are evaluated in the form of (favorable) reputation (Hochwarter et al., 2007). Specific to Machiavellianism in the workplace, having greater work social skill (i.e., political skill) helps Machiavellians choose a better strategy for use in social settings, such as by tempering their antagonistic impulses (Waldman et al., 2018) and hiding their intentions from others. Thus, enhanced political skill camouflages their manipulative strategies, resulting in improved Machiavellian work outcomes (Blickle et al., 2020).

However, the full, complex model proposed by Socioanalytic theory (Hogan & Blickle, 2018) has received little research attention overall, and it has not yet been tested with regard to dark personality (e.g., Machiavellianism). We believe that this comprehensive model is the key that will unlock our understanding of the Machiavellianism – job performance relationship.

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By investigating a complete Socioanalytic model of Machiavellianism, our study makes several contributions. First, we respond to calls to investigate not only other moderators of Machiavellianism (Spain et al., 2014) but also how the degree of political skill affects the ability of Machiavellians to temper and disguise antisocial behaviors at work. Second, Machiavellianism scales have characterized it as disinhibited and lacking ambition (Collison et al., 2018). However, the recently developed Five-Factor Machiavellianism Inventory (FFMI; Collison et al., 2018) correctly measures Machiavellianism's known strategic planning and calculating tendencies (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). Therefore, unlike with prior scales, using this more comprehensive measure of the construct, it's possible to test whether the translation of this strategic pursuit of social manipulation into workplace reputation and job performance is dependent on workplace social abilities (i.e., political skill). Lastly, our research contributes to the emerging literature on how Socioanalytic theory can explain how dark personality traits influence job performance through reputation building. Our study provides the first comprehensive empirical test of Socioanalytic theory for the dark personality – job performance relationship and demonstrates the importance of social factors to job performance (see Fig. 1).

## 2. Theoretical background & hypothesis development

Individuals high on Machiavellianism are ambitious, strategic, callous, cynical, manipulative, and amoral (Christie & Geis, 1970). Prior research has highlighted the importance of the social context (Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Smith & Webster, 2017) and power to Machiavellian work outcomes (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). Consequently, Machiavellians tend to view the workplace as political (Rosen et al., 2006), and this is likely due to their attraction to highly political environments (Cohen, 2016).

Machiavellians seek positions that provide the credibility and trust that permits personal gains (Hirschfeld & James Van Scotter, 2019), and Machiavellianism has been linked to a range of harmful work outcomes (see O'Boyle et al., 2012). Although those high on Machiavellianism have a willingness to manipulate others, are flexible communicators, and they use a variety of influence tactics (Paulhus & Martin, 1987), they also have shown to be low in emotional intelligence (Austin et al., 2007), having a more cognitive interpersonal orientation (Christie & Geis, 1970). It has been noted that Machiavellianism violates principles of social exchange in relationships (O'Boyle et al., 2012). Therefore, as others have cautioned (Austin et al., 2007; Jones & Paulhus, 2009), just because Machiavellians have a willingness to manipulate does not mean they have the *skill* to do so.

### 2.1. Political skill translates Machiavellianism into reputation

Social skill can translate identity into favorable reputation (Hochwarter et al., 2007; Hogan & Shelton, 1998), with greater social skill typically resulting in a more favorable reputation and positive work outcomes (see Hogan & Blickle, 2018). Reputation is defined as a “complex combination of salient personal characteristics and

accomplishments, demonstrated behavior, and intended images presented over some period of time” (Ferris et al., 2003, p. 213). Individuals with a more favorable reputation are perceived as more legitimate, competent, trustworthy, and possessing a higher status (Hochwarter et al., 2007).

Political skill is a workplace social effectiveness construct (Kranefeld et al., 2020) that allows employees to understand social contexts and appear more natural (Bentley et al., 2015). Moreover, the politically skilled are more capable of positive image creation (Blickle et al., 2018), resulting in improved work reputation (see Maher et al., 2021).

Prior research seems to support the notion that an individual can have high degrees of both Machiavellianism and political skill (Genau et al., 2022). For instance, when personally advantageous, some Machiavellians can skillfully work with others to form cooperative relationships (Hawley, 2003). Also, when Machiavellians are trying to impress others, they can be prosocial to achieve their goals (Belschak et al., 2015), and skilled at creating a desirable image (Deluga, 2001). Moreover, Machiavellians feign altruism when with others, but are self-interested when not under observation (Bereczkei et al., 2010), indicating that social status and favorable reputation is the aim of their prosocial behavior (Bereczkei et al., 2007).

Building a positive reputation requires that others believe that one's motives are not self-serving (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995), and political skill permits Machiavellians to attempt to convey this message. The influence of political skill on work effectiveness is through relationship quality (Brouer et al., 2013), because the politically skilled are able to successfully foster trust and commitment via positive, long-term social exchange relationships (Blickle et al., 2020; Treadway et al., 2004). In addition, political skill tempers the expression of antagonism (Waldman et al., 2018), as these behaviors would otherwise result in aversive and hostile working relationships. Consequently, the politically skilled Machiavellian would adopt a long-term strategic method to work relationships that would mitigate the reputational harm of their antagonism (i.e., cynicism, manipulateness, selfishness).

However, Machiavellians with low political skill would take a short-term, superficial approach (Blickle et al., 2020). When combined with their resentment of others, the Machiavellian's failure to understand social situations, absence of influence at work, low quality social network, inability to appear sincere, and low self-control (i.e., low political skill), would produce an unfavorable work reputation. Without heightened political skill, Machiavellians would be incapable of even momentarily successfully hiding their selfishness and antagonism from coworkers (Brouer et al., 2009). Being less able to conceal their egoistic motives, the exposure of these Machiavellian's manipulation and cynicism should result in a reduced reputation.

**Hypothesis 1.** Political skill moderates the relationship between Machiavellianism and workplace reputation, such that, when political skill is low, Machiavellianism will negatively predict workplace reputation.

Work reputation concerns how coworkers view an individual, and it is a social factor that contributes to job performance evaluations (Ferris

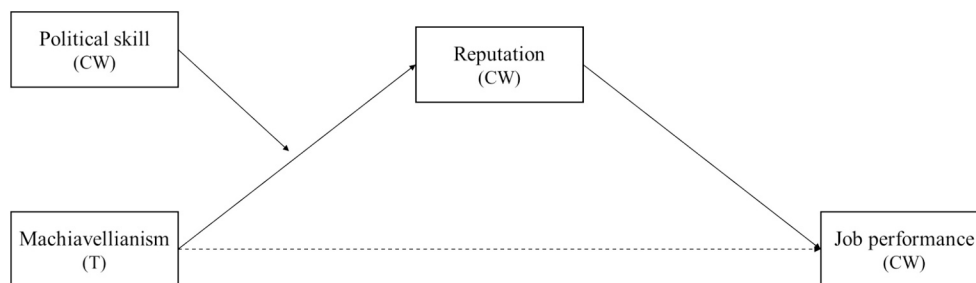


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

Note. T = target rating, CW = coworker rating.

et al., 2001, 2003; Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Specifically, career outcomes are thought to be more related to social factors than to objective performance (Ferris & Judge, 1991). Empirically, prior research has demonstrated the close link between favorable work reputation and job performance evaluations (Hochwarter et al., 2007; Zinko et al., 2012; Zinko & Rubin, 2015).

**Hypothesis 2.** Workplace reputation will positively predict job performance assessments.

The conversion of traits into behavior observed by others is integral to Socioanalytic theory (Hogan & Shelton, 1998), showing the value of both social skill and reputation to others' assessments, and, at work, these perceptions ultimately affect performance evaluations. In support, workplace reputation has been found to translate the effects of political skill to career success and work outcomes (Blickle et al., 2011; Hochwarter et al., 2007; Zinko, 2013). Moreover, in a meta-analysis, the Machiavellianism – performance relationship included zero, suggesting that moderators and mediators are likely present (O'Boyle et al., 2012).

Limited scholarship has examined the job performance of Machiavellians who have varying degrees of political skill. However, none comprehensively tested the Socioanalytic model on job performance. For instance, Smith and Webster (2017) used trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) to position political skill as a mediator between Machiavellianism and performance, added a social undermining – Machiavellianism interaction as a predictor of political skill, and did not assess the effects of reputation. Also, although Blickle et al. (2020) found that long-tenured Machiavellians who had low political skill demonstrated low career performance, they did not assess these effects of political skill and Machiavellianism on job performance nor as mediated by reputation, and neither has other scholarship. Thus, our study offers unique insights into the application of Socioanalytic theory (Hogan & Blickle, 2013, 2018; Hogan & Shelton, 1998) to Five-Factor Machiavellianism (Collison et al., 2018).

**Hypothesis 3.** When political skill is low, increased Machiavellianism will indirectly predict decreased job performance assessments by coworkers mediated by decreased workplace reputation.

### 3. Method

We conducted a power analysis for the index of moderated mediation (model 7) using the R package pwr2ppl (Aberson, 2019). We used the correlations reported in Kückelhaus and Blickle (2021) to estimate the relations between study variables. Additionally, we expected a small effect for the interaction between Machiavellianism and political skill. We calculated a required sample size of 327 for a power of  $1 - \beta = 0.80$  ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). Consequently, we were able to test our hypotheses in an already existing dataset (Kückelhaus & Blickle, 2023). More detailed information on our sample can be found in the study supplement.

The sample comprised 550 target participants, and each had at least one other rating by a coworker. In sum, there were 1127 coworker ratings, equating an average of about 2 coworker ratings per target. Data is available upon reasonable request.

We used the 52-item Five-Factor Machiavellianism Inventory (FFMI, Collison et al., 2018; Kückelhaus et al., 2021) to assess Machiavellianism, comprising antagonism, agency, and planfulness. A sample item is: "Sometimes you have to lie to get things done." Targets rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). Cronbach's alpha was  $\alpha = 0.81$ .

We used the 18-item Political Skill Inventory (PSI; Ferris et al., 2005, 2008; Lvina et al., 2012) to assess other-rated (Hogan & Shelton, 1998) political skill, comprising social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Coworkers provided assessments ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A sample item is: "S/he is able to communicate easily and effectively with others." We used the  $r_{wg}$  (LeBreton & Senter, 2008) to assess consensus among

raters and found a high agreement ( $M = 0.90$ ,  $SD = 0.17$ ,  $Md = 0.96$ ).

We asked coworkers to rate targets' reputation (Hochwarter et al., 2007; Kückelhaus & Blickle, 2021). The measure consists of 12 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A sample item is: "This individual is regarded highly by others." The rater agreement was high ( $r_{wg}$ ,  $M = 0.88$ ,  $SD = 0.27$ ,  $Md = 0.97$ ).

We asked coworkers to rate targets' job performance (Ferris et al., 2001). The scale includes core task performance, job dedication, and interpersonal facilitation (Blickle et al., 2011). The 15-item scale was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*weak*) to 5 (*very good*). A sample item is: "Finds resourceful and creative solutions to complex technical problems." The rater agreement was high ( $r_{wg}$ ,  $M = 0.88$ ,  $SD = 0.22$ ,  $Md = 0.97$ ).

Since job tenure and weekly working hours can increase Machiavellian cynicism and increase targets' overall exposure to coworkers (Zinko et al., 2007), we considered job tenure and weekly working hours as potential control variables (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016).

We tested our moderation hypothesis with a multiple moderated regression analysis and plotted the interaction following Dawson (2014). To combat negative consequences of multicollinearity, all linear predictors were centered prior to building the interaction terms. To test our first stage moderated mediation hypotheses, we used model 7 from the SPSS add-on PROCESS v4.1 (Hayes, 2018). In all our analyses, we used bootstrap inference with 5000 bootstrap samples.

### 4. Results

A confirmatory factor analysis with four correlated factors (Five-Factor Machiavellianism, political skill, reputation, job performance) had acceptable goodness of fit indices ( $RMSEA = 0.061$ ;  $CFI = 0.99$ ;  $TLI = 0.98$ ;  $SRMR = 0.03$ ; Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003).

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations between all study variables. In support of Hypothesis 2, reputation assessments correlated with job performance ratings ( $r = 0.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Machiavellianism was negatively associated with reputation assessments ( $r = -0.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that highly Machiavellian individuals have a slightly worse reputation among coworkers. As both control variables did not correlate simultaneously with the predictor, mediator, and criterion variables (Table 1), we did not consider them in subsequent statistical analyses (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016).

Hypothesis 1 stated that political skill would moderate the relation between Machiavellianism and reputation among coworkers. We found the expected interaction effect ( $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ; Table 2). The slopes of the interaction are shown in Fig. 2. Overall, those with strong political skill have a better reputation among coworkers ( $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As expected, although Machiavellianism had no relation to reputation for those high in political skill (gradient of slope =  $0.02$ ,  $p = .90$ ), there was a negative relation when political skill is low (gradient of slope =  $-0.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 expected a relation between workplace reputation and job performance and an indirect effect from Machiavellianism on job performance via workplace reputation moderated by political skill. As can be seen in Table 2, we found the expected relation between reputation and job performance ( $\beta = 0.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The overall model explained 47.8 % of the variation in job performance, and delta  $R^2$  was about 1 %, within the normal range (McClelland & Judd, 1993).

Table 3 reports the conditional indirect effects of the moderated mediation analyses. Concerning the moderated mediation, Table 3 shows the conditional indirect effects. As anticipated, we found a negative indirect effect when political skill is one standard deviation below the mean ( $B = -0.143$ ,  $SE = 0.056$ ,  $CI\ 95\ \% = [-0.247; -0.021]$ ). We also found a negative indirect effect at the mean level of political skill. The index of moderated mediation also supported the critical role of political skill ( $B = 0.106$ ,  $SE = 0.047$ ,  $CI\ 95\ \% = [0.002; 0.188]$ ). Additionally, the direct effect from Five-Factor Machiavellianism on job

**Table 1**  
Correlations, means, standard deviations, and internal consistencies of study variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Job tenure (years)	7.95	8.82	–					
Weekly working hours	38.76	8.79	–0.00	–				
Machiavellianism (T)	3.14	0.33	–0.06	0.18**	(0.81)			
Political skill (CW)	5.39	0.70	–0.04	0.00	–0.03	(0.94)		
Reputation (CW)	6.04	0.77	0.05	0.02	–0.09*	0.52**	(0.95)	
Job performance (CW)	4.08	0.48	–0.04	0.01	–0.04	0.61**	0.69**	(0.93)

Note. N = 550. Cronbach’s alphas in the diagonal. T = target rating, CW = coworker rating.

\* p < .05.

\*\* p < .001.

**Table 2**  
Regression coefficients of moderated mediation model.

	DV = reputation		DV = job performance	
	B (SE)	β	B (SE)	β
Machiavellianism (T)	–0.16 (0.09)	–0.07	0.04 (0.05)	0.03
Political skill (CW)	0.57 (0.04)	0.52**		
Machiavellianism × political skill	0.25 (0.11)	0.08*		
Reputation (CW)			0.43 (0.02)	0.69**
F (df1, df2)	71.64 (3, 546)		250.60 (2, 547)	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.282		0.478	

Note. N = 550. DV = dependent variable; T = target rating, CW = coworker rating;

\* p < .05.

\*\* p < .001.

performance was not moderated by political skill (B = –0.02, SE = 0.02, p = .20).

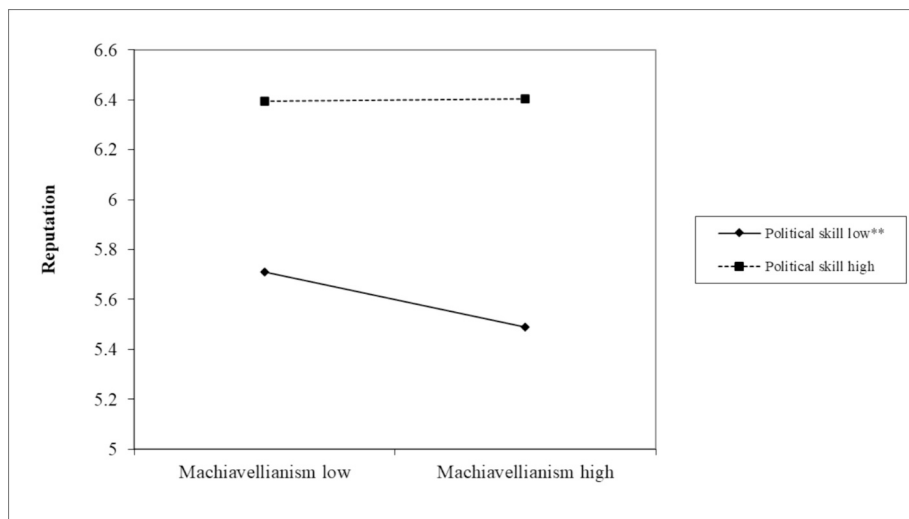
**5. Discussion**

Scholars have called for continued study of the effects of dark personality at work (O’Boyle et al., 2012; Smith & Webster, 2017). Given the voluminous workplace research utilizing either Socioanalytic theory (Hogan & Blicke, 2018) or Machiavellianism (Collison et al., 2018; Kückelhaus & Blicke, 2021), our study incorporated both into a comprehensive test of the Socioanalytic theory on job performance. Our

findings provided support for the complete Socioanalytic model, where Machiavellianism indirectly predicted job performance assessments, as moderated by political skill and mediated by personal reputation. Although we did not find that heightened political skill improved Machiavellian reputation and job performance, we showed that reduced reputation and job performance was present for those lower on political skill. Overall, the results demonstrate the importance of social factors to job performance assessments (Ferris & Judge, 1991), and of strong political skill to a Machiavellian’s ability to prevent negative work relationships with others that yield poor reputations and lowered performance assessments.

Regarding theoretical implications, our findings that heightened political skill is needed to avoid the harm of high Machiavellianism on work reputation and job performance affirms the theoretical characterizations of Machiavellians as not necessarily having the ability to manipulate others (Jones & Paulhus, 2009), since they are often perceived to violate social exchange norms (O’Boyle et al., 2012). As opposed to the vast majority of Machiavellianism and dark personality research that relates it to dark outcomes (e.g., counterproductive behavior), our study shows that by considering an appropriate moderator (i.e., low political skill) and mediator (i.e., reduced reputation), we can explain when and how Machiavellianism relates to reduced work performance. In addition, we offer one of the first full tests of the Socioanalytic theory on job performance (Hogan & Blicke, 2018; Hogan & Shelton, 1998), supporting its value to the study of Machiavellianism at work. Lastly, our findings add to the growing understanding that the self-control provided by strong political skill can be used to not only improve beneficial work outcomes, but also mask bad behavior at work (Waldman et al., 2018).

Practical implications include that political skill can be an



**Fig. 2.** Moderation of the Machiavellianism–reputation relation by political skill.

Note. \*\*p < .01.

**Table 3**  
Conditional indirect effects of Machiavellianism on job performance via reputation.

Political skill (CW)	DV = job performance (CW)		
	B (SE)	LLCI	ULCI
-1 SD	-0.143 (0.056)	-0.247	-0.021
Mean	-0.069 (0.038)	-0.142	-0.005
+1 SD	0.006 (0.043)	-0.081	0.090

Political skill	Index of moderated mediation		
	B (SE)	LLCI	ULCI
Political skill	0.106 (0.047)	0.002	0.188

Note.  $N = 550$ . T = Target rating, CW = Coworker rating. 5000 bootstrap samples, LLCI = lower limit confidence interval, ULCI = upper limit confidence interval, DV = dependent variable, in **bold** type: 95 % confidence interval did not include zero.

impression management tool that dark personalities use as camouflage for reputation building (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Alternatively, recent research suggests that political skill could function as a self-control mechanism that inhibits bad behavior in those prone to it (i.e., Waldman et al., 2018). Therefore, managers and employees should carefully evaluate the behavior of politically skilled coworker Machiavellians, given their potential to mask self-serving outcomes. It also might be advantageous to train such coworkers on political skill, since it could serve to inhibit bad behavior from occurring. However, at the same time, it should be made clear that unethical behavior will not be tolerated, and that work processes, not just outcomes, also will be evaluated. These precautions might help to prevent Machiavellians from using their political skill to hide negative intentions and behaviors.

A strength of the study is the use of other-reports, because other-ratings of political skill are better indicators of actual behavior (Meurs et al., 2010). Other-assessments also have been suggested for outcomes of Machiavellianism (e.g., Uppal, 2021), and when using social skill to test Socioanalytic theory (e.g., Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Additionally, our sample size ( $N = 550$  targets), is over twice as large as recommended (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2018). Moreover, each target was assessed on average by two coworkers ( $N = 1127$  coworkers), with high interrater agreement and all assessments were independently validated in previous studies.

Our study has limitations that include our cross-sectional data collection, which, despite our strong theoretical grounding, prevents us from determining causation. Moreover, our job performance outcome was rated by coworkers, and it is unclear if our findings would hold for objective performance measures. Lastly, although research has shown that Machiavellians often secure prominent leadership jobs (Jones & Paulhus, 2009), our study did not focus on such roles.

Future research could also comprehensively test Socioanalytic theory using other dark traits, such as psychopathy and narcissism, to discern if social skill has a similar function on reputation and job performance for other dark personalities. Furthermore, there are other important reputational outcomes (e.g., career success; Zinko et al., 2012), and studies could assess how our constructs relate to these. Future research could go beyond Socioanalytic theory by testing trustworthiness and relationship quality as other mediators of the trait – job performance evaluation relationship. Lastly, political skill is a multidimensional construct (Ferris et al., 2005), and future research could identify which particular facets are more valuable in the prevention of negative reputation building for dark personalities.

## 6. Conclusion

Although substantial research has related Machiavellianism to bad behavior at work, less scholarship has examined how dark personality

associates with beneficial outcomes, and inconsistent findings have been found in such studies. Our research is one of the first to explain that, by taking into account the *when* (i.e., low political skill) and *how* (i.e., reduced reputation), we can better understand the Machiavellianism – (poor) performance relationship. Our findings open many avenues for future studies to further develop our understanding of the complex relationships between dark personality, social skill, reputation, and work performance.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Bastian P. Kückelhaus:** Writing – original draft, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **James A. Meurs:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation. **Gerhard Blickle:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.  
No funding was received.

## Data availability

Data are available upon reasonable request.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2024.112728>.

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