

# Determinants of Success

## Hard work and talent or family and good luck?

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### Summary

An inherent element of studying individuals' biographies is analyzing whether they have achieved success in life and what determined their success. In this analysis we show what Poles think about the determinants of success and how these opinions have been changing during the last quarter of a century. We have asked the respondents for their opinions about the role of such factors as: ambition, knowing the right people, hard work, good education, good luck, innate abilities and talents, contacts with people having political influence, and coming from a rich family.

The factors that Poles highlight as the most important for achieving success now are ambition (77%), as well as having innate abilities and talents, good luck and a proper education (73% each). Those factors perceived as least important include knowing people with political influence and coming from the rich family (39% and 26% of respondents considered them important, respectively). Moreover, it bears noting that there is a fairly homogeneous structure of responses – almost all factors (except those associated with acquaintances) are believed to be crucial or quite important.

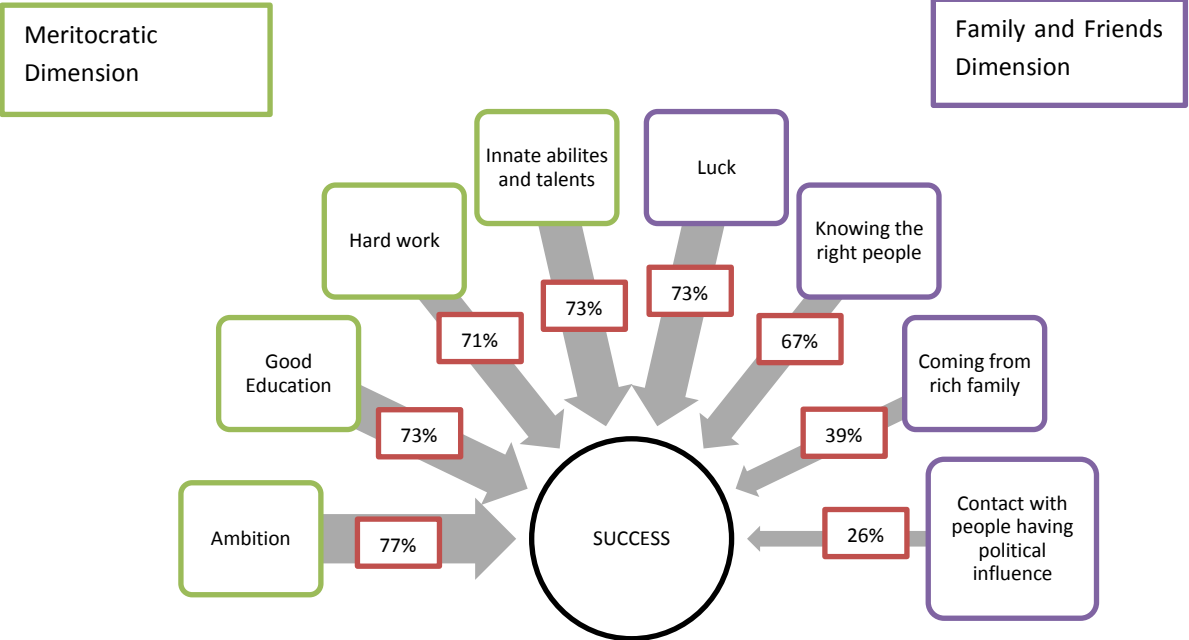
Also interesting is the dynamics of opinions about the role of individual determinants of success. Since the beginning of the study, 'innate abilities and talents' is the factor most widely acknowledged as important, with minor fluctuations over time. The biggest changes have occurred in the evaluation of **the role of hard work. Compared to 1988, the proportion of people, who consider this factor as important, grew by 33 percentage points - from 38% to 71%**, with the biggest change occurring during the past five years. Very interesting changes have also occurred in the perception of the role of education – the percentage of people who consider it important grew from only 61% in 1988 to 84% in 2008, though in the last wave we observe the first sign of its decline (73%).

A deeper analysis of the determinants of success provides the opportunity to distinguish two hidden dimensions in the data structure, which describe two different sets of characteristics influencing success: a meritocratic dimension (meaning that success in life is connected with hard work and good education, together with ambition and innate abilities and

talents); and a dimension associated with the power of one’s social network (family, acquaintances, people with influence), supported by a good luck factor. Success in this latter conceptualization is based on external resources.

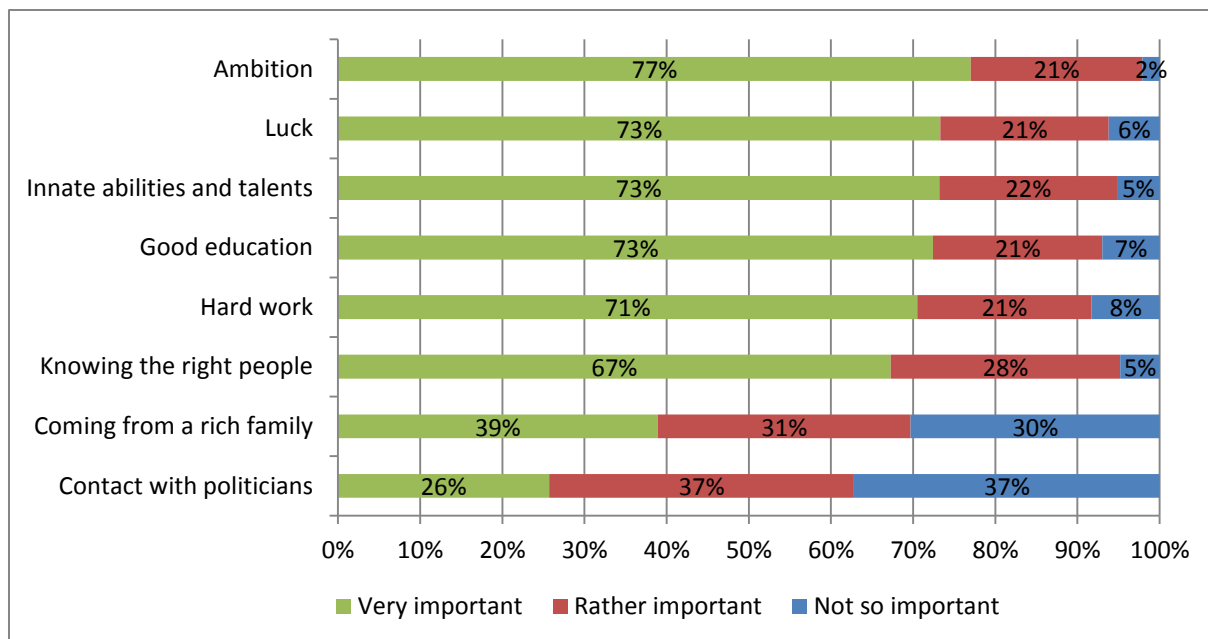
Incredibly interesting are the results of the analysis of how the endorsement of both dimensions of success varies between social groups. It turns out that belief in the meritocratic dimension of achieving success is highest among groups that **won the most during the transformation**; the strongest correlation was observed in the expert and managerial groups. On the other hand, the groups that mainly **lost during the transformation**, such as skilled and unskilled workers, are less likely to have faith in the power of meritocracy.

**Tables, schemes and diagrams**



**Figure 1.** Determinants of success in life and two dimensions of ways to success. The red boxes show the percent of respondents saying that each determinant is important

Source: POLPAN data 2013, N = 1926.



**Figure 2.** Important determinants of success in life, 2013

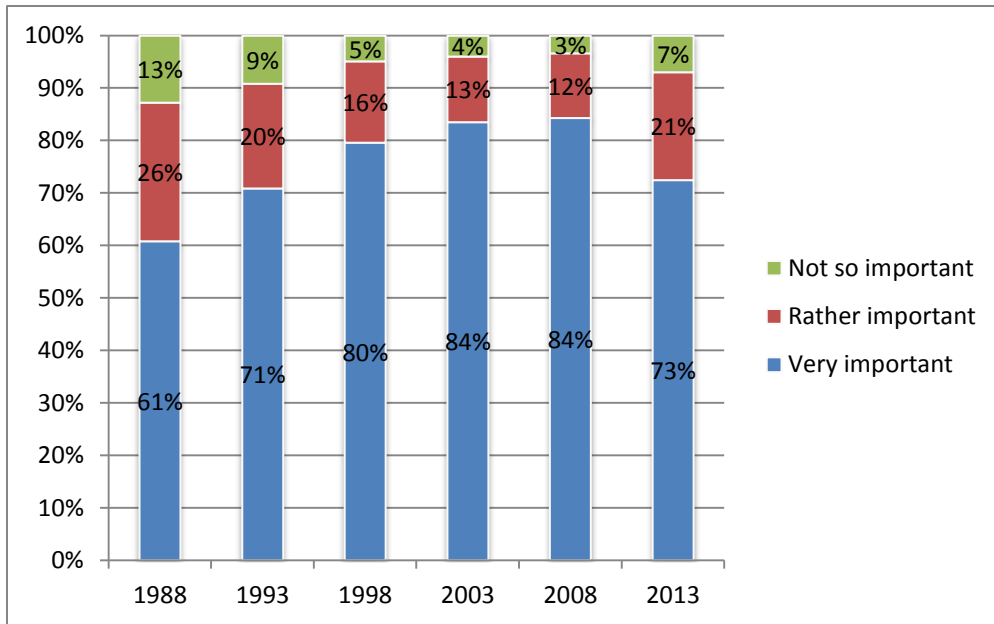
Source: POLPAN data 2013,  $N = 1926$ .

**Table 1.** “Absolutely necessary” and “very important” determinants of success

Determinants of success	1988	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013
	(%)					
Ambition	70	70	69	74	74	77
Luck	66	66	69	73	76	73
Innate abilities and talents	72	77	74	76	79	73
Good education	61	71	80	84	84	73
Hard work	38	49	45	49	53	71
Knowing the right people	53	58	60	69	65	67
Coming from a rich family	35	34	32	36	34	39
Contact with politicians	26	28	26	30	27	26

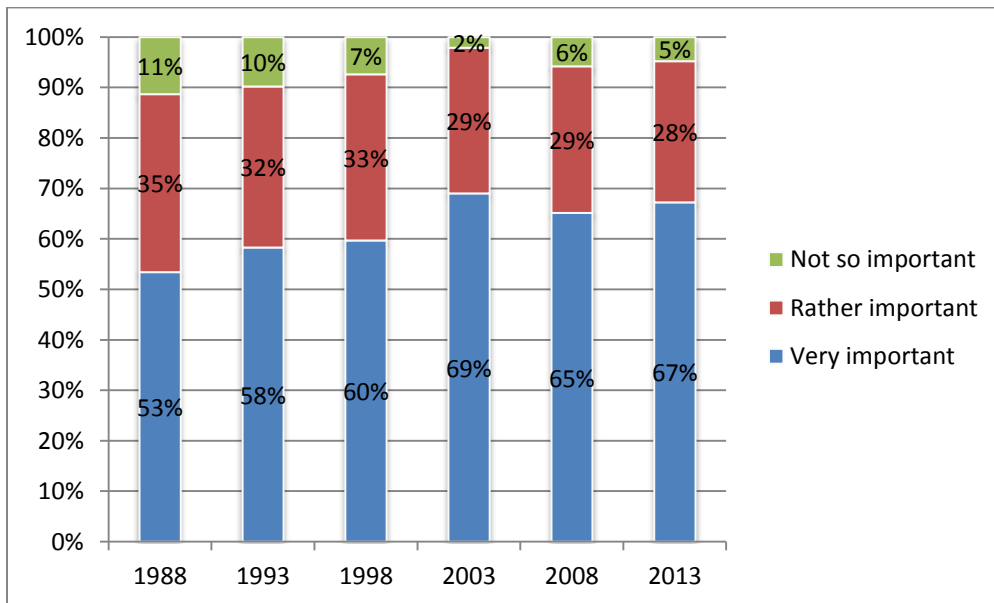
The red color shows the determinants of success that were chosen as the most important in a given year (two top values); the blue color highlights the determinants chosen least often (two bottom values).

Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2013.



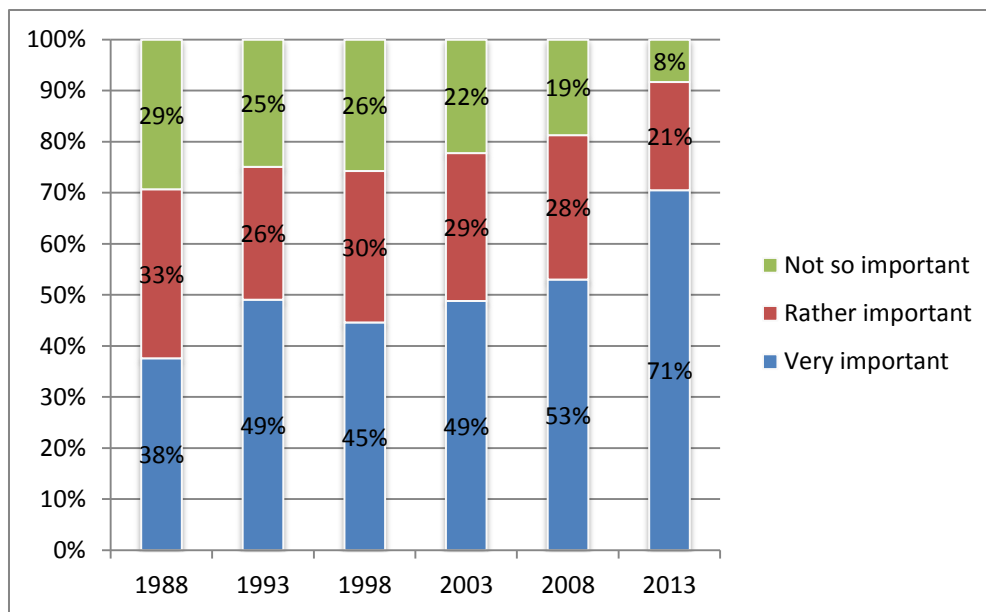
**Figure 3.** The importance of the “good education” determinant

Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2013.



**Figure 4.** The importance of the “knowing the right people” determinant

Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2013.



**Figure 5.** The importance of the “hard work” determinant

Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2013.

**Table 2.** The results of a factor analysis of determinants that, in respondents’ opinions, influence success in life

	Determinant	Factor loadings					
		1988	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013
Meritocratic dimension	Ambition	0,398	0,327	0,365	0,344	0,646	0,642
	Hard work	0,289	0,325	0,328	0,205	0,516	0,623
	Good education	0,555	0,560	0,575	0,592	0,717	0,627
	Innate abilities and talents	0,543	0,549	0,547	0,556	0,688	0,692
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	1,604	1,676	1,560	1,551	1,672	1,670
	<i>Proportion of explained variance</i>	0,401	0,419	0,390	0,388	0,418	0,418
Family and friends dimension	Knowing the right people	0,532	0,387	0,474	0,479	0,686	0,733
	Contact with politicians	0,631	0,669	0,586	0,607	0,705	0,748
	Coming from a rich family	0,494	0,593	0,551	0,560	0,709	0,752
	Luck	0,176	0,224	0,292	0,344	0,613	0,467
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	1,657	1,657	1,688	1,684	1,846	1,881
	<i>Proportion of explained variance</i>	0,414	0,419	0,422	0,421	0,461	0,470

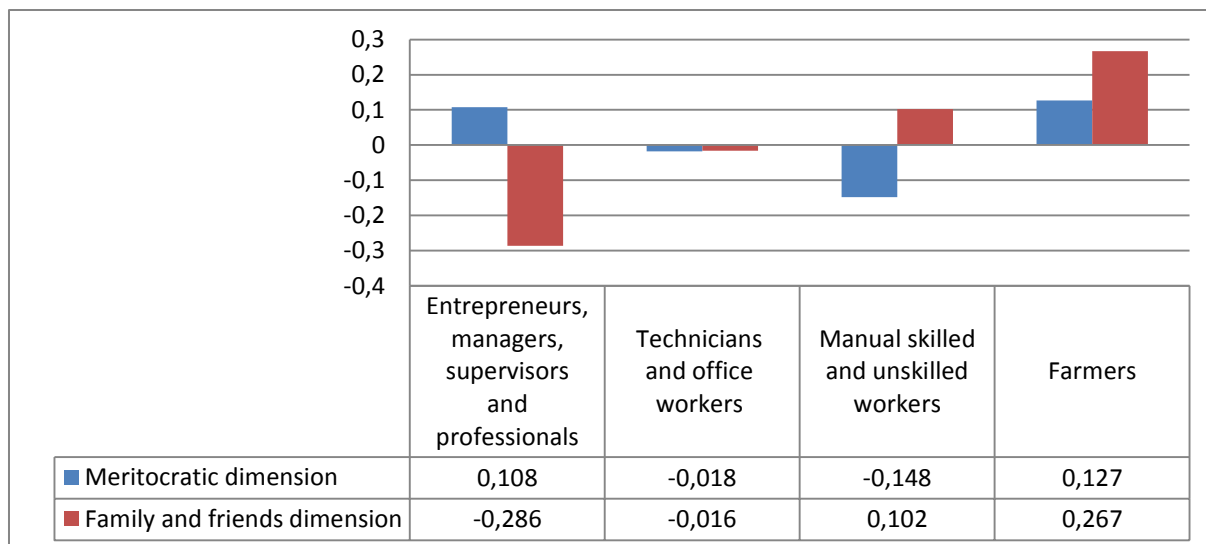
Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2013.

**Table 3.** Mean values of meritocratic and family-friends dimensions of factors influencing success – by social class

	Social classes	Mean values			
		1988	1993	1998	2003
Meritocratic dimension	Entrepreneurs	–	0,092	0,021	0,137
	Managers	–0,008	0,231	0,187	0,189
	Professionals	0,193	0,032	0,105	0,111
	Supervisors	0,153	0,01	0,062	0,047
	Self-employed	0,005	–0,244	–0,107	–0,076
	Technicians and office workers	–0,067	–0,134	–0,05	0,028
	Manual skilled workers	–0,038	–0,085	–0,09	–0,267
	Manual unskilled workers	0,041	0,01	–0,153	–0,167
	Farmers	0,015	0,036	–0,087	–0,015
	<i>Coefficient <math>\eta</math></i>	0,103	0,123	0,127	0,185
Family and friends dimension	Entrepreneurs	–	–0,085	–0,126	–0,219
	Managers	–0,116	–0,116	–0,229	–0,148
	Professionals	–0,049	–0,205	–0,17	–0,058
	Supervisors	–0,057	–0,104	–0,035	–0,275
	Self-employed	–0,192	–0,256	–0,001	0,164
	Technicians and office workers	–0,042	–0,072	0	0,087
	Manual skilled workers	0,07	0,111	0,064	0,005
	Manual unskilled workers	0,015	0,054	0,027	0,087
	Farmers	0,058	0,209	0,125	0,192
	<i>Coefficient <math>\eta</math></i>	0,086	0,189	0,124	0,186

The values in the table are the standardized averages (from -1 to 1), where negative values indicate the support lower than the average, and positive values show support higher than average.

Source: POLPAN data, 1988–2003.



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Source: POLPAN data, 2013.

**Figure 6.** Mean values of meritocratic and family-friends dimensions of factors influencing success – by social class in 2013

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