



Your first project assignment: How managers may unintentionally set your career trajectory

RESEARCH BRIEF

New research shows that newcomers assigned to more complex projects early in their careers learn more, gain peer recognition faster, and get promoted sooner, and the effect is causal.

Why it matters

Most onboarding programs focus on culture fit, relationship-building, and organizational norms. New research reveals a powerful yet overlooked lever: the complexity of the first project for a new hire.

- ▶ Newcomers assigned to more complex projects earned more professional certifications, received higher supervisor evaluations, and achieved faster promotions.
- ▶ The benefits worked through two distinct pathways: learning (expertise) and status (peer recognition).

How we know

Li, Krackhardt, and Niezink analyzed longitudinal archival data from 507 newcomers at SpeedTech, a Chinese space industry R&D firm, tracking monthly project assignments from 2020–2022. In 2020, the firm introduced random assignment of new hires to rotating six-month projects during their first two years, enabling stronger causal conclusions than typical survey-based studies. Using network analysis of the firm's OKR system, researchers measured project complexity and tracked outcomes including rewards, evaluations, certifications, status recognition, and promotions.

What researchers found

- ▶ Newcomers assigned to projects with higher coordination complexity showed the strongest and most consistent gains.
- ▶ These effects were mediated: complex projects built tech skills and earned peer recognition, driving performance, promotions.
- ▶ Prior same-industry experience amplified the benefits.
- ▶ However, component complexity produced more mixed results: while it supported learning and status, it unexpectedly slowed promotions.

What this means

- ▶ **For managers:** The projects you assign to new hires are not just workflow decisions, they are career-shaping interventions. Defaulting to low-stakes strategy may limit their growth.
- ▶ **For HR leaders:** Onboarding design should include a deliberate strategy for project assignment complexity, matched to each newcomer's prior experience.
- ▶ **For organizations:** Structured rotation programs exposing newcomers to complex, interdependent work can be a high-return investment in workforce development.

Now what?

- ▶ **Audit** your current onboarding project assignment practices to ensure new hires are deliberately placed on appropriately challenging work.
- ▶ **Match** project complexity to prior industry experience at hire.
- ▶ **Design** rotation programs that prioritize coordination complexity to promote collaborative, interdependent work, rather than simply adding volume or variety.
- ▶ **Build** status visibility into onboarding by creating structured opportunities for newcomers working on complex projects to gain peer recognition early.

LINK TO THE STUDY

