

The Kids Are All Right: How Investing in Career-Young Talent Can Create Engaged Future Leaders

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ABSTRACT

This presentation shares a personal journey through a Graduate Training Programme (GTP) and subsequent career growth to highlight the long-term value of investing in early career talent. It discusses the importance of solid foundations and supported, accessible learning in forming well-rounded and confident programmers & statisticians in the world of clinical data science. While recognising some of the challenges in implementation, this presentation will offer practical insights into how early engagement and meaningful investment in individuals' development can build not only technical capability, but also the confidence and commitment essential for growing future leaders in clinical data science. From student to master: exploring the route taken, essential skills gained and milestones along my journey from inexperienced programmer to ownership and coordination of a Graduate Training Programme.

INTRODUCTION

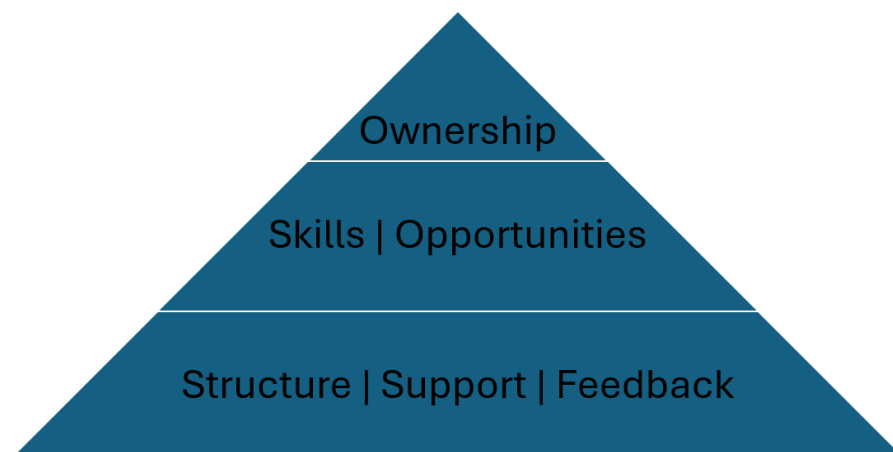
From starting my career as an inexperienced programmer, through a structured programme with dedicated support I was able to grow my technical and essential people skills alongside industry knowledge. This support and the opportunities for growth helped me continue to develop as I progressed through various roles as a programmer and contributed to future cohorts of the GTP, from mentoring to delivering training and eventually coordination and ownership of the programme itself. Observing subsequent iterations has convinced me that providing the foundation of solid technical and people skills, alongside an environment with the space, confidence and opportunity for growth develops strong statisticians and programmers, who are engaged in their own development.

WHY CAREER-YOUNG TALENT MATTERS

The concept of being career-young, that is, new to working in general and/or within a role/industry, typically means there's been a recent transition from education or another industry, and therefore refers to people who are motivated, eager to learn and receptive to information and learning.

Fostering and harnessing this produces people who develop quickly and stay motivated and invested in their own development. Having several people at this stage in their career can also harness the benefits of a collegiate atmosphere of learning and combining this with applied professional development can accelerate growth. Early engagement and investment develops people ready to take on meaningful responsibility at an earlier stage, and when given opportunity at the right stage, it is logical that as these individuals grow (provided they're given the right conditions), they grow into competent leaders.

WHAT DOES A GOOD PROGRAMME LOOK LIKE?



A key component to my development and something that warrants significant consideration is the training environment. Ensuring people can learn in an accessible way, feel confident that support is available (and are comfortable to utilise it), and are provided with regular feedback on their progress against measurable objectives sets the environment and tone for productive learning and development. This can take many forms, but key concepts include approachable mentors and encouraging feedback in both directions.

Building on this foundation, the content should be considered and some key questions to address should be:

- Which skills are needed by the organisation/industry – now and in the future?
- What opportunities will be available to utilise these skills following training?
- Is there appropriate support available for recipients of this content?
- What is an appropriate pace to deliver this content?

Clarity in the above will put in place a pathway and framework for success. An observed benefit from my personal experience is seeing those who have completed a structured programme eager to provide feedback and drive improvements for the next iteration. In my case this evolved from mentoring, through technical training and ultimately ownership and coordination of the programme overall. I now also have a growing level of support to me provided by others, often those taking a similar route to me.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

The primary challenge and barrier to adoption of a structured programme is the cost in both time and resource. Crucially, this is also not constrained to the set-up phase. The time required for training delivery and support is also important to account for, to ensure that there is adequate support and no knock-on effects in other areas of this time being unaccounted for.

The risk of running insufficiently prepared programmes could render them considerably less beneficial, and not worth the investment of time and resource if not done properly. Consideration should also be given to the maintenance and improvement of a programme and these efforts also planned for.

Overcoming these challenges requires an understanding of and investment in the time taken to create a structured path for development and supporting that development on an ongoing basis. However, a platform of empathetic support and individuals engaged in their own career progression with a clear path increases the likelihood of success.

ASSESSING WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

'Good' is likely to look different to different stakeholders, for example management, trainees and their teams. Therefore, it's crucial to have a common understanding of what success looks like for the individuals in question, as well as wider teams and organisations. To ensure success, regular feedback points should be planned to assess how and when improvements can be made, balancing importance with urgency.

If risk factors are considered and there's an openness to feedback and adaptation to stakeholder needs, these risks and challenges can be significantly mitigated and the chances of success on this investment greatly improve.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Starting my career following graduation with a Maths degree and a placement year, I was an inexperienced programmer who appreciated and benefitted from a structured programme to transition to the working world. Following my studies, I was receptive to learning and processing new information, with the energy that often comes from career-young professionals.

Having a structure supporting continuous development in place, with training and opportunities for application and growth certainly helped me. I came out of the GTP with a strong technical base but also a wide skillset, allowing me to work on real projects relatively quickly. Essential people skills training helped me to feel confident when stepping up for new tasks and responsibilities and to manage my workload healthily.

With my work supporting further iterations of the GTP in a variety of roles, I've found my greatest area of growth to be in organisation and delegation, which has proved again beneficial in my primary role as a programmer leading projects.

I feel my experiences may differ from those coming into the industry in the future, but core themes remain the same. Where the primary focus of my training was on improving technical skills (particularly in SAS), those entering the industry now and in the coming years can utilise AI and automation tools to do much of this programmatic heavy lifting. The agility to adapt to new and evolving technologies, as well as interpreting the output of any tools used, is already more important than technical depth in one language. Skills based not in the programming itself, but in the use of the data will grow in importance.

Where the need for hands-on programming may reduce, the importance of utilising expertise (e.g. in data standards or a particular therapeutic area) appropriately will likely increase. This requires strong essential people skills to work within and across teams to find and use this knowledge, particularly for those early in their careers where these knowledge bases are still shallow. Therefore, focussing on developing key skills such as communication and time management remains crucial to early career growth.

One constant throughout my professional journey so far that will remain firmly important for professional development has been the power of feedback – whether for my own personal development or for the GTP. Harnessing this by listening, assessing and balancing feedback from different sources that occasionally contradict each other, and then actioning the feedback to drive continual improvement has been crucial for my personal and the GTP's development.

PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

1. Implementing a structured programme for career-young talent successfully requires buy-in from all stakeholders
2. A clear structure or framework is needed: it can be flexible and should be updated and evolve as necessary, but the expectations should be clear
3. Time needs to be available: for training and for support
4. Choose the right people to provide training and support – not everyone is interested in or suited to this
5. Opportunities need to be available to use the skills gained
6. Harness the openness to learning, collaboration and growth common in career-young professionals
7. Encourage, assess and action feedback from all areas (i.e. trainees, trainers, wider teams, management) to ensure continuous improvement

CONCLUSION

Career-young talent can be an asset to organisations for a variety of reasons, but their potential needs to be invested in and their growth supported. Through my experiences completing a Graduate Training Programme and coordinating one, I have seen the impact of a structured learning environment with accessible training and relatable, reliable support manifest in confident and capable statisticians and programmers who want to be involved in future iterations of the programme to help deliver and improve it. This has resulted in positive feedback from stakeholders and a high retention rate of programme completers.

On a personal note, I see highly capable career-young individuals growing and gaining skills in a similar way to I have. This makes me confident that the early investment in their development has returned engaged people who have pride in what they have achieved so far and want to continue to improve both themselves and the structure that helped them develop.

In the context of an industry with a changing technical focus, it's important to plan for the required skillset of the future. However, many of the most important skills remain people-focussed, so this will continue to be a key area to develop for career-young talent.

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