

↑ FIRST-GEN RISING

# First-Generation Professionals: A Hidden Talent Strategy for Retention and Growth

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Michelle Y. Hoover  
February 10, 2026



# What's *ahead*

FGPs as a talent pool

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... and how they are misread

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Who are FGPs?

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Insight on FGPs → improved retention

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FGP workplace behaviors...

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Q&A

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# Hello!



## Michelle Y. Hoover

Leadership advisor & coach,  
Author of *From First to Fearless*

**Global Scale & Expertise:** 20+ years of leadership development across 5 continents, developing more than 75,000 professionals

**Strategic Talent Development:** Head of Leadership Development at an Amazon subsidiary; focused on building sustainable, scalable leadership pipelines.

**Enterprise Value Creator:** Developed the foundational learning solutions that paved the way for a \$400M+ startup acquisition

**Subject Matter Expert:** Leading researcher and author on first-generation professionals, providing data-driven insight into how organizations can better recognize and develop first-generation talent to address avoidable attrition

Why First-Generation Professionals?  
Why Now?



# FGPs Are No Longer a Future Workforce Issue

54%

of U.S. college  
undergraduates are  
first-generation students

Retention challenges are rising among early-career professionals.

A growing share of that population is first-gen.

~600,000

first-generation professionals enter  
the workforce each year

***The pipeline brings first-generation talent in.***

***Development determines whether it stays and advances.***



## WHO ARE FIRST-GENERATION PROFESSIONALS?

- First in their families to enter professional environments
- Are without inherited knowledge of white-collar workplace norms
- Are already inside organizations, not just early-career talent





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#### SBA Senate ratifies four new law student groups - The GW Hatchet

The GW Hatchet

Student Bar Association senators unanimously approved the Native American Law Student Association, **First-Gen Professionals**, Nonprofit Law ...



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Daily update · September 27, 2023

NEWS

#### Beyblades and barbecues: KU Law students build community outside the classroom

Kansan.com

Logan Brtek, a third-year law student and executive board member of **First-Generation Professionals**, described the group as "a safe space for people to ...



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#### University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law

Maryland Daily Record

... **first-generation professionals** through programming that addresses intersectional professional challenges. Student-led organizations ...



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**LAW.COM**  
Business of Law Practice of Law Corporate Legal Legal Technology

Expert Opinion **Young Professionals** [+ Follow](#)

### Breaking New Ground as a First-Generation Attorney

For first-generation law students and attorneys, this guidance may be far less acc...  
individuals often find themselves navigating the legal profession on their own, lea...  
go. This can be challenging, but it also provides unique opportunities for growth...

5 minute read · May 29, 2025 at 09:49 AM · By Austin Tapero

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#### Stories of Notre Dame Law School!

Notre Dame Law School - University of Notre D...  
Sam and Morgan are the first in their families to...  
support of the **First Generation Professionals**



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#### Breaking New Ground as a First-Generation Attorney

Law.com

The legal **profession** is deeply rooted in traditions passed down through **generations** of attorneys. For some attorneys, family members offer invaluable ...



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#### Binghamton University celebrates first-generation students - WBNG

WBNG

First-generation students often navigate what is referred to by Zeinman as the "hidden curriculum" of higher education and professional life. "They ...



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NEWS

#### Intro to Personal Finance for First-Generation Law Students Co-hosted by FGP

Marquette University Law School

Wednesday, October 30, 2024 - 12:10pm • TBD. **First-Generation Professionals** and the Law School's Office of Student Affairs are excited to cohost ...



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Daily update · May 9, 2025

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#### First-Gen Student Ready for Her Next-Gen Career | University of Virginia School of Law

UVA Law - The University of Virginia

Among the most meaningful experiences of her time at UVA Law, she said, was her involvement in the Virginia Law **First-Generation Professionals**, ...



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# What We Know About First-Gens

What was out there...

81%

cite financial stability as their reason for going to college

\$93,000

gap in median household wealth between continuing-gen graduates and first-generation graduates

... What we learned

FGPs face three key challenges in navigating the professional world:

1. Building networks and social capital
2. Accessing mentorship and sponsorship
3. Accumulating professional preparation experiences / lack of exposure to professional environments



## What Else We Know About FGPs



32% more likely to be loyal to their employers



40% more likely to be intrinsically motivated



48% likelier to pursue management positions later in their career if they are intrinsically motivated



# The Hidden Curriculum of White-Collar Work

## Unspoken Expectations

- Relationship-based visibility
- Unspoken norms and language
- Informal pathways to leadership

## Formally Taught

- Role-specific competencies
- Technical skills
- Performance metrics



## How FGPs Show Up – And Why It Costs Them

**Risk Aversion** *Reducing downside when expectations are unclear*

**Hanging Back** *Controlling exposure until norms are understood*

**Consistency as Cover** *Using steady performance to minimize exposure, even when it limits visibility for advancement*

**Protective Withholding** *Managing dissent carefully when consequences are uncertain*

# Confidence vs. Competence

Polish vs. Potential



# What Talent Models Recognize

## How potential is identified

- Early risk-taking
- Comfort with ambiguity
- Visibility
- Self-advocacy

## Impact on FGPs

Discretion is read as disengagement.

Waiting for clarity is read as a lack of initiative

Consistency is seen as limited range.

Reluctance to self promotion slows advancement

The behaviors that enabled academic success and *got* them the job are different from those required to *thrive* in professional workplaces.



# Development Risk Is Noticed Only When It's Loud

Conflict or escalation

Egregious underperformance

Credible retention risk



# The Next Gap: Informal Upskilling

Learning and development is increasingly...

... and the knowledge gap will widen for FGPs

- Self-directed
- Opt-in
- Dependent on confidence and proximity to influence

Ambiguity is not opportunistic

Unclear expectations bog down

AI fluency is the most visible, current example.

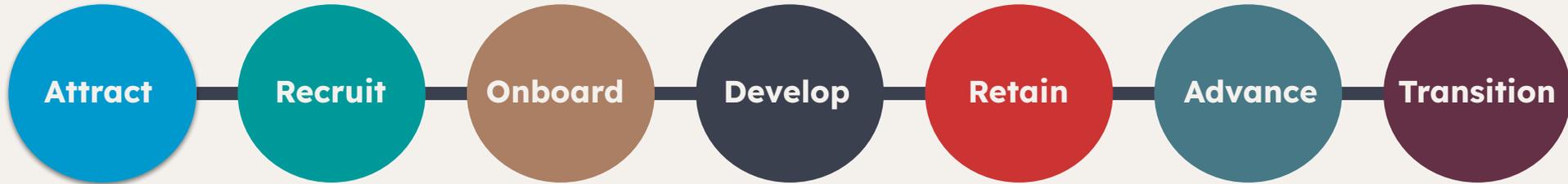
*This pattern will repeat with every new tool or skill introduced through informal adoption until the underlying causes are addressed.*

What This Requires of Our Talent Systems

Every step in the employee journey  
is an opportunity to intentionally deepen  
loyalty and motivation.

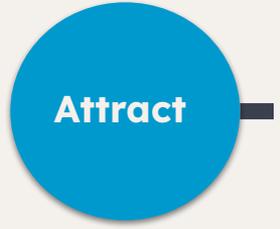


# The Employee Journey





# The Employee Journey

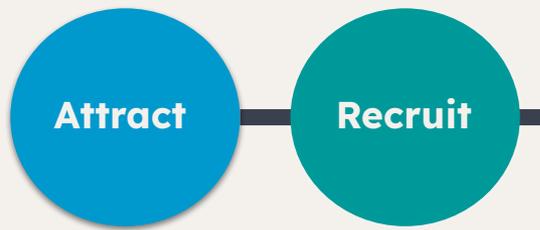


**Attract**

1. Review which colleges you're recruiting from and why. If they are public institutions, your chances of getting FGP talent are higher. Strategize accordingly.
2. Write job descriptions that emphasize how employees make decisions, not just how they present themselves.
3. Create a compelling Employee Value Proposition attractive to incoming talent
  - Financial and insurance literacy education
  - Home ownership resources
  - Emergency liquidity access
  - Family contingency support



# The Employee Journey



Attract

Recruit

1. Design interviews to surface judgment. Ask candidates how they handled tradeoffs, constraints, and risk, not just about outcomes.
2. Train interviewers on signal translation. Teach them to recognize when caution, precision, or deference signal judgment, not lack of confidence.
3. Audit early rejection patterns. Identify where candidates drop out and *why*.



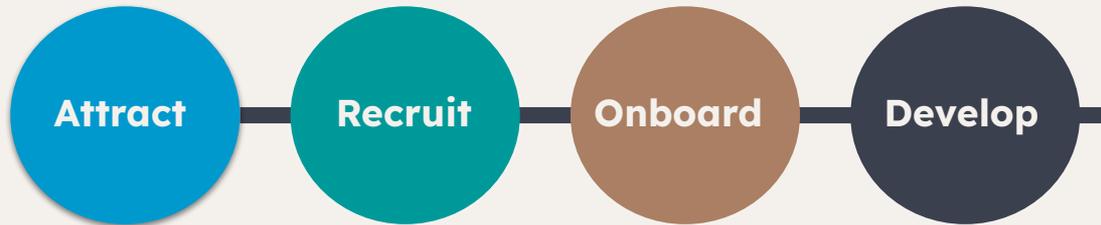
# The Employee Journey



1. Facilitate early mentor/context narrator relationships. Ensure new hires have contact with decision-makers, not just peers.
2. Explicitly teach *how feedback is given and used*
3. Make success criteria explicit in the first 30 days. Share what *strong first-year performance* actually looks like



# The Employee Journey



1. Reframe “high potential” criteria: Distinguish between *confidence* and *sound decision-making*.
2. Clarify future paths. Spell out what progression looks like, what evidence matters next, and how current choices affect future opportunities.
3. Make *how advancement decisions are made* teachable. Explain how readiness is evaluated, name what evidence matters at different stages, clarify when potential vs. performance is weighed



# The Employee Journey



1. Redesign stay interviews around decision points. Don't ask about only satisfaction. Ask: "What tradeoffs are you making right now?" "What feels risky to pursue?"
2. Teach managers to test their interpretations of cautious behavior before labeling it disengagement.
3. Normalize lateral growth as legitimate progression. Validate skill-broadening moves, clarify how lateral experience compounds, avoid framing non-promotion as failure.



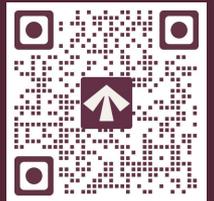
# The Employee Journey



This is a systems-design challenge.

It requires intentional updating,  
not awareness training

# Questions and Discussion



# Thank you!

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