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The Graduate's Guide to a First Job That Compounds

How to choose your first role for trajectory, not for prestige — and how to make the most of it once you're there.

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01 Introduction

> *Your first job sets the slope of your career. Pick the slope, not the title. The compounding does the rest.*

Your first full-time role is the most asymmetric career decision you will ever make. The right choice compounds for thirty years. The wrong choice locks you into adjacencies that are harder to escape than they look. Most graduates choose on prestige (the firm with the strongest brand) or money (the highest-paying offer); the candidates who compound the longest choose on slope (the role that builds the highest-value capabilities for the next twenty years).

This guide is for graduates and early-career professionals — your first job, your first real promotion, your first lateral move. The disciplines are universal; the regional twists are at the back.

01 Slope, not title

Choose what compounds, not what sounds best.

Three jobs that look equivalent on graduation can produce wildly different career trajectories ten years later. The difference is rarely the prestige of the firm. It is almost always the **slope of capability development** — how steeply you're learning new things in the first 18-36 months.

A graduate analyst at a Big Four firm in a heavily templated audit team learns very specific procedures. A graduate analyst at a mid-market consulting firm working directly with clients learns judgement, written communication, and stakeholder management. Five years later, the second analyst can move into product, strategy, founding, or a senior role almost anywhere. The first is locked into audit-adjacent paths.

The questions to ask before accepting a graduate offer:

1. What will I be doing on a typical day in month 6? Month 18?
2. How often will I write something a senior person reads carefully?
3. How often will I make a real decision with my name on it?
4. How is performance measured — by template-following, or by judgement?
5. What did the last graduate cohort do in their second job?

Slope-positive answers: writing often, deciding often, judgement-measured, broad next-job paths. Slope-negative: rare writing, no decisions, template-measured, narrow next-job paths.

> ★ **CRITICAL**
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> Title and salary are easier to optimise on later. Slope is much harder to fix later. If you have to choose between a high-slope role with a 10% lower salary and a low-slope role with a 10% higher salary, the high-slope role is the right choice every time at this stage.

02 How to read a graduate JD honestly

What's in the words versus what's actually in the role.

Every graduate JD says some version of "fast-paced, dynamic, learning culture, mentorship, exposure to senior leadership". Most of these phrases are noise. Three things in the JD actually predict the role's quality:

1. **The team size and structure.** A graduate role on a 5-person team has very different exposure than the same title on a 200-person team. Smaller teams = more direct work with senior people = more slope.
2. **The "preferred experience" phrasing.** If the JD lists 4-6 specific tools, methodologies, or frameworks under "preferred", you'll spend significant time on those. If it lists 20 buzzwords, the role is poorly defined and you'll spend time on whatever someone hands you.
3. **The career path described.** A JD that explicitly describes what month 12, year 2, year 4 look like is from a firm that has actually invested in graduate development. A JD that says "growth opportunities" without specifics has not.

03 The first 90 days: how to install yourself

Habits that compound for the rest of your career.

Your first 90 days establish the patterns that will define how senior people see you for years. Five habits to install on day one:

1. **Send a weekly summary email to your manager.** Three lines: what you shipped this week, what you're working on next week, what you need from them. Most graduates don't do this; managers love it; it builds a paper trail of your output.
2. **Take notes by hand in every meeting.** Write the names of every person who attended, what was decided, what you committed to. Re-read your notes 24 hours later. This single habit lifts your perceived competence dramatically.
3. **Ask "naive" questions early.** Day one is the lowest-cost time to ask. By month two it looks like you should already know.
4. **Build a private "mistakes" log.** Every time you get something wrong, write down what happened, what you'd do differently. Review monthly. This is how you compound 1% better per week instead of plateauing.
5. **Get to know one person outside your immediate team every week.** Quick coffee, 15 minutes. By month three you have 12 internal allies. By year one, 50.

04 The trap of being "too useful"

How to say yes to the right work and no to the wrong.

The graduate who is too useful early on gets typecast. They become the person you go to for the urgent template, the rushed deck, the overnight data pull. Five years later, they are still doing the same work — they just have a slightly fancier title.

The graduate who compounds builds a portfolio of strategic work alongside the operational work, even when nobody asks them to. The unglamorous version of this:

1. Take 15-20% of your time and direct it at work that builds your judgement, not just your output. Reading the firm's strategy docs. Sitting in on senior meetings as note-taker. Volunteering for the cross-team initiative.
2. Surface this work in your weekly summary. "Sat in on the EMEA strategy review and took notes; here's what struck me." Senior people read this; junior people don't have the bandwidth.
3. Politely decline the third repetitive task in a row. "I'd like to take this on, but I'd also like to be useful on the [X] project — could we trade?". A graduate who can negotiate their work portfolio at month 6 is rare and valuable.

05 The first promotion: usually 18-30 months in

How to make sure it actually arrives.

The first promotion is rarely automatic. Even at firms with structured "up-or-out" graduate paths, it's not guaranteed. The candidates who get promoted on time, every time, do three things:

1. **Know the criteria explicitly.** What does the next level look like at this firm? What are the performance bands? What are the common reasons people don't get promoted? Most graduates don't ask. The ones who do, plan for it.
2. **Build a promotion case file from month 6.** A private document where you log specific examples of work that demonstrates the next-level competencies. By the time of the promotion review, you have 30+ specific examples — not a vague memory.
3. **Cultivate a sponsor, not just a mentor.** A mentor gives you advice. A sponsor talks about you in rooms you're not in. Senior people who advocate for your promotion in calibration meetings move outcomes more than any other factor.

06 The lateral move: when, and how to time it

Most successful careers have one well-timed switch in years 2-4.

Staying at your first firm forever is rarer than people think. The most common pattern across most professional careers worldwide: 2-4 years at the first firm to build foundational capability, then a lateral move to a firm where the slope is steeper or the optionality is broader.

The right time to leave: when the slope at your current firm has flattened. Signs of slope flattening:

- You can predict your work for the next 6 months with high confidence
- The senior people you've been learning from have stopped giving you new things to learn
- Your peers who were ahead of you have started moving
- The firm's top performers in your role-cluster have started moving externally

The wrong time to leave: when you're frustrated with a specific manager or project. Frustration is normal; switching firms because of one bad month is expensive.

08 Regional variants

Where the universal pattern shifts by market.

US

United States

High switching tolerance. Average graduate stays 2-3 years at first job. Stock vesting cliffs (typically 1 year) influence timing. Tech and consulting both fluid; finance more linear.

UK

United Kingdom

Graduate schemes are formalised at most large employers. 2-year structured programmes with rotations. Promotion on completion is standard. Lateral switching after the scheme is normal.

DE

Germany / DACH

Apprenticeship culture (Ausbildung) co-exists with university graduate paths. Long tenure at first firm more common. Switching after 2 years can read as instability; 4-5 years more typical.

JP

Japan

Lifetime-employment culture diluting but still real. Switching firms in years 2-3 risks being labelled a "job hopper". Career trajectory at first firm is the dominant factor; choose carefully.

AFRICA

African graduate hiring

Big employer schemes (banks, telcos, NGOs, multinationals) most structured. Smaller firms and the long tail much more variable. Bridge through the structured scheme then move once you have brand on the CV.

IN

India

IT services (TCS, Infosys, Wipro) hire in the tens of thousands per year with bench-plus-rotation models. Product companies (Flipkart, Razorpay, Zerodha) much smaller cohorts but higher slope. Switch from services to product is the canonical pivot.

Ready to put this into practice?

Your first job is the slope. Your second job is the leverage. Choose the slope first, optimise the leverage second, and the rest of the career compounds. Most candidates do this in reverse — and pay for it for ten years.

CV Gap Filler

A graduate CV needs different discipline than a senior one. The tool calibrates accordingly.

myjobconcierge.com/ai-tools/cv-diagnostics/

Interview Prep

Graduate interviews are heavily structured (competency, case, panel). Practice all formats before the assessment centre.

myjobconcierge.com/ai-tools/interview-preparation/

AI Career Coach

Talk through the offer comparison. Slope, leverage, optionality. The coach walks you through the decision.

myjobconcierge.com/ai-tools/career-coaching/

Career Guides Hub

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