

GUIDE 02

THE FOUNDATIONS SERIES

Career Streams & Tracks

Every track an organisation can run, what each one is for, and how to choose the four to six you actually need.

— CONTENTS —

What this guide covers

01 What a stream is
page 3

02 The complete track catalogue
page 6

03 The dual career ladder
page 23

04 How many you actually need
page 26

05 Failure modes
page 29

06 Worked examples
page 31

01

What a stream is

The second of the three axes, and the one most often confused with the other two.

— DEFINITION —

A career stream describes the kind of contribution, not the size of it.

Two people can do work of identical size and scope and still belong in different streams, because the nature of the contribution differs.

A senior engineer and a senior manager may operate at the same level of the organisation. One contributes through personal technical depth; the other contributes through the output of a team. Same size, different kind. That distinction is what a stream captures.

Streams exist because a single ladder cannot describe both. Force everyone onto one ladder and you get the outcome every organisation recognises: the only way up is to become a manager, and your best practitioners leave or become mediocre managers.

— DON'T CONFUSE THE AXES —

Stream, family and level are independent

Changing one does not change the others. This is worth labouring, because mixing them up is the most common conceptual error.

SAME FAMILY, DIFFERENT STREAM

Software Engineering · T4 · Lead Technical Specialist

Software Engineering · M2 · Engineering Manager

Same craft. One contributes through depth, one through a team.

SAME STREAM, DIFFERENT FAMILY

Software Engineering · P3

Financial Planning & Analysis · P3

Same kind and size of contribution, entirely different discipline.

SAME FAMILY AND STREAM, DIFFERENT LEVEL

Software Engineering · T2

Software Engineering · T5

Same craft, same kind of contribution, very different scope.

02

The complete track catalogue

Fifteen tracks that exist in real organisations. You will use four to six of them.

Fifteen tracks, and how common each one is

The next fifteen slides take one track each. This is the index.

Code	Track	How common	Where it shows up
E	Executive	Near-universal	Any organisation above ~1,000 people
M	Management	Universal	Everywhere with more than one layer
P	Professional	Universal	Every professional function
T	Technical / Specialist	Very common	Where technical depth is a competitive asset
TM	Technical Management	Selective	Engineering-heavy organisations
S	Support / Administrative	Common	Coordination and service delivery
O	Operational / Production	Sector-specific	Manufacturing, processing, contact centres
C	Skilled Trades / Craft	Sector-specific	Utilities, construction, transport, facilities
R	Sales / Revenue	Common	Any direct sales motion
CL	Clinical	Sector-specific	Healthcare and life sciences
RS	Research / Scientific	Sector-specific	R&D-intensive organisations
AC	Academic / Faculty	Sector-specific	Universities and research institutes
F	Fellow / Distinguished	Selective	Large technical and scientific organisations
AD	Advisory / Strategic	Selective	PE, professional services, senior counsel
FL	Field / Frontline	Sector-specific	Retail, branch networks, field service

Executive

E

Enterprise leadership. Accountable to the board or chief executive for a whole domain of the organisation, not for a function within it.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 2–4 levels, at the very top of the spine.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Every organisation above roughly 1,000 people. Below that, the top management levels usually do this work without a separate track.

WHAT TO WATCH

Keep it genuinely small. An executive track with eight levels is a management track wearing a better title.

Management

M

People leadership. The defining feature is accountability for others' work through others — hiring, performance, capability and structure.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 4–6 levels, from first-line supervisor to functional head.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Universal. Every organisation with more than one layer needs this track.

WHAT TO WATCH

Managing one or two people does not automatically make a management job. Scope and accountability do.

Professional

P

Individual-contributor knowledge work: analysis, advice, design and delivery in a discipline, without responsibility for other people's output.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 5–7 levels, the longest ladder in most organisations.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Universal in any organisation with professional functions — finance, HR, legal, marketing, operations.

WHAT TO WATCH

This is where most of your population sits. Getting its level count right matters more than any other decision.

Technical / Specialist

T

Deep technical individual contribution where the expertise itself is the product: engineering, architecture, data science, actuarial, quantitative work.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 5–7 levels, deliberately mirroring the Professional ladder.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Any organisation where technical depth is a competitive asset rather than a support function.

WHAT TO WATCH

If T levels stop lower than P or M levels, you have signalled that technical depth is worth less. People read that immediately.

Technical Management

TM

The management apex of a technical organisation: leaders who manage technical teams and are still expected to hold genuine technical judgement.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 2–4 levels, overlapping the upper M range.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Engineering-heavy organisations where a pure general-manager profile would not be credible to the teams being led.

WHAT TO WATCH

Only instantiate this if the technical credibility requirement is real and tested. Otherwise use M and save yourself a track.

Support / Administrative

S

Administrative, coordination and service-delivery work executed within established procedures.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 3–4 levels.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Almost universal, though shrinking in many organisations as coordination work is automated or absorbed.

WHAT TO WATCH

Do not use this track as a catch-all for work you have not thought about. Miscellaneous is not a career stream.

Operational / Production

O

Repeatable production, processing or service-delivery work, usually measured on volume, quality and cycle time.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 3–5 levels, from entry operator to lead.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Manufacturing, logistics, shared services, claims and processing operations, contact centres.

WHAT TO WATCH

The boundary between the top of this track and the first management level is the most contested one in operational organisations. Define it explicitly.

Skilled Trades / Craft

C

Licensed or apprenticed craft work where capability is certified externally: electricians, machinists, welders, technicians.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 3–5 levels, often mapped to apprentice / journeyman / master progression.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Manufacturing, utilities, construction, transport, facilities.

WHAT TO WATCH

External certification defines capability, not level. The level still has to describe scope and complexity, or the architecture defers to a third party.

Sales / Revenue

R

Direct revenue accountability: acquiring, growing and retaining customer relationships against a target.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 4–6 levels, frequently segmented by account size or market rather than by pure scope.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Any organisation with a direct sales motion.

WHAT TO WATCH

Sales levels drift toward being a function of quota. Level the work — territory complexity, deal complexity, autonomy — not the number.

Clinical

CL

Licensed clinical practice: physicians, nurses, allied health professionals, pharmacists. Practice scope is bounded by licensure and credentialing.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 4–6 levels, often aligned to established clinical ladders.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Healthcare providers, life sciences with clinical operations, insurers employing clinical staff.

WHAT TO WATCH

Licensure is an input to leveling, never a substitute for it. Two nurses with the same licence can hold very different jobs.

Research / Scientific

RS

Original research and scientific investigation where the output is new knowledge, and timelines are long and uncertain.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 4–6 levels, often with a distinguished-scientist apex.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Pharmaceutical and biotech R&D, industrial research, advanced engineering research groups.

WHAT TO WATCH

Research output resists annual measurement. Level on the scope and originality of the problem, not on last year's publication count.

Academic / Faculty

AC

Teaching and scholarship roles governed by academic convention — lecturer through professor — usually with their own promotion machinery.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 3–5 levels, set by academic tradition more than by architecture design.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Universities, teaching hospitals, research institutes.

WHAT TO WATCH

This track usually pre-exists your architecture and will not bend to it. Map alongside it rather than trying to absorb it.

Fellow / Distinguished

F

The apex of the technical or scientific ladder: a small number of individuals whose expertise is an organisational asset in its own right.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

1–3 levels, sitting above the top of T or RS.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Organisations large enough that a handful of people genuinely operate at enterprise technical scope.

WHAT TO WATCH

Scarcity is the whole point. The moment this becomes a reward for tenure, the technical ladder loses its top and its meaning.

Advisory / Strategic

AD

Senior advisors, operating partners and strategic counsel who carry influence and expertise without line accountability.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

1–3 levels, usually at senior grades only.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Private equity and alternative assets, professional services, organisations retaining senior figures post-executive.

WHAT TO WATCH

Easy to abuse as a parking track. Require a defined remit and a real accountability, or do not create it.

Field / Frontline

FL

Customer-facing delivery in a distributed footprint: stores, branches, depots, sites — usually with its own layering by location and region.

TYPICAL LEVEL RANGE

Typically 4–6 levels, layered by site size then district and region.

WHEN IT EXISTS

Retail, hospitality, branch banking, field service, distributed logistics.

WHAT TO WATCH

Field and corporate ladders are different shapes. Forcing one onto the other is the classic retail architecture failure.

03

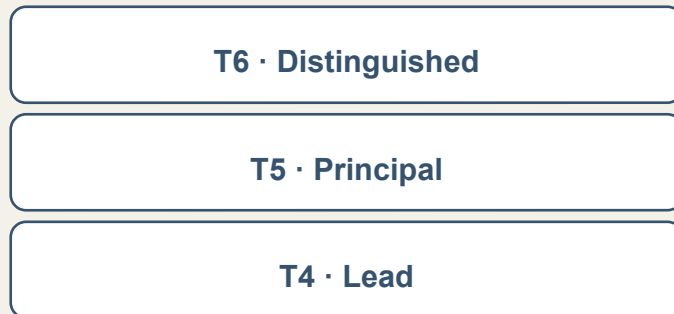
The dual career ladder

The single most valuable thing a stream model gives you — and the one most often faked.

Advancing without managing

A career runs up a common trunk, then branches. Equal height on both branches is the whole design — if the technical branch stops short, the ladder is decorative.

TECHNICAL BRANCH



MANAGEMENT BRANCH



the common
trunk



Four things that make a dual ladder real

Any one of these missing and people will correctly conclude the technical branch is a consolation prize.

- It reaches the same height. The top technical level maps to the same global grade as a senior management level — not one or two below it.
- It is populated. There are actual people at the top technical levels, and they were promoted there rather than hired in once.
- It carries real decision rights. Senior technical roles own architectural or professional decisions that management cannot simply overrule.
- It is visible in succession planning. Technical succession is discussed with the same seriousness as management succession.

04

How many you actually need

Fifteen exist. Most organisations should run four to six.

Most organisations need four to six tracks

Start from the near-universal set and add only what your work genuinely requires.

ALWAYS

The core four

- E · Executive
- M · Management
- P · Professional
- S · Support

USUALLY

Add if it fits

- T · Technical, where depth is a competitive asset
- R · Sales, where there is a direct revenue motion

ONLY IF REQUIRED

Sector tracks

- O, C — production and craft work
- CL, RS, AC — licensed, research and academic practice
- F, TM, AD — apex and specialist leadership
- FL — a distributed field footprint

— DECISION AID —

Which tracks to instantiate

Answer each question. A yes creates a track; a no saves you one.

Do you employ licensed clinicians?	➡	Clinical (CL)
Do you run production, processing or plant operations?	➡	Operational (O)
Do you employ apprenticed or certified trades?	➡	Skilled Trades (C)
Is there a direct sales motion with revenue accountability?	➡	Sales (R)
Is deep technical expertise a competitive asset, not a support function?	➡	Technical (T)
Do you run original research on multi-year horizons?	➡	Research (RS)
Do you operate stores, branches, depots or field sites?	➡	Field / Frontline (FL)
Are there people whose personal expertise is an enterprise-level asset?	➡	Fellow (F)

05

Failure modes

Three ways track design goes wrong, all of them recoverable if caught early.

Three failures you can see coming

FAILURE 01

The fake dual ladder

A technical track is published, stops two levels below the management track, and holds nobody above its midpoint. Everyone reads it correctly as decoration. The fix is structural, not communicational: raise the ceiling and promote into it, or withdraw the claim.

FAILURE 02

Everyone becomes a manager

The only route to seniority runs through people leadership, so the organisation systematically converts strong practitioners into reluctant managers. It loses the practice and gains poor management in one move. A real technical or professional ladder is the only fix.

FAILURE 03

Track proliferation

Every function argues it is different and gets its own track. At twelve tracks nothing is comparable, calibration is impossible, and the architecture has recreated the chaos it replaced. Require evidence that work genuinely differs in kind, not just in content.

06

Worked examples

The same decision, made three times, at three very different organisations.

A 200-person software startup

Fictional organisation, used to show the reasoning.

TRACKS CHOSEN

Three tracks, ten levels

- P · Professional (P1–P5)
- M · Management (M1–M3)
- E · Executive (E1–E2)
- Technical work sits inside P rather than a separate T track

WHY

Minimum viable architecture

At 200 people the cost of governing a track exceeds the value of the distinction it draws. One professional ladder covers engineers and everyone else.

- Split P into P and T at roughly 500 people, when engineering depth becomes a distinct market
- Support work is absorbed into P at the lower levels for now

— WORKED EXAMPLE 02 —

A 5,000-person bank

Fictional organisation, used to show the reasoning.

TRACKS CHOSEN

Six tracks

- P · Professional — the bulk of the population
- T · Technical — technology and quantitative roles
- M · Management
- E · Executive
- S · Support
- R · Sales — relationship management and coverage

WHY

Regulated, relationship-led

Coverage and relationship-management roles carry genuine revenue accountability and a distinct progression logic, so they earn a track.

- Risk, Compliance and Audit sit in P — they are professional work, not a separate stream
- Considered and rejected: a separate track for regulated roles. Licensing is an attribute of a job, not a kind of contribution

A 40,000-person manufacturer

Fictional organisation, used to show the reasoning.

TRACKS CHOSEN

Seven tracks

- O · Operational — plant and production
- C · Skilled Trades — certified maintenance and craft
- P · Professional
- T · Technical — process and manufacturing engineering
- M · Management
- E · Executive
- S · Support

WHY

Two populations, one architecture

Production and craft work differ in kind from professional work — different entry routes, different progression, different certification. Collapsing them would make the largest population in the company invisible.

- The O-to-M boundary is defined explicitly, because it is where most disputes land
- Sales sits in P — this manufacturer sells through distributors, so there is no direct quota-carrying population

UP NEXT IN THE SERIES

GUIDE 03

Levels

How many levels to run, where to draw the lines between them, and what it costs you to get that wrong.

Find the full series and the free mapping workbook at hrdigitalplayground.com

HR Digital Playground