



Getting Results from Early Talent Programs:

An Updated Analysis of Practices that Drive the Success of Early-Career Talent Development Programs

Based on data from the

[Fifth Edition of *The LDP Survey: An Assessment of Practices in
Managing Early-Career Development Programs*](#)

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Executive Summary

This document examines the relationships between early-career development program “inputs” (practices) and their outcome measures (results). The analysis is intended to help managers of early-talent programs identify program attributes that correlate with a program’s effectiveness, and to uncover ways to improve program performance.

Our analysis is based on data collected through the fifth edition of [The LDP Survey: An Assessment of Practices in Managing Early-Career Development Programs](#) (“LDP Survey”)– a comprehensive investigation of the management, recruitment, and operational practices associated with running early talent development programs. The fifth edition of the *LDP Survey* includes data from 169 programs across [97 organizations](#) representing a broad range of industries; and is believed to be the only survey of its kind.

Key findings:

- Internship-driven recruitment is positively correlated with program completion rates.
- The establishment of a strong sense of community is correlated with higher confidence levels in demonstrating program performance (continuing a trend found in earlier studies).
- Programs with clearly defined retention goals tend to achieve better retention outcomes.
- Longer programs show a negative correlation with graduation rates.
- Diversity within a program is positively linked to program completion rates.
- Focusing on structured programs (as opposed to direct hires) may reduce the time required for early talent to reach higher salary bands - suggesting accelerated career progression.
- Although 77% of surveyed programs indicated that program participants outperformed the general employee population, no program input factors were significantly correlated with this outcome.

The bulk of the findings in this report stem from correlation analysis, examining the relationships between program inputs (such as structure and curriculum choices) and outputs (such as retention rates and participant performance).

Notably, although there are multiple program inputs significantly correlated with outcome measures, **no input correlation has been found to be “strongly” correlated with any output** – according to conventional correlation thresholds (which are detailed below). This suggests that *an early talent development program’s benefits are complex and likely emerge from an array of inputs acting in combination*. However, there are many statistically significant “weak” and “moderate” correlations that are useful in guiding us. Those relationships are shared in detail below.

Introduction

In a competitive and dynamic business landscape, the strategic cultivation of early talent is an important element of workforce planning. Early-talent development programs are designed to attract, nurture, and retain high-potential recent graduates so that they may contribute to achieving organizational goals. Early talent programs can be complex to administer. This report aims to better understand how various program practices impact program success.

The data for this analysis come from the fifth edition of [*The LDP Survey: An Assessment of Practices in Managing Early-Career Development Programs*](#) ("LDP Survey") administered by LDP Connect – the community of early talent development professionals. The LDP Survey contains data on 169 such programs reported by [97 organizations](#) and is a comprehensive assessment of how organizations design, manage, recruit for and evaluate their early talent pipeline programs. The full survey offers organizations an opportunity to benchmark their program characteristics, practices, compensation levels, budgets, staffing ratios, outcome metrics, and many other attributes against peer organizations.

The survey has been conducted five times - in 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021 and 2023 - bringing together a wealth of data on how the country's marquee employers approach and manage early talent development programs. **All 20 comprehensive data reports, along with a list of questions and participants, can be found at www.LDPsurvey.com.** Reports are available by program functional area (analytics & data science, engineering, finance & accounting, general management, human resources, information technology, logistics/supply chain, manufacturing/operations, research & development, sales & marketing) and in overall aggregate.

The LDP Connect community exists to help early talent pipeline professionals create better programs, better graduates, and more satisfied executive sponsors. With an active membership of over 650, the community shares insights, tools and intelligence during monthly meetings, and at our annual conferences: the [LDP Summit](#) in North America, and the [GDP Summit](#) in Europe. We invite you to learn more and become a member of the community at <http://www.LDPconnect.com>.

In the first part of this report, we look at **nine key measures of early talent program outcomes** and the program factors that are statistically correlated with them. In the second part, we summarize the basic characteristics of survey respondents.

As is typically the case with this sort of analysis, there are multiple ways to interpret what the data tell us. We expect that the reader will find the information presented here more provocative than prescriptive, but hope that it will be useful in either validating the reader's current practices, or in inspiring a fresh look into areas of program improvement that may have been overlooked.

Approach

This analysis aims to derive *practical intelligence* from real-life examples to answer the question: “What can be done to improve programs?” Therefore, we focus on “outcome” metrics that are *measurable*, and program “inputs” that a program manager might reasonably feel empowered to influence. For example, inputs analyzed include elements like program structure, curriculum design, recruitment practices, and a program’s sense of community, and not things like location, size of company, revenues, etc. There were **69 inputs** analyzed for this report.

“Outcome” metrics were determined through in-depth conversations with the early talent community to identify commonalities in measurement – and then surveyed as part of the LDP Survey. There are **nine** outcomes included in this analysis:

1. Whether or not program participants are outperforming the general population
2. Level of confidence in the ability to demonstrate the success/value of the development program to senior management
3. The Net Promoter Score® from the program participants
4. Net percent time impact of the development program on a participant’s “Time to Next [salary] Band”
5. Percent of participants completing the first year of the development program
6. Percent of participants completing the full program
7. 1-year post-program retention rate
8. 5-year post-program retention rate
9. Whether or not the program met its retention goals the prior year

Correlation analysis indicates how much two variables move in relation to each other. A correlation of 1 means they move perfectly in alignment with each other, while a 0 means no relationship at all. A negative 1 correlation means the variables move perfectly in opposite directions. This type of analysis reveals insight into how different program inputs are related to, and may influence, the key output metrics.

The boundaries between “weak and “strong” correlations are not absolute in the world of statistics, but generally can be judged according to the follow scale:

- Between +/- 0.25 and +/- 0.39 is = “weak” relationship
- Between +/- 0.4 and +/- 0.59 = “moderate” relationship
- Beyond +/- 0.6 = “strong” relationship

It’s important to note that correlation, no matter how strong, does not imply or show causation.

All correlations noted in this analysis greater than .25 or less than -.25 met a .05 p-value threshold for significance, validating that it is unlikely the correlation is a matter of chance. All correlations beyond 0.3 and -0.3 met, at a minimum, a .01 p-value (which is an even stronger validation against randomness in the relationship).

Summary of Correlation Analysis

The graphic below is a heatmap of the notable inputs correlated to the outcome variables noted above. The deeper the red color, the stronger the positive correlation (i.e. the more the two variables align with each other in how they change); and the deeper the blue color, the stronger the negative correlation (i.e. the more the two variables move opposite to each other).

(Note that there are many statistically “significant” correlations discovered that fall below the threshold of “weak” defined above. This report does not explore these in detail.)

“Input” practices	“Outputs”								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
% program’s most recent class from internship program	0.18	-0.00	-0.10	0.16	0.25	0.35	0.10	0.18	0.22
Manager tries to create distinct sense of community	0.09	0.40	0.10	0.19	-0.12	-0.01	0.05	0.02	0.09
Distinct sense of community EXISTS	0.07	0.35	0.15	0.11	-0.04	-0.12	-0.04	-0.11	-0.01
Formal in-house training	-0.01	0.05	-0.21	0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.32	0.10	0.17
% of total participants diverse	0.11	0.05	0.30	-0.12	-0.08	0.06	0.14	0.17	0.02
FTE - direct managers	0.09	0.02	-0.31	0.13	-0.02	0.10	0.05	-0.00	0.03
5-yr retention goal	0.03	0.02	0.32	0.20	-0.11	0.19	0.19	0.43	-0.01
3-yr retention goal	0.00	-0.07	0.31	0.19	-0.04	0.05	0.16	0.22	0.05
Avg months to complete program	-0.07	0.04	-0.09	0.20	-0.04	-0.36	-0.08	0.05	0.09
% total annual early talent hires hired into structured programs	0.16	-0.02	-0.16	0.36	-0.05	-0.05	-0.18	-0.09	0.11
Full virtual option	0.00	0.07	-0.07	0.02	0.18	0.31	0.10	0.03	-0.03

* All values greater than .25 or less than -.25 met the .05 p-value for statistical significance. All values beyond .3 and -.3 met, at a minimum, a .01 p-value.

Key to “Outputs” noted in chart columns

1. Participants outperforming the general employee population
2. Confidence in ability to demonstrate the success/value program
3. Most recent program Net Promoter Score (NPS)
4. Net percent time impact of program on "time to next (salary) band"
5. Percent of participants completing the first year of program
6. Percent of participants completing the full program
7. One-year post-program retention rate
8. Five-year post-program retention rate
9. Met retention goals over the past year

Detailed Key Findings

Overall, there were many significant statistical correlations discovered between program inputs and outcomes in our analysis. We provide details below on those that meet (at least) the “weak” strength threshold and seem actionable. The five areas of correlation below are particularly salient:

A strong community matters – but less so...

We asked LDP Survey respondents the following two questions:

In your view, to what extent does your development program manager try to create a sense of community among program associates and graduates that is distinct (although not necessarily isolated) from the company’s overall community?

AND

In your view, to what extent does a distinct sense of community EXIST in your development program (regardless of the program managers' intentions one way or the other)?

Respondents were asked to rate their level of community building effort, and community strength, respectively, on a scale from 1-10. Those programs with higher levels of both tended to report stronger confidence in demonstrating the value and success of their program.

Although this year’s analysis reveals only one notable correlation between community and outcomes, the relationship is one of the strongest discovered among all variables evaluated. It’s important to note that **the positive correlation between strong community and strong outcome metrics has been consistently observed in our analysis since we began conducting it in 2018** (including a correlation with six out of eight outcomes examined in our last analysis).

For the complete summarized results of responses to these community questions, [see here](#).

Participant Net Promoter Score – Too many chefs?

We asked LDP Survey respondents to provide their program’s average Net Promoter Score (NPS) among their program participants. Encouragingly, we found that the overall average NPS was 62 – a figure within the generally accepted range of “great” eNPS scores. (For the complete summarized results of responses to NPS data, [see here](#).)

NPS Score is positively correlated with the following inputs:

- Program overall diversity levels
- 5-year post-program retention rate
- 3- year post-program retention rate

Program managers are likely to find intuitive the positive correlations above. More surprisingly, **NPS Score is negatively correlated with the number of program management FTE’s that directly supervise participants**. In other words, the more company employees with direct supervision over program participants, the lower the program’s NPS.

Perhaps multiple reporting relationships lead to confusion? We leave it to the reader to speculate.

A focus on structured programs means acceleration

We asked respondents to indicate their program's impact on participants promotion velocity by answering the following question:

What is net percent time impact of your program on "time to next band?"

"Time to next band" is a key metric selected by the [LDP Connect Enterprise Council](#) to capture a program's direct impact on the "velocity" of a participant's career trajectory. It measures the speed at which an employee jumps to the next salary band post-program. This metric is expressed as a comparison number between program associates and the company's general population (or a relevant comparator group).

Our analysis found that **programs hiring a larger percentage of early talent hires into structured programs (as opposed to "direct" roles) reported higher "time to next band" scores.** Perhaps this indicates that employers more focused on structured programs develop higher competency in driving career acceleration from those programs.

For details on how "time to band" is calculated and the complete summarized results of responses on this metric, please [see here](#).

Is program length hurting your program completion rate?

Retention is a commonly tracked performance metric in early talent development programs. In the LDP Survey, we ask respondents to provide the following retention metrics:

- First-year program completion rate
- Program completion rate ("graduation")
- 1-year post-program completion rate
- 5-year post-program completion

Programs that hire a larger percentage of their program's incoming class from their intern pool tend to experience higher program completion rates. Programs where it is possible to complete the program virtually (at least, most of the program), also report higher program completion rates.

Intuitively, the analysis also shows that longer programs experience lower completion rates. Additionally, 1-year post-program completion rates tend to be higher where formal in-house training is a component of program curriculum.

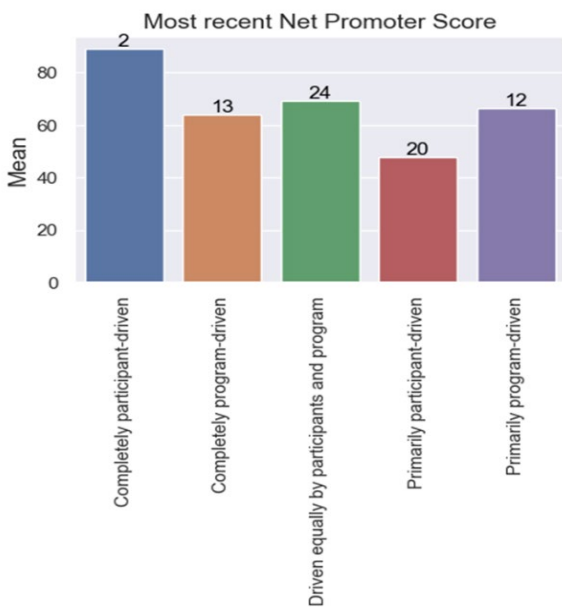
In the strongest correlation found in the entire study, 5-year post-program completion rates are higher for those organizations that have 5-year post-program retention goals. The relationship between retention goals and results was more pronounced in our last study, but the numbers continue to suggest that setting retention goals aligns with better performance.

For the complete summarized results of program retention data, [see here](#).

Other Observations

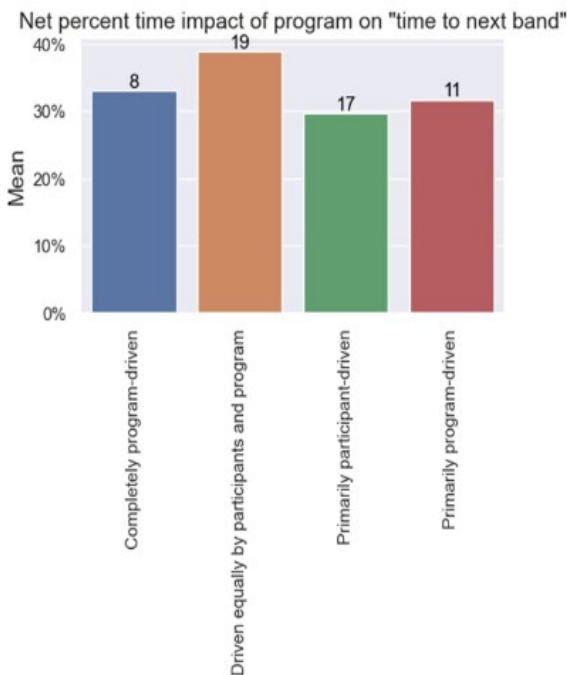
In addition to the correlation findings above, there were other notable observations derived from an assessment of the *qualitative* questions in the LDP Survey. Although not statistically significant, there are some intriguing patterns in the data that bear calling out.

LDP Survey Question: Which answer below best describes how your program participants move into roles after [program] graduation?



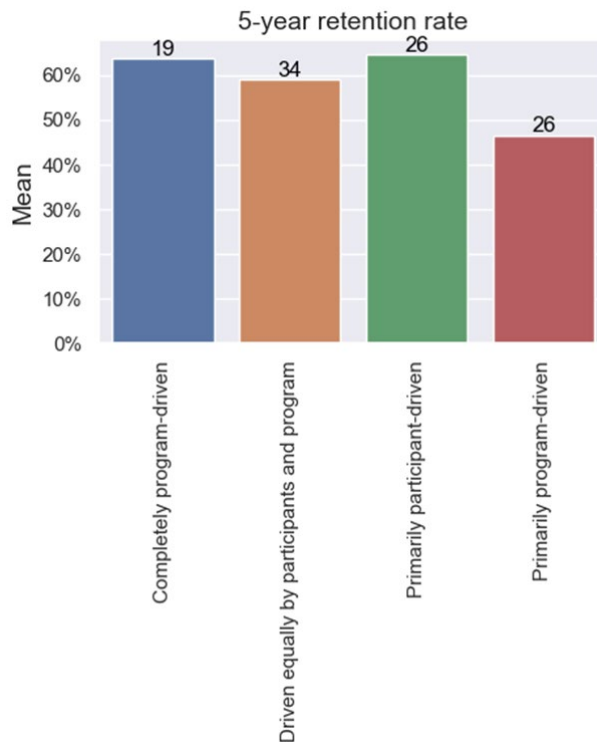
1. Programs with a post-program placement process that is primarily participant-driven appear to have lower NPS scores.

The chart at left suggests that programs with a placement process that is primarily driven by the program participants have an average NPS score that is at least 10 points lower than programs using other models of placement.



2. Programs that share the placement process appear to have a better "time to next band" metric.

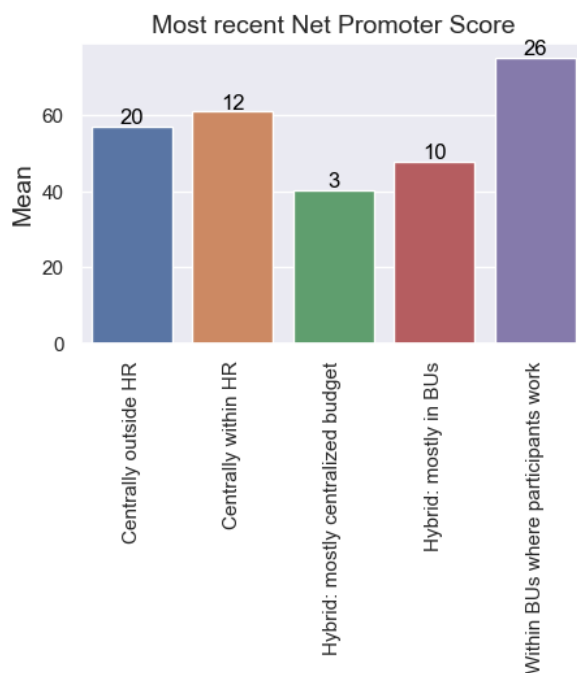
There is nearly a 10% positive difference in "time to band" career acceleration among programs whose placement process is driven equally by program administrators and participants versus other placement models.



3. Programs where placement is primarily program-driven tend to have worse 5-year post-program retention.

There is at least a 10% gap in five-year post-program retention between programs with a post-program placement process that is primarily program-driven and all other models surveyed.

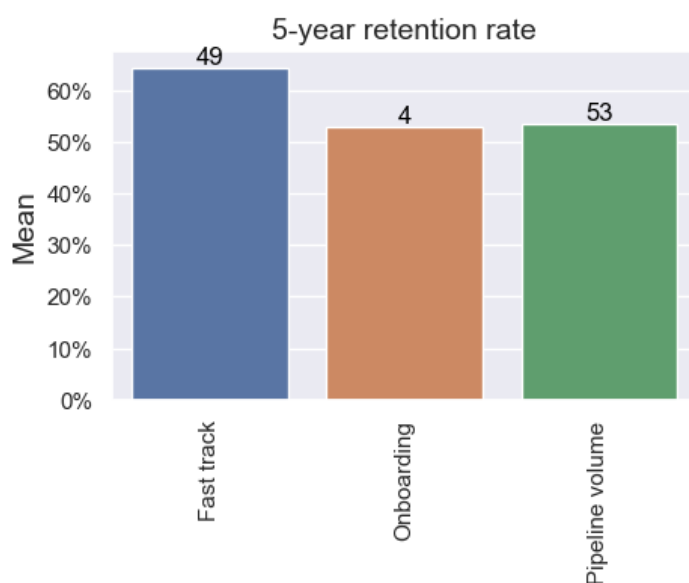
LDP Survey Question: *What term best describes how your program is funded?*



4. Programs that are funded from within the business tend to have a higher NPS.

Programs that are funded completely from within the business units served by the program have a mean NPS score that is nearly 20 points higher than the second most popular funding model.

LDP Survey Question: Which of the following BEST describes the PRIMARY purpose of your program (even if several apply)?



1. “Fast track” programs have better 5-year retention rates.

Programs that are focused on career acceleration have about 10% better 5-year retention than programs focused on building talent pipeline in a particular function.

Respondent Characteristics

Number of respondents

The fifth edition of the LDP Survey contains data collected from 97 organizations representing 169 distinct early-career talent development programs.

Program budget

The average program reported a budget of just over \$1 million (\$1,065,885)¹. However, the median² program reported a budget of \$160,000. This large discrepancy between the mean and median indicates that there are many lower budget programs and a small number of very high budget programs. This is shown in the table below.

Operating Budget (n=83)	%
< \$25,000	19%
\$25,000 - \$100,000	20%
\$100,000 - \$500,000	19%
\$500,000 - \$1,000,000	16%
\$1,000,000 - \$2,500,000	16%
> \$2,500,000	10%

¹ Net of salaries and bonuses.

² The ‘median’ is a measure of centrality, like the mean (average). It is the value where half of the programs are higher and half lower, in value.

Investment per participant

The average investment per participant is \$23,522³ broken down by the ranges indicated below.

Investment Per Participant (n=78)	%
<\$2,500	30%
\$2,500 - \$5,000	19%
\$5,000 - \$10,000	15%
\$10,000 - \$15,000	9%
\$15,000-\$25,000	15%
>\$25,000	12%

Industries

Participants spanned a wide range of industries. As has been typical for several years, the most highly represented industries are **financial services**, **manufacturing**, and **health care**. Participants could select more than one industry.

Industry (n=165)	Percent
Manufacturing	25.3%
Financial Services	18.2%
Health Care	13.5%
Internet/Technology	10.6%
Engineering	8.8%
Science & Technology	8.2%
Pharmaceuticals	7.1%
Aerospace	7.1%
Consumer Products	5.9%
Energy	5.9%
Medical Device	4.7%
Food	4.1%
Beverage & Tobacco	4.1%
Biotechnology	4.1%
Software	3.5%
Telecommunications	3.5%
Defense	2.9%

Industry	Percent
Education	2.9%
Agriculture	2.4%
Automotive	2.4%
Retail & Wholesale	1.8%
Utilities	1.8%
Chemical	1.8%
Electronics	1.8%
Consulting/Professional Services	1.2%
Entertainment	1.2%
Hospitality	1.2%
Transportation/Logistics	1.2%
Construction	1.2%
MRO	0.6%
Real Estate	0.6%
Government	0.6%
Gaming	0.6%
Insurance	0.6%

³ Excluding salaries and bonuses. One value, at \$729,600 was dropped as it was 4x the next highest value and was therefore suspected to be an entry error (more likely to be \$72,960 or \$7290). With this value included the average was \$31,367.

Program functional areas

Development programs for early-career hires are spread across a wide range of functional areas, and 87% of organizations reported that they had multiple programs. The most common areas reported were **finance/accounting**, **information technology**, and **engineering**.

Functional area of program (n=164)	%
Finance/Accounting	20%
Information Technology/Software	17%
Engineering	14%
Sales & Marketing/BizDev	9%
Manufacturing/Operations	8%
General Management	7%
Human Resources	5%
Logistics/Supply Chain	4%
Analytics/Data Science	3%
Research & Development	2%

The above is a summary of the characteristics of the organizations that responded to the survey used in this analysis. For comprehensive information on participant and program demographics, [please see here](#).

Methodology

This analysis of the LDP survey was undertaken to better understand the relationship between the “input” variables and the “output” variables in early talent development programs. Due to the nature of the survey, a certain amount of data cleaning, preparation, and alteration needed to be done. Most of this involved non-numeric, “ordinal,” responses that were given quantitative values. For example, a question with responses being “high,” “medium,” or “low,” may have been given the values of 3, 2, and 1, respectively.

Additionally, choices were made as to frequent use of average (mean) as a measure of centrality. A different measure, such as median, may have yielded a different perspective on the data.

Correlation values were obtained using a Pearson coefficient, as were p-values.

In examining survey questions where qualitative responses were not hierarchical (nominal responses), an analysis was performed to determine if there were any significant differences in the averages associated with different responses. Unfortunately, none were found to be of significance given the small differences and number of responses. However, the graphs noted in the “Other Observations” section can still provide insights into potential relationships that are worth considering and testing.

It should be noted that the participant organizations completing the LDP Survey may not be representative of the entire population of early career programs. ([Click here](#) for a full list of organizations that participated in the survey.) Therefore, results should be interpreted with caution.

About this Report

LDP Connect

ldpconnect.com

LDP Connect is a membership organization providing research, events and support to the global community of professionals who manage, support or recruit for early career talent development programs. Since 2012, LDP Connect has hosted the annual [LDP Summit®](#) and the [GDP Summit](#) – best-practice conferences in North American and Europe, respectively, featuring case studies of innovations, group brainstorming sessions, benchmarking data on program practices, and networking and idea sharing.

LDP Survey

ldpsurvey.com

Custom reports and additional data analysis services from the Survey of Practices for Early-Career Development Programs are available. LDP Connect also offers full program benchmarking services. Contact Dan.Beaudry@LDPconnect.com for more information.

Jason Doedderlein

Jason Doedderlein conducted the analysis referenced in this whitepaper. He has a 20+ year history of research and analysis with a focus on data analytics and financial and economic modeling.

Jason has an MBA from the University of Colorado-Denver and a dual-BA in Political Science and Philosophy from the University of Massachusetts-Boston. Additional education has come from the US Navy Nuclear Power Program, MIT, and Harvard.

To learn more about Jason and the work he does, please visit his [LinkedIn page](#) or [ResearchGate profile](#).