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The surprising leadership effect accelerators have on startup employees

*Entrepreneurship training programs across the world aim at boosting the success of startups. But even when startups fail, these programs bring positive results in the form of employee upskilling. **Juanita González-Uribe** writes that their newly acquired knowledge, confidence and skill flow into other firms and industries, fuelling broader productivity gains and boosting the economy.*



Governments around the world spend over \$1 billion each year on **training** programs aimed at helping entrepreneurs succeed. Among these, **startup accelerators** stand out as the most intense. They offer short, high-pressure sprints combining structured mentorship, targeted feedback and sometimes early-stage funding to **accelerate** growth or expose failure quickly.

Most of the attention has focused on how these programs help startups raise investment or survive. But what about the impact on the people inside them? What happens to startup employees who go through these programs? Do they benefit from the structure, pace and exposure? And do those benefits last?

Higher-order skills

In new research, we find that they do. We combine LinkedIn resume data, official salary records and observations from Colombia's ValleE accelerator to track what happens to employees' careers after the programs.

The evidence is striking: employees in accelerated startups are much more likely to become managers, earn higher salaries and move into roles that demand soft, **higher-order skills** such as leadership, communication and team coordination—abilities they learn through experiential learning in the structured, feedback-rich environments accelerators create.

These skills are **increasingly** recognised as essential for top **management** in the innovation economy. The potential aggregate impact is substantial. By 2023, nearly one in 10 newly appointed managers in young, innovative firms with LinkedIn profiles had previously worked at an accelerated startup.

Immersive environments

Our research indicates that employees without business degrees benefit most from structured entrepreneurship programs, which can serve as a substitute for traditional business education. Strategic pivots, structured feedback and investor pressure are central to structured training. This immersive environment can be deeply formative, exposing workers to key elements of decision-making, leadership and adaptation, often at earlier stages of their careers.

To test our finding, we used two complementary strategies. First, we assembled a large dataset including thousands of startups and over 10,000 employees across the Americas. Second, we used information from Colombia's ValleE accelerator, where admission decisions were made by randomly assigned judges with differing standards (some stricter, others more lenient). This allowed us to cleanly identify the causal impact of program participation on workers.

Higher salaries

The results are clear and robust. Within three years of joining an entrepreneurship training program, employees were 13 per cent more likely to move into managerial or entrepreneurial roles, often in entirely new firms, not the startups they originally joined. Their salaries rose by close to 10 per cent, even when the startup they worked for failed. There was no increase in unemployment risk.

What drives these benefits is learning.

To understand the nature of this learning, we analysed job descriptions using natural language processing and occupational data from the US Department of Labor. Employees of firms that took part in acceleration programs move away from technical or routine tasks and shift into roles that demand stronger social, cognitive and leadership skills. These higher-order capabilities are increasingly essential in the innovation economy.

Without entrepreneurship programs, much of this learning potential may go untapped, particularly in startups led by inexperienced founders, perhaps lacking strategic clarity.

We ruled out two common alternative explanations. First, these effects are not simply about better job matching or network advantages: employment rates remain unchanged and new roles rarely involve peers from the same training group. Second, the gains are not driven only by signalling success. Employees from failed startups experience similar wage and career gains.

Not just Silicon Valley

Our results hold across countries, sectors and types of programs. Effects are strong in both North and Latin America, and we see similar impacts for accelerators that offer no capital. In Colombia's ValleE accelerator, we track outcomes using national social security data. Even in this setting with smaller entrepreneurial ecosystems, startup employees are more likely to become managers and earn higher wages. And because entry into the program was influenced by random judge assignment, we can confidently interpret these effects as causal.

High turnover, fail fast

One concern is that employee upskilling might harm participating startups and founders by making it harder to retain talent. But we found no evidence of this. Training programs do lead to higher turnover, but firms tend to replace departing employees with more experienced or higher-quality hires. This is consistent with a broader professionalisation process, also seen in the wake of [venture capital investment](#).

Most evaluations of entrepreneur training programs focus narrowly on startup survival, revenue or investment raised. These metrics matter, but they miss a big part of the picture. We have shown the benefits to employees' careers and broader productivity gains in the economy. But there's yet another advantage: accelerators can help low-potential firms close early, reducing wasted resources and freeing up attention for more promising ideas.

Towards broader metrics

As policymakers around the world look to boost innovation and productivity, entrepreneur training programs will continue to play a central role. But we need to widen the lens through which we judge their success.

Programs that fail to produce unicorns may still generate tremendous value, especially in regions where access to quality education is limited. To capture their true impact, we must move beyond firms and begin tracking the broader effects on teams, talent and the innovation economy.

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- *Juanita González-Uribe will be speaking at the LSE Festival event [How startup accelerators shape careers: the hidden “soft skills dividend”](#), Wednesday 18 June 2025, 12.00pm to 1.00pm.*
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