

Social Mobility in Organizations:

Between Formal Commitment
and a Lack of Support





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Is a career merely a question of individual performance—or is it also a question of organizational design? Socioeconomic mobility is often discussed as a social challenge. But companies play a central role in determining whether potential turns into real growth. They determine how recruiting is structured, how career paths are designed, and which talents are recognized.

In this publication, we analyze how the 115 largest companies in Germany structurally take account of socioeconomic background—and where there is still an implementation gap between formal approval and effective support. Based on our comprehensive benchmarking and in-depth interviews, we show the specific levers companies can use to actively shape mobility.



Socioeconomic Mobility Is Not a Given

Opportunity gaps don't arise at a single point; they build up throughout a person's career. In Germany, it starts with the level of education in one's family background. For years, statistics have shown a persistent and striking gap in opportunities between children of college graduates and those whose parents do not have academic degrees¹.

These early disparities carry through to the start of a person's career. As already shown in the previous edition of this study (*Hiding in Plain Sight: First-Generation Professionals*, 2023), first-generation college graduates (hereafter "FirstGens") start their professions with structural disadvantages. There, we reported that FirstGens have less access to supportive networks and relevant information about entry-level positions and more often feel they cannot be themselves in the workplace.

Unequal opportunity



Children of parents without a college degree

Children of college graduates

Achieve a college-prep high school

46%

vs.

80%

Attend university

27%

vs.

79%

Strong Commitment, Low Structural Implementation

But how is this situation being addressed? Today, many companies² in Germany are expressly committed to diversity and inclusion. However, when it comes to socio-economic diversity, there is a clear discrepancy between

formal commitments and meaningful structural support. Even where social background is now included in core diversity frameworks, this commitment is still rarely reflected in sustained action.

We evaluated 115 companies ...

Embedment and commitment

94%

have signed the **Diversity Charter**

43%

have set socioeconomic background as a **DEI dimension**

Visibility and presence

50%

have **addressed** socioeconomic background **in recruiting**

17%

have partnerships with ext. **FirstGen networks**

Support and platform

8%

have an internal **FirstGen network**

2%

have dedicated **FirstGen training/mentoring**

For reference:
78%
have
networks for other
diversity groups

Our evaluation of the top 115 companies in Germany initially indicates a high degree of formal approval. For example, 94% of companies have signed the Diversity Charter, which has explicitly included social background as a diversity dimension since January 2021. At the same time, however, only 43% have actually integrated social background into their canon of values or code of conduct as an independent dimension of diversity. The visibility of this dimension remains limited: Just 10% of companies

showcase first-generation college graduates through publicly shared success stories. There is also a mixed picture in recruiting: Around 50% of companies address socioeconomic background in their recruiting processes at least selectively. Seeking alignment with existing structures is rarer still. Only 17% of companies partner with external FirstGen networks. The topic is often limited to individual measures and depends on isolated initiatives, rather than being systematically embedded.

Methodology

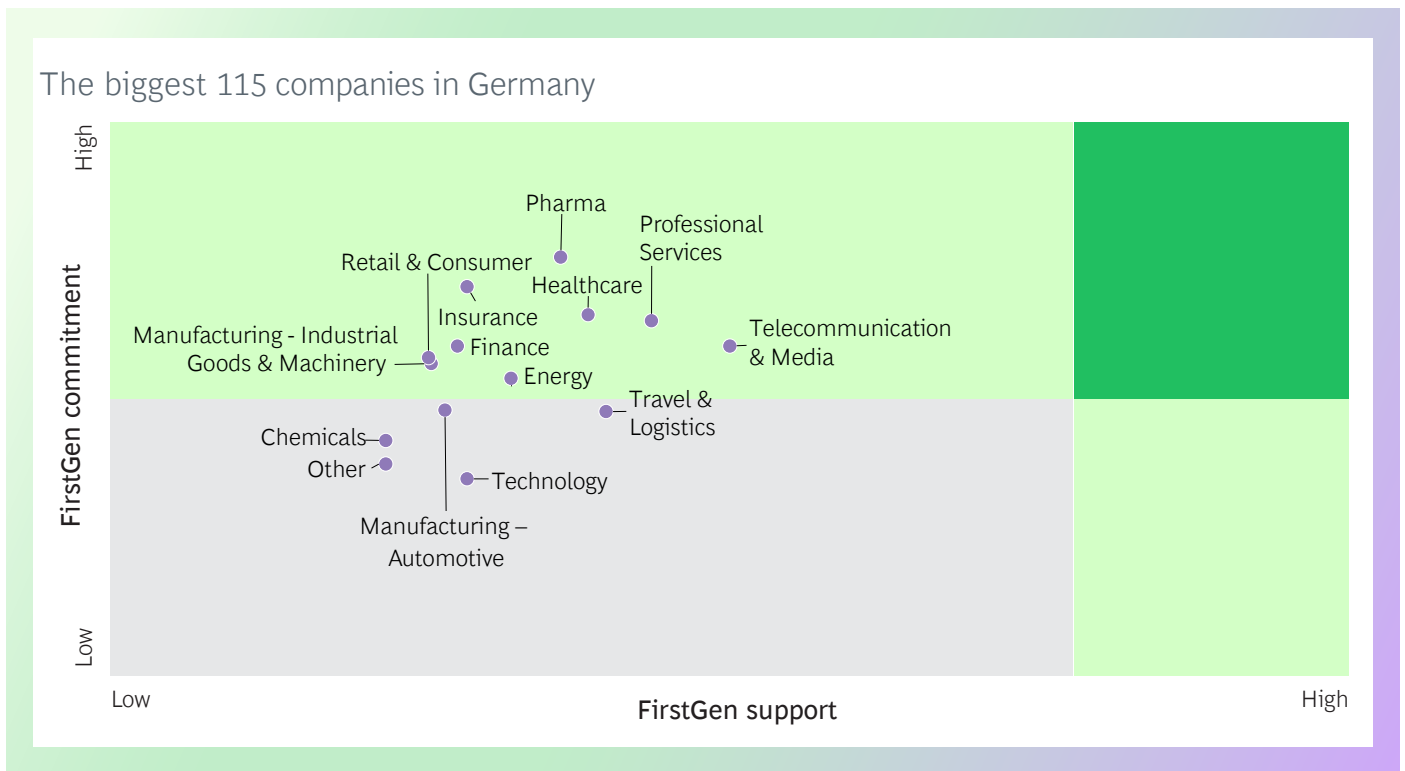
This report benchmarks the 115 leading companies² in Germany. They are comprised of the top 100 in terms of domestic value added, supplemented by the DAX40 groups that were missing at the time of the survey. The companies were evaluated systematically on their FirstGen commitment and support through an additively weighted index.³

"FirstGen commitment" encompasses taking socioeconomic background into account in recruiting, formally recognizing it as a diversity dimension, and signing the Diversity Charter. "FirstGen support" assesses the availability of an internal FirstGen network, dedicated training or mentoring, the visibility of FirstGen role models, partnerships with external FirstGen organizations, and FirstGen awards. The findings were shared with all the companies for review prior to publication. In addition, interviews were conducted with six companies, some of which are highlighted below as pioneers. Some of the statistics presented are based on the anonymous online survey conducted by BCG for the first edition of this study. The survey was taken by 1,125 professionals from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

FirstGen Commitment and Support at the 115 Largest Companies in Germany, by Industry

The gap between expectations and reality is particularly pronounced when it comes to targeted, proactive support and platforms. Although 78% of companies have employee resource groups or similar networks for other diversity groups, only one-tenth of them have an internal network with a specific focus on social background. Dedicated development offerings are also rare: Hardly any company offers programs explicitly for FirstGens; for example,

in the form of training or mentoring. Overall, our evaluation of the companies indicates that although socioeconomic background is increasingly recognized as a relevant diversity dimension, support for FirstGens has remained largely symbolic so far. There is a clear implementation gap between formal embedment, sporadic visibility, and sustained structural support.

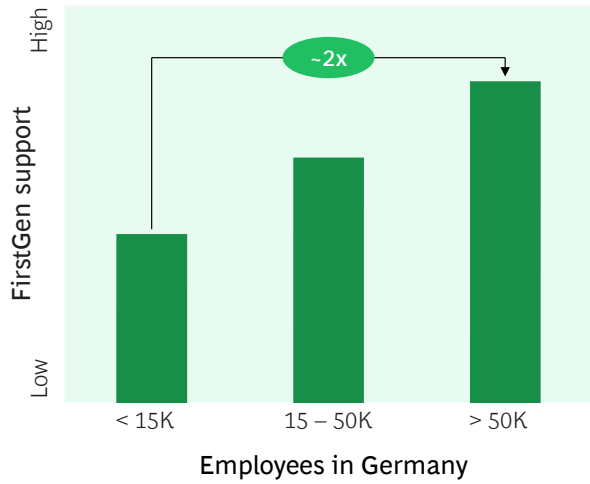


But why is that? Networks of staff members from comparable socioeconomic backgrounds often take a grass-roots approach, initiated by individual employees with personal commitment, not as a strategic initiative of the company. The analysis of the 115 largest companies points to a consistent pattern: FirstGen support tends to be higher in larger companies and sectors with a high proportion of college graduates.

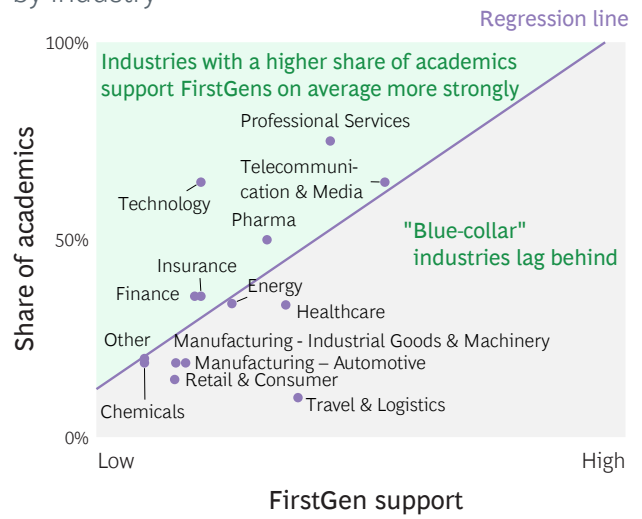
While a superficial reading might suggest a mere correlation, several structural mechanisms point to an inherent link: greater visibility of socioeconomic disparities, the strategic relevance of FirstGen support in the competition for talent, structural feasibility, and the capacity to integrate support initiatives into existing diversity frameworks.

FirstGen Support increases with company size and the proportion of academics in Germany, by Industry

Company size in Germany and FirstGen support



Share of academics and FirstGen support by industry ^{2, 4, 5}



Visibility of socioeconomic differences in academic contexts. In highly academic industries, career paths are formalized, educational trajectories are more homogeneous, and implicit expectations regarding bearing, network access, or professional demeanor are particularly strong. Differences between FirstGens and non-FirstGens are more evident in such environments and increase the likelihood that individual engagement will lead to networks and structured support formats.

Strategic relevance in the race for academic talent. Companies with a high demand for highly qualified specialists and managers compete particularly strongly for them. FirstGens are not a peripheral concern; they constitute a meaningful segment of the talent pool. Our previous study also shows that they often exhibit high intrinsic motivation, loyalty, and resilience.

Structural viability in large companies. Big corporations frequently boast established diversity structures, contacts, and budgets. Furthermore, a larger workforce increases the likelihood of a critical mass of committed employees initiating and supporting such a network.

Integrating with existing diversity strategies. In companies where diversity is strategically prioritized, it is easier to integrate socioeconomic background as an additional dimension. Existing employee resource groups offer points of reference that FirstGen networks can build upon.

How FirstGens Make Companies Stronger

The differences in career development described are not only a matter of fairness but also have a direct impact on company performance. The Gender Diversity Index by TUM and BCG shows that companies with diverse management are more successful, more resilient, and more innovative than homogeneous ones.¹⁰

The link between diversity and corporate success extends beyond gender diversity—FirstGens demonstrably contribute as well. Sina Barenkau describes FirstGens as "natural

high performers," having had to fight their way forward without a safety net or inherited advantages. In her opinion, this results in three key strengths: resilience, a high level of self-motivation, and a distinct ability to communicate.

Companies that fail to actively cultivate this potential forgo not only equal opportunity but performance as well. Socioeconomic mobility isn't a marginal issue—it's a strategic lever in the competition for leadership talent.



Pioneers: What Are They Doing Right?

A closer look reveals that some industries are true pioneers—let's call them "system builders": firms that go beyond pledges on equality in terms of socioeconomic background and take clear, proactive steps to advance it. Let's look at three examples.

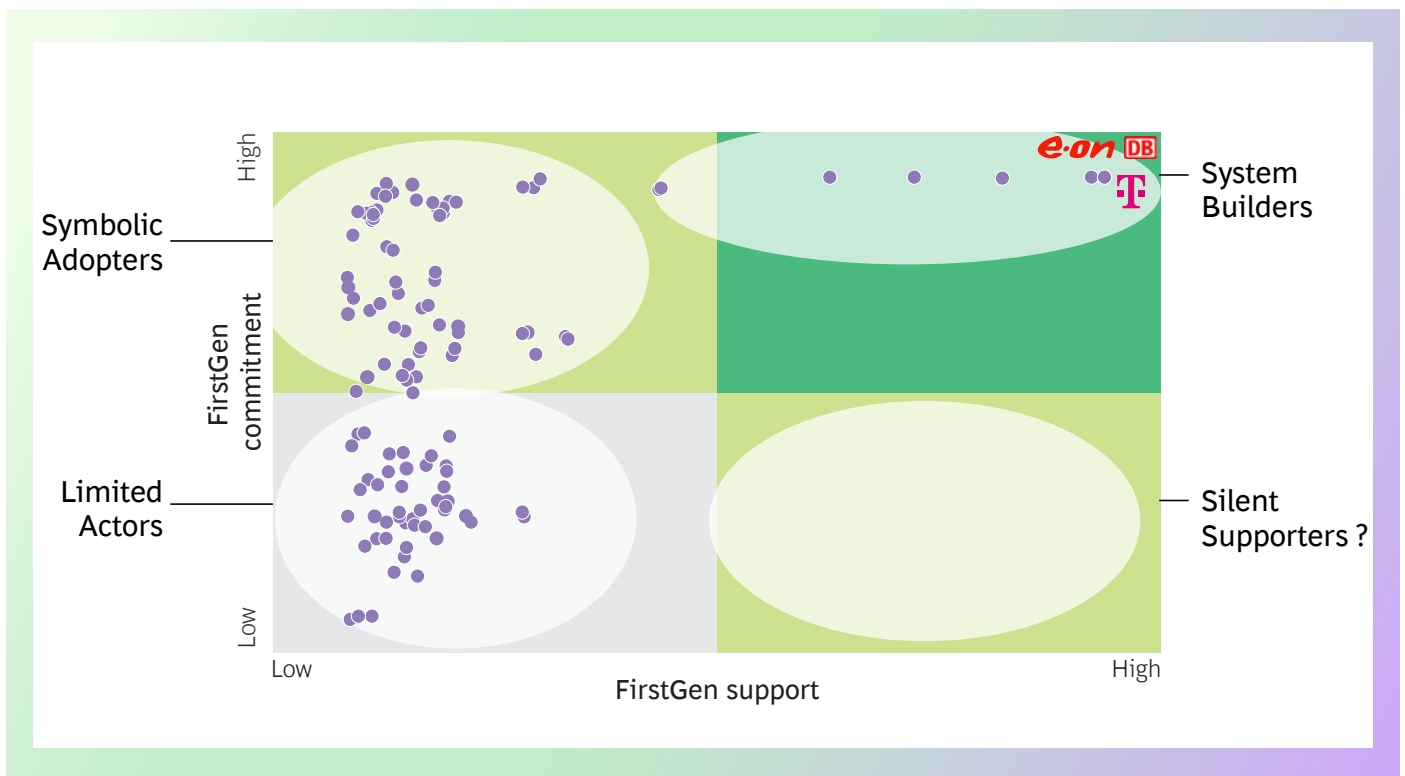
The empty quadrant of the so-called "Silent Supporters" is striking: companies with strong FirstGen support but little formal commitment. The fact that not one of the 115 com-

panies is located there shows that structural support does not seem to materialize in practice without an explicit commitment to it.

Examining organizations that actively foster social mobility makes one thing clear: Impactful FirstGen support relies less on elaborate programs than on well-defined guiding principles.

FirstGen Commitment and Support at the 115 Largest Companies in Germany

The following illustration provides an overview of all 115 companies examined—divided into four clusters depending on their FirstGen commitment and FirstGen support.



Low threshold and immediate assistance: Successful initiatives emerge where engagement meets quick support. Instead of lengthy application processes or formal hurdles, FirstGen initiatives gain early access to resources and budgets and gain organizational backing. This low threshold is more than an operational advantage—it signals recognition and legitimacy. Lessons from companies such as E.ON

and Deutsche Bahn demonstrate that real impact occurs where ownership is shared and initiatives are actively made possible. Matthias Preiser, Group Head of Leadership, Talent and Performance, at Deutsche Bahn confirms just that: "A framework with a time budget, small amounts of money to finance the network's own activities, and a small core of motivated pioneers, are required".

Visibility is key to change: Socioeconomic background only becomes effective as a dimension of diversity when it's visible. Pioneering companies pointedly address FirstGen status as a diversity dimension, continuously talk about it, and use different formats—from recruiting campaigns to presentations by strong role models who publicly speak about their experiences. Haritharan (Harry) Gunapalasingam, second deputy chairman of Deutsche Telekom's works council, says about role models, "Communicating openly about one's own story is extremely important. What's needed are role models—and the assurance that your background won't be held against you when you share your story." Such visibility draws attention across the entire organization and embeds socioeconomic background as a legitimate topic at all levels.

Raising awareness where decisions are made: Another success factor lies with the decision-makers. Especially in recruiting and career progression, unspoken

expectations can become hidden obstacles. Pioneering companies are therefore investing specifically in raising the awareness of recruiters and managers and are questioning established selection criteria. The focus shifts from rigid CV milestones to capabilities, promise, and potential for development—making social mobility manageable. Haritharan (Harry) Gunapalasingam stresses the importance of fair career opportunities for all: Many advertised positions have long been filled in the background. Recruitment should start internally to ensure that team members ready for the next step are not overlooked.

What pioneers have in common: Regardless of the industry or type of organization, mobility does not happen on its own. It becomes possible when companies make diversity visible, empower decision-makers, and allow employees to show initiative. Where these elements come together, FirstGen measures unfold their structural impact.

Pioneers:



What is E.ON doing?

Founded in 2024 by Sina Barenkau and Dr. Martina Berenbrinker, the FirstGen@EON network offers its members the opportunity to network with each other and creates awareness for the topic. Among other things, the network carried out training courses at various relevant points in the company, such as the recruiting department.

What makes E.ON special?

E.ON expressly welcomed the initiative to establish the FirstGen network. There were no application hurdles, just interest and support—so the first event was organized quickly. As Sina Barenkau would say: At E.ON, there is room for bold resets.

What does one of the founders of the FirstGen network have to say?

"Dare to start what you would have wanted in your career. Start small and then continue!"

Dr. Martina Berenbrinker
(Senior Compliance Expert)



Pioneers:



What is Deutsche Bahn doing?

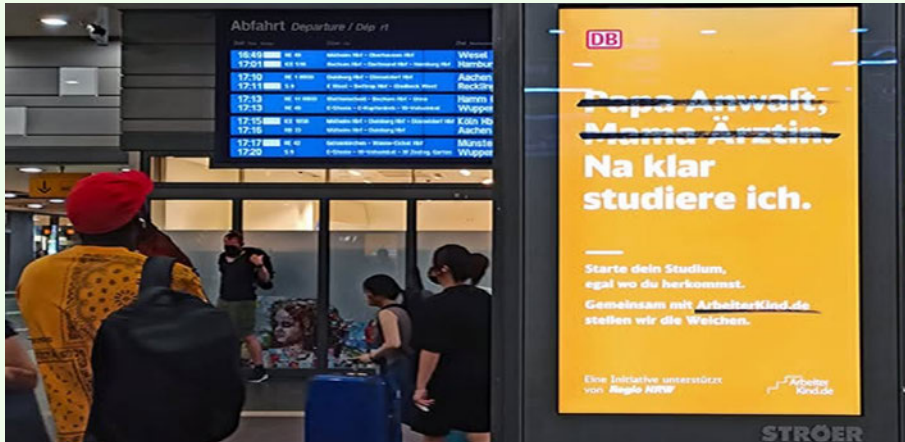
Deutsche Bahn is promoting equal opportunities for FirstGens by cooperating with the initiative ArbeiterKind.de to support students from non-academic families in starting their careers. Since 2025, it has had its own network, Arbeiterkind@DB, which offers various formats and networking options.

What makes DB special?

DB is particularly vocal in its social media presence and recruiting campaigns. In doing so, it specifically inspires people from families without an academic tradition.

What does the founder of the FirstGen network have to say?

"Role models that really shine are what's needed. In addition, each board member 'sponsors' a diversity dimension and actively supports it."



Matthias Preiser
(Group Head of Leadership, Talent and Performance)

Pioneers:



What is Deutsche Telekom doing?

Deutsche Telekom's FirstGen network, Magenta Social Movers, was founded in 2024 and enables its members to exchange information regularly in monthly calls and other learning formats. The founder, in particular, tries to help other members with his extensive network of contacts. Internally, the topic is supported by a senior sponsor. In the future, the Social Movers are planning numerous activities, such as attending schools.

What makes Deutsche Telekom special?

Deutsche Telekom deliberately creates an environment and culture in which FirstGens can grow. After his apprenticeship, Harry was encouraged and actively supported by a manager to pursue his further education by enrolling at a university.

What does the founder of the FirstGen network have to say?

"Resilience is FirstGens' greatest strength—and companies need it more today than ever before."



Haritharan (Harry) Gunapalasingam
(2nd Deputy Chairman of the Works Council)

The Three Career Milestones: Where Mobility Gets Stuck

Next, let's look at what critical milestones FirstGens pass through on their career journey. Each career step follows its own, mostly implicit, rules. They change with each transition and represent structural hurdles for FirstGens at crucial milestones.

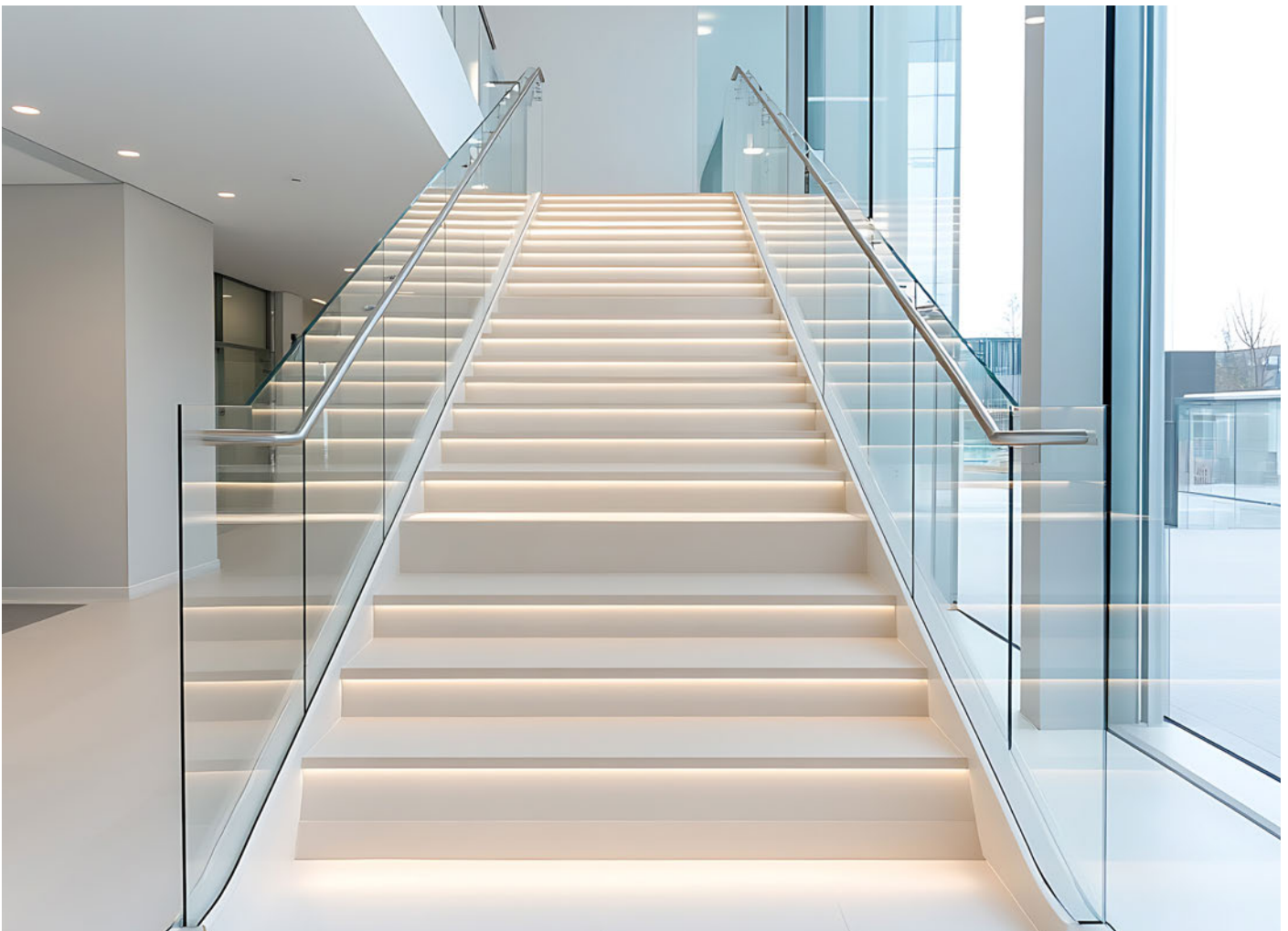
1. Career start

Starting a profession marks a fundamental change of role that carries implicit prerequisites: Internships at renowned companies, a resilient network, and a confident bearing are expected—resources that are structurally less available to FirstGens. In addition, FirstGens tend more often to pursue educational or dual courses of study when choosing an institution of higher education—formats that parents are familiar with and generate early income but may restrict access to specific employers and career paths from

the outset. This remains noticeable even after several years of employment, because those who already feel they don't belong at the start of their career more often experience self-doubt or avoid riskier, potentially career-promoting steps.⁶

2. Entering middle management¹²

Another critical transition is entering into middle management. Alongside professional performance, the topics of leadership, relationship management, and the ability to navigate structural power dynamics become increasingly important. Not only is leadership competence expected but also visibility as a manager. According to Sina Barenkau, first-time college graduate, lawyer, and co-founder of the FirstGen network at E.ON, this visibility is a decisive factor



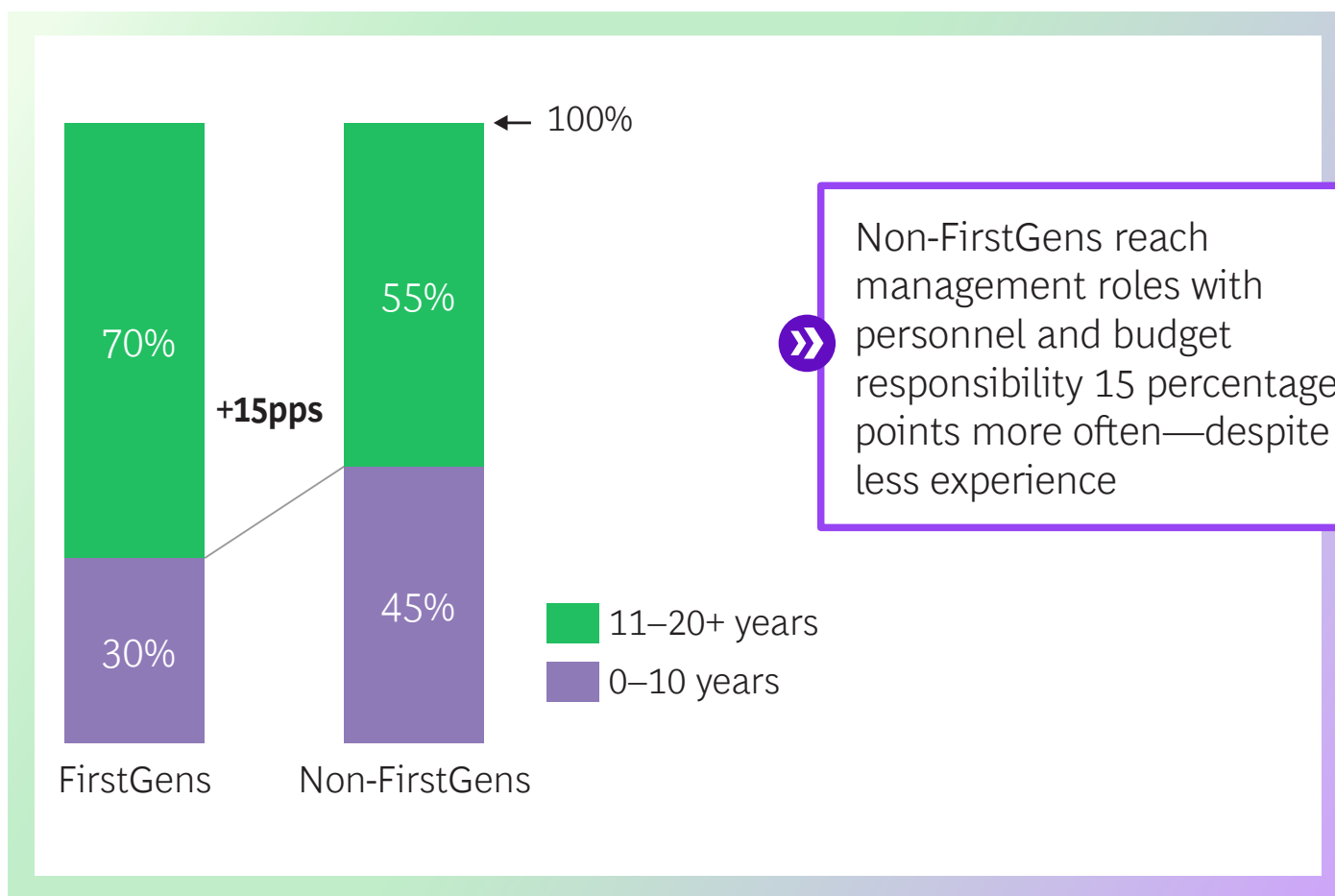
in career progression: "Only those who are visible get ahead." Added to this is a pronounced scale-up gap:

In Germany, a pronounced "class effect" comes into play: Higher-level leadership roles tend to require a socially "appropriate" background.⁷ Our data further indicates that experienced FirstGens are more likely to stay in positions without leadership responsibility.⁸ The proportion of relatively inexperienced non-FirstGens in higher-level leadership roles is 15 percentage points greater.

3. Advancing to senior management¹²

Moving into senior management often means entering a socially homogeneous leadership circle that, in Germany, has traditionally been shaped by individuals from highly educated, high-income households.⁹ For FirstGens, access remains limited: According to a 2025 BCG report, only 6% of executives globally come from low-income families—that figure is 28% among non-managerial employees.⁶

FGPs/NFGPs with personnel and budget responsibility, by professional experience



Time for a Bold Reset

Socioeconomic background influences access as well as potential—and thus the success of companies. The class pay gap—estimated to be 10–15% in Germany¹¹—underscores how much progress is still needed. An extrapolation from the 115 companies examined in Germany shows they employ an estimated 410,000 FirstGens. Of these, around 350,000 work in companies without an internal FirstGen network or comparable structural support.^{2,3,4} This represents untapped potential and a clear mandate for action.

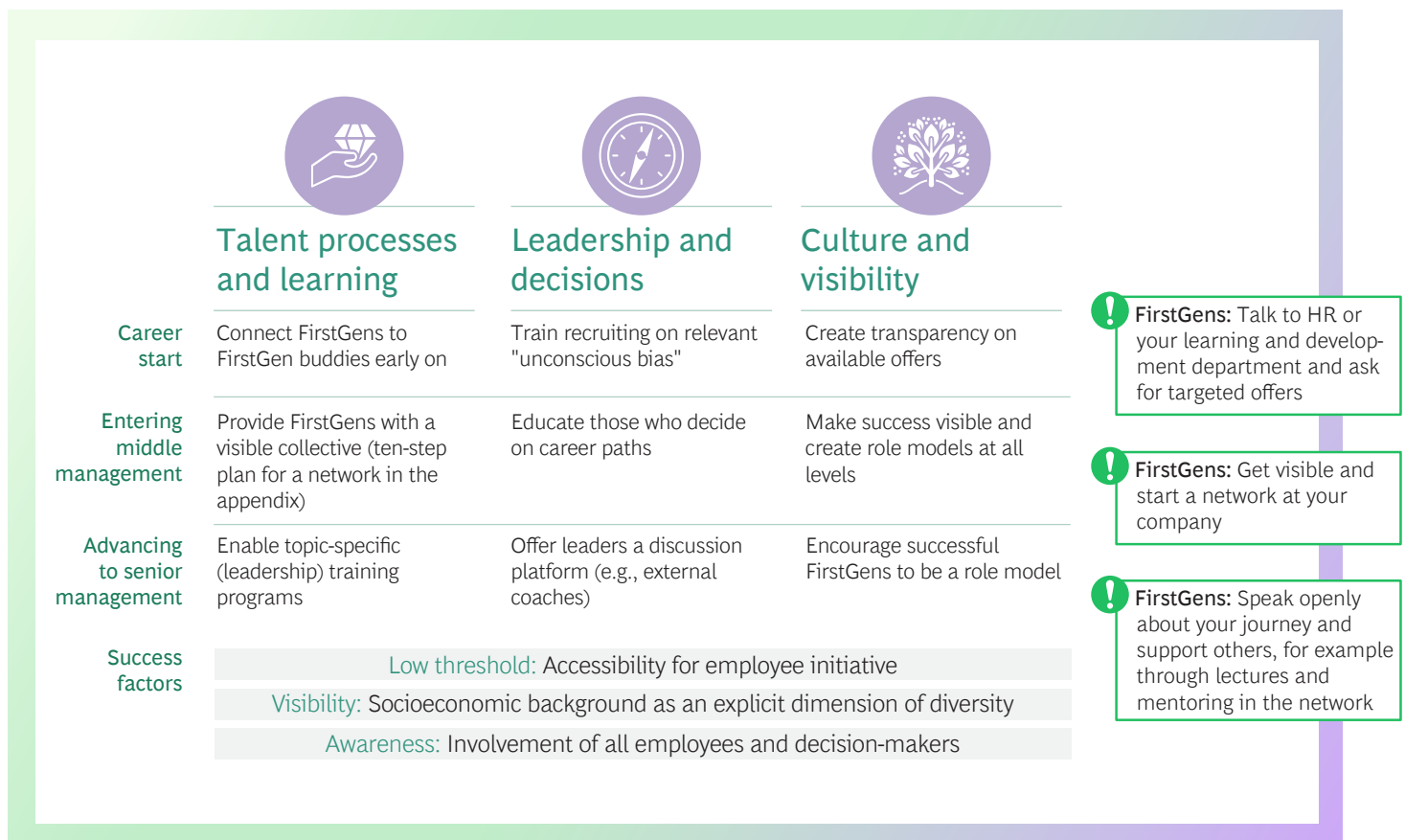
To ensure social mobility is not a matter of chance, companies can intervene strategically at pivotal career junctures: hiring, transitions, and promotions. The good news: It doesn't require complex programs—rather clear responsibilities, resources, and measurable actions. Based on our findings, the following exhibit outlines concrete, actionable levers companies can use to provide their FirstGens with targeted support at key career transitions.

The ten-step plan in the appendix provides an actionable start—from defining initial goals to sustainably embedding the network in the company.

More visibility is also required for those navigating these structures. Such a "bold reset" does not have to be a major act. It is often just a conversation or suggestion in the team, in the company, or in public.

Even if not all FirstGens aspire to leadership roles, those who do should not be held back by unspoken rules. This report therefore concludes with a clear appeal: Socioeconomic mobility does not happen on its own. It is shaped by companies, managers, FirstGens, and allies who take responsibility. The time to begin is now!

Levers for FirstGen support across career transitions



Footnotes

- ¹ Source: Buchholz, S., Kracke, N., Schwabe, U. (2024): Trotz Akademisierungsschub immer noch ungleicher Zugang zur Hochschule. DZHW Brief, 2/2024. https://cdn.table.media/assets/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/08172244/dzhw_brief_02_2024.pdf
- ² Source: Monopolkommission (2024): Hauptgutachten XXV: Wettbewerb 2024. Tabelle I.1: Die nach inländischer Wertschöpfung 100 größten Unternehmen im Berichtsjahr 2022 <https://www.monopolkommission.de/de/gutachten/hauptgutachten/450-xxv-gesamt.html>. Supplemented by missing DAX-40 companies (as of January 2026).
- ³ Note: FirstGen commitment score: considering socioeconomic background in recruiting (weight: 5), explicit embedment of socioeconomic background as a diversity dimension (weight: 5), signing of the Diversity Charter (weight: 3) FirstGen support score: internal FirstGen network (weight: 5), specific training or mentoring (weight: 4), visibility of FirstGen role models (weight: 4), cooperation with external FirstGen organizations (weight: 2), FirstGen awards (weight: 2)
- ⁴ Source: Eurostat (n.d.): Employed persons by occupation and economic activity. [Data set]. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsa_eisn2/default/table?lang=
- ⁵ Source: Malin, L., Schumacher, S. (January 4, 2024): Pharmaindustrie: Steigender Druck auf dem Arbeitsmarkt. Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft (IW). <https://www.iwkoeln.de/studien/lydia-malin-simon-schumacher-steigender-druck-auf-dem-arbeitsmarkt.html>
- ⁶ Source: Boston Consulting Group (BCG) (2025): Socioeconomic Status Affects the Workplace, Too. Here's How to Make Sure Everyone Succeeds. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2025/how-socioeconomic-status-shapes-workplace-success>
- ⁷ Source: Deutschlandfunk Kultur. (August 27, 2025): Die deutsche Elite bleibt unter sich. <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/elite-die-da-oben-ungleichheit-deutschland-100.html>
- ⁸ Note: Findings from the survey of the previous report, *Hiding in Plain Sight: First-Generation Professionals* (2023)
- ⁹ Source: Vogel, R. (2024): Die entzauberten Eliten: Michael Hartmann demontiert den Mythos der Chancengleichheit. Humanistische Union. <https://www.humanistische-union.de/publikationen/vorgaenge/163-vorgaenge/publikation/die-entzauberten-eliten-michael-hartmann-demontiert-den-mythos-der-chancengleichheit/>
- ¹⁰ Source: Boston Consulting Group (BCG) (2025): Germany Gender Diversity Index 2025. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2025/germany-bcg-gender-diversity-index>
- ¹¹ Source: Equal Pay Day (February 6, 2025): Der Class Pay Gap ist ein blinder Fleck: Interview mit Marcel Fratzscher. <https://www.equalpayday.de/presse/blogbeitraege/der-class-pay-gap-ist-ein-blinder-fleck-interview-mit-marcel-fratzscher/>
- ¹² We define "middle management" as positions with team responsibility; "upper management" as positions with strategic corporate responsibility (e.g., department or division management).

Appendix

Ten-Step Plan

Systematically embed socioeconomic diversity

1. Define purpose and objective

Clarify why socioeconomic diversity is relevant for the company and what is to be achieved in concrete terms. Clearly identify focus fields and communicate them internally.

2. Gain visible support from leadership

Actively involve managers who credibly represent the topic, drive it forward in the organization, and assume a clearly defined role with a specific contribution.

3. Specify clear responsibilities

Establish a central, core team. Define responsibilities, contacts, and decision-making channels. Assign responsibility consistently, so that engagement does not depend on individuals.

4. Appoint local contacts

Engage dedicated employees on-site as contacts. Embed responsibility for networking, events, and new-member support locally. Ensure close alignment with the core team.

5. Establish fixed formats and rhythm

Institute regular meetings, cross-location communication, and local check-ins. A reliable rhythm creates commitment and turns individual initiatives into structured support.

6. Develop reusable offerings

Provide easily transferable formats and materials: event concepts, buddy programs, onboarding guides, and communication templates, for instance. The goal is maximum engagement with minimum effort.

7. Clarify budget and resources with transparency

Define a clear budget framework per location. Establish simple approval processes that foster personal initiative rather than case-by-case decisions that hamper it.

8. Actively shape visibility

Make the topic of socioeconomic background visible via newsletters, internal channels, events, and success stories from FirstGens. Continuous communication anchors the issue as a legitimate dimension of diversity at all levels.

9. Measure and magnify impact

Get regular feedback from the community. Consistently use insights to advance offerings, priorities, and how the network works.

10. Embed and expand the network structurally

Integrate FirstGen support into existing recruiting, career, and development processes. Link the network with other diversity initiatives, so that socioeconomic mobility does not remain a marginal issue but rather becomes part of the corporate culture.

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