

Senior Technical Jobs that Offer an Alternative to Management Tracks are Evolving

High-level technical employees— often referred to as fellows or chief scientists— are becoming a common alternative to management roles. However, that’s not always the case.

As the dynamic technology sector job market continues to evolve, we regularly take stock of the jobs contained within the [Radford Global Technology Survey](#). Several years ago, motivated by requests from some of our largest technology clients and the rising prominence of “dual career ladders,” which allow individual contributors to rise to new heights in organizations, we added two roles to our survey— *Fellow* and *Senior Fellow*. These jobs cover a critical and increasingly prevalent position at many firms: top technical individual contributors equivalent to the VP-level or higher. These employees often carry the job title of Fellow, Chief Scientist or Consultant.

When companies add this role to their organization, it is typically for someone who oversees applied research or advanced engineering in the development of new products, processes or services in unique individual contributor roles. These roles, despite their importance, are specifically designed for people who do not actively manage other employees. In fact, these roles are often created as a way to reward and recognize key employees with highly specialized technical skills who have no desire, or the leadership skills, needed to manage. However, just like new jobs are always appearing inside organizations, specific job duties within a given role also evolve. A recent interaction with a client at a large US-based technology company illustrates this point well. Our client was hearing inquiries and requests for his company’s senior technical employees to begin managing staff, but the firm initially created these roles to recognize technical talent and provide an alternative to the management track.

The situation described above provided us the opportunity to look into our data surrounding this role and see just how common it is for Fellow and Senior Fellow positions to directly manage other employees. According to our research conducted in early 2016, of the 178 US-based technology companies with Fellows (job level 7), 87 companies, or 49%, indicate that one or more employees in the position has direct reports. Of the 33 companies that report a Senior Fellow (job level 8), 18 of them, or 55%, have one or more individuals in this role that directly manage employees.

Another job role relevant to this analysis is what we call a Job Level 7 Distinguished Engineer. This “P7 role” is equivalent to a Senior Director rather than a Vice President. Common job titles for this role include lead software architect, senior principal scientist, technical fellow, and senior software architect. There are 68 US companies in our database with this role; only 19 of those companies, or 28%, report employees actually reporting to employees matched to the P7 job.

The Fellow and Senior Fellow role (or equivalent positions at your firm) is an important one. Career paths in the US and elsewhere are changing. Companies are trying to develop alternative tracks to recognize and promote top performers who want to continue doing the specialized individual work they do best. This is especially relevant in the technology sector where individual contributors that use in-demand skills are highly valued. In some cases, companies are benchmarking target pay for technical positions higher than senior managers or executives (see

our article, [Hot Topics Excerpt: Technology Firms Aim Higher for Engineers than Executives](#), for more details on this phenomenon).

Nonetheless, there is a strong pull inside some organizations to more fully leverage the work of their most skilled people developing new technologies by asking them to also manage some individuals working on key project teams. Creating non-traditional career pathways isn't easy and takes time. The real test of whether senior technologists should be spending their time managing individuals will be circumstantial and judged by the performance of the individuals involved. If the "individual contributors" thrive as people leaders, they may find a path to become traditional managers in the future.

To learn more about participating in a Radford survey, please [contact our team](#). To speak with a member of our compensation consulting group, please write to consulting@radford.com.

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