

# Why José Mourinho's protégés failed when they became managers

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2016/06/08/why-jose-mourinhos-protoges-failed-when-they-became-managers/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2016/06/08/why-jose-mourinhos-protoges-failed-when-they-became-managers/)

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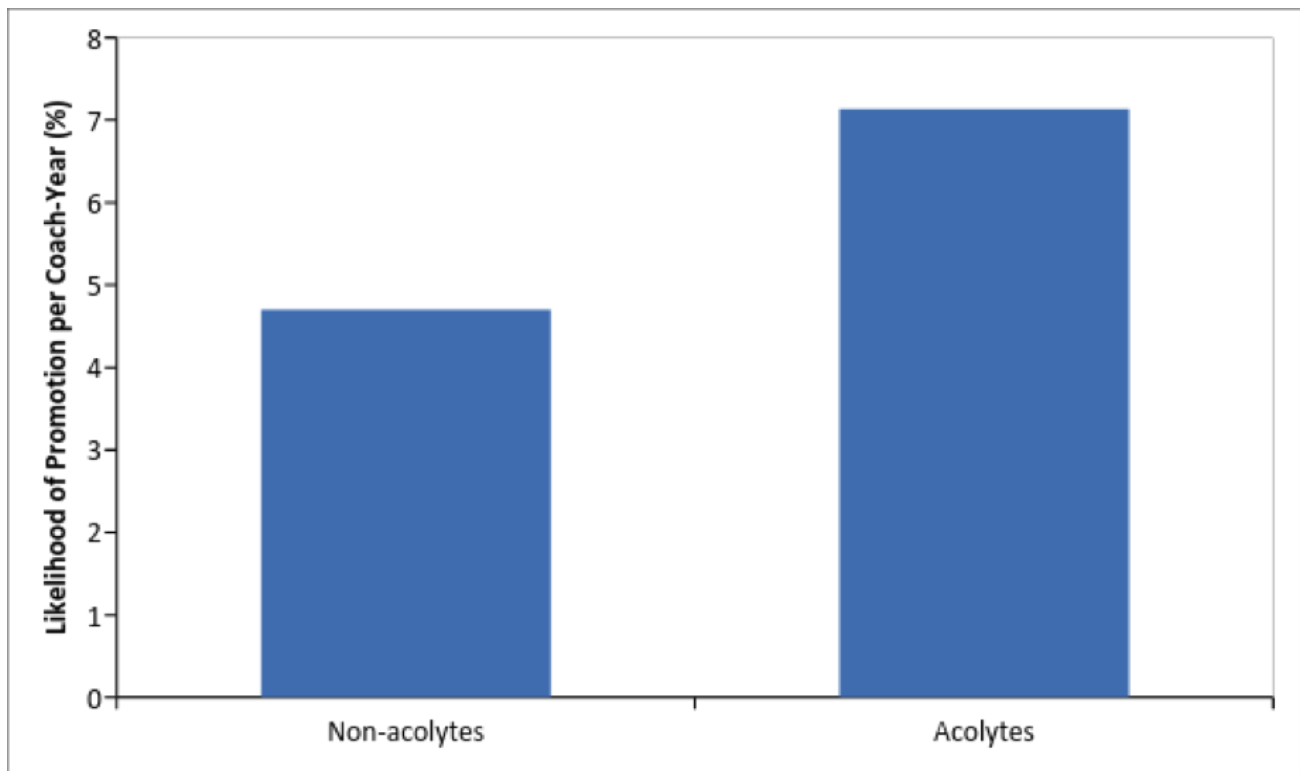


When Jack Welch was chairman and CEO of General Electric, he was widely considered to be the best manager in the world and his protégés were in demand as CEOs of their own companies. But most of these protégés failed in their new roles despite the Jack Welch [connection](#). Similarly, the assistant coaches under José Mourinho, when he was manager of Chelsea football club, themselves succeeded in becoming managers of other clubs, but most of them have been fired for [underperformance](#) in their new roles. These are two anecdotal instances of protégés or acolytes of high-performing managers gaining promotions but then experiencing unfavorable career outcomes later on. How general is this phenomenon?

To investigate, we examined the career histories of all coaches who were named on the USA National Football League coaching rosters between 1980 and 2010, a sample of almost 1300 coaches and over 10,000 coach-years of data. We designated a coach as an acolyte in a particular year if he had previously worked with a high-reputation head coach (e.g., Bill Belichick of the New England Patriots) but were no longer doing so.

Our core question was whether acolyte status was associated with an increased likelihood of promotion. Our results were strong and unequivocal. Those assistant coaches we termed acolytes because of their high-reputation connections had a significant, meaningful increase in the likelihood of being promoted, even after accounting for a range of other individual and team characteristics, such as age, experience, roster size, and team performance. Across our entire sample, acolytes were 52 per cent more likely to be promoted in any given year (the likelihood of promotion rose from 4.70 per cent for non-acolytes to 7.13 per cent for acolytes).

**Fig 1: Likelihood of promotion per coach-year (%)**



**N = 10,269 coach-years**

We then tested our hypothesis that acolyte status would be more influential when less was known about an individual, the idea being that the connection to the high-reputation head coach might function as a substitute for the absence of other information about the potential new hire. Our results also supported this idea. We found that the effect of acolyte status on the likelihood of promotion was especially strong when the assistant coach met any of the following conditions: 1) few years of experience in the NFL; 2) employment history with a small number of NFL teams; or 3) co-working history with relatively few other coaches.

Finally, we examined the long-term career outcomes of acolyte status. In particular, we wanted to see whether promoted acolytes outperformed or under-performed promoted non-acolytes. Again, our results were meaningful and significant. However, in this case, acolyte status appeared to be a curse, not a blessing. We coded the outcome of every promotion in our data as either a positive outcome (a further promotion or a lateral move) or a negative outcome (a demotion). For promoted acolytes, only 46% of promotions resulted in a positive outcome, while 54% resulted in a negative outcome. However, for promoted non-acolytes, 57% of promotions resulted in a positive outcome, while 43% of promotions resulted in a negative outcome. We wondered whether this was because acolytes were being promoted into positions with less-successful teams, which might explain the poorer outcomes. However, the opposite was the case. Promoted acolytes were both more likely to work with better teams (which should increase the chance of success) *and* more likely to underperform in those roles.

**Table 1: Outcomes of All Promotions**

	Acolytes	Non-acolytes	Total
Positive outcome	71	158	229
Negative outcome	83	121	204
Total	154	279	433

Thus our results showed that having worked under an industry leader was a double-edged sword; it was associated with both benefits and drawbacks. Acolyte status made it more likely that a coach would be promoted (compared to a non-acolyte), and this effect was strongest in situations where the coach was less well known. However, when we compared the eventual outcomes of all of those individuals who gained promotion, we found that promoted non-acolytes (who gained no benefits from connections to high-reputation coaches) significantly outperformed promoted acolytes.

What are takeaways of this research? First, for those who are seeking promotions, we found evidence against the widespread notion that those who get ahead because of social network connections tend to maintain their advantages irrespective of merit. The good news is that competitive markets tend to self-correct misinterpretations of signals of competence such as connections to high-reputation managers. In addition, our results suggest that if you find yourself promoted on the basis of social network connections, avoid complacency, watch out for social undermining by those jealous of your success, and manage the high expectations of those who hired you. Otherwise, you may be heading for a demotion or face being sidelined from the race to the top.

Second, our research has an implication for managers engaged in hiring. Our results suggest that managers need to look beyond potentially misleading social network signals. It's helpful to ask: "How much weight am I assigning to this person's association with the industry superstar, and how much is due to the person's other merits?" Otherwise your new hires may arrive trailing great expectations only to flame out relative to their less celebrated peers.

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Notes:

- This post is based on the authors' paper [Magnification and correction of the acolyte effect: Initial benefits and ex post settling up in NFL coaching careers](#), *Academy of Management Journal*, 59: 352-375.
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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