

# Specialists move up to higher ground

---

## *ING's high impact performance program pays dividends*

### New skills

There is a steep learning curve when an organization's finest talents move up the specialist ladder and take on new and different responsibilities, which are not necessarily linked directly to their technical expertise.

One major issue that all businesses face is ensuring that executives have the necessary skills to meet new challenges. In June 2004, the International Conference of the ING Group addressed them head on. The former CEO of the global bank, insurer and asset management company, addressed his top 200 managers. They all agreed that the company, which at that time had 115,000 employees doing business in 50 countries, would benefit hugely from becoming more adept at executing the outcomes of management decisions. Especially specialists, people with potential to "get things done" were, it was felt, being underused. General managers, and specialist managers in project and program management benefited from leadership development programs, but about 1,500 high value specialists (HVS) were less well served, with no systematic approach to their development.

ING Business School (IBS) received the assignment to develop and implement a program that would accelerate the career development of HVS and develop their leadership capability so that they would be able to accelerate strategy execution based on: superior customer service; performance excellence and profitable growth; accountability and transparency; and shifting from a product to a client focus. Through a high impact performance program (HIP) IBS worked in partnership with "the world we work in" (TWWWI), a global network of experienced facilitators and executive coaches, which has a track record of accelerating learning and change for a wide variety of global organizations.

The HIP program is a four-day residential leadership development program for specialists. It is part of an experiential eight-step, four-month development process that addresses the challenges that HVS face when moving from a technical expert to a trusted advisor role. It addresses the different skills needed by technical specialists, in order to become trusted advisors. As an example, as a technical specialist, a young lawyer contributes to the completion of all legal documents around the merger of two companies. But in the role of trusted advisor, he or she develops the skill to gauge when and how the legal documents should be introduced between two merging clients. In the next stage of their career, as strategic business partners, he or she translates the evolution of international mergers and acquisitions jurisdiction into new legal process steps for a successful integration of future acquisitions.

**“The views of the HIP participants on potential steps to take in the light of revising our strategy in this changing environment were relevant and refreshing. I’m confident that these learning initiatives are strong engagement drivers and powerful enablers of our five-year strategy.”**

### Impact on strategy

Technical specialists use and expand their know-how and skills in the beginning of their careers with little impact on the strategy of the company. Trusted advisors, on the other hand, are contributing to the realization of the strategic direction. They must understand what that direction is, and how the focus and prioritization of their work can help them to make a valuable contribution. As a strategic business partner he is expected to contribute strategy formulation through knowledge of his functional domain and creativity. To relate this to specific skills, a technical specialist will need technical proficiency, good self-management and ability to deliver results. A trusted advisor will have to contribute more effectively to strategy implementation, establish trusted advisor relationships with clients, and use personal impact to influence clients, managers and peers.

The four-day HIP program comprises action-learning assignments, skills workshops and reflection periods. The former included a strategy workshop for participants and strategy sponsors; each virtual team, established four weeks before the program, presents the outcome of their pre-program virtual team assignment through an interactive workshop in which they must engage and effectively influence their fellow participants and strategy sponsor. The program also used boxing as a martial arts experience with participants finding out physically what their most basic response is to a tense situation. Workshops included a Myers-Brigg Type Indicator (MBTI) psychometric questionnaire, which establishes personality strengths and weaknesses, and a coaching workshop in which participants learn how to help their peers to enhance their personal impact, through dialog and coaching rather than through advice. A stakeholder-influencing workshop is considered an eye-opener for many specialists, because business politics tends often to block participants from implementing their projects.

### Room to improve

Since 2005, 65 programs have been run successfully within nine business lines and group functions, in nine different countries in Europe, the US and Asia. IBS and TWWWI have jointly assessed the impact of the HIP through various indicators, including the observations of participants. On a five-point scale, the average participant evaluation score over 65 programs is 4.5, and in 2011 reached its previous highest level from three years earlier of 4.6. In connection with behavior change, measured through follow-up calls after the program, the average “impact” score is four, representing “strong” impact but not quite so strong as the immediate post-program score. This indicates that the post-program follow-up can be improved. There are also significant differences between programs, suggesting room to further develop faculty capability and knowledge sharing.

The HVS process revolves around eight distinct challenges, which relate to issues of impact on business, strategy, and client objectives, some of which are combination of these elements. The picture emerged of participants mentioning the impact dimension eight times more than the other two (strategy and clients), with self-awareness, dialog skills and impact skills among the most highly valued attributes. Participants were frank in their assessments, pointing up problem areas in the program, such as one observation about the change-over from peer coaching to client assignment “being messy and confusing for the client”.

## Value understood

Organizational benefits include a huge growth of HVS expertise, with more than 1,200 specialists enhancing their capability of operating at a trusted advisor level. The specialist career track is growing in importance with the company keen to embrace the promotion of technical specialist to “trusted advisor” and “strategic business partner” roles on the basis of their capability and motivation to lead. A properly developed career path is more likely to bring this desired outcome to fruition, rather than allowing the situation to develop, as often happens, whereby technical specialists, faced with an under-developed career path, aspire to managerial roles for the wrong reasons: status and career progress.

With the impact of the program, two to five months later described as a “strong” experience by its participants, this has helped the position of the HVS to grow significantly in importance. This applies especially to the finance and risk function. Even allowing for the fact that the financial crisis has been significant in shifting the internal power dynamics, HVS are recognized in the business and held in much higher regard. Comments from strategy sponsors and senior managers all point to the HIP being valued for its business impact: “The views of the HIP participants on potential steps to take in the light of revising our strategy in this changing environment were relevant and refreshing. I’m confident that these learning initiatives are strong engagement drivers and powerful enablers of our five-year strategy.”

## Comment

This review is based on “Accelerating professional development and strategy execution: the ING Group high impact performance program for specialists,” the winning submission paper for the European Foundation for Management Development Excellence in practice Award 2011, by Gert-Jan van Wijk, Jetske van Heusden and Kate Ng. The HIP seems, on the evidence here, to work as a fine stepping stone for people with technical expertise taking on new responsibilities without necessarily taking on managerial responsibility. Perhaps its best achievement will lie in encouraging ambitious and talented individuals to pursue their careers with ING rather than moving on.

### *Keywords:*

Accelerated learning,  
Experiential learning,  
Organizational development,  
Strategic implementation,  
Specialist career track,  
Specialist development

---

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: [reprints@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:reprints@emeraldinsight.com)  
Or visit our web site for further details: [www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints)