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High potential programs in professional service firms

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HIGH POTENTIAL PROGRAMS IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS

A Research Project

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graziadio Business School

Pepperdine University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

In

Organization Development

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by

Charlene Robison

August 2022

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This research project, completed by

CHARLENE ROBISON

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The Graziadio Business School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Date: August 2022

Faculty Committee

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Abstract

This study examined whether a mixed-cohort of billable and non-billable (e.g., marketing, human resources, accounting, technology) participants in a high-potential development program is beneficial to the organizations that utilize this development approach and to the participants in such programs. This research focused on professional service firms with time-defined and structured high-potential programs. This study utilized a mixed-method design and gathered data in two phases: a survey and a focus group. These methods were used to obtain participant sentiments of participating in their respective high-potential programs. Twenty-five high-potential professionals completed the survey and six participated in the focus group. The study found that participants benefited from the mixed-cohort experience to varying degrees. In addition, the study concluded that professional services firms may also benefit from this approach when high-potential programs are thoughtfully designed and communicated.

Keywords: High-Potential Program, Professional Services, Billable, Non-Billable

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

In many organizations, only 5% of employees are considered to have a high potential (Zenger & Folkman, 2017) to grow into positions of leadership. A high-potential employee is "someone with the ability, engagement, and aspiration to rise to and success in more senior, critical positions" (Gartner, n.d.) and are represented across various departments and functions. High-potential employees seek continuous growth and can bring great value to an organization. To satisfy this desire and to prepare them for the future, organizations will often create high-potential development programs. The program is designed to identify employees who have a high potential for growth and develop them for future leadership positions (Babcock, 2014). Those who would be beneficiaries display anticipation and excitement when the company introduces such a program and others describe the program as elitist when they were not selected to participate (Björkman et al., 2013). Leadership sells the program as a development opportunity for those perceived to be future executives of the organization and then select individuals to go through the program. Sometimes, this can cause tension between those who are selected and those who are not.

At times, there are mixed cohorts where both client-facing and non-client facing (i.e., administrative and support) employees participate in the program together, while the curriculum is primarily focused on the needs and interests of the client-facing participants. Client facing graduates may subsequently be promoted and offered more career progression opportunities than non-client facing graduates (Forstenlechner et al., 2008). Being labeled as high potential sends a message of confidence to those employees and raises their expectations for their growth opportunities. In professional service firms, promotion opportunities for client facing billable employees are theoretically only limited by how much a client will pay for that individual, whereas the promotion opportunities for back-office staff are restricted by the scale of the firm (Maister, 2007).

As employees in client facing positions gain more expertise and skills, client fees will increase for that individual and, accordingly, allow for multiple levels of growth on the career ladder. Conversely, depending on firm size, it is less likely that a firm will have more than one senior level position available in its functional departments (e.g., accounting, human resources, IT). It is unlikely, for example, that in a firm of 100 employees there would be two human resource directors. If participants of a high-potential program do not experience career progression, they may feel as though the company backed out on a promise made to them (Martin & Schmidt, 2010).

Additionally, Quinn (2009) posits that members of professional groups value the perspectives and evaluations of those within their own professional group over the opinions from those outside their discipline. “Many doctors, for example, resist the attempts of HMOs and insurance companies to tell them how to practice medicine” (Quinn, 2009, p. 90). This may be a factor worth considering when designing a high-potential program with a mixed cohort of professional disciplines.

Not all the paradoxes of the delivery of these high-potential programs can be resolved but understanding where they exist may be beneficial in an organization’s communication strategy as well as seeing the intended benefits realized. Professional services firms are in a unique position as it relates to developing talent. Learning and development activities are typically focused on those who are in client-facing positions

(Forstenlechner et al., 2008). The other side of that coin, of course, is that back-office employees also value and desire development opportunities. This creates a dilemma: create opportunities for the back-office employees or risk losing them. Most professional services pride themselves on having a low overhead ratio and so development of employees in these areas is often not a priority (Deltek, Inc., 2021).

In addition, there is some concern within talent management research that companies have a deficiency in their ability to identify high-potential employees (Hogan et al., 2018; Zenger & Folkman, 2017). Lorsch and Tierney (2002) state that “Even in firms that are most successful at recruiting and developing high-performing professionals, predicting who will succeed – and stick – is at best, a batting average proposition” (p. 69).

When viewing this in the context of the research that the top 20% of performers account for 80% of a company’s output (Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2013; Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2017; Downs, 2015; Snipes, 2005), the stakes of correctly identifying and developing high performers can be quite high. When non-billable employees receive learning and development opportunities, they are sometimes through external seminars and on an individual basis (Forstenlechner et al., 2008). Sometimes, these employees are invited to participate in larger scale company training sessions where the target audience is the client facing staff and the benefit to the non-billable employees is articulated by management as learning more about the business. One reason for this may be that a company takes an approach of spending training dollars on activities that serve strategic priorities (Carucci, 2018). This philosophy can be viewed in many high potential development programs within the professional services industry.

A professional service firm is a company that provides “professional assistance to the business community; that is, accounting firms, advertising agencies, management consultants, executive search firms, investment banks, information technology consulting firms, and most numerous of all, law firms” (Lorsch & Tierney, 2002, p. 5).

In a professional services firm, two primary goals of a high potential development program are to assist in succession planning and to generate revenue (Holt et al., 2018). These goals are accomplished by identifying potential future leaders and providing them with the skills they will need to be revenue generators. By that very definition, when non-billable employees are included in such programs, they may only be partial beneficiaries of the curriculum and the experience. Is partial benefit better than no benefit?

Purpose

This study examined whether a mixed-cohort of billable and non-billable participants in a high-potential development program is beneficial to the organizations that utilize this development approach and to the participants in such programs. What outcomes can be anticipated when billable and non-billable employees participate in a single high-potential program? This research focused on professional service firms with time-defined and structured high-potential programs. An exploration of three primary topics supported this purpose:

1. The satisfaction of billable and non-billable participants of the high-potential development program in promotion opportunities upon completion of the program
2. The satisfaction of billable and non-billable participants of the high potential development program as it relates to their current positions

3. Billable and non-billable participant employment and promotion statuses after participating in the high-potential program

The results of this research will benefit leaders in professional service firms when considering how to design high potential development programs. It may also provide firms insight into what to communicate to the participants. In addition, it will benefit the participants of high potential programs in understanding the risks and benefits of such mixed-cohort programs so that they may form realistic expectations of career growth after participating in such a program.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study examined whether a mixed-cohort of billable and non-billable participants in a high-potential development program is beneficial to the organizations that utilize this development approach and to the participants in such programs. What outcomes can be anticipated when billable and non-billable employees participate in a single high-potential program? This research focused on professional service firms with time-defined and structured high-potential programs.

General research on this topic is limited and, in some cases, over 20 years old. A review of the literature revealed an emphasis on three key themes: identifying and defining a high potential employee, the effectiveness of high potential programs, and the level of transparency of an employee's high potential status.

Identifying and Defining a High-Potential Employee

A common factor in identifying a high-potential employee is the current and past performance of an individual (Effron & Ort, 2010; MacRae et al., 2021). Posthumus et al. (2016) indicate that organizations can be challenged in successfully defining a high-potential employee due to implicit assumptions made about the employee. In one study, managers demonstrated a preference for performance over potential when making promotion decisions (Cadigan et al., 2019). Conversely, Dries et al. (2012) found that learning agility was shown to be a better predictor of an employee's high potential over job performance.

Approximately half of organizations admit to not being able to effectively identify high-potential employees (Corporate Leadership Council, 2011). Silzer and Dowell (2009) attribute this partially due the challenging nature of predicting the future of an individual's performance. A high-potential employee is someone "who has been identified as possessing the ability and the potential to not merely be promoted, but to ultimately ascend to the most senior levels of the organization" (Zenger & Folkman, 2018, p. 28). Some organizations have defined that even more narrowly to those who are believed to have the ability to be promoted two levels above their current positions (Church et al., 2015).

A person's perceived ability and potential can be influenced by the similar-to-me bias, where those responsible for identifying high-potential employees are inclined to give higher ratings to those of similar backgrounds to their own (Bernardin et al., 2015). In the United States, over 60% of senior leadership positions are held by white men (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.org, 2021). If the identification of high-potential employees is the responsibility of senior management, the effect of the similar-to-me bias has the potential to perpetuate a lack of diversity in developing employees.

In addition, there can be a tendency to rely more on an employee's current performance to predict future potential, which carries two risks: employees may be promoted above their ability and ultimately fail in a new leadership role and there may be employees with hidden or undiscovered talents who are overlooked (Zielinski, 2006). Basing an employee's high-potential status on current and past performance may lead to a lack of innovation, thereby limiting possibilities for the future in the organization.

Effectiveness of High Potential Development Programs

There is some debate (Boudreau et al., 2019; Bush et al., 2016) in the literature regarding the effectiveness of high-potential programs. While there is data to support that high-potential employees create more value than average performers (Aguinis &

O'Boyle, 2013; Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2017; Downs, 2015; Snipes, 2005), there is not general agreement on whether high-potential programs are effective in achieving the desired financial results. There are several definitions for effective in the context of high-potential programs. In one study, where a measure of effectiveness was the number of high-potential employees who have been successfully promoted into leadership roles, 50% of high-potential employees had difficulty in meeting the challenges and requirements of their new positions (Corporate Leadership Council, 2005). Yet, a study of 300 organizations across 31 countries found that organizations that invested in high-potential programs "financially outperformed their competitors over the course of seven years" (Bush et al., 2016, p. 99). An organization's financial performance is dependent on many factors, making it difficult to reach a definitive conclusion on whether the existence of a high-potential program directly leads to financial results.

Level of Transparency of an Employee's High Potential Status

A recent study revealed that only 34% of organizations are fully transparent within their organizations about whom they have identified as being a high-potential employee or the existence of a high-potential program (Church et al., 2015). Another study with ten years of data showed that 63% of organizations do not reveal high-potential status to the employees who have been identified as such (Downs, 2015). Employers who decide against transparency of their high-potential programs cite several factors in their decision making. First, they wish to avoid alienating those employees who have not been identified as high-potentials and who may become resentful. There is research to back this fear. Church et al. (2015) found that most organizations state that they believe their high-potential population to be at or below 15%, thus most of an employee population is made up of those who are not identified as high-potential. Those who are excluded from high-potential programs may believe they are equally deserving of the label and the opportunities that come with it (Malik et al., 2017). As a result of being excluded, they may view a high-potential program along with those who have been included in a negative light (Malik et al., 2017; Swailes, 2012). In one such study of 203 employees, "employees who were identified as a high potential perceived higher distributive justice than employees who were not" (Gelens et al., 2013, p. 170).

Second, there is concern that telling employees that they have been identified as high-potentials will create a sense of entitlement among those who have been chosen, as was the case for Harrah's Entertainment (Zielinski, 2006). Harrah's was experiencing an unusual amount of turnover among its group of high-potential employees. Upon speaking with the employees who were leaving, it was discovered that they had believed that the company was going to tell them when new opportunities arose for which they would be a good fit. They believed that their elevated status of being identified as a high-potential employee meant that they did not need to pursue opportunities on their own.

Another way this sense of entitlement may appear is through an expectation of higher employment outcomes. High-potential employees are likely to expect to receive higher compensation, promotions, and "are more sensitive to how value is captured compared to their lesser performing peers" (Morris et al., 2021, p. 253). The third reason employers cite when choosing not to disclose high-potential programs is the desire for flexibility to move employees on and off the high-potential list should an employee's perceived status change in the eyes of leadership (Burke, 1997; Zielinski, 2006).

Despite efforts made by some organizations to keep a high-potential program and its participants under wraps, leaders in those organizations have acknowledged that both the program and the participants are often commonly known to the rest of the employee population through the types of development opportunities that are made available to those who have been chosen (Zielinski, 2006). There have been multiple studies that show that the more transparent an organization's high-potential program is, the more successful it is in terms of building organizational trust and commitment as well aiding in recruitment, retention, and career development efforts (Church & Rotolo, 2016; Downs, 2015; Wolfe et al., 2009).

Gaps in the Research

While the term 'High-Potential Program' is commonly used throughout the literature, there is a gap in the research around how a high-potential program is designed. There is general agreement that it includes challenging job rotational assignments, special projects, coaching and mentoring, close performance monitoring and feedback, and access to executives (Burke, 1997; Downs, 2015; Zielinski, 2006). The research lacks information on the length of such programs and on how structured or unstructured they are. Church et al. (2015) state that a high-potential program is best designed when it is "customized and fully integrated into the business strategy" (p. 18), which may contribute to the lack of research available.

High-potential programs exist in a variety of industries outside of professional services. PepsiCo, for example, has a rigorous program that has been researched extensively (Byham, 2002; Church et al., 2021; Fulmer et al., 2009). When it comes to data specifically in the professional service industry, there is less research available.

There is a lack of data on the demographic details of high-potential employees such as career level, position, gender, or race. Additionally, there is a gap in the research in the segmentation of industries.

The purpose of this study is to learn whether the inclusion and participation of employees in back-office support positions (e.g., marketing, human resources, accounting, technology) in high potential development programs is beneficial (to the organization and to the participants) when mixed with a cohort with client facing employees. The focus of this research will be on professional service firms that have a structured, time-defined high-potential program, utilizing a cohort-based learning approach. Unlike industries such as the consumer goods or manufacturing industries where a tangible product is produced, in professional service firms, an employee's knowledge is the product. The professional services market is expected to grow by 10.9% globally in 2022 (ReportLinker, 2021) and is currently 13% of the GDP in the United States, an increase of 2% since 2005 (U.S Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022). The development of such knowledge workers is one possible avenue of increasing organizational effectiveness (Turner, 2011; Tymon & Stumpf, 2003). Employers in this growing market will benefit from this research as they look at ways to remain competitive in recruitment and retention.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study examined whether a mixed-cohort of billable and non-billable participants in a high-potential development program is beneficial to the organizations that utilize this development approach and to the participants in such programs. What outcomes can be anticipated when billable and non-billable employees participate in a single high-potential program? This research focused on professional service firms with time-defined and structured high-potential programs. An exploration of three primary topics supported this purpose:

- The satisfaction of billable and non-billable participants of the high-potential development program in promotion opportunities upon completion of the program
- The satisfaction of billable and non-billable participants of the high potential development program as it relates to their current positions
- Billable and non-billable participant employment and promotion statuses after participating in the high-potential program

This chapter outlines the research design, sampling methodology, data collection, data analysis, and the protection of human subjects.

Research Design

The research design for this study utilized a mixed methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Quantitative and qualitative data was collected to identify and illustrate trends as well as to compare data from each type of role and to conduct a deeper analysis into the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of the research participants. This study began with a literature review of existing research on the topic of high-potential programs in professional service firms. The lack of disaggregated data by billable and non-billable position type informed the design of the interview protocol.

Sampling Methodology

Participants were selected using purposive sampling from two professional service firms within my professional network that utilized a structured, time-defined high-potential development program, with both billable and non-billable participants. The target population included all participants from a combined total of six high-potential development programs between the two firms, for a total of 48 possible research participants. The study population represented both billable and non-billable positions. All participants in the study were over the age of 18.

Data Collection

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected in two phases through a survey and a focus group conducted with individuals from the two professional service firms who were willing to participate in the research. The first phase utilized an online survey questionnaire to collect quantitative data to identify and illustrate trends as well as to compare data from each type of role (i.e., billable and non-billable positions). The online survey included an introduction and overview of the study, potential risks and benefits, the questionnaire, and a statement that completion of the survey implied consent to participate in the study (Appendix A). The questions (Appendix B) were adapted from a career satisfaction measure developed by Greenhaus et al. (1990), which measures satisfaction with career success, with a coefficient alpha ranging from 0.83 to 0.89. I selected this tool due to its validity in the measurement of perceived outcomes that are also related to participation in a high-potential development program. Career satisfaction correlated positively with "…number of promotions received, perceptions of upward mobility, sponsorship within an organization, acceptance, job discretion, supervisory support, career strategies, perceived personal-organization value, presence of an internal labor market, and job performance. It correlated negatively to having reached a career plateau" (Fields, 2013, p. 29). Each question in the survey required a response from the participants to minimize the risk of missing data. Participants were given a deadline of seven calendar days to complete the survey.

In the second phase, an internet-based focus group was utilized to collect qualitative data to conduct a deeper analysis into the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of the research participants. One week after the closing of the initial survey, I sent an email to all individuals in the target population inviting them to participate in an internet-based focus group via Zoom. The email stated that the session would be recorded, solely for research purposes (Appendix C). The format of the focus group was 90 minutes and was unstructured with open ended discussion prompts (Appendix D). The discussion prompts were created by me.

Data Analysis

Responses from the first three questions (demographic and employment data questions) were tallied. Descriptive statistics were used in conjunction with two-sample t-tests to analyze the data obtained from questions 4-11 in both sample groups. Measures of central tendencies, frequency distributions, and percentages were calculated.

In analyzing the qualitative data from the focus group, responses were categorized into themes. The frequency of each theme was calculated by the number of responses for each discussion prompt.

Protection of Human Subjects

I completed the MSOD Human Subjects Training course sponsored by CITI Program on September 25, 2019. Approval to conduct the study was granted from Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board. For the initial survey phase, consent requests were sent to everyone in the target population as part of the survey. Participants were not required or requested to provide their names. For the focus group phase of the study, an email of informed consent was sent to the entire target population, without regard to survey participation, as there was no identifying information in the survey.

Participants were not financially compensated or otherwise incentivized to participate in the study. There was little to no risk of harm to participants, other than the possible perceived inconvenience in the time it takes to complete the survey and participate in the subsequent focus group.

All participant responses have been kept confidential. All data and subsequent analysis have been reported in aggregate.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study examined whether a mixed-cohort of billable and non-billable participants in a high-potential development program is beneficial to the organizations that utilize this development approach and to the participants in such programs. What outcomes can be anticipated when billable and non-billable employees participate in a single high-potential program? This research focused on professional service firms with time-defined and structured high-potential programs. An exploration of three primary topics supported this purpose:

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- Billable and non-billable participant employment and promotion statuses after participating in the high-potential program

This chapter presents the findings of the survey and the focus group from the participants about how their experiences while participating in a high-potential development program.

Survey Results

In the first phase of collecting data from participants, an invitation to participate in this study and complete the survey was sent via email to 48 individuals employed in the professional services industry who had participated in a structured, time-defined, high-potential development program with both client facing and non-client facing participants in the same cohort. The target population consisted of 37 (77%) billable participants and 11 (22%) non-billable participants. Of the 48 individuals in the target population, 25 responded to the survey (52% response rate). Table 1 illustrates the breakdown of billable and non-billable survey participants.

Table 1

Billable vs. Non-Billable Survey Participants

Position	*N* = 25	Percentage
Billable	17	71%
Non-Billable	8	29%

Table 2 reflects the responses on whether they are still with the same employer and whether they have experienced career advancement since participating in the high-potential program.

Table 2

Frequency of Employment Data Among Survey Participants

	Billable (*n* = 17)		Non-Billable (*n* = 8)	
Question	Yes	No	Yes	No
Are you still employed by the organization for which you participated in the high-potential program?	12	5	5	3
Have you experienced career advancement since your participation in the high-potential program?	13	4	3	5

71% of billable respondents reported being currently employed by the same organization for which they participated. Of those, 83% experienced career progression and 92% selected either “Strongly Agree” or “Agree to Some Extent” in if they were satisfied with their chances for promotion. 63% of non-billable respondents stated that they are with the same organization. Of those, 25% experienced career progression and

50% selected either “Strongly Agree” or “Agree to Some Extent” in if they were satisfied with their chances for promotion, with 25% responding “Strongly Disagree”.

Table 3 represents the occurrences of sentiments for the billable survey.

Table 3

Sentiments Among Billable Participants

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree to Some Extent	Uncertain	Disagree to Some Extent	Strongly Disagree
While participating in the high-potential program, I felt that I had sufficient opportunity to express my viewpoint	2	14	0	1	0
While participating in the high-potential program, I felt that I had sufficient opportunity to represent my role in the organization	6	10	0	1	0
I developed new skills in the high-potential program that I use in my current position	13	4	0	0	0
I believe the curriculum in the high-potential program was relevant to my career	15	1	1	0	0
I believe the curriculum in the high-potential program was relevant to the participants who were not in the same role as I was (i.e., client facing vs. not client facing).	2	11	1	3	0
I believe the backgrounds of the others in my cohort were suitable for the high-potential program.	1	9	3	4	0
I am satisfied with my chances for promotion	8	7	2	0	0
Overall, I am satisfied with the high-potential program I participated in	9	7	1	0	0

Table 4 represents the occurrences of sentiments for the non-billable survey.

Table 4

Sentiments Among Non-Billable Participants

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree to Some Extent	Uncertain	Disagree to Some Extent	Strongly Disagree
While participating in the high-potential program, I felt that I had sufficient opportunity to express my viewpoint	3	2	0	3	0
While participating in the high-potential program, I felt that I had sufficient opportunity to represent my role in the organization	2	5	0	1	0
I developed new skills in the high-potential program that I use in my current position	5	3	0	0	0
I believe the curriculum in the high-potential program was relevant to my career	3	2	0	1	0
I believe the curriculum in the high-potential program was relevant to the participants who were not in the same role as I was (i.e., client facing vs. not client facing).	6	2	0	0	0
I believe the backgrounds of the others in my cohort were suitable for the high-potential program.	2	5	1	0	0
I am satisfied with my chances for promotion	1	2	2	2	1
Overall, I am satisfied with the high-potential program I participated in	3	3	1	1	0

Tables 5 through 12 reflect the descriptive data comparisons and two-sample t-test for each survey question.

Overall, billable participants reported a higher confidence level in their opportunity to express their viewpoints while in their high-potential programs than non-billable participants (Table 5).

Table 5

Data Comparison: Viewpoint

	Billable (n = 17)	Non-Billable (n = 8)	t-value	df	p-value
T-Test			0.72	8	0.491
Min	2.00	2.00			
Max	5.00	5.00			
Mean	4.00	3.625			
SD	0.612	1.408			

Overall, billable participants reported a slightly higher confidence level in their opportunity to represent their roles in their organizations while in their high-potential programs than non-billable participants (Table 6).

Table 6

Data Comparison: Role Representation

	Billable (n = 17)	Non-Billable (n = 8)	t-value	df	p-value
T-Test			0.63	11	0.543
Min	2.00	2.00			
Max	5.00	5.00			
Mean	4.235	4.00			
SD	0.752	0.926			

All respondents reported developing new skills that were relevant to their careers (Table 7).

Table 7

Data Comparison: New Skills

	Billable (n = 17)	Non-Billable (n = 8)	t-value	df	p-value
T-Test			0.66	11	0.522
Min	4.00	4.00			
Max	5.00	5.00			
Mean	4.765	4.625			
SD	0.437	0.518			

Billable participants reported a stronger belief that the curriculum in the high-potential program was relevant to their careers than non-billable participants (Table 8).

Table 8

Data Comparison: Relevant

	Billable (n = 17)	Non-Billable (n = 8)	t-value	df	p-value
T-Test			1.87	8	0.098
Min	3.00	2.00			
Max	5.00	5.00			
Mean	4.824	4.125			
SD	0.529	0.991			

Overall, non-billable participants reported a stronger belief that the curriculum in their high-potential program was relevant to the billable high-potential participants compared to the billable participants reporting that they believed the curriculum in their program was relevant to non-billable high-potential program participants (Table 9).

Table 9

Data Comparison: Other Role

	Billable (n = 17)	Non-Billable (n = 8)	t-value	df	p-value
T-Test			-3.77	22	0.001
Min	2.00	4.00			
Max	5.00	5.00			
Mean	3.706	4.740			
SD	0.920	0.463			

Overall, non-billable participants reported a stronger belief that the backgrounds of the others in their cohort were suitable for the high-potential program compared to the billable survey participants (Table 10).

Table 10

Data Comparison: Suitable

	Billable (n = 17)	Non-Billable (n = 8)	t-value	df	p-value
T-Test			-2.22	19	0.039
Min	2.00	3.00			
Max	5.00	5.00			
Mean	3.412	4.125			
SD	0.939	0.641			

Overall, billable participants reported a higher confidence level in their chances for promotion than non-billable participants (Table 11).

Table 11

Data Comparison: Promotion

	Billable (n = 17)	Non-Billable (n = 8)	t-value	df	p-value
T-Test			2.74	8	0.025
Min	3.00	1.00			
Max	5.00	5.00			
Mean	4.353	3.00			
SD	0.702	1.309			

Overall, billable participants reported a higher satisfaction level with their high-potential program than non-billable participants (Table 12).

Table 12

Data Comparison: Satisfaction

	Billable (n = 17)	Non-Billable (n = 8)	t-value	df	p-value
T-Test			1.16	9	0.278
Min	3.00	2.00			
Max	5.00	5.00			
Mean	4.471	4.00			
SD	0.624	1.069			

Focus Group Results

In the second and final phase of collecting data from participants, an invitation to participate in this study and join a 90-minute focus group was sent via email to the same target population of 48 individuals. Of the 48 individuals in the target population, six participated in the focus group. I facilitated a discussion utilizing discussion prompts.

Table 13 illustrates that, in each case, the majority of the high-potential program participants were billable.

Table 13

Breakdown of Billable and Non-Billable Participants in Respondent Cohorts

Respondent	Billable (n)	Billable (%)	Non-billable (n)	Non-billable (%)	Total
1	3	75%	1	25%	4
2	4	80%	1	20%	5
3	6	75%	2	25%	8
4	9	90%	1	10%	10
5	8	80%	2	20%	10
6	8	73%	3	27%	11

Table 14 describes the key themes that emerged from the focus group participants related to their experiences while participating in the high-potential program.

Table 14

Key Themes from Discussion Prompts in Focus Group

Discussion Prompt	Key Theme(s)	Frequency (n = 6)
What did you enjoy most?	Exposure to leadership Developing new ways of thinking	4
What did you find most challenging?	Balancing the workload	3
What would you have liked to learn that you didn't?	Emotional intelligence skills	3
What was the most valuable piece of learning that you came away with?	Seeing things from a larger or different perspective	5
How was your experience in a mixed cohort of billable and non-billable participants?	Generally positive with some challenges	6
Unforeseen benefits	New and deeper knowledge of the business Relationships with colleagues	3 2
Unforeseen challenges	No key theme identified	

When asked what they enjoyed most about participating in their high-potential program, one key theme participants mentioned was the exposure they received to members of leadership in their companies. One participant said,

> Before being in the program, I thought I had good relationship with our CEO. We would pass in the halls and exchange nods and pleasantries. But after spending a year in the high-potential program that she led, our relationship is deeper and richer than it was. We regularly go to lunch and talk about both work and personal topics. I was able to build relationships with many members of the executive team and pick their brains.

Another said,

> In my group, we were paired up with mentors. The mentors were members of the Board of Directors. They used to seem distant and intimidating. Working with my mentor showed me that he was just a regular person going through similar experiences in his life as the rest of us.

A second theme that emerged around what participants enjoyed most was that that they developed of new ways of thinking. As summarized by one participant, “I loved how I was challenged to think differently. In the group I was in, we had a total of 10 employees in our cohort. Each person had a different viewpoint on almost every topic we discussed.”

When asked what they found most challenging while participating in the high-potential program, all participants stated that they had to learn how to balance the work required in the program with their normal job duties. One person stated, “There was so much work! We had books, meetings, projects, and travel. And we couldn’t let our regular jobs slip.” Another relayed a story, emphasizing the point:

> The worst moment for me while in the program was about two months in. I told our HR Director that I wouldn’t be able to make a meeting with the rest of the group because of a client commitment. That made it back to my boss, who told me that I had to figure out how to balance the high-potential program work with client work and they both had to be done well. It was the first time that something in our firm was taking more or similar priority over project work. I was bit lost in the beginning with that.

When the focus group topic moved to what the participants wish they had learned that they had not, the most common response was around emotional intelligence. One participant said, “It has been about six years since I had my experience. My 360 review had comments about my emotional intelligence could be improved. There wasn’t much in the program about emotional intelligence.” Another person added,

> We were taught a lot about the tactical aspects of running a business and how to make customers happy with the work we do. We weren’t really given anything tangible on EQ. I’m still trying to understand what EQ is. It seems to be getting more and more important in the business world.

When asked about the most valuable piece of learning they came away with while participating in a high-potential program, there was a theme of being exposed to alternative perspectives that led to being able to see a more complete picture.

One participant said, “I had a narrow view of right and wrong before I went through the program because I only saw what was happening in my department. It was eye-opening to hear about the challenges that other people were facing in different parts of the company.” Someone else added,

> We would often discuss challenges we were having with our employees and get advice from the other group members. Even if I didn’t have any issues going on at that time, I came away from those conversations with valuable ways to think about managing my team.

A third said, “I loved most of the reading assignments. Some of the books went pretty deep and had me think about things differently.”

In the final focus group topic, participants were asked how they felt about their overall experience being in a high-potential program with a mixed cohort of billable and non-billable participants. Every participant stated that the experience was generally a positive one. From one, “I am so glad I had that experience. If it had been structured so that there were only people in positions similar to mine, I don't think I would have gotten as much out of it." Another person added,

> When our CEO announced the launch of our high-potential program, I assumed that it was just going to be for the project folks. When I was selected for it as an IT professional, it felt like an honor. For that time, I felt like what I do for the company is just as important as what they do.

A few participants indicated that what they got out of the experience outweighed the challenges. One participant stated,

> Being in the finance department, I sometimes felt out of my depth. One of the projects we were given was to come up with an innovative industry product to sell to home builders. We then had to create a presentation and pitch it to the Board. I was a complete wreck during this presentation because I knew nothing about home building or what our customers wanted. That was the most intense experience, but there were many moments like that; where I felt that the topics were not meant for me. The flip side was that I learned more about what we did as a company that I ever would have if I had not been a participant. This has been the biggest win for me in my working relationships with leaders.

In continuing the discussion on unforeseen benefits of being in a mixed-cohort environment another added,

> We had someone in HR in the group I was in. I sometimes wondered why she was there and if she was getting anything out of the discussions. Then we had a session on recruiting and job advertisements, and I got a lot out of that, so I started to see that you didn't need to be in one category to learn certain things.

And from another participant,

> I went into the program thinking I was going to learn how to be a good leader. I wasn't expecting to learn about the inner workings of the company - things like how much the annual IT budget is and what goes into staffing a particular project. I was grateful to learn about those things.

An additional theme that emerged from the discussion of unforeseen benefits of participating in the high-potential program was the relationships built with colleagues. One respondent said, "Throughout the program, we all became pretty close. Now I have a group of people I can turn to for advice who went through the same experience." Another added, “It’s not just with the people I was in the program with. It’s the people who did it before me and after me. It’s like there’s a community of people because we all want to see it continue.”

In discussing the unforeseen challenges of being in a mixed-cohort high-potential program, responses varied, and a theme could not be identified.

> One participant shared an experience of differences in promotion paths:
> I was in a small group of high-potentials. We only had four people go through. When I started it, I was a Systems Manager and the only internal operations person. The other three people were Consultants. Halfway through our program, they were all promoted to Manager. By the time our program ended, they had all been promoted to Director. I was so excited when I was selected for the program. I thought it was going to be a door to more opportunities. I don’t feel like there is a place for me here anymore.

Another participant discussed being viewed negatively by others:

> I wasn’t prepared for how other people who were not going through the program felt about me being in the program since my position at the time was administrative. There were rumors in the company about favoritism. Someone even wrote about it in a Glassdoor review.

From another, a gender dynamic came with challenges,

> We had eight people in our cohort, and it just so happened that the only two females were also in non-billable positions. The rest of us were on the delivery team and male. One time, a few of us were planning a team building event for the whole group, and we thought it would be fun to go to a baseball game. When we took it back to the group, the women had no interest in doing that. It didn’t even occur to us to consider what might be fun for them.

Summary

This chapter presented the research of the study and summarized the data collected. The first section described the results of the survey taken by 25 participants. The second section summarized the findings and key themes that emerged from the focus group of six participants.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study examined whether a mixed-cohort of billable and non-billable participants in a high-potential development program is beneficial to the organizations that utilize this development approach and to the participants in such programs. What outcomes can be anticipated when billable and non-billable employees participate in a single high-potential program? This research focused on professional service firms with time-defined and structured high-potential programs. An exploration of three primary topics supported this purpose:

- The satisfaction of billable and non-billable participants of the high-potential development program in promotion opportunities upon completion of the program
- The satisfaction of billable and non-billable participants of the high potential development program as it relates to their current positions
- Billable and non-billable participant employment and promotion statuses after participating in the high-potential program

This chapter completes the study by summarizing the results, conclusions, recommendations, and limitations.

Summary

In this study, it was revealed that in high-potential programs in professional service firms, billable employees outnumbered non-billable employees in participation. Billable participants were generally more satisfied with their programs than non-billable participants, though non-billable participants were generally not dissatisfied. Billable participants were more likely than non-billable participants to remain in the organizations with which they participated in the high-potential program. This finding indicates a benefit to the organization as it relates to retaining billable participants. Billable employees were more likely to experience career progression, which is also a benefit to the organization because it demonstrates a realized goal of a high-potential program. Non-billable employees were more likely than billable participants to leave the organizations with which they participated in the high-potential program. This finding indicates a potential lack of benefit to the organization as it illustrates an investment in employees who may take those newly developed skills to another company.

All participants gained relevant skills, which indicates a benefit to both the employees who participated as well as to the organization. Non-billable employees were more likely to report that the curriculum in their high-potential program was relevant for those in opposite roles, and billable employees were less likely to report that the curriculum was relevant to those in opposite roles. Similarly, billable participants were more likely to believe that their own backgrounds were better suited to the high-potential program compared to the non-billable participants.

There were two primary themes that emerged from the focus group data that indicated positive experiences: benefits of building relationships and gaining of and appreciation for new perspectives. The one primary theme that emerged from the focus group data that indicated a missed opportunity in the experiences was a further exploration into emotional intelligence.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, there is an opportunity for professional service firms to take a deeper look at the curriculum when designing a high-potential program with a mixed cohort of billable and non-billable participants to ensure that the curriculum is relevant and applicable to as many participants as possible. Another recommendation for professional service firms is to be as transparent as possible around the career progression outlooks for each participant to mitigate future misalignment.

Limitations of Research

There were four primary limitations in this study. First, the focus and scope of the research was narrow, and thus may have limited applicability across other organizations or industries. Second, the sample size was small and may not be representative of all high-potential programs in professional service firms. Third, all data was self-reported by the research participants. Last, there was subjectivity in my interpretations.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations, it would be beneficial to replicate this research in additional professional service firms and with a larger sample population. It would also be beneficial to research the curriculum being utilized in various professional service firms to better understand the design methodology and desired outcomes from organizations. One possibility for future research would be to conduct a longitudinal study to discover how much revenue participants of a high-potential program generate compared to employees who do not participate in a high-potential program.

Conclusions

In a professional services firm, the two primary goals of a high potential development program are to assist in succession planning and to generate revenue (Holt et al., 2018). This research suggests that a mixed cohort of billable and non-billable participants in a high potential program is generally beneficial on both counts as it pertains to billable participants, as they are likely to stay with the firm and be promoted into higher billable levels.

The results are not as clear as it pertains to non-billable participants. While the non-billable participants in this study expressed overall satisfaction with their participation in the high-potential program, they were also more likely to leave the organization and expressed dissatisfaction over their career opportunities.

The professional services market is expected to grow by 10.9% globally in 2022 (ReportLinker, 2021) and is currently 13% of the GDP in the United States (U.S Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022). The development of such knowledge workers is one possible avenue of increasing organizational effectiveness (Turner, 2011; Tymon & Stumpf, 2003). Employers in this growing market will benefit from this research as they look at ways to remain competitive in recruitment and retention.

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Appendix A: Survey Invitation and Informed Consent

Survey Invitation and Informed Consent

Dear [name],
My name is Charlene Robison. I am conducting a study on high-potential programs in professional service firms. If you have been employed in the professional services industry and have participated in a structured, time-defined, high-potential development program with both client facing and non-client facing participants in the same cohort, you may participate in this research.

What is the reason for doing this research study?
The purpose of this study is to research whether the inclusion and participation of employees in back-office support positions (such as marketing, human resources, accounting, technology, etc.) in high potential development programs is beneficial (to the organization and to the participants) when mixed with a cohort with client facing employees. The focus of this research will be on professional services firms that have a structured, time-defined high-potential program, utilizing a cohort-based learning approach.
In order to participate, you must have been employed in the professional services industry and have participated in a structured, time-defined, high-potential development program with both client facing and non-client facing participants in the same cohort, you may participate in this research.

What will be done during this research study?
Participation in this study will require approximately 15 minutes to complete a survey and an additional 90 minutes if you participate in the follow up focus group. You will be asked to complete a 13-question survey. Participation will take place via an online survey tool, Qualtrics. You will be invited to participate in a focus group, which will take place via Zoom.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?
It is anticipated that no more than minimal risks exist for participating in this research. Minimal risk of participants feeling imposed by the requested time commitment. Will provide 1 week for participants to complete the survey. Will provide breaks as requested by participants during the focus group. Participants will have the option to opt out of the study at any time.
Minimal risk of participant discomfort with the discussion topics while participating in the focus group. Will provide breaks as requested by participants during the focus group. Participants will have the option to opt out of the study at any time.
Potential risk for breach of confidentiality. Data will be de-identified during analysis and securely stored. Researcher will begin the focus group with request that confidentiality be honored.

What are the possible benefits to you?
There are no direct benefits to participants.
Potential benefit to individual subjects is the exposure to various perspectives during the focus group. Results of this research will potentially benefit leaders in professional

service firms when considering how to design high potential development programs. In addition, it will potentially benefit the participants of high-potential programs in understanding the risks and benefits of participating in such mixed-cohort programs.

How will information about you be protected?
Your responses will be kept confidential. The online survey will not request your name or any other identifying information. Your online responses to the survey will be password protected via the Qualtrics website. The analysis of the data resulting from the survey will be stored in a password protected electronic storage drive. All data resulting from this research will be reported in aggregate. No individual identity will be established or reported.

What are your rights as a research subject?
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.
For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s):

- Name: Charlene Robison
- Phone: 1(949)491-0920
- Email: charlene.robison@pepperdine.edu

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: 1(310)568-2305
- Email: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?
You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw') at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.
You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.
Documentation of Informed Consent
You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By clicking on the I Agree button below, your consent to participate is implied. You should print a copy of this page for your records.

I Agree	I Do Not Agree

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Survey Questions

1. Your role within the organization at the time of participating in the high-potential program:
    - Billable/client Facing
    - Non-billable/not client facing

2. Are you still employed by the organization for which you participated in the high-potential program?
    - Yes
    - No

3. Have you experienced career advancement since your participation in the high-potential development program?
    - Yes
    - No

Please rate the following statements about your experience:

4. While participating in the high-potential program, I felt that I had sufficient opportunity to express my viewpoint.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree to Some Extent
    - Uncertain
    - Disagree to Some Extent
    - Strongly Disagree

5. While participating in the high-potential program, I felt that I had sufficient opportunity to represent my role within the organization.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree to Some Extent
    - Uncertain
    - Disagree to Some Extent
    - Strongly Disagree

6. I developed new skills in the high-potential program that I use in my current position.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree to Some Extent
    - Uncertain
    - Disagree to Some Extent
    - Strongly Disagree

7. I believe the curriculum in the high-potential program was relevant to my career
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree to Some Extent
    - Uncertain
    - Disagree to Some Extent
    - Strongly Disagree

8. I believe the curriculum in the high-potential program was relevant to the participants who were not in the same role as I was (i.e., client facing vs. not-client facing).
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree to Some Extent
    - Uncertain
    - Disagree to Some Extent
    - Strongly Disagree

9. I believe the backgrounds of the others in my cohort were suitable for the high-potential program.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree to Some Extent
    - Uncertain
    - Disagree to Some Extent
    - Strongly Disagree

10. I am satisfied with my chances for promotion.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree to Some Extent
    - Uncertain
    - Disagree to Some Extent
    - Strongly Disagree

11. Overall, I am satisfied with the high-potential program I participated in.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree to Some Extent
    - Uncertain
    - Disagree to Some Extent
    - Strongly Disagree

Appendix C: Focus Group Invitation and Informed Consent

Focus Group Invitation and Informed Consent

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Focus Group
Dear [name],
My name is Charlene Robison. I am conducting a study on high-potential programs in professional service firms. If you have been employed in the professional services industry and have participated in a structured, time-defined, high-potential development program with both client facing and non-client facing participants in the same cohort, you may participate in this research.

What is the reason for doing this research study?
The purpose of this study is to research whether the inclusion and participation of employees in back-office support positions (such as marketing, human resources, accounting, technology, etc.) in high potential development programs is beneficial (to the organization and to the participants) when mixed with a cohort with client facing employees. The focus of this research will be on professional services firms that have a structured, time-defined high-potential program, utilizing a cohort-based learning approach.
In order to participate, you must have been employed in the professional services industry and have participated in a structured, time-defined, high-potential development program with both client facing and non-client facing participants in the same cohort, you may participate in this research.

What will be done during this research study?
You are being invited to participate in a focus group, which will take place via Zoom. The focus group will be unstructured with open ended questions. Participation in this study will require approximately 90 minutes. The meeting will be recorded for research purposes only.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?
It is anticipated that no more than minimal risks exist for participating in this research. Minimal risk of participants feeling imposed by the requested time commitment. Will provide 1 week for participants to complete the survey. Will provide breaks as requested by participants during the focus group. Participants will have the option to opt out of the study at any time.
Minimal risk of participant discomfort with the discussion topics while participating in the focus group. Will provide breaks as requested by participants during the focus group. Participants will have the option to opt out of the study at any time.
Potential risk for breach of confidentiality. Data will be de-identified during analysis and securely stored. Researcher will begin the focus group with request that confidentiality be honored.

What are the possible benefits to you?
There are no direct benefits to participants.
Potential benefit to individual subjects is the exposure to various perspectives during the focus group. Results of this research will potentially benefit leaders in professional

service firms when considering how to design high potential development programs. In addition, it will potentially benefit the participants of high-potential programs in understanding the risks and benefits of participating in such mixed-cohort programs.

How will information about you be protected?
Your responses will be kept confidential. The Zoom meeting recording and the analysis of the data resulting from the focus group will be stored in a password protected electronic storage drive. All data resulting from this research will be reported in aggregate. No individual identity will be established or reported.

What are your rights as a research subject?
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.
For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s):

- Name: Charlene Robison
- Phone: 1(949)491-0920
- Email: charlene.robison@pepperdine.edu

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: 1(310)568-2305
- Email: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?
You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw’) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.
You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Documentation of Informed Consent
You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By joining the focus group you have given your consent to participate in this research. You should print a copy of this page for your records.

Appendix D: Focus Group Discussion Prompts

Focus Group Discussion Prompts

- In the high-potential program you participated in, approximately how many in the cohort were billable vs. non-billable?
- What did you enjoy most?
- What did you find most challenging?
- What would you have liked to learn that you didn't?
- What was the most valuable piece of learning you came away with?
- How was your experience in a mixed cohort of billable and non-billable participants? Can you talk about any unforeseen benefits? Can you talk about any unforeseen challenges?