

Women - higher positions are not more demanding

According to Mirjam, it was striking that only a few women turned down the offer of being mentored. "Men don't turn down such opportunities because they know they're good for their career. Women focus more on doing their job well rather than on their visibility and getting recognition for their work. I see a lot of women who get stuck in middle management, where the jobs are usually stressful and their position awkward because they get orders from superiors as well as subordinates. Women think that higher positions are more demanding, but in most cases that's not true. For example, you have a secretary and don't have to account for your actions as much. At ING Nederland, we have a women's network where we can exchange experience and knowledge. The invitation for the 'meetings' are sent via - mostly male - managers who are asked to forward them to women for whom the meeting may be interesting. People often make jokes about the 'women's clubs.' In the end, they're just a way of showing how interesting such a network can be."

Cultural differences that pleasantly surprise

Babette wonders how Mirjam ten Cate experiences diversity. For example, which cultural differences in ING did she find pleasantly surprising? Mirjam tells about her trip to the United States. "You always hear that the States are further than we are, which is true for a number of areas. But in the States, I saw a lot of employee networks that are based on their own culture. In the Netherlands, ING has one large multicultural network that embraces employees with all kinds of different backgrounds. That works really well. What I like about the States is that people focus on what's good and praise each other. It is very flattering when people first tell you what they like about you and then ask their question or make their remark. In the Netherlands, we more readily criticize and lecture people about the things they do wrong."

Role models?

Babette: "With our Inspiration for Integration contest, the first of which, by the way, was won by an ING employee of Turkish origin, we want to bring role models for bicultural people to the fore. We actually offer a platform. Is there such a thing as an ING role model?" Mirjam: "Anyone can be a role model. In our list of top 200 employees, you will find a woman who, for a long time, only worked three days a week because she was taking care of the kids. This clearly proves that you can grant yourself the freedom and still be successful in your job. The list also contains men who work four days a week as well as multicultural role models. But role models aren't only found at the highest level. As an employee, you can participate in round-table discussions with senior managers. We also ran a project in 2007 in which a small group of talented people with very different backgrounds had to try to achieve a diversity objective in one hundred days. In this way, we increased the number of ING executives by five people with 'diverse' backgrounds, and matched 28 international talented people to projects lasting six months to a year at one of ING's Dutch headquarters. But you can also look at yourself. I regularly meet colleagues who speak English with a strong accent. You have a tendency of thinking that they're less competent. But once you get started, you realize that an accent doesn't say anything about a person's skills. You have to be open for this in order to create good working relationships between the cultures."