

Excellence has many parents

Biography of an idea at the WZB

I once was a sketchy, crude, but very clever idea in a young mind. I popped up in a conversation my researcher had with his director and I was instantly snapped up. My main points were nailed down in a sloppy note and so I was born. Soon enough, I was being pursued by a team of researchers. That's how it goes, when people chase after ideas, they rarely do so on their own. But it's like this:

Money was needed and there were discussions on where to get it with a certain research manager proving particularly adept. At the WZB, where I'd first shown myself, people were very proud of having created a new profession forty years ago. Dubbed "research managers" ('Beauftragte für Forschungsmanagement') they strove to take some of the weight of administration off the shoulders of researchers. They watch for promotion possibilities, deadlines, and rules – everything that makes research transparent and efficient – and they faithfully accompany us thoughts as we set out into the world.

If you happen to be at the WZB, take the opportunity to inspect the four busts mounted to the walls of the great conference hall, formerly a court room. They represent the ages of humans: from infancy to youth, from adulthood to the fullness of old age. No-one has yet given plaster form to the aging of ideas, but we age too. We move from sudden inspiration to application, and from project to completion.

To put it bluntly, this progression would be hard to manage if we existed solely as reflections of our researchers. It's where we at home, but only with other institutions, disciplines, and lands can we reach our full potential. This further shows how important research support administration and service units are – for third party funding, travel expenses, personnel. – Lots of people are involved.

My birth certificate was a master file with all the key information about me. On that basis, staff positions could be advertised, conferences and experiments planned, while surveys and service contracts were commissioned. There were researchers in their offices and conference rooms but praise is also due to the janitors, technicians, and incredibly patient cleaners who kept the place going. I was fed with data and there were routine checks about the relative advantages of commissioning data collection or doing it internally. In my case, a survey was done using WZB data management tools. The ethics commission took a close look at the design and gave the go-ahead. What followed was a great deal of hypotheses, analyses, and conferences. And since I hadn't been born in a void, a great deal of work had already been done and had to be considered with all publications thoroughly reviewed. The WZB has a whole tower full of literature, and can rightly claim that its library catalogue was, as one of the first ones in Germany, fully digitized by the 1980s.

Gradually, results emerged and texts were being drafted and discussed. Articles began to appear in scholarly journals, and reports were given to boards and committees at the WZB, the Leibniz Association, and for our sponsors. Clearly committed to Open Access, the WZB does everything it can to make results accessible to everyone. Soon, I was being nominated for awards. The WZB press office got involved, had me try out new outfits, argued enthusiastically with my researchers – I even made it on to television!

Luckily, I have had a pretty straightforward career. I know of other ideas who have gone through veritable crises along the way. They lost their bearings and no longer knew where they belonged. They fell victim to competing claims of ownership, accusations of plagiarism, breaches of trust, and all the rest. It's a good thing we have ombudspople at the WZB, who resolutely sort such things out.

Now, while I'm facing my final conference, I can look back on my eventful life. How to describe it? I believe I have remained true to myself through it all. Even in the copious reports, that original kernel of an idea is still there. People say it takes a whole village to raise a child, well, I say it takes a whole institute to bring an idea to fruition.

By Gabriele Kammerer, press officer in the Information and Communication Department.



Internal mail: a living system

No-one had cause to catch their breath if they received an envelope labelled "lab test results." Long before sustainability became the motto of our times, the WZB was using up vast stocks inherited from a medical institute. Older members of staff will remember them: letters from the administration with misleading stamps. To this day, mail room staff make their rounds twice a day through the building, announced by the characteristic clatter of trolley wheels over the threshold.

WZB internal mail envelope stamped "Laboratory test results" (Photo: Thu-Ha Nguyen).