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Why our users feel best served by our library

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The admittedly less than humble assertion made in the title of this presentation calls for explanation, or rather, justification. Based on a suggestion from outside the WZB (Prof. Hobohm), the formulation conveys something of the impression that a WZB visitor had from my description of the role, mission, and assessment of the Library and Research Information Unit as this workshop was being prepared. The smiley face at the end of the “official” title also appeared in the suggestion, having been placed there with me in mind. I have included it here intentionally, and you will learn why later.

In answering the question of whether we are meeting the needs of our clients and providing what is required for the research topics and disciplines at the WZB, I could start with the difficulties, of course. I could note the problems, technological change, increasing competition between institutions, and boundary conditions, and I could infer demands from all of it. Instead, I'd rather see the proverbial “half-empty glass” as a “half-full” one, partly because the following assessment and self-assessment rest on the wish to believe that we're appreciated and respected by everyone.

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS—OR HOW WE FIND OUT WHETHER WE'RE DOING A GOOD JOB

I would like to cite two kinds of evidence substantiating my assessment and enhancing its plausibility: (a) direct feedback based on the subjective opinion that individuals have of our performance and (b) indirect, institutional confirmation and facts that objectively say something about the “standing” of “my” information facility among WZB scholars and at the WZB in general.

Direct Feedback

Praise and recognition. We often receive explicit praise (something fairly rare in Germany) and receive written or oral recognition from many sides, be it from colleagues at all

levels of the hierarchy, through E-mails, in forewords and dedications, at celebrations and other events, or in both official and private conversations.

Indirect, Institutional Confirmation

Increasing procurement funds. The library's budget has steadily increased annually for years, whereas the WZB's overall budget has stagnated and even shrunk. It is justified to assume that a good share of appreciation and trust may be sustaining this growth. There is confidence that the library is capable of fulfilling its function of providing service to the entire WZB.

The library's large degree of autonomy. Over the years there have been few, if any, administrative interventions by the hierarchy. This freedom, too, obviously attests to the trust in the ability of this unit's management and staff to make its own, highly autonomous decisions on professional, organizational, and personnel matters.

Symbolic expressions of esteem. For years now, members of the library staff have been chosen as representatives to the WZB's internal advisory and comanagement committees, a fact that indicates the special kind of esteem in which the library is held. The librarians are often elected by a remarkably wide margin to the works council, the equal opportunity commission, the computer committee, the board of trustees, and other key decision-making groups. The Library and Research Information Unit thus has a solid reputation for the professional, social, and communicational competence of its staff, an aspect that cannot be underestimated.

FACTORS OF SUCCESS—OR WHAT WE AND OUR WORK ARE NOTED FOR

Allow me to summarize what the WZB library does and to point out the characteristics that I think distinguish us from most other information facilities.

Our Support Structure is Research-intensive

We offer the fellows full, process-oriented assistance—from seeking out the required information to ensuring ultimate completion of the product. Time priorities and efficiency are important to us. We analyze experience, follow up as a team, and develop corresponding work procedures as a matter of course.

Members of the library staff are assigned to the various research units and scholars, whose research topics, work approaches, information needs, and “mentalities” thereby become familiar to us.

The library is an open-stack facility that is accessible constantly, even at night and on weekends. Every user is welcome. Located in the tallest building of the WZB, the campanile and all its informational resources are both the physical and figurative expression of the central part that the library plays in the service of science in this institution. The architect, James Stirling, placed the tower at the very junction of the buildings housing the major research units. This position facilitates access to the library staff members and the various services they offer. Form is indeed an element of content!

Being networked and linked into overarching structures promotes the partnership between science and services. This fact is true not only for the Library and Research Information Unit as a whole, which is fully integrated into the entire WZB and its committees, but also for the individual staff members, who work closely with the various research units and groups.

Our Output of Services and Products is Wide

Librarian jobs at the WZB today are definitely internet jobs, which are characterized by the use of IT instruments to procure what are primarily digital objects. The ever-growing volume of requests for information has made the Internet an indispensable ally in professional research of every kind. It affords access to catalogues, reference works, facts, persons, institutions, and literature, including digital full-text retrieval. Bringing together technical skill, scholarly knowledge, and solid practical experience, the Internet competence of the Library and Research Information Unit has been commended again and again as an important link in the research effort at the WZB. A logical result of this development is that the unit conducts Internet training sessions, which are well attended by its users.

Our Team is the Greatest “Capital” of Our Library

Independence. All tasks having to do with efficiently supplying information to the WZB fellows and other scholars are handled independently by the assigned members of the library staff. No bureaucratic, administrative, and hierarchical obstacles slow or complicate direct communication and cooperation with the users, other WZB units, or external partners. The jobs of the librarians are structured in ways that enable them to arrange procedures according to their best judgment.

Personal responsibility. The internal organization of the library is oriented to the WZB’s research units and research groups and emphasizes personal responsibility. The handling of the media units—electronic information, books, and journal articles—is not divided into several levels and broken into small, discrete steps. Instead, it is modeled on the concept of integrated work organization, which consolidates all operations sectorially in the hands of one person. Input and output functions are not separated.

Role variety, share in decision-making, and inclination to innovate. To the staff members, providing service means stepping beyond their own sectorial context in order to attend to the users of the WZB library overall. This breadth in the role of the librarians builds their competence at effective participation in decision-making when appropriate opportunities arise within the unit and at higher levels. The previously mentioned election of WZB librarians to different committees is just one example. Role variety and involvement on the part of the librarians greatly increases their inclination to innovate.

Team management as a social process. I view interaction within an organization as a social process. More succinctly, I see the library as a social process. For management, this perspective means that basic professional competence—and individual WZB librarians are certainly well qualified—must be paired with social competence. This dimension includes attitudes and traits such as an ability and willingness to deal with conflicts sensitively, a problem-solving orientation, readiness to learn, a capacity to interact and cooperate as an equal in professional matters, an ability to undergo role reversal, willingness to negotiate, and much more. Good practice calls for far more than just theoretical knowledge about these aspects. That is another subject, though. As managers, we should not underestimate the

importance of such theoretical knowledge and its inclusion in training and human resource development if we are serious about improving the extent to which our institutions accomplish their missions.

Orientation to employees as the key advantage. At this point I'd like to allow myself an almost heretical statement, but one accompanied by another smiley face. My assertion is that the crux for a service institution is not its "customer orientation"; ostensibly, everybody has that. I consciously set store by the orientation to *employees*. What is good for employees is ultimately good for "customers." Or as one colleague succinctly put it: "Unhappy employees—unhappy customers."

The high motivation of employees and their above-average involvement in daily work surely have much to do with these basic tenets. But, to come back to the winking smiley face mentioned at the outset of this presentation, they also have to do with something else—with humor. Discovering the comic (and occasionally the absurd) in everyday life; cultivating rather than overlooking what is fun; including the library's public; and showing a certain ease and sense of irony, even when things get difficult—these qualities, too, affect the interaction of the library staff and the users. Perhaps this style contributes to the positive feedback we receive about we do. In any case, it is reason enough for the self-confident optimism exuded in the title of this presentation.