

Strategy development for the library system of Freie Universität Berlin

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Summary

The article outlines the main activities of the first year of the project Wandel@FU-Bib, which focused on establishing a strategy for the libraries at Freie Universität Berlin, entitled “Creating spaces of knowledge”. The focus is on describing the process rather than the content. At the time of writing, the project had just passed its one-year-anniversary and therefore its halfway point.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel werden die Hauptaktivitäten des ersten Jahres des Projekts Wandel@FU-Bib skizziert, die sich auf die Erarbeitung einer Strategie für die Bibliotheken der Freien Universität Berlin konzentrierten. Dabei wird eher der Prozess als der Inhalt beschrieben. Die Strategie trägt den Titel „Wir gestalten Wissensräume“. Zum Zeitpunkt des Verfassens dieses Artikels hat das Projekt gerade sein einjähriges Bestehen überschritten und befindet sich damit in der Halbzeit.

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1.1. Context: Freie Universität Berlin and its libraries

Freie Universität Berlin is one of the larger German universities, with 33,000 students and about 4,500 staff. It is part of the German “Exzellenzstrategie” (strategy of excellence)¹ and internationally well connected. The libraries of Freie Universität Berlin form a typical and traditional two-tier library system in many ways. Since the 1970s, they have been gradually transformed into a functional one-tier system for acquisition and cataloging. The library and user services in the faculty libraries, however, were not included in this transformation. Currently, there are 13 branch libraries and one central location. All in all, the organization includes more than 400 employees. Roughly a quarter of them are students.

In 2018, the Center for Digital Systems (CeDiS) was integrated into the university library. CeDiS supports all university institutions in the use of digital tools for teaching and research. CeDiS was formally assigned to the library, but without any accompanying structural, organizational or strategic measures. The need to complete this integration was the starting point for a bigger change project.

1 The German strategy of excellence is a programme for promoting outstanding universities on a national scale.

But even apart from that, the libraries of Freie Universität Berlin are facing more and more challenges: We have to face complex problems that require quick solutions and answers for which our traditional organizations are not well positioned. Digital change is not something that lies in the future; libraries have been in a process of digital change for a long time, changing the way we live and work. The world around us and our working environments are changing rapidly. For many people, this is the cause of great frustration: old, tried and tested solutions cannot be applied to the new problems. And it may not be possible to permanently apply newly acquired solutions. As the problems are constantly changing, no one solution can be implemented long-term. This frustration is not caused by digital change as such – rather, it arises when our environment changes faster than we do and we lack the tools and organization to react to the changed conditions.² So there is a dire need for our libraries to change in order to be able to meet these challenges.³

1.2. The project: Wandel@FU-Bib

This is why the Executive Board of the university approved a comprehensive two-year change project for our libraries to tackle all these challenges while implementing continuous organizational development. Freie Universität Berlin funds the project from central means, so as not to burden the library budget. The project goals were defined in 2018:

1. Bringing the libraries and CeDiS together,
2. working further towards a functional one-tier library system,
3. increasing user orientation and service quality,
4. increasing agility, flexibility, innovative strength and future-oriented perspective.⁴

At the beginning of the project in early 2019, the project structures were set up, which in the beginning had three elements: The central project management team (“Projektbüro”) consists of two people (the authors of this paper) who are tasked with project lead and project management, working on the project full time for two years starting in early 2019.⁵ Both the project lead and the project manager are exempt from all other tasks for the duration of the project so that they can focus solely on the change process.

2 For more on these challenges see: Lee, Martin; Poth, Daniela; Sablowski, Friederike et al.: Führung und agiles Arbeiten. Modell für ein stabiles und dynamisches Grundgerüst in einer komplexeren und digitaleren Zukunft, in: BuB. Forum Bibliothek und Information, 02–03, 2020, p. 111–115.

3 This article is based on a presentation: Lee, Martin; Riesenweber, Christina: Wir gestalten Wissensräume. Strategie-Entwicklung an der Freie Universität Berlin, #vBIB20. Online: <<https://doi.org/10.5446/47562>>. The talk was originally planned for the 109th Deutsche Bibliothekartag in Hannover, which had to be canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

4 For more information about the start of the project see: Brandtner, Andreas; Geukes, Albert, Lee, Martin; Riesenweber, Christina; Tatai, Andrea: Neuausrichtung der Informations- und Forschungsinfrastruktur an der Freien Universität Berlin, in: o-bib. Das Offene Bibliotheksjournal, 6(2), 2019, p. 134–137. Online: <<https://doi.org/10.5282/o-bib/2019H2S134-137>>.

5 For more information about the work of the project management team, please refer to our upcoming article in ABI Technik (scheduled for issue 4/2020): Lee, Martin, Riesenweber, Christina: Challenge for Change Agents, in: Abi-Technik, forthcoming.

The senior management team of the library system, with library director Andreas Brandtner, his vice director Andrea Tatai, the head of CeDiS Albert Geukes and Martin Lee, act as a steering committee. In addition, a consulting team was hired: two experts in organizational change who support the process and provide coaching and guidance (Maik Arensmann and Katrin Glatzel from osb international. The agency specializes in systemic organizational consulting).⁶

1.3. Project timeline

The project timeline has three consecutive phases and one ongoing process.

In the first phase of the project, we assessed our current situation by interviewing colleagues and conducting workshops to get a better idea of the current state of our organization. Both the interviews and the workshops were conducted by the consulting team, allowing for a non-biased view on our work. Building on these insights, we started with a strategic analysis which led to different possible scenarios for the future. Out of these, we developed a strategy to lay down the path for the next five years. This article focuses on describing the details of this phase.

In the second phase of the project, which started in spring 2020, the future organizational design will be developed. This includes, among other aspects, organizational structure, business processes and control systems. The organizational design also includes new leadership practice, which is tightly interwoven with all other elements.

The third phase of the project is the actual redesigning of all areas. This includes the consideration of sequence and intensity of changes, as some elements can be changed quickly while others will have to be gradually implemented. Some changes can take place simultaneously while others rely on previous changes. In addition, the departments and teams will receive additional training and support to empower them to not only implement the changes, but to keep them up and running for the future. As a result, the new system will be alive and constantly evolving.

The fourth element in the change process is an ongoing process of cultural change. In the first year of the project, this mainly consisted of endeavours to bring the members of our organization closer together and allow for connections across departments and teams. This included, among other things, the start of an in-house English class, a big team-building event with about 160 staff in the summer, and a new year's party in January 2020, with about 170 colleagues from all locations and teams getting together socially. All of these strands are closely accompanied by our consulting team, making the project management and its support into a fifth ongoing element (fig. 1).

6 <<https://www.osb-i.com/en/>>, accessed 12 October 2020.



Figure 1: Project outline

2.1 Why do we need a strategy?

At this point, most academic or university libraries in Germany do not have an explicit strategy. At Freie Universität Berlin, however, strategic planning for change is considered a crucial element in order to provide excellent work within the university. Of course, there have already been strategic elements in our work in the past and there are a few individual sub-strategies, for example the open access strategy for the university or the conversion of journal acquisition to e-only. With the current strategy, however, there will be a strategic orientation of the entire library system for the first time.

We understand the process of building a strategy as an opportunity for reflection on the organization as a whole and as a starting point for designing the future of the organization. It allows us to rise above the everyday details and reflect on the past in order to plan the future thoughtfully. While not laying out every single aspect of that future – we want to become more agile, after all – our strategy will serve as a framework for future decisions, so that we can minimize confusion and ensure that everybody works towards the same direction. It will also make future decisions more comprehensible, because they will be embedded in an explicit strategic framework.

Our strategy model consists of three long term elements: a vision („Who do we want to be?“), our mission („What is our assignment?“) and our values („How do we want to work together?“). In addition to this overarching trio, the strategy contains a set of strategic goals, which we aim to achieve within three to five years.

2.2 The strategy team

In order to take all organizational perspectives into account, in September 2019 we established the strategy team, inviting four additional colleagues from different parts of our organization to work on the strategy. The library director put together a team which consists of members of management and various experts from different fields and areas. Leadership discussed the members of the strategy team intensively. The selection was based on complementary professional qualifications, coverage of all major areas of the library system, expertise in strategically relevant subject areas, professional experience, communication skills and strategic experience. These criteria applied to a large number of colleagues, so that ultimately considerations of a well-balanced team were decisive. Together with the project office and the senior management team, this team of nine was central in creating the strategy (fig. 2).

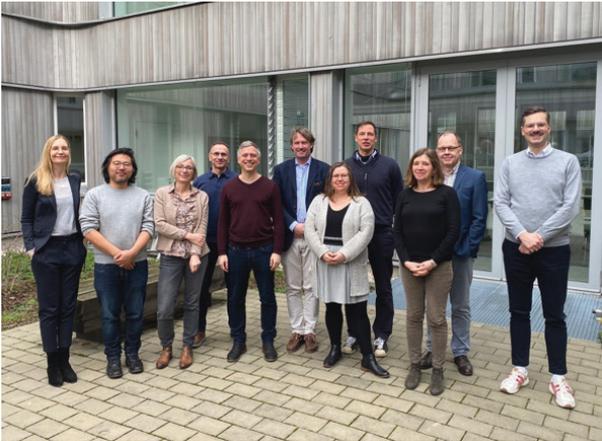


Figure 2: Strategy team with the two consultants

2.3 Strategic analysis

Following the suggestions of our consultants, the strategy process started with a strategic analysis using four core methods.

- (1) PESTEL-analysis:⁷ We reflected on Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal factors that influence ourselves and our surroundings. Starting from this, we identified trends, chances, risks and developed preliminary strategic approaches on different topic areas. Among other things, we discussed Open Science, Artificial Intelligence and the changing needs of staff development.
- (2) In order to get a better understanding of our user groups, we used the Persona method as a user-centred design. We generated six very different fictional users of our services: from Olga, the PhD student, to Patrizia, a professor of information science. We took great care not to resort to stereotypes too much, but at the same time tried to make the personas representative of the target groups.
- (3) For defining our core competencies, we employed the method of interviewing each other as members of the strategy team. The goal was to find out what it is that we do best and what is essential for us as an organization by switching perspectives. We focussed on success stories within all areas of our organization. Unsurprisingly, all had to do with data, information and knowledge.

7 PESTEL is a common method from strategic management. A current description of the concept with further literature can be found here (in German): Schomaker, Rahel M.; Sitter, Alexander: Die PESTEL-Analyse. Status quo und innovative Anpassungen, in: Der Betriebswirt, 61(1), 2020, p.3–21.

- (4) The fourth method we employed was a classic stakeholder analysis, looking at the organizations and groups – other than our users – which shape our work. We discussed how important each of these are, arriving at a model of our surroundings with elements such as the university leadership, political actors in higher education and strategic partners, such as Wikimedia, but also partners which provide a certain amount of risk and uncertainty, like big publishing houses.

2.4 Working mode: iteration and feedback

The working mode of the strategy team had two major components: iteration and feedback, allowing for frequent re-positioning and questioning of our previous work. This structure was suggested and moderated by the consulting team and has resulted not only in a good final strategy, but also allowed for multiple learning opportunities along the way.

We used this *modus operandi* within the strategy team itself. This was very new for many of us: We developed ideas, often by using a very specific method, in very short time frames. But rather than perfecting every aspect of it before sharing it, feedback and discussions were delivered early – and honestly. This allowed us to move on from very pointed – and at times deliberately unrealistic – concepts towards a clear outline of where we see the future of our organization.

But iteration and feedback were not limited to the work within the strategy team. A key rationale of the entire project is to enable as many colleagues as possible to be part of the change, giving feedback and actively contributing to the future shape of our organization. Therefore, from the very beginning, formats that include many more people than just the key actors were implemented.

The first of these workshops was positioned at the transition point from the strategic analysis to the drafting of the strategic outline in November 2019. All four elements of the analysis were presented to about 80 colleagues from all departments by members of the strategy team. Working on eight stations, moderated by members of the strategy team, we discussed and expanded upon the results of the previous work. Based on this, we started drafting our collective vision of the future of our organization, with a very open approach at first, narrowing it down to more realistic options along the way.

2.5 Arriving at the first draft

The results of this workshop were then taken up by the strategy team, resulting in a SWOT-analysis (mapping current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats), and laid the basis for the first draft of the strategy. For this important part, we moved location and worked for two full days at a place outside of our normal working environment, aptly named “Ideenlabor” (laboratory of ideas), in Berlin-Kreuzberg – a co-working space specifically made for design thinking projects. Here we discussed different scenarios in a conscious attempt to face the inherent unpredictability of the future. In doing so, we tried to explore possible developments in our external environments and

differentiate them according to plausibility, in order to then see possible development directions of our own organization. This resulted in several different scenarios which we expanded and refined in several consecutive team meetings and smaller groups, transforming them from exaggerated thought experiments to realistic images of the future (fig. 3). We also discussed and decided upon the criteria that our scenario, as the groundwork for our strategy, would have to meet. Our decision-making was therefore shaped by very concrete objectives such as sustainability, feasibility or fit with our university identity. Once we had decided on an option, we worked this out in further detail.

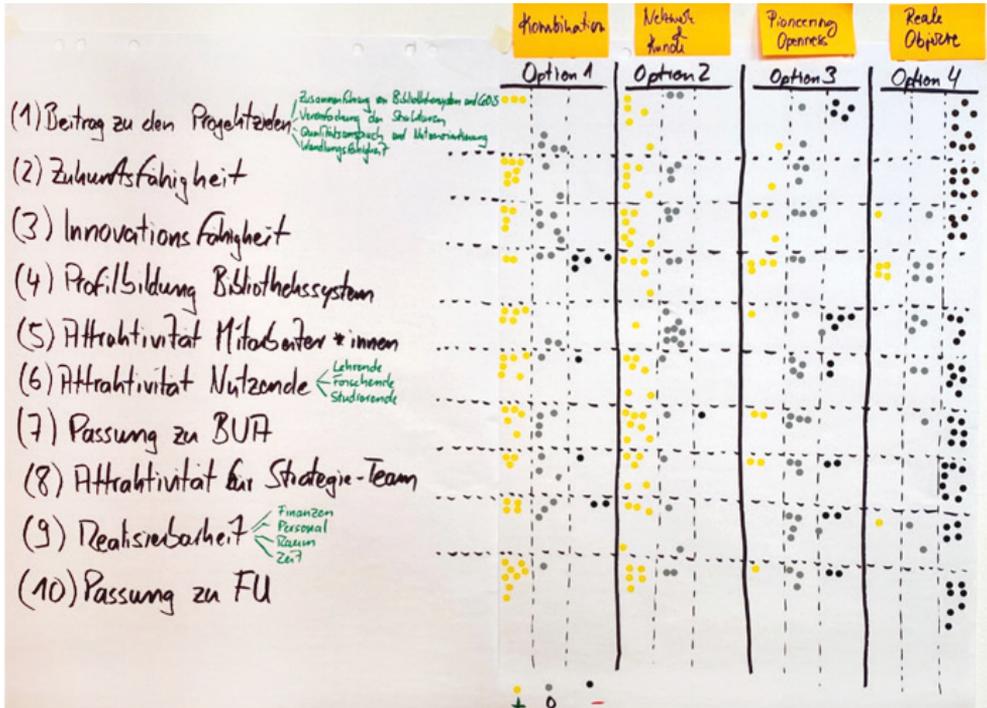


Figure 3: Deciding on the strategic option

2.6 Feedback

The first draft of the strategy was then again presented to a group of colleagues for feedback. In this one-day workshop 66 colleagues worked together in eight teams and discussed the key elements of the strategy (vision, mission, values and goals), moderated by members of the strategy team. Each of the teams was asked to produce and present a poster at the end of the day, summarizing their feedback and suggestions for the final strategy. In a similar fashion, we got a small group of researchers, lecturers and students involved in two smaller workshops who provided insights from a user perspective. As a final input, we sat down with the provost of our university, asking her for input and feedback on the first draft of the strategy.

Incorporating such a large amount of valuable feedback is quite a challenge. The project management team sifted through the results and sat down with the library director in order to prioritize and make decisions. This was necessary, because obviously the feedback wasn't unanimous across all topics. Points of content were, for example, whether our identity should be rather that of a service provider or that of a strong partner. Also highly debated was the question of our target user group: should we focus on members of our university or prioritize our status as a public institution? Based on these discussions, we derived at guidelines for the revision of the first draft of the strategy. The revised draft was again discussed and refined by the strategy team and then presented to the provost and the president of the university, before presenting it to the entire staff.

2.7 Presenting the strategy

At this point of the strategy process, the COVID-19 pandemic had already drastically changed our lives and the way we worked together. The presentation of the final strategy therefore had to be moved into an entirely virtual setting. Regardless of this, we tried to uphold our concept of participation. So we did not simply want to present the strategy to all staff, but instead wanted all of our colleagues to immediately engage with the content, and even allow for one last round of feedback.

We therefore decided to present the strategy first to colleagues who head departments and teams, giving them the opportunity to discuss the strategy in three smaller online meetings with us directly. For the presentation of the strategy to everyone, we decided on an online lecture format, where the project management team would lay out the process and the library director would present the content of the strategy. With more than 200 participants, we were very happy with the turnout of that event. We did not stop at the presentation, however. The second half of the event was used to work in smaller teams. We had previously asked the department and team heads to set up online discussion rooms, and were therefore able to host 27 (!) parallel online rooms, organized by existing team structures. The discussions in these teams were documented in real time within our wiki on corresponding pages which had been prepared and structured in advance. The teams were asked to select one question to be discussed at the end of the event. After the team discussion, all of the 200 colleagues moved back into the virtual lecture hall. Here, our consulting team moderated a panel talk that allowed us to directly address the issues and questions raised in the team discussions.

The final strategy was received with overwhelmingly positive feedback. It was clear from the discussions and conversations that the strategy had very much benefited from the multi-perspective input and a lot of colleagues were happy to see their ideas actually reflected in the final text. There were, however, some valid points of criticism which resulted in some small adjustments to the final strategy.

In order to complete the formal adaptation of the strategy, it was finally presented to the university leadership and the academic senate of Freie Universität Berlin. We are currently preparing the publication of the strategy which was given the title "Creating Spaces of Knowledge".⁸

8 You will find the strategy on our website after publication: <<https://www.fu-berlin.de/sites/ub/ueber-uns/wandel/index.html>>, accessed 12 October 2020.

3. Let's work together!

Communication, cooperation and collaboration are at the centre of our strategy. This includes strengthening our network and all the communities of practices we are involved in. In order to further the international discourse on organizational development surrounding the digital transformation, especially in academic libraries, we welcome critical discussions, productive partnerships and creative endeavours. This ranges from discussions and mutual visits to joint workshops and strategic cooperation between institutions, maybe even as formal cooperations like our recent connection with the University of Edinburgh Library.⁹ If you want to join our ongoing conversation on organizational development in libraries, please be in touch!

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⁹ <https://www.fu-berlin.de/en/presse/informationen/fup/2020/fup_20_161-Bibliothek-Kooperation-Edinburgh/index.html>, accessed 12 October 2020.