life

ETH *zürich*

The ETH community magazine

April 2023

Dear Reader,

The rETHink project is entering a critical phase, with the focus now shifting onto its implementation. In the coming months and years, the full impact of the work carried out by the project teams over the past four years will be felt right across the university. *life* magazine's editorial team feels that's worth dedicating attention to in a special edition.
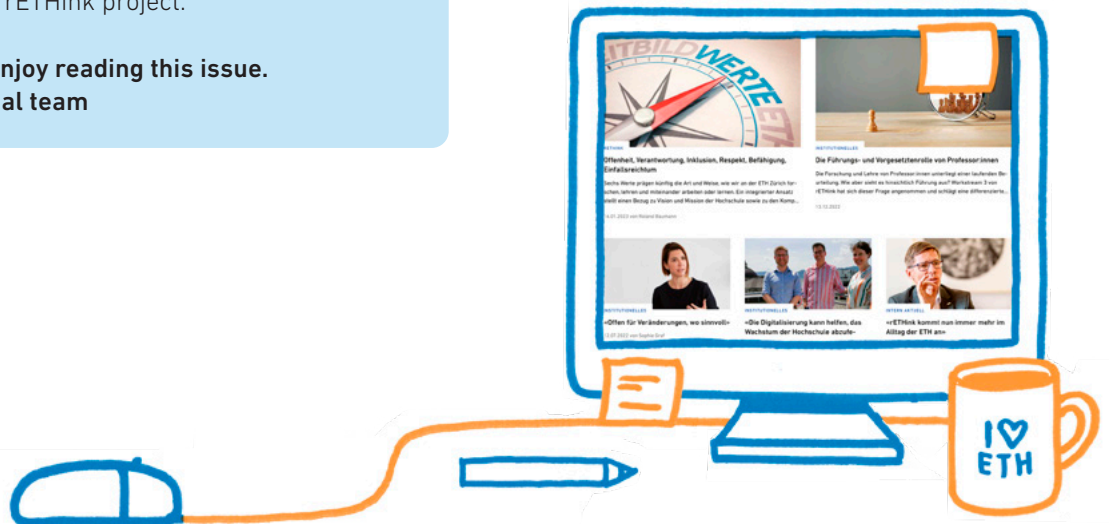
The key proposals were already presented at the "rETHink Switch" event at the end of March, with the main message being: there will be no "Big Bang", but rather smaller and bigger adjustments that will allow us to move forward.

Some measures have already been implemented, and many more will follow. This special edition reports on the current status, work still to be done and the experiences to date of the ETH members involved in the rETHink project.

**We hope you enjoy reading this issue.
The *life* editorial team**

Give and take

Enabling good communication within a research group, creating a positive team dynamic and retaining know-how following someone's departure are challenges that many professors have met over the years by developing their own tried-and-tested good practices. Others should now be able to benefit from this accumulated knowledge. As of summer 2023, more than 100 examples of good practice will be collated into a toolbox and made available online to all faculty members. Under the motto "give and take", this toolbox will be added to continually and will support the open exchange of know-how. The name of a colleague who can be consulted will be added to every practical example.

Find out more about rETHink

Why is rETHink necessary? What values have been discussed? What went on in the workstreams? The answers can be found in numerous articles online.

→ www.ethz.ch/rethink

Sharing resources to maximise benefits

ETH Zurich's excellent infrastructure is one of its great strengths – this is something that all researchers involved in rETHink agree on. They also believe that sharing the use of this infrastructure still holds a lot of potential. They are therefore calling on ETH to create an environment that encourages greater sharing of infrastructure, resources and know-how. This has given rise to the launch of a new project called "Mindset to Share".

Lots of Zoom and Teams, but finally in-person meetings

rETHink had barely started when the pandemic struck. Luckily it did not stop the project in its tracks. Virtual workshops, interviews and meetings were quickly organised online. Even so, there was a huge sense of relief when more than 100 participants from the various sub-projects were finally able to meet in person for the first time in October 2021. At the rETHink gathering, they confirmed their support for the project's objective by immersing themselves in the university's culture of discussion.
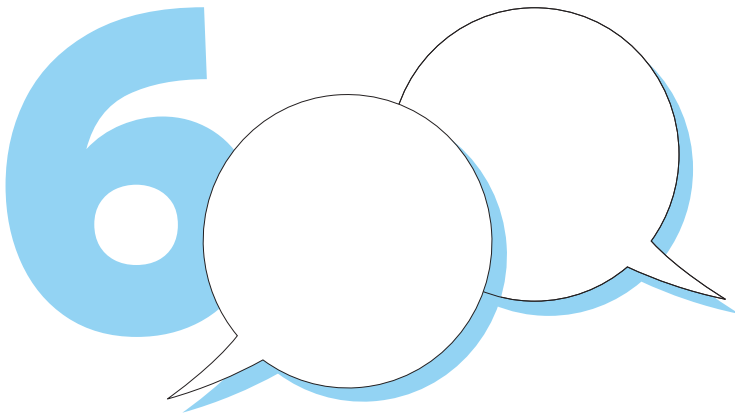
Launched by the ETH Executive Board in the summer of 2019, the rETHink project has seen more than 600 employees join forces to help shape the university's future development.

Fostering a common under-standing of our university

How to preserve our autonomy while reducing the effort involved. An interdisciplinary working group puts forward proposals for improving collaboration between the professorships, academic departments and ETH Executive Board.

"At the same time, we realised that we also pay a price for the strong individualism and the comparatively weak structures of academic self-government."

When Joël Mesot, having just been appointed ETH President, announced the launch of the organisational development project rETHink just under four years ago, very few could have imagined how important it was going to be. Some initial measures have since been put in place, many of which some of us are not even aware can be traced back to rETHink.

ETH members from all domains of the university have worked on more than 60 subprojects varying in scope and size. One of these projects stands out. It concerns the university's leadership structure and consequently the function of the entire institution.

How is ETH governed?

The main feature of the university's leadership structure is the President's broad decision-making powers, which in practice he shares with members of the Executive Board. At the same time, individual professors enjoy a great degree of freedom – not only in organising their own teaching and research but also in other areas. This assures the autonomy of professorships.

While professorships in most of the world's top universities are grouped into a handful of schools presided over by full-time deans, ETH has 16 academic departments. They have extensive freedom in how they organise themselves, and their management is based on the principle of academic self-government. In practice, individual professors take on management responsibilities in their department for a set period – in addition to their everyday activities in teaching, research, knowledge transfer, communication and managing the professorship.

Evolution, not revolution

"When our working group compared the organisational models of different universities, it quickly became apparent that ETH's existing model is one of its major strengths," reports Jan Vermant, leader of the working group and Professor for Soft Materials. The individual freedoms of the professorships, which are based on a culture of trust, allow people to work efficiently and effectively.

"At the same time, we realised that we also pay a price for the strong individualism and the comparatively weak structures of academic self-government," Vermant adds. Continuity in the department management teams is poor, for example, and team members suffer from heavy workloads. The way the 16 academic departments interact with the university's central administrative units is very disjointed and thus frequently inefficient. There are also very few structured paths for collaboration between departments.

Improving communication between levels

However, the discussions also revealed room for improvement in the collaboration and communication between academic departments and the ETH Executive Board. "Here the monthly Conference of the Heads of Department (DVK) was identified as being the most important platform for dialogue between the Executive Board and the departments," Vermant notes. Chaired by the ETH President, this meeting looks at overarching questions of strategy, planning, teaching, research and services.

While the main purpose of the DVK is to provide a platform for the Executive Board and departments to exchange information and opinions, the members of the working group gained the impression that the meeting had developed in recent years into a top-down

information event presided over by the Executive Board. "No blame was apportioned for this – everyone agreed that both sides had contributed to this development," Vermant stresses.

Given this backdrop, the working group drew up proposals for adjustments that allow a high degree of autonomy to be retained, while at the same time reducing the expenses incurred by individualisation.

Strengthening the departments

The first change affects the Conference of the Heads of Department (DVK). The aim is to develop it further into a joint committee of the Executive Board and Heads of Department (DV) and give it a new name to reflect the change: the Executive Board – Department Heads Conference (SL-DV-K). In practical terms, the department heads and the Executive Board are to join forces to prepare for the meeting and focus on exchanging ideas on strategically relevant topics. This will require the department heads to take on a more active role and bring to the meeting any topics that are important for several departments.

This also has consequences for what is known as the "pre-DVK", where the department heads get together to exchange ideas before the actual conference. This was traditionally an informal meeting, but a more structured part will now be added that allows a more long-term agenda and identifies and prepares topics ahead of the subsequent meeting with the ETH Executive Board. This body will be chaired by someone able to continue in office for an extended period and with enough time to prepare. The spokesperson should also be supported by a special office. They should be nominated and elected by the DVK and should have formerly served as a head of department.

Promoting a common understanding

The role of the current Strategy Commission also needs revising. A new body should be created comprising both Executive Board members and heads of department whose task is to continuously review strategic issues.

"When we put forward the measures, they were generally well received by the departments."

The working group also suggests organising regular retreats to ensure discussion of important topics affecting the entire institution and to promote a common understanding. Here the university's collective intelligence should come into play, and bottom-up input should be generated that can be used as the basis for developing the strategy. "This proposal drew a lot of interest from the DVK," says Vermant. Last year Annette Oxenius, as spokesperson, announced the first retreat on the topic of Life Science, scheduled for June 2023.

"The measures are mainly intended to promote a common understanding between the professorships, academic departments and Executive Board, and especially to strengthen the dialogue between the Executive Board and the departments," Vermant summarises. But they are also meant to optimise the self-government of departments and encourage their closer collaboration. Ultimately, the changes should ensure that the strategy is developed and implemented in a consistent and integrated manner.

"When we put forward the measures, they were generally well received by the departments," Vermant comments. To implement these measures, changes need to be made to university regulations. A consultation process will therefore take place giving all those affected the chance to voice their opinions. But regulations are just one aspect. "Even more important is the willingness of all those involved to work together in an open and constructive spirit for the good of ETH as an institution and to support and promote a culture of this kind," says Vermant.

Author
Roland Baumann

Illustrations
Michael Furler

A visit to a leadership course

13.30

Participants sit in deep concentration in the meeting room in the Octavo building. Seven new female and six new male professors at ETH Zurich have come here with the goal of learning about the demands and challenges associated with their leadership role.

"This split is fairly typical – the ratio of men to women in our programme is fairly equal, with a slight tendency towards more female participants," says Olga Pardo. A qualified psychologist, she leads the Leadership4newFaculty programme together with her VPPL colleague Eric Ryf. An external specialist, Tanja Manser, provides additional support.

The kick-off meeting is scheduled for this afternoon. Over the next five months, participants will learn more about the different aspects of their leadership role. The main purpose of today's session is to get to know each other and discuss their expectations and any questions they may have as they begin the programme. Any issues raised will be explored in greater depth in a two-day retreat and small group discussions.

Learning to say no

Are there typical challenges facing new professors? "Many of our participants soon bring up learning to say no," explains Eric Ryf. "Someone taking on the role of professor for the first time sees themselves confronted with many questions and expectations. It's not always easy to keep your distance and develop self-management skills." During the leadership programme, the discussion also often focuses on how best to delegate tasks or recruit suitable group members, not to mention dealing with conflict.

A strong network helps

Programme leaders provide support in the form of tips, theories and approaches to problem solving. "Swapping ideas is particularly important, though, as is collective learning using concrete examples of leadership challenges," Olga Pardo adds. "Our participants often discover that others are concerned about the very same issues. The network that develops here is worth its weight in gold – even after the programme has ended."

How it relates to rETHink

The concept behind the leadership programme was developed a good four years ago in response to the need to provide better support to new professors in assuming their leadership role. "Leadership does not simply mean more bureaucracy. The objective is to work together to achieve something, going on to create a positive working environment and set an example of an open leadership culture," says Eric Ryf.

These aspects are also important for rETHink. That is why the groundwork and suggestions produced by rETHink feed into the further development of the leadership programme, allowing the content to be more closely configured to the target audience. "A leadership culture is exemplified by professors in their role as leaders but affects everyone at ETH," stresses Olga Pardo. "That's why the interplay between rETHink and our programme is so important. New professors often find their leadership role a little unclear or loosely defined. We want to support them in consciously defining their new role, thereby allowing them to play an active part in shaping the university's culture as well."

→ www.ethz.ch/leadership

13.30 Olga Pardo welcomes participants to the kick-off meeting.

14.15 What challenges do professors face in their new role? Discussion in pairs.

15.00 Coffee breaks are also a good opportunity to build networks that participants can benefit from later on.

15.25 What rituals and culture would I like to promote in my research group? Symbolic images stimulate the discussion.

Author
Mona Blum

Photos
Nicole Davidson

Has the culture of discussion at ETH improved?

For

Pius Krütli
Co-director of TdLab at D-USYS

It's impossible to give a completely objective answer to that question, but based on my own observations and experiences related to rETHink, I would say it has improved.

The start of the project differed from the past. Its launch was prompted by the arrival of a new ETH president who had to deal with inherited problems. In such cases, the solution is often to begin restructuring straight away. His approach was a bit different: he wanted to first take time to consider carefully where we stand – and at the same time initiate cultural change. That's what rETHink is all about: a process imposed top-down but implemented bottom-up. Broad-based and open-ended. A participative process with the active involvement of more than 600 people.

The working groups, comprising members from all university bodies, were given the autonomy to nominate and work on their chosen topics within the framework of the rETHink project. This involved lengthy discussions – some measured, some more heated. New ideas were put forward, and sometimes rejected again. Most importantly, everyone listened to each other and created something together at the same time. Although this should be an essential part of any creative process, it's not always common – even among academics. Sometimes it's about privileges that may seem to be under threat, or about exercising the power of interpretation. Individual interests may be affected. Things can turn nasty quite quickly. End of discussion. This is the way it has to be done.

The rETHink approach: everyone on an equal footing. The better argument wins, not the entrenched hierarchical status.

For me, the litmus test was the issue of excellence – one of the five key values in ETH's vision. A tough nut to crack, which many struggled with. Excellence is now no longer an ETH value – an open outcome. But ETH continues to strive for excellence, as now embodied in its mission statement.

So has the culture of discussion actually changed? From the subjective perspective of the rETHink experience: yes, it has. But there is still an element of doubt. Was it mainly an issue that only concerned a minority? Were the majority of people perhaps not even aware of rETHink and learnt nothing from it? And are some people whose attitudes may have been the reason for launching rETHink in the first place simply continuing to live their own "culture"? That can't be ruled out. But that's where we all have our part to play. Because we live and breathe our university culture. And we must set boundaries for those who try to manipulate an open and liberal organisational culture in their favour. This calls for a somewhat different culture (of discussion).

"The rETHink approach: the better argument wins, not the entrenched hierarchical status."

In my function as a business developer in Campus Services and in my role as a member of the university's Staff Commission (PeKo), I am constantly involved in a huge variety of challenging and – above all – interesting discussions. Has there been any change over the past two years? Not as far as I can see.

Every day I talk with a broad range of people and mix with different leadership levels and organisations. Here I repeatedly encounter situations that preoccupy me and give me cause to stop and think. Discussions often fail not because of differing opinions but because of conflicting values and people's reluctance to change. Someone who is constantly interrupted and prevented from saying what they want to say tends to get angry or inwardly retreat from the conversation. As a result, the discussion becomes more heated or turns into a monologue. That's something I frequently witness. Every point of view is naturally important, but having to listen to others simply voicing opinions, making assertions and using catch phrases makes people dig in their heels even further. If someone cannot come up with anything more to counter an argument, it certainly doesn't mean they have been persuaded that it's right: a discussion is not a contest.

As far as I'm concerned, the same rule of thumb applies to a discussion as to an interview. To really understand what makes a person tick, you need to pose as many open questions as possible and not put words into their mouth. If you listen attentively, you can find common ground in any conversation. It's worth addressing these commonalities, as this creates a good atmosphere for rewarding discussions.

Although I love working at ETH Zurich, I still think there is a lot of room for sustained and long-term improvement in our culture of discussion. The shift to more hybrid forms of working presents us with additional challenges, as it means fewer face-to-face conversations. This makes interaction more difficult and requires new skills in our culture of discussion. On top of that, most of our thinking is too compartmentalised. This has to do with the university's structure, individual ETH members and people's general reluctance to change. I very much hope, however, that this will improve over time thanks to the revised key values and the new leadership competencies introduced at ETH.

For my part, I have made a firm commitment to contribute to a better culture of discussion. I hope you all have too!

"A discussion is not a contest."

Against

Christian Mimjähner
Campus Services business developer

What do you think?
Join the discussion now at:
www.ethz.ch/discussion

"As a professor your work is never done"

Nina Buchmann likes to get actively involved. She is passionately committed as a researcher and lecturer, and just as deeply dedicated to ETH Zurich as an institution.

Even as a doctoral student she wanted to become a professor. Nina Buchmann has now been with ETH for 20 years. As Professor of Grassland Sciences, her main research topics are the carbon and nitrogen dynamics of ecosystems. Born in Heidelberg (Germany), she has long been a leading light in her field. Nina Buchmann is a Fellow of the American Geophysical Union (AGU) and has twice received the distinction "Highly Cited Researcher". From 2012 to 2021 she served first as Deputy Head and then for four years as Head of the Department of Environmental Systems Science (D-USYS). The 57-year-old likes to get involved, which is why she played an active role in the rETHink project. She was also attracted by the opportunity of viewing ETH from different perspectives and assisting with its further development.

Professorships under the spotlight

What should a professorship at ETH involve in future? This was the key question tackled by Workstream 2, led by Nina Buchmann and emeritus biology professor Markus Aebi. Despite her many years as a professor, she was confronted repeatedly with numerous surprises. She was unaware, for example, that assistant professors not only consider research and teaching to be important tasks but also outreach and knowledge transfer. What's more, they are also equally involved in university self-government or in external bodies – but are generally less deeply engaged than their colleagues on fixed-term contracts. She also found it very motivating that the desire to make ETH fit for the future was evident across all university groups. "The collective willpower is incredibly strong," says Buchmann, and that makes her feel proud of "her ETH".

Taking a break to recharge batteries

Pausing for reflection is important – not only for the university but also for Nina Buchmann herself. "I regularly take a step back and ask myself: Am I still doing the right thing?", explains the very busy researcher. "As a professor your work is never done. You always have a manuscript lying around somewhere that you need to work on, or an email to reply to." That's exactly why she says it's so important to take a break: chill out, make time for the family or some sport, or simply do nothing for a change – just listen to the birds sing.

Buchmann's main form of relaxation is travelling with her family. Even while she was head of department, she took advantage of the summer breaks to take extended family holidays with her daughter, who at the time was still at school. Her dream destination is Australia. She would have liked to have spent her 2021 sabbatical there, but this was not possible due to the pandemic. She had to change her plans at short notice, first spending two months at the University of Lund in Sweden, followed by six weeks in Granada.

Research group is her extended family

For Nina Buchmann, her research group numbering almost 25 members is like an extended family. The bonding between team members is tangible, particularly on special occasions such as Christmas parties, which are usually celebrated with family members. "Nina definitely makes the group a high priority," says Anna K. Gilgen, her management and research assistant. "As an ambitious leader and quick thinker, she demands quite a lot of her team, but always takes time to deal with our problems." This informal exchange deepens the already strong team spirit.

Flexibility to adjust priorities

Of course there have been some setbacks in Nina Buchmann's life. Last year the death of a team member forced her to re-organise the research group and adjust her priorities. She calls it "adaptive priority setting". At the level of the university as a whole, she found COVID-19 to have been an enormous stress test, as she did the exclusion of Switzerland from the Horizon Europe research programme.
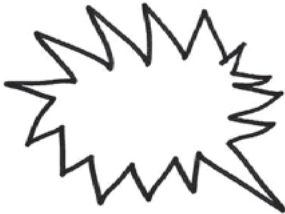
"Being a professor at ETH can be challenging, but it is also very satisfying and great fun," she summarises. This gives her energy and drive. "Life is too short for bad research, bad collaboration and bad coffee," she says with a grin, and hurries off to her next lecture.

Author
Sophie Graf

Photos
Marco Rosasco

What impact do you think the rETHink project has had so far?

Friederike Brütsch
Department Coordinator at D-ERDW

"My first thought was: nothing at all. And the second was: potential chaos! Many people all working at once on the interconnected issues of the individual workstreams. But we learned how to communicate with each other and talk on equal terms both within and beyond functional levels. The implementation stage will reveal just how good we were."

Maxim Polikarpov
Former postdoctoral student at D-ITET

"rETHink was a milestone in the university's ongoing development. It triggered discussions on many different topics, such as how to shape ETH's future culture. rETHink didn't just deliver a detailed development plan – it also highlighted the importance of continuous dialogue across all university groups and staff."

Christian Feghali
Real Estate Management employee

"In rETHink the university was analysed and evaluated from very different perspectives. This gave me the chance to network with people right across the ETH community. However, I'm not sure whether we managed to address the deep-seated areas of action. Based on the catalogue of measures, only time will tell how successful rETHink was."

Recorded by
Simone Gohl

Photos
provided

"I was late getting involved in rETHink, replacing a colleague who had left ETH. The work done by our workstream will have a direct impact on my area. The new digitalisation strategy we have developed will help us optimise records management at ETH."

Madeleine Lüthy
Head of Consulting for Professors

Michael Gasser
ETH Library employee

"I found rETHink both inspiring and challenging. It was inspiring to see the commitment of our workstream in tackling change. What I found challenging was trying to consolidate the different viewpoints. Despite different needs, however, we always managed to find some common ground, namely: 'We all want the best for ETH'."

Edoardo Mazza
Professor at D-MAVT

"For me, one of the many important impacts of the rETHink project was the way we analysed our key success factors in the past so as to preserve them for the future."

"Making something good better is always challenging. It was an honour to be involved in this process as part of the rETHink team. The toolbox planned for new professors, full of suggestions from more experienced colleagues, is a prime example of the approach to optimise our resources through collaboration."


Markus Aebi
Emeritus Professor at D-BIOL

Christina Tsalicoglou
Former doctoral student at D-MAVT

"Exchanging ideas as part of the rETHink project made it clear to me just how different life at ETH can be for some people. Such projects encourage you to see things from a different perspective and promote mutual respect. I am confident that rETHink will have a positive and sustained effect on our ETH culture."
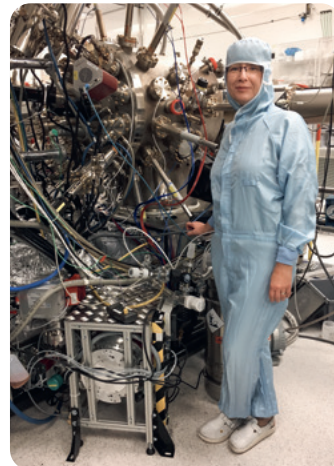
Silke Schön
FIRST-Lab Operational Team/Lecturer at D-PHYS

"rETHink tackled topics that were uncomfortable or had been overlooked in the past. But educating young people not only means imparting knowledge and conducting high-level research. It also involves living out modern values and fostering a culture that appeals to both students and researchers – inspiring them to perform at their best."

How will the digitalisation strategy impact employees?

A formal strategy has been agreed for the digitalisation of the university's administration. The roadmap was drawn up by a rETHink working group and is intended to accommodate ETH Zurich's growth with the help of digital technologies. What impact will this have on ETH employees?

ASK THE EXPERTS

Paul Cross and Peter Jäggi: It will take a while for the effects of the digitalisation strategy to be felt in daily campus life. And there won't be a specific date when the strategy is implemented and everything will be digitalised. After all, digitalisation is an ongoing process. This is precisely where the strategy kicks in: it's intended to help the university's administration exploit the potential of digitalisation more effectively. A key factor here is employees themselves. We can introduce as many digital tools as we like, but if we lack the competence to use these technologies effectively, our efforts will be destined to fail. This competence – known as "digital literacy" – is therefore one of six areas of action identified in the digitalisation strategy. Here ETH Zurich has set itself the target of ensuring all staff continuously develop their digital skills. The newly formed Digital Transformation Office supports IT Services and the Vice-Presidency for Personnel Development and Leadership in further developing the existing course offering and extending it to include other forms of learning where necessary. In future, the programme should cover a broader range of topics – from working with classic Office applications to the use of data science and artificial intelligence.
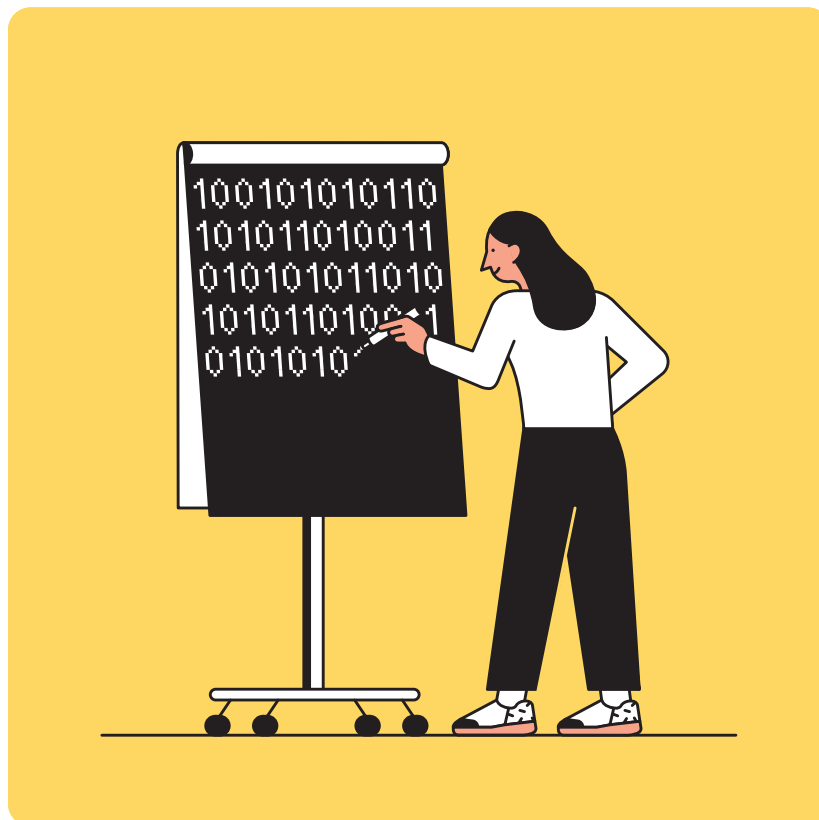
In addition, ETH Zurich has launched two initial projects as part of the digitalisation strategy. The first concerns systematic records management, for which a dedicated system is to be assessed and rolled out. The second is a pilot project aimed at developing a graph-based database. This will allow existing data sources to be bundled together to deliver a much faster overview of the university's current research collaborations, research topics and researchers.

Although not all the topics in the digitalisation strategy may directly affect ETH employees, everyone should eventually feel the effects: the university's administration will be able to utilise digital resources more quickly and efficiently in its day-to-day work.
→ www.ethz.ch/dtc

Illustration
Benjamin Hermann

Paul Cross and Peter Jäggi lead the Digital Transformation Office, set up as part of the digitalisation strategy

Security Expert interviews Department Coordinator

Adrian Meier
55
Head of Security at SSHE
Has been at ETH for 15 years

Margot Ziekau
57
Department Coordinator (D-MATL)
Has been at ETH for 15 years

In this interview, Margot Ziekau tells Adrian Meier which aspects of rETHink she found surprising and why her own three children immediately spring to mind when she is asked to name some successful people.

Adrian Meier: How long have you been with ETH Zurich?

Margot Ziekau: 15 years, though I've held three different positions during that time.

Adrian: Why did you choose ETH in particular?

Margot: Back then, I had to look after three children from four to seven years old. So naturally I was very grateful to have been able to secure a post with the university. Before I came to ETH, I was a freelance consultant specialising in autonomous pension funds and management development. My work took me all over Switzerland.

Adrian: What was the first department you worked in at ETH?

Margot: I started out in the Department of Mechanical and Process Engineering. They were about to undergo a department evaluation and needed to fill a vacancy that arose due to ill health. I had to settle into the job as quickly as possible.

Adrian: And now you're Coordinator for the Department of Materials. Can you tell us a little about your work?

Margot: I assist department management with all their various tasks. That involves managing the resources the department receives from the ETH Executive Board. I make suggestions with regard to how to do this more efficiently, which people listen to, discuss and in some cases implement.

Adrian: And what about your role as coordinator?

Margot: For the most part, it really does involve managing resources. The job title is actually a little outdated, given that ETH has become a lot more complex. My position is more like that of a managing director working in industry. It's very important to maintain a good network within the department itself and with all the teams in the various Executive Board domains.

Adrian: Managing resources was also something addressed by rETHink, which you contributed to. How did you get involved in this project?

Margot: Even before rETHink began, our department had thought about how to use our existing resources more efficiently when carrying out administrative tasks. It was not just a question of processing more transactions but of improving quality as well. Our analysis produced many useful findings, leading to several measures that were subsequently implemented. rETHink was launched a year later, and our department was able to make a significant contribution to the project.

Adrian: What did you find most surprising about the project?

Margot: How long it takes to make changes at ETH Zurich – until suggestions are accepted and measures can be implemented. Given my professional background in the corporate world, I assumed all ETH employees would be aware of the issues after all the communication measures. I imagined the entire process would be more efficient and less time consuming.

Adrian: What have you learnt from rETHink?

Margot: As coordinators, we have realised how important it is to communicate with one another, as all departments work with the same resources and have the same mandate: to conduct research, provide education and support knowledge transfer. The pandemic has encouraged us to communicate more regularly, and collaboration is now highly valued by everyone. We have undergone precisely the cultural change inspired by rETHink. If we manage to extend these small-scale experiences to include the entire university, we will make a big difference.

Adrian: Let's finish with a few personal questions: who immediately comes to mind when you hear the word "successful", and why?

Margot: Three people – my own teenage children. Over the past 15 years, they have learnt how to fall and pick themselves up again, analyse events and discuss them with others, stand up for themselves and reset their own lives. All three have done this in their own very different ways, but they have all grown stronger as a result.

Adrian: What music do you listen to when you get up?

Margot: I prefer silence. I'm not fond of background music. I actually almost decided to study classical music – so I prefer to focus on a piece of music rather than do other things at the same time.

Adrian: What's more important: being honest or being nice?

Margot: As a person? Obviously being honest. As a manager …? (laughs).

Adrian: What do you always keep stocked in your fridge?

Margot: Tofu. I always feel in top form when my diet includes rice and tofu.

Recorded by
Roland Baumann

ETH referendum signatures being handed over in Bern, 1969

ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive
Photo by: Heinz Baumann

From referendum to rETHink

More than 50 years ago, students called for a referendum on a new ETH Act that they claimed failed to meet their demands for co-determination. The proposed law was rejected at the ballot box in 1969. It wasn't until 1993 that a new ETH Act came into effect. The new legislation effectively yielded to pressure from Swiss society for universities to be more democratic and flexible. It also gave the departments budget autonomy for teaching and research.

Today autonomy has also been a frequent discussion topic in the rETHink project. Everyone agrees that autonomy does not mean the absence of rules, that rights go hand in hand with obligations, and that the more directly activities are tied in with research and teaching, the greater the freedom.