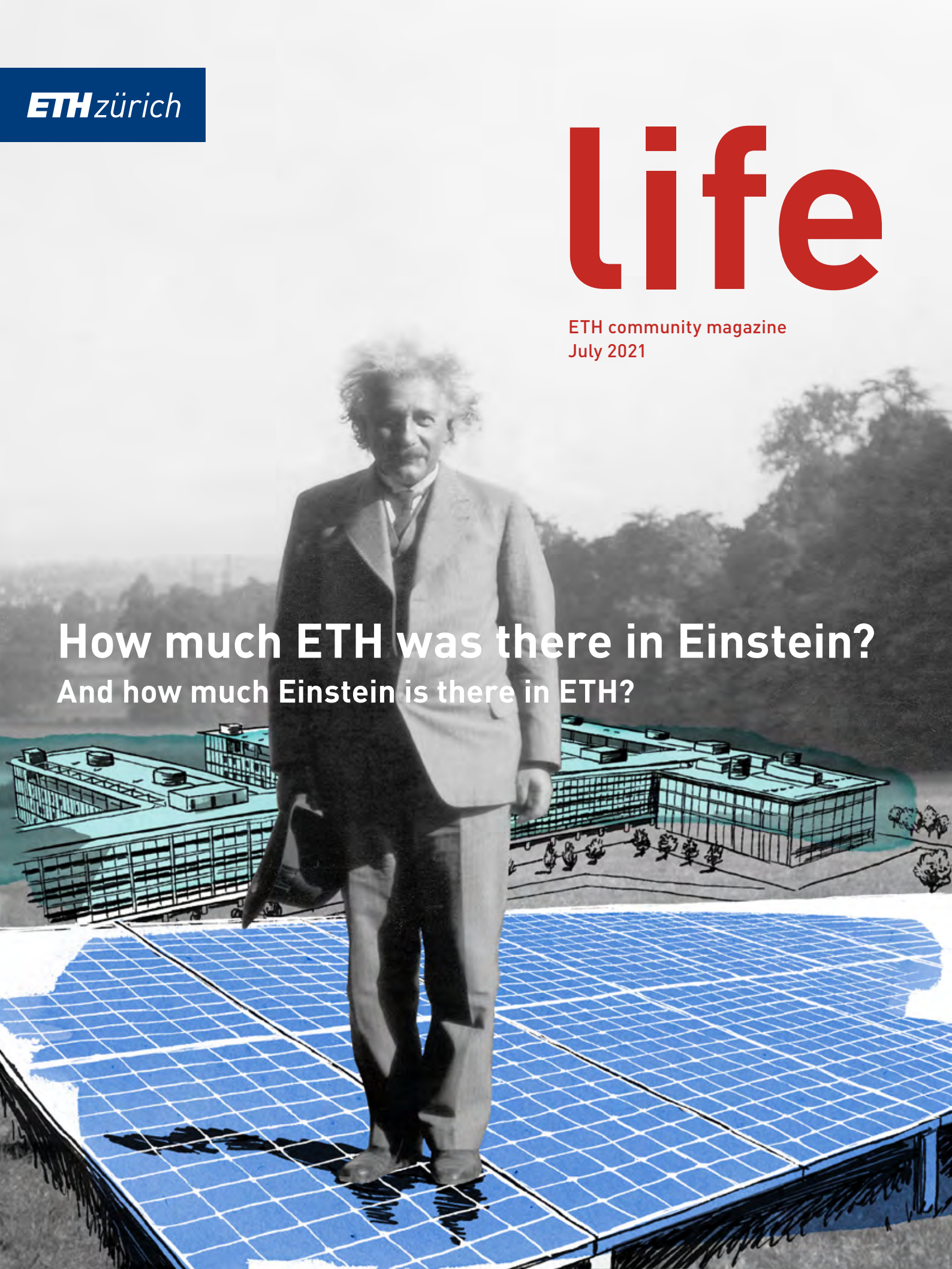
ETH zürich

life

ETH community magazine
July 2021



How much ETH was there in Einstein?

And how much Einstein is there in ETH?

Medicine of Tomorrow

Treffpunkt goes YouTube

This year, the spring programme of Treffpunkt Science City took place exclusively online, with the headline topic, "Medicine of Tomorrow", attracting 15,000 online viewers. All of the event's lectures on common diseases, healing methods and coronavirus research, plus the popular series of children's lectures, can be viewed on the new YouTube channel. The autumn programme, entitled "Rich and Poor", starts on 31 October 2021.
www.ethz.ch/treffpunkt-en →

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Einstein would lecture on the Hönggerberg campus today. (Photo: ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive; Illustration: Oculus Illustration)

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Image: ETH Zurich / Hager Partner AG

Developments on campus

Construction under way

There is construction work in progress on both the Zentrum and Hönggerberg campuses. On the Zentrum campus, the renovation of the Main Building will begin in June 2021. The forecourt and its underground garage will be more open and accessible in the future. An information event on the structural development of ETH will be held for ETH members at 10 a.m. on 31 August 2021.
www.ethz.ch/hg-project →
www.ethz.ch/structural-development →

150-year anniversary

Rowing into the history books

In 1871, nine students from the Swiss Federal Polytechnic – which later became ETH Zurich – founded the Polytechniker Ruderclub (Polytechnic Rowing Club or PRC). Today, the PRC is the second-oldest rowing club in Switzerland and resides in the country's oldest boathouse on Zurich's Mythenquai. The club is open to all rowing enthusiasts and now boasts over 500 members, almost half of whom are women. Circumstances permitting, monthly events will be held during this anniversary year.
www.poly150.com →


Photo: State Archives of Zurich VII_247.12.1, "Photoalbum 1909–1920"

Executive Board

New ETH Rector

On 21 May 2021, the ETH Board elected Günther Dissertori as the new Rector of ETH Zurich. He will take up the role in February 2022 and succeeds Rector Sarah Springman, who will retire at the end of January. Günther Dissertori joined ETH Zurich in 2001 as an assistant professor and has been Full Professor of Particle Physics since 2007. He has received several awards for his dedication to teaching.

www.ethz.ch/new-rector →

Photo: ETH Zurich / Giulia Marthaler

Zurich student cycling community

For the love of bikes

VELOVE promotes cycling at and around the universities in the Zurich area and works closely with the Association of Students at ETH Zurich (VSETH). The association is running two bike workshops, one on the Hönggerberg campus and one at ZHAW Wädenswil, where undergraduates, doctoral students and employees can come to fix their bikes and meet like-minded bike lovers. Membership is free for university staff and students.

www.velovezh.ch →

AVETH Diversity Award

Advocating greater diversity

In collaboration with Equal!, the Academic Association of Scientific Staff at ETH Zurich (AVETH) has presented the AVETH Diversity Award for the first time. Among more than 80 nominees, the awards were presented in two categories: organisational units advocating the inclusion of under-represented groups in the ETH community and individuals who have made a noteworthy impact in increasing diversity. The two top prizes were awarded to the African Students Association Zurich (ASAZ) and to physicist and doctoral student Chiara Decaroli.

www.aveth.ethz.ch/diversity-award →

Key figure

17,462

That's the number of messages that were sent through the new alert network in April 2021. Some of these included fire or personal alarms – which are used when someone gets stuck in a lift and pushes the alarm button, for instance. However, most of the messages were the result of technical alarms relating to equipment malfunctions. The new security infrastructure enables comprehensive radio communication at all ETH sites and is used by internal ETH intervention units.

www.ethz.ch/safety →

From mediocre student to Nobel Prize winner

Albert Einstein was a student and a professor at ETH Zurich. This year marks the 100th anniversary of his Nobel Prize in Physics. But how much ETH was there really in Einstein? And how much Einstein is there in ETH?

Text Christoph Elhardt **Images** Oculus Illustration
Photos ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive

When the 20-year-old ETH student Albert Einstein reported to his practical physics course professor in March 1899, he had a feeling something bad was going to happen. He had hardly attended any classes in the last few months. Instead of carrying out monotonous lab work, Einstein had decided he would rather study the masters of theoretical physics by himself. Jean Pernet was not impressed: Einstein was reprimanded for his poor work ethic and failed the course with a 1, the lowest possible grade. But the young Einstein did not seem to be too dismayed. When the professor asked why he didn't want to study medicine, law or philology instead, he simply replied: "Because I feel that I have a talent, Herr Professor. Why shouldn't I at least try physics?"

The fact that we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of Einstein's Nobel Prize this year – which he won for his services to theoretical physics, and especially for his discovery of the law of the photoelectric effect – is in no small part down to the self-confidence that he demonstrated as a young man.

For ETH, Einstein is part of the furniture today. He is ETH's most famous alumnus. He is portrayed extensively on the university's website and a dedicated Einstein tour is available for visitors. Many of his documents are kept in the ETH Library archives. There is an Einstein bust on the Hönggerberg campus. A café on the Polyterrasse bears his name and soon visitors will even be able to have a chat with a digital Einstein. But how much ETH was there in Einstein? How did his time as a student and a professor at ETH influence his subsequent success? And how relevant are his theories today?

"Vagabond and loner"

Albert Einstein started studying at ETH, which was known as the Zurich Polytechnic at the time, in October 1896. At just 17 years of age, he was one of the youngest students. He studied there for four years, focusing on physics and mathematics, but also taking courses in literature and history. Time and time again, he had to be content with being awarded mediocre marks because – as he recalled in his memories of ETH in 1955 – to be a good student "you must be able to grasp things easily; you must be willing to concentrate your energies on everything you are told in the lectures; you must enjoy writing down everything presented in the lectures in an orderly fashion and working on it conscientiously. Regretfully, I realised that I fundamentally lacked all these qualities." What the young Einstein, who described himself as a "vagabond and a loner", did have, however, was an insatiable enthusiasm for the physical theories and problems of his time. As these topics were not really taught at ETH at that time – Maxwell's theory of electromagnetism and Boltzmann's theory of thermo-dynamics, for example, were both absent from the syllabus – Einstein studied them independently instead. "Even at a very young age, Einstein had a profound thirst for knowledge. He wanted to get to the bottom of things that were not understood at the time and he really challenged the existing physical paradigms," explains Hans Rudolf Ott, Professor Emeritus of Physics at ETH.

Albert Einstein as Student at the Polytechnic, 1898

The fact that Einstein managed to graduate at the age of 21, despite his lack of enthusiasm for the curriculum, was in part down to his friend, mathematics student Marcel Grossmann. As Einstein often skipped classes, he relied on Grossmann's meticulous lecture notes to help him through his studies. However, this wasn't enough to secure him a good mark at the end of his degree. With an average of 4.91, Einstein's mark was the second lowest in his class and he was the only student not to be offered a role as a research assistant.

Annus mirabilis in Bern

After graduating from ETH, Einstein took on various odd jobs in order to keep money coming in, including as a tutor in Bern. It wasn't until June 1902 that he found a position as a technical expert at the patent office in Bern on the recommendation of Grossmann's father. There, far from the academic establishment and working in his free time, Einstein published no fewer than 33 works in the period up to 1909.

These included his most important works on the special theory of relativity and on the light-quantum hypothesis, for which he would later win the Nobel Prize.

It was these publications, several of which turned the world of classical physics on its head, that finally opened up the possibility of a university career for him after numerous disappointments and setbacks: after two years as a professor at the University of Zurich and one year in Prague, Einstein returned to his alma mater, ETH, as Professor of Theoretical Physics in 1912 at the age of 33. "Hallelujah!" wrote Einstein from Prague to his friend, ETH history professor Alfred Stern, when the long-awaited call from Zurich finally came.

Zurich's contribution to the theory of relativity

"Grossmann, you have to help me or I'll go mad." This is how Einstein is said to have greeted his erstwhile saviour from his student days when they met again for the first time after he arrived in Zurich. During his time in Bern and Prague, Einstein had already formulated the key physical concepts for his general theory of relativity. What he was missing was the right way to express it mathematically. In this critical moment, Einstein's lack of interest in higher mathematics threatened to be his undoing. Thankfully, however, Grossmann – who was now Professor of Mathematics at ETH – was once again there to lend a hand to the desperate Einstein.

Over a period of nine months of extreme exertion and concentration, the two men produced a first draft of the general theory of relativity and gravitation, which was published in 1913 and was very similar to the final version. The equations that Einstein wrote down in his Zurich notebook were more or less correct, but he would only realise their full significance three years later, by which time he was already working as a professor in Berlin. In the end, he left ETH after only a year and a half as he was unable to resist the opportunity to work at the highly regarded Prussian Academy of Sciences. Even the generous offer of a double professorship at the University of Zurich and ETH Zurich in 1918 was not enough to tempt him back to Switzerland.

GPS, lasers and solar cells

Albert Einstein died in April 1955 at the age of 76 in Princeton in the United States, where he had continued his research career from 1933 onwards. However, his revolutionary findings live on in our everyday lives and in scientific research.

After his time spent at ETH, Einstein went on to carry out research in Berlin; here in his office in 1920

For example, it is hard to imagine a world without GPS today. It was Einstein who, in his general theory of relativity, anticipated that clocks run more slowly on board satellites than on Earth. If we didn't take these time differences into account, location information would be out by several kilometres every day.

Furthermore, Einstein's light-quantum hypothesis and his work on Planck's theory of radiation set out key principles that would come to be crucial in the development of the now omnipresent laser technology and the generation of electricity using solar cells.

Einstein's research lives on

"Today's physics is inconceivable without Einstein. The general theory of relativity is central to our understanding of the world and of the cosmos," explains Lavinia Heisenberg, who is a professor at ETH's Institute for Theoretical Physics. Further confirmation of Einstein's theory has been obtained in recent years: firstly, through the discovery of evidence of gravitational waves, which opens up the possibility of new findings regarding the creation of the universe and its changes. Secondly, an international research team succeeded in making a black hole visible for the first time in the past year. Einstein predicted this phenomenon mathematically, although he did not personally believe in its existence.

Furthermore, cosmologists like Lavinia Heisenberg are still working today on questions that go back to Einstein: for example, scientists are still to clarify whether the theory of relativity also applies to the very small units found in quantum physics. And when it comes to research on the early universe and on black holes, Einstein's theory leads to singularities which remain unresolved.

Albert Einstein on a sailing trip in 1934

"These problems will continue to occupy us for many years. Like Newton before him, Einstein isn't going to drop off the radar any time soon," says Heisenberg. As it turns out, it proved really worthwhile for that mediocre student when he decided to give physics a try back in 1899. And not just for ETH. ■

“It’s crucial to put your own enthusiasm at the forefront of your leadership”

ALEA Award winner Ulrike Kutay explains what she considers to be good leadership, how ETH’s strategy plan could change in the future, and why there are still issues to resolve in the process of promoting women.

Interview Anna Maltsev **Photos** Stefan Weiss

Professor Kutay, in February you were named the most exemplary leader at ETH. Were you surprised by the award?
Yes, very much so – especially since I had no idea that my research group had nominated me. But that made me feel all the more appreciated!

How would you describe your leadership style?
I think my style is rather anti-authoritarian. I see myself more as a mentor and try to give my staff the freedom to manoeuvre and strengthen their sense of personal responsibility. I firmly believe that putting them in charge of their own projects enhances their creativity and self-confidence.

Are there any other aspects that you consider important in leadership?
Respect and fairness are both extremely important to me. You should approach everyone simply as people, not on the basis of where they sit in the hierarchy.

Do you have any tips for newly minted managers?
Looking back on my own transition from postdoc to assistant professor, I mostly remember that I wanted to give it my all. I had just been appointed and I wanted to prove that I could do it – I was obsessed with being successful. In that kind of situation, it’s very important to learn not to simply force your own personal standards onto your staff: you can’t expect everyone to dedicate the same amount of time and energy as you do. In other words, it’s not about imposing your convictions on others – the key is to motivate and encourage people, not control their every move.

Could you expand on that a little?
If you can get your employees excited about a certain project, they will happily dedicate themselves to it – but you can’t force your own way of working onto them. In scientific disciplines, it’s crucial to recognise how you yourself go about your own work processes and how you handle timing. You have to listen to your employees and respond to their individual concerns. At the same time, it’s essential to lead your group by showing them your own enthusiasm for the project you’re working on.

In addition to your role as a professor, you were appointed as the Head of the ETH Strategy Commission this year. What are the commission’s tasks?
Our main task is to support the Executive Board in preparing the Strategy and Development Plan, which is a document that sets out ETH’s strategy for the next four years. It includes the teaching and research objectives and the subject areas that the university wants to focus on in particular. While its primary role is in internal planning, it is also a useful tool for presenting ETH’s strategy to wider society and the political sphere. Our strategy for 2021 to 2025 was published on the ETH website just a few months ago and we are already working on the next one.

> “You shouldn’t approach people on the basis of where they sit in the hierarchy.”
>
> Ulrike Kutay, Professor of Biochemistry

How do you go about it?
The Strategy Commission primarily has an integrative function, but we also have the ability to highlight certain things. Part of our role is to look at the medium-term planning and long-term perspectives of ETH: in doing this, we try to determine ETH’s strengths and weaknesses, but also analyse any environmental influences and identify trends and opportunities. However, we also have the remit of documenting and bringing together the concepts, ideas and initiatives that both the Executive Board and the departments present – which means that we work in constant dialogue with the President.

What happens after you have analysed all this information?
We meet once a month, discuss our analysis in great detail, organise workshops and invite experts to contribute their input. This enables us to provide recommendations to the Executive Board, which then ultimately decides on the content of the new strategy plan.

"Women face extremely high demands."

Ulrike Kutay, Professor of Biochemistry

Do you already know what might change in the next strategy plan?
The coronavirus crisis has given rise to much more dialogue between science, politics and society. It has shone a spotlight on how important it is to maintain this, but also how quickly it can lead to misunderstandings. The next strategy plan will place much greater emphasis on these interactions in all of their facets.

Which facets are those?
I think science has gained a much more prominent profile in society as a result of the pandemic, whether that's been through the transfer of knowledge to industry or through the part science has played in shaping public opinion. Both aspects have a vital role, not only in the current pandemic situation, but also – and just as much – in the context of other issues such as the environment and sustainability.

Why did you decide to head the Strategy Commission?
Joël Mesot asked me to take on the role. I had already been a member of the commission for six years before that, and I've always found it very appealing to deal with a completely different set of challenges than the ones I face in my everyday scientific work. The commission gives us an in-depth, exciting insight into how ETH works and allows us to gain different perspectives, which in turn broaden our own horizons. I also think it's important to give something back to ETH.

You are also involved in many other committees, such as the rETHink project or selection committees. You must have 80 hours in your day, not 24!
Yes, it often feels that way, and not just to me – I know a lot of my female colleagues are just as busy as I am. That's partly because ETH presidents have strongly encouraged women to participate more and have their say in recent years, and partly because the male-to-female ratio among professors is still far from equal. So the few women who are in such positions have to take on a lot. That means we're naturally more involved, are heard more and have more of a say. But women face extremely high demands.

How do you balance all these commitments, your job and your family, including two children?
I'm very lucky that my husband has been incredibly supportive over the past decades and has often had to take a back seat.

Apart from choosing the right partner, what other tips can you give women who want to pursue an academic career?
Networking is extremely important – I underestimated that at the beginning of my career. And sometimes you just have to learn to say no. You also need to be aware of your own abilities and get over any shyness and hesitation to put yourself out there. All too often, women are perfectionists and don't dare to show the world what they're capable of achieving. ■

Ulrike Kutay was born in Potsdam, Germany, in 1966 and studied biochemistry in Berlin. In 1999, she was appointed an asssistant professor at ETH Zurich, before attaining the role of associate professor in 2006. Since 2011, she has been a full professor at the Institute of Biochemistry. In addition, she is involved in numerous university committees and has been appointed as the Head of the Strategy Commission this year.

Our tips for your next holiday read

We asked you to recommend some of your favourite books, and you gave us more than 40 suggestions in response! Here's a pick of our ETH members' top tips – and you'll find lots more to check out online in "Internal news". So get ready to dive into a summer of great reading!

Editing Anna Maltsev

***Über Menschen* by Juli Zeh**

I devoured this book in one day. It's the story of a young woman who breaks up with her boyfriend during the pandemic and moves to the country. But above all, it deals with how we interact with people who are different from us and hold opposing views. This is a very unconventional novel with a lot of wordplay.

Eva Gottschewski, staff member in personnel development

***Hot Milk* by Deborah Levy**

At just over 200 pages, this psychological novel might at first seem like a light holiday read. But it packs a punch and soon reveals its immense depth. I can't think of very many books that have gripped me so much and still had me thinking long after I had turned the final page.

Cristiano Aires Teixeira, D-ARCH staff member

***Grand Hotel Europa* by Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer**

A writer retreats to a hotel to devote himself entirely to his writing. The bizarre events at the hotel and his memories meld into a picture of Europe that evokes in the reader an almost defiant affection for an imperfect world while reminding us that Europe is inevitably changing.

Jana Lipps, D-GESS doctoral student

***Meine Väter* by Martin R. Dean**

This partly autobiographical novel is extremely funny and intelligently written. Transporting the reader to the Caribbean via London and back to Switzerland and even the Alps, this is the perfect summer read for anyone who's stuck at home.

Eva-Karin Meierhans, ETH transfer staff member

***The End of Loneliness* by Benedict Wells**

Three orphaned siblings are left to fend for themselves. But what happens to the soul and the mind of someone who has to go through something so earth-shattering at a young age? How does their life unfold from that point? In this award-winning novel, author Benedict Wells poignantly explores the themes of overcoming loss and loneliness. And pens a great love story along the way.

Romano Meier, D-ERDW staff member

***Last Chance to See* by Douglas Adams and Mark Carwardine**

Species conservation and climate change are hot-button topics right now – but there's nothing really new about them. Science-fiction author Douglas Adams and biologist Mark Carwardine were already busy exploring these issues in depth as far back as the 1980s. In this book, the pair document their experiences in encountering species considered the last of their kind, all with a striking, lively and highly satirical tone. It's a book that will surprise you and make you cry and laugh all at once!

Carina Känzig, D-BIOL doctoral student

***Bruno, Chief of Police* series by Martin Walker**

The author cleverly combines criminal suspense with culinary expertise and wanderlust – making you feel like you've been transported directly to France's Périgord region. The series now spans 13 books and delves into not only the cases that Chief of Police Bruno is trying to solve, but also the lives of those living in his village and his passion for cooking. There's even a wonderfully illustrated cookbook for readers who want to try out Bruno's recipes at home.

Cornelia Künzle, ETH Library staff member

You can find more book tips under "Internal news":
www.ethz.ch/book-tips →

Finding the right ones

The professorships held at ETH Zurich make a significant contribution to maintaining the university's successful position. In this article, *life* provides an insight into the planning and appointment process for professorships and the role that the Office for Faculty Affairs plays in this.

Text Leo Herrmann **Illustration** Oculus Illustration

ETH currently employs 566 professors. The university's success is highly dependent on their expertise and their teaching and leadership skills. This places high demands not just on them, but also on the processes that take place before they take up their posts. Viewed over the longer term, the process of planning professorships determines the basic funding allocated to departments and has a considerable impact on the infrastructural requirements that ETH has to meet. This means it has to not only cover the needs of the department in question, but also operate in line with ETH Zurich's strategic goals. All this takes place against a backdrop of a steadily growing number of professorships, changing and merging disciplines, and an increasingly fierce battle for the best brains.

The Office for Faculty Affairs is at the helm of all these challenges: as the central coordination unit, it handles every process ranging from professorship planning and recruitment to the incumbent's assumption of their post. Birgit Kessler, Head of the Office, reveals that it generally takes more than a year for the ETH Board to appoint a professor after the vacancy has been advertised. The recruitment cycle never stops: "We are usually working on dozens of appointments at any given time," Kessler explains. Each recruitment – which is usually initiated by the department in question – begins with a decision on the underlying principle of the process: that is, whether to reappoint someone to the professorship, shift the focus of its remit or create an entirely new position.

The growing role of headhunting

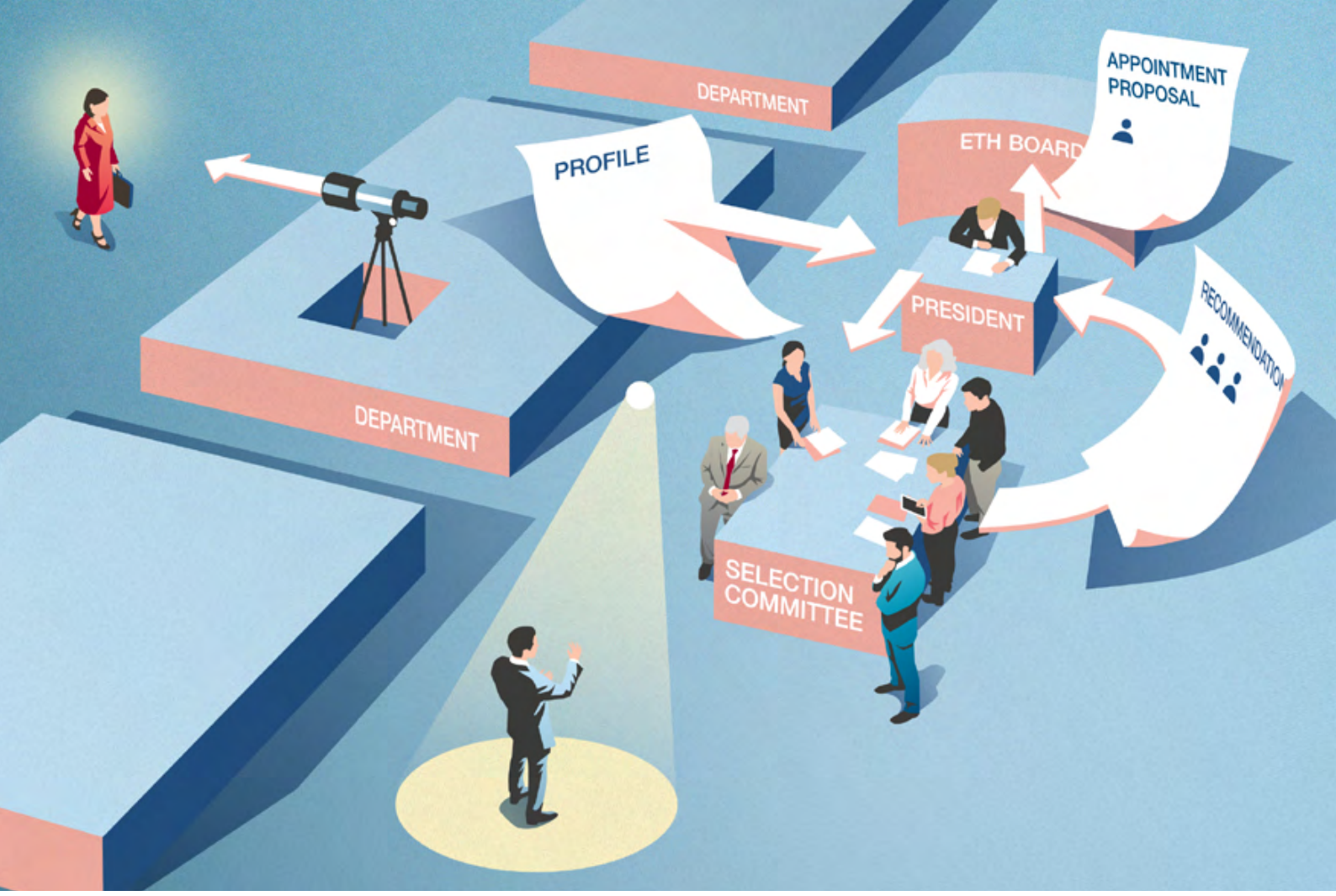
ETH does not offer direct succession to professorships. This means that the university evaluates and adapts the profile of a professorship before the position is advertised – not only in the case of newly created professorships, but also when professors retire. The profile must be in keeping with the challenges that the department in question faces, its teaching requirements and the strategic planning conducted by it, ETH and the ETH Domain. The department submits a profile paper outlining the professorship's teaching and research requirements to the ETH President. Even at this early stage in the process, it must include a list of renowned experts as candidates for the position. These people are then contacted directly as part of the call for applications and encouraged to apply. Since established professors are not on the lookout for open positions in many cases, this proactive strategy is becoming an increasingly vital step in the recruitment process. In terms of numbers, almost every second permanent professorship is filled through this direct method.

The Office for Faculty Affairs advertises the position on an international level and assembles a selection committee on behalf of the ETH President, consisting of ETH professors and external representatives. To ensure a balanced perspective is maintained, the committee also includes one representative from each of the following: the student body, the scientific staff, industry, a foreign university, the University of Zurich (UZH) and EPFL. After reviewing all the applications, the committee agrees on four to six candidates and invites them to give a presentation and take part in an interview. Following extensive discussion, the committee then submits its recommendation – ideally consisting of three preferred candidates – to the ETH President. The President selects a candidate, contacts them to discuss the offer from the university (a process that also covers the infrastructure that ETH needs to have in place) and submits an appointment proposal to the ETH Board.

However, it is not always necessary to advertise a position and go through the entire appointment process. "If outstanding researchers have been recommended by a department, the direct appointment process allows the President to enter into direct negotiations with these potential candidates and then submit an appointment proposal to the ETH Board on this basis," explains Katharina Hagenauer, who is responsible for professorship planning in the Office for Faculty Affairs.

Focus on young and female talent

Direct appointment is an effective tool for increasing the percentage of women in ETH professorships, which currently stands at around 15%. "It is often easier to recruit a top female



scientist directly than to go through the process of advertising a specific profile," says Hagenauer. However, promoting female candidates in professorships is a firm principle of the standard appointment process too. As a rule, the selection committee must include at least three female professors. Moreover, the department in question must provide the President with a list of suitable female candidates before the professorship is advertised. Another requirement is that at least two female candidates are invited to the selection interviews.

The majority of professors are either full or associate professors, with around one fifth occupying the role of temporary assistant professor. The latter professorships are viewed as a funding instrument for young, talented researchers and play an important role in developing new research areas. Assistant professors (who are not on the tenure track) are usually appointed to ETH professorships with funding from the SNSF or an ERC Starting Grant. These professorships are limited to the duration of the grant. Holders of assistant professorship roles at ETH normally pursue their scientific careers at another university.

The tenure system provides an effective way for ETH to train its focus on promoting young academics: assistant professors on the tenure track receive a permanent professorship after they have successfully undergone the tenure process. Consisting of multiple stages, this process is based on external reviews and several performance evaluations. The final step involves a tenure committee – made up of one representative per department – informing the President whether or not it would recommend the candidate for a tenured professorship at ETH. This system provides a kind of test phase for long-term potential, particularly where young researchers are concerned. "We give them the opportunity to gain important experience, which they will most certainly benefit from if they are successful," explains Birgit Kessler.

She adds that ETH has to try everything it can to attract and retain young talent, particularly in booming fields such as computer science. "The more experience they have, the more fiercely they will be headhunted by other universities and the industry itself," Kessler explains. At the same time, however, it is important to ensure that there is the right mix of ages among all of the professors. Established professors are key players in the teaching experience at ETH, especially given that student numbers are steadily rising. As Katharina Hagenauer points out, they also act as a mainstay in academic self-governance by taking on department head roles, for example. Ultimately, ETH Zurich recognises that having a professoriate that is dedicated to the university is an indispensable part of its success, but that this has to be reconciled with the professors' needs in developing their own careers. ■

Nikolaus Gotsch
Staff member, Office of the President

From agriculture to organisational culture

Text Vanessa Bleich **Photo** Florian Bachmann

"I have been lucky enough to experience university life from a whole range of scientific angles: as a student, doctoral student, postdoc and senior academic assistant, and even as a project manager – but I have never been a professor," says Nikolaus Gotsch, who embarked on his agricultural studies at ETH more than 40 years ago. He has now worked at the Office of the President for nearly 17 years and has responsibility for strategic projects, which currently include the organisational development project rETHink.

However, Nikolaus Gotsch really came to appreciate ETH during his time away from the university – while working as a researcher at universities abroad, for instance, or when he started producing his own ice cream after turning 50. He describes his experience of building up his own company with his own employees alongside his work at ETH as "a tailor-made MBA". "I learned so much during the process – including what it means to be exposed to a lot of financial pressure and be dependent on customers and demand," he continues. Gotsch still produces his gelato on a professional scale – albeit a much smaller one these days.

He still enjoys preparing his ice cream for events as it allows him to get to know people, including many ETH employees, from a different perspective. Gotsch thrives on personal interactions and finding common ground with others. The 61-year-old particularly enjoys his current position at the Office of the President not only because it allows him to work as part of a team, but also because it gives him a first-hand insight into what drives the university. He considers it a privilege to help shape the further development of ETH through the rETHink project. "My professional career has somehow always revolved around cultural development," he sums up. "In the beginning, it was all about developing agricultural cultures, and now it's focused on what we can contribute to the development of organisational culture." ■

Do we need flexible workplaces at ETH?

For

Nicole Kasielke
Co-Team Leader of the Communication Channels Team, Corporate Communications

Around two years ago, I would have said that flexible workplaces were my biggest nightmare. Not having my own desk and space where I could leave everything behind when I head home is the last thing I would have wanted. But two years ago, I was also certain that I would never be able to work from home. Then along came the coronavirus pandemic, which forced me to do just that; and after a few months I came to the realisation that I actually work surprisingly well from home.

And that's not all – in the future, I'd like to work from home on a regular basis. At the same time, I'm happy to be going back to the office because I miss my colleagues and the overall atmosphere at ETH. I don't necessarily miss my workstation, which is overloaded with paperwork.

That being said, it's obviously nice and convenient to have my own desk – and it does also let me indulge in my little day-to-day habits. But after months of humdrum routine, the idea of adding a bit more variety to the professional side of things actually sounds quite appealing. So I'm delighted that we're introducing flexible workplaces in Corporate Communications.

Will it be annoying to have to clear up my desk every evening from now on? Yes, in my case that's a given – and our workdays will also be more complicated at first. But I obviously understand that we can't just leave empty workstations unused several days a week. We'll just have to get used to new ways of doing things; and that's something I'm definitely looking forward to. I'm not creative enough when I get too comfortable and settled. Besides, changing your desk neighbours from time to time can help you to swap more ideas, gain important insights and come up with new joint projects. What's more, you really get to know different colleagues with whom you wouldn't normally have interacted much otherwise. After all, expanding your own network is a must in today's working world – and it can be very enriching on a personal level.

While it is true that most changes take some time to reveal their true potential, it still pays off to leave your comfort zone once in a while. And when I think back to the beginning of 2020, when most of us only associated the word "zoom" with a camera lens, it makes me realise just how flexible we really can be.

Against

Jan ten Pierick
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When we all found ourselves having to work from home due to the pandemic, we had no other alternative but to make the best of it. But it also made me appreciate just how invaluable it is to work in an office together with my direct colleagues.

Working from home means no more discussions about little details and less awareness of what is on people's minds and what problems we face. No more "coffee talk" – often the time when people come up with their best ideas and exchange valuable know-how. In a nutshell, no more face-to-face communication – an integral part of ETH's open and collaborative culture that I very much appreciate. Virtual meetings are just not as effective as being able to talk to people in the same room.

At the same time, of course, it is also very important to have a quiet place to work. After all, most of us are in jobs that require a high degree of concentration. Furthermore, having your own office helps to make you feel welcome and motivated.

This may no longer be possible if we have to find a new workplace every day, and we will probably often end up in a noisy environment where we do not feel comfortable and cannot work in peace. This could then lead to rising stress levels that may affect health. And people might opt to work from home as a result, bringing a halt to those very fruitful exchanges in the corridor.

Having a flexible workplace will also mean carting your laptop and other work utensils to work every day, making it more impractical to come in on foot or by bike. It will also complicate matters if you want to take part in after-work activities. To store your laptop safely, you will have to clock up more kilometres by taking it home first before heading out again – all increasing the carbon footprint.

What's more, the chances of finding something again if you accidentally leave it behind might be virtually zero, and the anonymous nature of such workplaces might result in an increase in theft.

Flexible workplaces do save costs, but I think ETH staff deserve to be able to work in proper offices – the return on investment is not to be underestimated. It would be a pity to sacrifice the great culture we had before the pandemic in the interest of saving costs. ■

Illustrations: Kornel Stadler

What do you think about flexible workplaces at ETH? Join in the discussion on Internal news: www.ethz.ch/flexible-workplaces →

From lynxes to drones

The four-legged lynx robot named Dyana looks and moves like a cat. Developed by 14 students as part of their focus project, it bridges the gap between animation and robotics with the aim of looking as lifelike as possible.

In focus projects, Bachelor's students in Mechanical Engineering are set the task of putting their theoretical knowledge into practice and developing a product. An overview of this year's prototypes – which include a drone with gripper arms and a four-seater electric aircraft – is available in the eExhibition:
www.ethz.ch/focus-projects2021 →