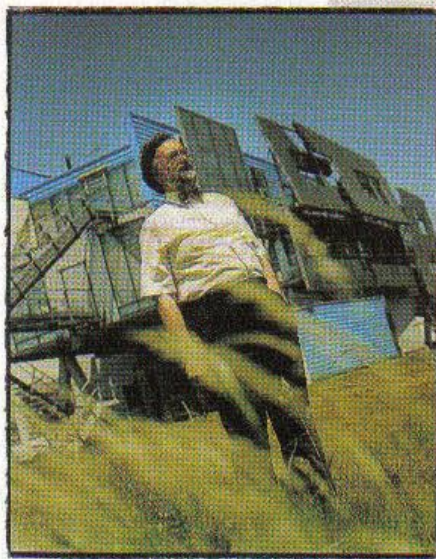


The Knowledge Manager

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portrait



KNOWLEDGE IS ANY COMPANY'S MOST IMPORTANT ASSET. STRANGELY, IT DOESN'T FEATURE IN COMPANY REPORTS. PROFESSOR GÜNTER R. KOCH IS CHANGING THAT, THOUGH.

Over forty years ago now the Austrian government established this country's first and only nuclear research facility in the small village of Seibersdorf south of Vienna. The experimental reactor has meanwhile been closed down, and the institute's 400 scientists – experts in such diverse fields as computer science, physics and biology – have switched to other areas of research, notably the growth field of information technology. The Austrian Research Institute in Seibersdorf has emerged as Austria's Silicon Valley.

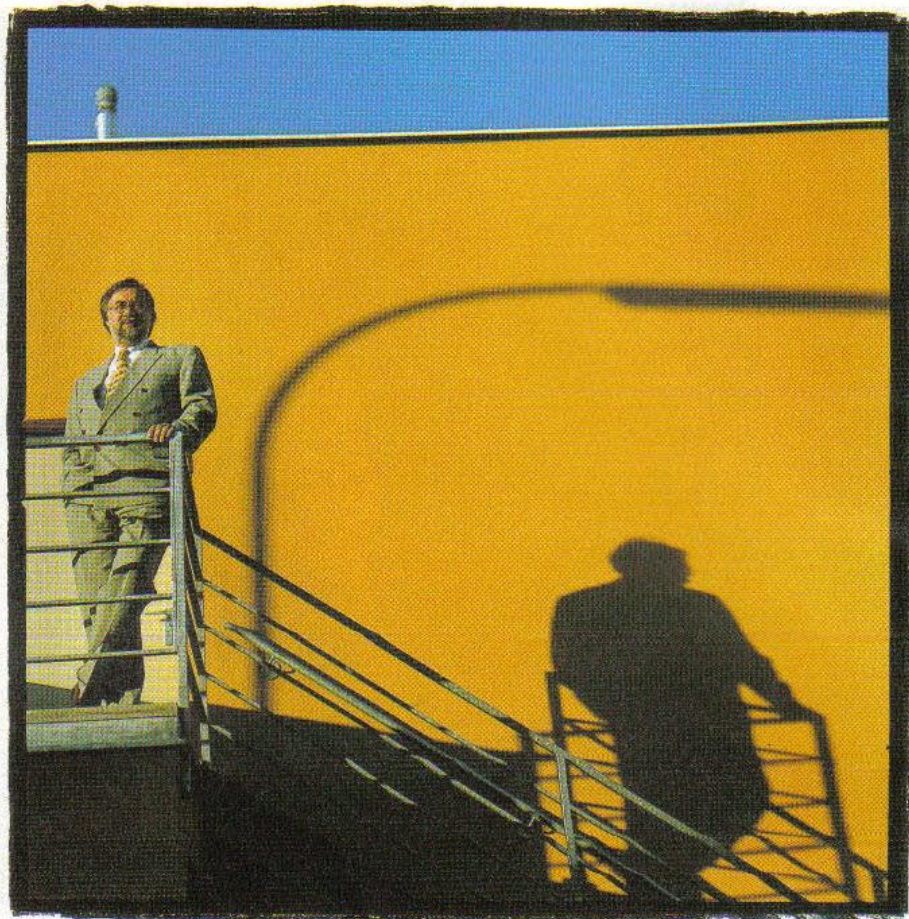
The institute's two managing directors, Wolfgang Pell and Professor Günter R. Koch, are currently transforming the facility into a "knowledge enterprise". In effect this means that the scientists are called upon to think in terms of applied research and business considerations.

Koch has just launched a minor revolution by making Seibersdorf the first large research institution in Europe to publicise virtually the entire range of its work. In the scientific community, transparency still ranks as a bad thing. It could – so the superstition goes – induce those who hand over the money to pick and choose, financing only the plums in the cake. Koch disagrees, feeling that the public as well as private sponsors have a right to know what a research institute is spending the money on.

By Holger Christmann
Photos Reiner Riedler

Zusammenfassung Der Rebell

Professor Günter Koch, einer der beiden Geschäftsführer des österreichischen Forschungsinstituts in Seibersdorf, hat eine kleine Revolution ausgerufen. Als erstes Großforschungsinstitut in Europa legt sein Haus fast lückenlos seine Aktivitäten offen. In Form einer so genannten „Wissensbilanz“. „Dem Wissen kommt in unserer zunehmend wissensbasierten Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft eine Schlüsselrolle zu“, sagt Koch. „Wissen“ scheint in gewöhnlichen Geschäftsberichten nicht auf – dabei erreichen Unternehmen, die für Wissen stehen, Börsenkurse, die weit über ihrem Buchwert liegen. So legt der deutsche Staatsbürger Koch, der seit 1996 in Österreich lebt, sämtliche Produkte und Dienstleistungen offen, die das Institut in den letzten Jahren entwickelt hat; unter anderem Industrieroboter für die Automobilproduktion, ein kostengünstigeres Verfahren zur Herstellung von Lichtbauwerkstoffen oder eine neuartige Schadstoffanalyse von Pflanzen via Computer. Mit der Offenlegung will Koch vor allem private Geldgeber ansprechen, die in Zeiten knapper Budgets (30 bis 50 Prozent des Seibersdorfer Budgets von sieben Milliarden Schilling steuert der Bund bei) für die Forschung immer wichtiger werden.



Transparenz statt hoher Mauern: Prof. Koch legt erstmals in Europa eine Wissensbilanz eines Großforschungsinstituts vor. Transparency instead of secrecy: Günter Koch heads the first major research institute to disclose its knowledge assets.

Hitherto the federal authorities have accounted for between thirty and fifty per cent of Seibersdorf's budget, the remainder coming from private companies. "In the years to come, though, we – like everyone else – can expect an increase in funding only from private sources," says Koch. It is all the more crucial, then, that the business community becomes aware of good reasons to put its confidence in Seibersdorf. Which is why the institute has just published an unprecedented Report: a Knowledge Balance Sheet. "Our business and social lives are increasingly knowledge-based, and knowledge plays a key role." Conventional company reports tend to ignore "knowledge" as an item, although the stock markets have long since taken the point. Companies doing business with the commodity "knowledge" are quoted way above their book values. On the other hand, how do you set about objectively assessing a business's intellectual assets?

The knowledge balance sheet lists the products and services which the institute has developed in recent years: industrial robots for use in the automotive industry, or a cost-cutting manufacturing process for lightweight materials, an optical verification device for banknotes (already in use at the Austrian National Bank), or a new computerised technique for analysing pollutant levels in plants. The balance sheet points out the institute's strengths and discloses the weak spots which it has targeted for remedying. As Koch puts it: "This is really dropping our pants! And we don't always look good. For instance, the report discloses that we still send too few of our staff abroad. On the other hand, we have a sizeable proportion of foreign team members – six per cent."

Koch is the right man for the job, as his biography shows. Having gained a degree in computer science, he was a faculty member at the Applied Computer Science Institute at Karlsruhe University from 1975 to 1981. Then he took a post as managing director of a software company and held the same position at the Baden-Württemberg Technology Centre. In 1993 the EU appointed him head of the European Software Institute in Bilbao – which explains the many pictures of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum that adorn the walls of his office. Finally, he worked as a chief consultant to Sun Microsystems Computer Corporation in Geneva before moving to Seibersdorf. Even now, he has other irons in the fire: he teaches telecommunications management at Krems University and lectures on research management at Vienna University.

Koch knows his way around both research and management, then, which gives him a shrewd understanding of both sides of the fence. Inevitably, he sometimes gets asked whether his emphasis on the commercial aspect of the institute's work doesn't discriminate against "free research". Major German research institutes had misgivings about disclosing the details of the institute's activities which, they felt, could be used as a lever to channel the flow of funds at will. Koch argues that free research is better left to public institutions like the universities than to research centres, whose job is to build bridges between basic and applied research. "But the universities themselves are going to have to define their targets more clearly in the years to come," he adds. "For years the Austrians have lived in a cloud-cuckoo land, with guaranteed retirement pensions and full social insurance coverage. Nice if you can get it, but it tends to make people complacent." Some research scientists, he points out, would prefer to go on "pottering about in their allotments, but we need to focus on those areas where we have an edge over the others."

Koch is driven by missionary zeal, and yet he has retained a human perception of his job. He is glad he hasn't had to make anyone redundant, he says. At times his face takes on a pensive look, almost melancholy. When he gets a hankering to do some research himself, that has to wait until after work – and share his time off with a play he's writing. The plot centres around a couple who are both research scientists. "She" works at a commercial scientific facility, "He" at a research institute. "It's all about the pressure which market forces exert on many people today ... Which brings us back to the subject at hand."

On top of it all, Koch is a family man, although his family life happens only once a fortnight when he flies back to Germany. His wife, a teacher, stayed there because she didn't want to give up her job. Koch is convinced she was right: "Experience shows that if a woman abandons her career for a man's sake, it's bound to lead to disaster." So he pays a high price for his post at Seibersdorf. Still, he has to concede: "I have the best job in Austria."



EISEN-ZEUG-SAFARI

Kunst gefällig?

**Auf Schritt und Tritt.
Vom Check-in zum Gate.**

EISEN-ZEUG-SAFARI. Eine Ausstellung aufregend schöner Eisenskulpturen von Gerhardt Moswitzer. Vom 18. Mai - 30. September 2000. Am Flughafen Wien, auf Ihrem Weg an Bord.

EUROPAS ERSTE ADRESSE

