

Joint Forces: Merging Competencies and Cultures in University IT

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Abstract

Mergers in university IT are a major challenge, as ongoing operations should be affected as little as possible. At the same time, it is not uncommon for different work cultures to collide between data centres, decentralized IT and administrative IT. There are also different expectations on the part of the user groups that need to be met. The merger of the *Zentrum für Informationsverarbeitung* (the IT centre with approx. 100 employees whose focus is on infrastructure) and the *Stabsstelle IT und Prozessentwicklung* (the administrative IT department with approx. 60 employees whose focus is on operations and organization projects) to form the “WWU IT”, which took place at Münster University (WWU) at the beginning of 2020, can serve as a good example for similar IT restructuring at universities.

1 Background

While mergers with other organisations and restructuring take place regularly in the business sector, German universities often shy away from this step. One reason could be that advantages are less obvious, because monetary gains in terms of staff savings are not immediately realisable in the German public sector. Nevertheless, especially in university IT, efficient, merged organisations seem to make more and more sense. The advantages of specialisation are continuously disappearing due to the general standardisation of hardware and software. The traditional division between the IT centre and the administrative IT is becoming increasingly blurred due to the expanded range of services emerging from digitalization, resulting in redundant work and a lack of transparency for users caused by unclear responsibilities. Moreover, the complex needs of current IT projects require powerful large units with sufficient human and financial resources.

Against this background, Münster University decided to merge the *Zentrum für Informationsverarbeitung* (IT centre) and the *Stabsstelle IT und Prozessentwicklung* (administrative IT) into the new unit “WWU IT” with over 160 employees as of 01.01.2020. The objectives were to develop

synergies in terms of improved IT support for research, teaching and administration and a more efficient organisation with regard to current and future major projects.

2 Organisational Merger

Supported by an external consulting firm, the WWU IT merger was initiated in 2019 with a staff meeting. The first phase (organisational merger) was completed in March 2021 and divided into the following stages: (1) creation of organisational structures, (2) creation of a common identity, (3) development of synergies, and (4) evaluation of WWU IT by the stakeholders.

In order to *create organisational structures*, the structures of IT units at other universities were first surveyed. As these were very heterogeneous and often seemed to have grown historically, various organisational structures were developed and evaluated internally. A large-scale reorganisation did not have sufficiently clear advantages to justify the significant impact on day-to-day operations. Therefore, a conservative structure was chosen in which the seven existing units (four from the IT centre, three from administrative IT) were left unchanged and placed under a common management, with the heads of units forming a joined management board. The chosen structure proved to be very effective in the course of the year, even during the massive challenges of the Corona pandemic.

The *creation of a common identity* was of particular importance in the merger because of the largely unchanged organisational structure, which provides only few points of contact between some of the departments. Previously identity-creating features such as name and logo were deliberately abandoned in favour of new ones in order to visually express a merger at eye level. A mission statement was developed together with all employees, which describes the self-image and the way of working and cooperating with each other. This also revealed existing reservations, prejudices and problem areas that could subsequently be addressed. In addition, an anonymous staff survey was conducted and a likewise anonymous idea box was set up to create space for honest feedback.

Cross-cutting topics were a good starting point for *developing synergies* and at WWU IT business office processes, client operations and service processes were focused. In workshops, working methods, responsibilities and processes were identified together with the employees concerned, thus laying the foundation for improved cooperation in the future. During the workshops, important learnings also emerged as a result of the better insight into the topic areas. For example, because of the very different customer groups that the service team supports, the original idea of “one face to the customer” was abandoned and the creation of two specialised customer group focused hotlines with interfaces was defined as a new goal.

Another important component of the merger was the identification of optimization potential via an *evaluation of WWU IT by its stakeholders*. External consultants conducted extensive structured interviews with a total of 12 stakeholder representatives, which supplemented the already existing quantitative evaluation in the form of an annual user survey with a qualitative methodology. In the external perception, both the service portfolio and the organisational structures appear to be very efficient and user-friendly. From the customer's perspective, WWU IT was able to convince with a strong performance in supporting stakeholders during the pandemic, which was very challenging due to the need for short-term solutions in the areas of home office and digital teaching. A quantitative user survey confirms this evaluation.

In addition to the organisational integration, the cultural integration is crucial for the success of a merger. This is all the truer for WWU IT, as the organisational structures were largely retained and changes in this regard took place primarily at management level. The achievement of the merger goals was essentially based on the cooperation and cohesion of the employees, because the development of synergies and a more efficient work organisation mean above all a reorganisation of responsibilities

beyond the predefined structures and an intensified exchange to benefit from the newly gained competences. This necessarily involves compromises to combine the best of both worlds.

3 Cultural Merger

At the organisational level, the foundation for a common organisational culture was laid by creating a common identity and formulating common values. However, in order for a shared organisational culture to actually emerge and be lived, communication and direct contact between the employees is needed above all. Personal contact had to be largely suspended during the central phase of the merger due to the Corona pandemic. Accordingly, communication measures were extremely important to allow for previously independent teams to get to know each other and, ideally, even grow together. The following formats were generated for this purpose: (1) fusion café, (2) open dialogue and open office hours, and (3) shared internal wiki and chat.

The *fusion café* simulated informal exchange in common rooms and was originally planned as a regular one-hour face-to-face event, but was predominantly implemented in digital form. The aim was for employees to get to know each other across departmental boundaries and to get a better overview of the respective work areas and responsibilities. In order to reduce communication barriers, the events were topic-based (focussing on customer communication, project management, and home office, among others). The fusion café was explicitly not intended as a workshop and was attended and evaluated very well by employees.

The WWU IT management offered the *open dialogue* format, which met the employees' demand for more transparency and information regarding topics at management level. Here, the management regularly reported to all interested employees on current projects and subsequently answered questions in an open discourse and accepted feedback and suggestions.

A *shared internal wiki* was set up via the Confluence platform, giving employees insight into the work tasks, responsibilities and projects of all departments. The wiki has proven its worth and is used intensively. The same applies to channels in the *group chat* service Mattermost, which have established themselves as an informal, uncomplicated way of communication.

4 Conclusion

Managing a university IT merger without disrupting ongoing operations can be considered a challenge in principle. Conducting such a merger during a pandemic, in which the functioning of the entire university depends even more than usual on IT and in which the demands and workload far exceed the usual level, would be a real test for any organisation. The conservative approach to creating a new integrated organisational structure with largely established processes under the umbrella of a joint management has paid off and made WWU IT's rapid responses to the crisis possible in the first place. Difficulties have arisen mainly from the lack of face-to-face teamwork and informal exchange, which are crucial for new colleagues to get to know each other and build and strengthen their social cohesion. These aspects can only be inadequately represented by digital formats. At the same time, the pandemic has prompted the creation of new ad-hoc working groups in a very short time as a result of unexpected challenges and has demanded efficient cooperation across departmental boundaries. The positive feedback from stakeholders reflects the joint achievement, which has created a sense of community in the context of the merger in a rather unusual way. The issues that still need to be addressed with regard to the organisational culture can be faced optimistically in view of this starting position. The following success factors have proven helpful in the WWU IT merger process: (1) regularly informing all employees about the current status and the next steps, (2) creating a common

identity through a new name, logo, external image and mission statement, (3) creating a joint management board at eye level, (4) promoting interdepartmental cooperation at the working level, (5) establishing feedback channels and prompt addressing of staff concerns, and (6) minimising the impact of the merger on services and customer processes.

Overall, the merger process so far has been very positive thanks to the consideration of these aspects and can serve as an example for other institutions. In the future, it is important to continue the steps that have been taken and, in particular, to harmonise the still different working cultures.

5 Author Biographies

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R. Vogl holds a Ph.D. in elementary particle physics from the University of Innsbruck (Austria). After completing his Ph.D. studies in 1995, he joined Innsbruck University Hospital as IT manager for medical image data solutions and moved on to be deputy head of IT. He served as a lecturer in medical informatics at UMIT (Hall, Austria) and as managing director for a medical image data management software company (icoserve, Innsbruck) and for a centre of excellence in medical informatics (HITT, Innsbruck). Since 2007 he has been director of the IT centre (now WWU IT) of the University of Münster (WWU) and has been appointed CIO of WWU in 2017. His research interests focus on management of complex information systems and information infrastructures. More Info: <https://www.uni-muenster.de/forschungaz/person/10774>

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