

Community Talk with **Anja Fischer**

From a matter of work to a matter of the heart

Anja Fischer has found plenty of meaning in her life. In her journey from shorthand typing to leading an ITEA project to a successful conclusion, a pattern emerges of a person who enriches and is enriched by her environment and the people in it. Anja holds a degree in Business Administration (VWA) and Project management (GPM / IPMA) and is a certified logotherapist, which means that she can help people. Conceived by Viktor Frankl, this concept is based on the premise that the primary motivational force of an individual is to find a meaning in life whatever the circumstances. Quite a good skill to have when leading a project like OPTIMUM. This is a story of opportunity and fulfilment.



A life-changing experience

Reflecting on her path to ITEA, Anja looks back to her first serious job as a team assistant in 1995. While working for a supplier in the automotive industry, her manager was summoned to Asia for a quality issue and Anja remained in Germany to help solve this. Ultimately, it transpired that testing fuel in Germany had a different density to this local fuel in Asia, so validated fuel systems could fail in practice. "That was when I realised for the first time that I have a love and affinity for technical stuff. It was a life-changer," laughs Anja. "But being invited to lead the OPTIMUM project in 2017 was an experience like never before. It has topped every project I've done – and I've done a lot of them."

Enrichment and honour

Starting in 2017, OPTIMUM focused on improved safety, efficiency and usability in smart factories through technologies such as distributed control, indoor localisation and 3D engineering & visualisation. It was also the very first ITEA project for Anja's company Demag Cranes & Components GmbH, which came via long-time collaborator ifak. "When we got the funding approval for OPTIMUM, I was asked to switch positions to fully dedicate myself to it," Anja continues. "It was very exciting as it's a totally different kind of work. Sure, you have interdisciplinary projects within your own organisation. But in ITEA, you have different companies throughout the globe! It's such an enrichment and honour to meet all these highly professional and extremely qualified personalities who contribute to a joint vision. I'm so grateful that I was asked to take up this task."

Room for personal discovery

"In the beginning, I had a lot of support from ifak. Thomas Bangemann, the leader of the German consortium, mentored me. He led the task to build a project consortium agreement, which was the groundwork to openly communicate across company borders and enabled us to work as one team. All of us really loved contributing to this project and it was so nice to enrich the project with technical and research aspects that were not defined in the FPP because they had not been thought of. More things popped up during the project – points of personal interest from universities, for example – and were supported. It was one thing to reach the deliverables and realise what we promised, but there was also room for personal discoveries, and that made the project so rich. OPTIMUM turned from a matter of work to a matter of the heart."

Just do it

This level of commitment has been demonstrated throughout the course of the project, from the presence of OPTIMUM partners at Demag's 200th anniversary in 2019 through to a number of online parties to mitigate the social impact of COVID-19. Anja also organised weekly Corona meetings to share personal concerns and coping strategies, ensuring that potential problems were foreseen before they impacted the project. "We had grown together as an excellently functioning team before COVID-19 hit us, so we were able to overcome it," explains Anja. "And the ITEA Office was extremely responsive and helpful. The reviews and KPIs are always challenging, so it's a big chance to grow. In our third Project progress report (PPR), we got an evaluation that we thought was not good. That was a turning point in the project and we dedicated ourselves to taking these comments seriously. We challenged ourselves to define the KPIs: yes, it's difficult, but just do it! And in the fourth PPR, we got a really good evaluation again."

Common base of values

This hard work has paid off: having secured highly positive results with OPTIMUM, parts of the former consortium are now starting up a new project called InnoSale that aims to improve sales processes using Artificial Intelligence. "OPTIMUM was our first funded research project at Demag and we now have the commitment to continue and invest in research. This would not have happened without ITEA," Anja notes. "As a company, it was a very good experience regarding the organisation and reviewing. Without this project, we would not even have a research department and research factory at Demag in Wetter. My personal experience is that I've learnt so much. There are big role models at ITEA. If you want to improve yourself, you can do that with their support and challenges. The values being shared in the ITEA Community give meaning and sense to work and to life. And if you have a common base of values, you can also grow as a person."

Words of advice

Given her positive experiences, is there anything Anja would have liked to have been done differently? "I had an improvement suggestion," she concedes, "but it was implemented basically immediately, so ITEA is always open to reflecting on their own work and improving themselves as well. What would really help the projects is a kind of alignment with national funding decisions. We hope that partners with a good chance of getting funded at a later point can start at the same time as the others to be a bit more aligned. But this is not in the hands of ITEA, I'm afraid."

Any advice for ITEA then? Anja thinks for a second. "Keep up what you're doing! And thank you for all your support."

