

Spark curiosity about science and delight in innovation

*Know-how and synergies
in Austria's science
communication...*

Unlike many other countries, Austria for a long time hasn't had a science centre in the form of a specialised museum. However, there were a number of efforts and protagonists using similar concepts – interactive science centre activities – in their sphere of action. This situation in 2005 inspired the formation of an unusual structure: a non-hierarchical network, initiated and cared for by a specific non-profit organisation, the association ScienceCenter-Network. The Network is based on the cooperation of very diverse actors, all furthering the understanding of science and technology by means of interactive science centre activities.

Our common understanding of science centre activities is defined as interactive opportunities for self-determined learning about science and technology. Such activities should emphasise a hands-on or minds-on approach, featuring interactive exhibits that encourage users to play, to explore and to think ahead, irrespective of their previous knowledge. We thus support an educational concept based on individual, self-directed learning processes. This concept is valuable for a range of target groups including kindergarten children, primary and elementary schools, adults as well as special groups like retired or homeless people.

The association ScienceCenter-Network firmly believes that such science centre activities can make an important contribution in tackling a variety of issues in our current society. We therefore aim to make their potential better known – to spread, encourage, improve and investigate them. In order to achieve this, the association coordinates the network; it is responsible for lobbying and public relations and



Hands-on-exhibits: Learning by doing

acts as an information hub. In addition, it initiates projects and conducts research in order to raise the quantity and quality of science centre activities in Austria. The association is also an Austrian node in the international science centre community, passing on international know-how and contacts to its national partners.

Since the initial network meeting in 2006, the Network has grown to more than 90 partners who actively contribute to the community by developing, offering or using interactive science centre activities throughout the country. They work together by exchanging experiences, discussing strategies and ideas as well as developing cooperative projects, thus becoming more visible and experienced. Diversity is our strength; network partners, who are organisations as well as individuals, cover a wide spectrum of expertise, including universities and other research institutions, museums, science communicators, schools, teacher training organisations as well as designers, artists, media, and industry.

With our activities we support a future-oriented approach towards science and technology as an important element of both our society and economy. The label ScienceCenter-Network Activity stands for high quality offers by our network partners. Together we develop transdisciplinary new projects with an emphasis on experimenting and discussing, focusing on learning with a positive attitude. With reference to everyday experiences we want to spark curiosity about science and delight in innovation. We wish to inspire the dialogue on these matters and accordingly want to support young people in their choice of career.

With the Network, a new and highly successful cooperative structure was created. Our structure and working style reflect the content, as they are based on the same principles as science centre activities: active participation, openness and flexibility, encouragement for own development and learning. The Network is a structure in which all partners – whether from the field of science, education, exhibition making or the target audiences – introduce their respective strengths while at the same time receiving incentives for their own activities.

Differences are used to enhance cooperation and differences are transformed into synergies.

We establish cooperation and exchange between network partners by organising regular network meetings and trainings. Internal communication fosters professional exchange, the analysis of good practice examples and the development of new strategies and ideas together. Open exchange and discussion formats are qualities characteristic of the ScienceCenter-Network and have proven essential for the positive atmosphere within the Network.



ScienceCenter-Network Chairwoman Margit Fischer, wife of Austria's Federal President, explores with children

In addition to networking and exchange, a wide range of activities for the public has been initiated by ScienceCenter-Network. The new website is an important reference point, listing information and opportunities for interactive and hands-on learning for science and technology throughout Austria. Network projects aim at including many Network partners so that they reflect the diversity of our approaches, thus achieving multi-faceted compilations of activities that no single partner could have accomplished. In addition, activities as well as know-how are distributed to a local level, resulting in an efficient use of resources.

ScienceCenter-Network cooperates with private and public partners and initiatives for science communication. Among these is Sparkling Science, an initiative by the Federal Ministry of Science and Research, aimed at cooperation between schools and scientists, whereby students actively participate in research.

Further cooperation includes the Austrian Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology, the City of Vienna, province governments, the Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development, as well as social partners and sponsors.

Below are some examples of activities emerging from the Network:

- Travelling exhibition 'Discovering Net[work]s': touring Austria since 2007, the exhibition has already attracted 75,000 visitors. A set of interactive stations, developed by partners of ScienceCenter-Network, invite visitors to marvel and experiment on topics like biological networks, physical network structures, communication nets, social networks, economic networks, and many more;
- 'Hands-on X-Netz!' invites young people to generate their own ideas for interactive exhibits and enables their realisation through financial and professional support. Some of them have already become part of the travelling exhibition;
- 'playDECIDE', a discussion game developed within an EU-project, offers an easy introduction into complex scientific topics. ScienceCenter-Network took up this tool, offering and moderating events in Austria for many interested groups: amongst others, those in the café at the national radio venue, with students, with homeless people and in prisons;
- Within 'Explorative Learning', six Austrian science centre-like institutions work together, each establishing long-term partnerships with primary schools on inquiry-

based learning. This lighthouse project of the Ministry for Innovation's initiative 'generation innovation' has a strong research component, focusing on changes and learning of children, teachers as well as institutions;

- 'Children exploring Technology' is a mobile theatre project in combination with interactive exhibits, fostering a playful contact with technology for kindergarten children;
- Teacher training institutions get regular input from network partners. Some have already structurally joined forces to systematically integrate science centre activities into the school system.

Today ScienceCenter-Network Austria is a synonym for expertise when it comes to interactive science communication. With its highly successful events and ongoing projects, it provides complementary opportunities and continuous input for the educational system as well as a contribution to 'science in society' aims. Find more information about ScienceCenter-Network, its diverse partners, interesting projects and science centre activities in Austria at www.science-center-net.at.



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