

Thomas Hirth - the final goal is the product

Integrated concepts are the recipe for success for the new director of the Fraunhofer Institute of Interfacial Engineering and Biotechnology IGB in Stuttgart. Hirth himself is a chemist but, during his long Fraunhofer career, he has always managed to successfully integrate neighbouring fields into his projects.

Integration is Prof. Dr. Thomas Hirth's byword. Hirth, 45, is the new director of the Fraunhofer IGB in Stuttgart. He is not only interested in bringing together a broad range of topics, but is particularly keen on involving people and achieving success through teamwork. Hirth is convinced that success only ever comes as a result of working closely together; without teamwork success would not be possible.



Prof. Dr. Thomas Hirth, new director of the Fraunhofer IGB (Photo: IGB)

He sees his role as director of the Fraunhofer IGB as working closely with his staff. Hirth uses a sports metaphor to explain his ideas on teamwork: "I do not visualise my role as that of the coach who stays on the touchline. In football, the captain is the player with the number ten and, like him, I would like to be in the thick of the action," said Hirth. His experience as head of department at the Fraunhofer Institute of Chemical Technology ICT in Pfinztal showed him that visualising his role in this way is the best way to motivate his team.

A leader who stays close to the action

Born in Baden, Hirth has always had an interest in many topics. After his chemistry studies, he included technical issues in his doctorate, which dealt with overcritical fluids. His interest in the

natural sciences was awakened as a schoolchild when he received his first chemistry set. "At the age of fifteen, it was clear that I was going to focus on chemistry when I grew up. Before the final school examination, I changed secondary schools in order to be able to choose an intensive course in chemistry, which unfortunately was not possible at my old school," said Hirth recalling his early interest in chemistry.

After doing his doctorate in physical and technical chemistry at the University of Karlsruhe, he moved just down the road to the Fraunhofer ICT, which is only a few kilometres east of Karlsruhe. There, he worked on process engineering with a major focus on environmental engineering. Barely three years later, he became the head of the Department of Environmental Engineering and turned it into one of the largest departments in the Fraunhofer ICT.

Establishment and further development of the environmental chemistry priority at the Fraunhofer Institute

"When I came to the ICT in 1992, it was oriented towards detonation and combustion research, including research into propellants and explosives. I was in charge of the civil area, which nowadays has three major areas of study – environmental engineering, polymer technology and electrochemistry," said Hirth. He has been working with the IGB in Stuttgart on several levels since 1994. "The number of cooperations has increased gradually over the years. At the beginning, our two institutes worked mainly on joint projects focusing on environmental technology and surface purification. At the beginning of 2000, we started to focus more and more on the field of renewable resources and we have launched a number of cooperative projects with our colleagues in Stuttgart," said Hirth.



Prof. Dr. Thomas Hirth has been with the Fraunhofer Society for 15 years. (Photo: IGB)

Hirth regards the sustainable, industrial use of renewable resources as one of the major topics of the future, and it is an area that very much interests him. Hirth has been coordinating the “industrial white biotechnology” research and innovation area for three years now, which integrates eight Fraunhofer Institutes from all over Germany. Hirth will also continue to coordinate some of his old projects from Stuttgart. These include a BMBF-financed project in which biotechnological processes are used to develop constituents for diverse industrial sectors, from the pharmaceutical industry to the fine chemistry industry.

Leadership, research, education – and remaining human

With the move to Stuttgart, Hirth has taken the decision to expand his teaching activities. He has been lecturing for about 15 years and has been honorary professor at Wiesbaden University of Applied Sciences since 2003. Now he will also be lecturing at the University of Stuttgart. On the 1st

of April, Hirth succeeded Prof. Dr. Herwig Brunner as head of Department of Interfacial Engineering and of the institute of the same name, which, following a restructuring at the university, is now part of the Faculty of Energy Technology, Process Engineering and Biological Engineering.

Despite his many professional activities, Hirth's private and family life is also very important to him. The decision to move to Stuttgart was a joint decision taken by his entire family. "It was a family decision, and this is the only way to manage stress and work," emphasises Hirth, who has three children. The family enjoys doing things together, short trips to Lake Constance and trips to Southern France where Hirth is very fond of the Languedoc region. "Enjoying the countryside and life in general gives me the strength I need to pursue my profession," said Hirth.

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