

Herding cats - experiences at the ILL

Memories and impressions

It's now over 20 years since I left the ILL; for me it was the best workplace I experienced - and also the longest with 15 years. I have very fond memories not only about the ILL's scientific life, but also about its social aspects with 'pots' and Comité d'Entreprise activities. The multicultural environment was a real plus although there were misunderstandings and the frustration experienced in learning French and understanding French administration outside the ILL: indeed, a steep learning curve, but very exciting as well as transforming my life. I must admit that I hated the first six months at the ILL, coming from Germany; I guess it was because everything was so different and you felt so vulnerable. However, after this induction period, I loved it and embraced all aspects of it, including the French way of life. Subsequently, it gave me the taste for change, looking for new challenges and venturing into new environments.

My time in Grenoble

What made my time at the ILL interesting? I think, it was the freedom of exploring new paths, learning multiple aspects of doing research in different fields, including new techniques, as well as dealing with people of different cultural background at different (hierarchical) levels. When I started my 5-year contract on the time-of-flight instrument IN5 (in August 1984) I felt completely out of my depth: no idea about time-of-flight - I'm a crystallographer - and next to no knowledge of French, but trying to deal with a new world of a cultural, administrative and social life. But after a year I really liked the atmosphere with all its variety, including the challenge of participating in the ILL ski cup and playing "balai-ballon" at the Atomiades. My move into scientific coordination (and a permanent job) opened my eyes to the world of research management. Bernard Maier, then the head of the office, taught me a lot before he retired; Diana Dijoux and Katja Mayer-Jenkins supported me through all the years and we are still friends now across continents. Alan Leadbetter, then the scientific director, was a great mentor for me. And not to forget I met my husband, Don Kearley, when we were both working on IN5.

During my time at the ILL, digitalisation was advancing enormously, instrumentally as well as for management tools using databases.

The instrument IN5

For me, the most memorable improvements on IN5 were:

- the four choppers were moved to run on magnetic bearings;
- the detector bank was filled up, including a small-angle detector.
- The introduction of an automated checkup for wavelength and time-of-flight settings at the start of an experiment not only reduced errors in data collection, but it also liberated time to do your own research.
- Introducing the possibility of setting temperature (of cryostats) remotely was also a plus, but seems in this day and time completely trivial.
- One of IN5's problems, compared to other instruments, was dealing with the readout of huge amounts of data at acquisition and their storage. Therefore, in the late 80s, we asked for a Winchester which caused quite an uproar in one of the group meetings as half of the people

thought it was a gun. Actually, probably nowadays even fewer people know that it is a computer-disk technology that permits high-density storage (then ~100MB). We succeeded to get a few disks, but it seems completely hilarious now to discuss this amount of storage as a serious issue.

Scientific coordination

In scientific coordination, the biggest challenge was the introduction of a comprehensive database that was required to deal with the proposal system as well as the user programme, scheduling experiments, collecting experimental reports and similar. In addition, information needed to be connected across departments with regards to reimbursing travel and accommodation of users and subcommittee members. Frequently, the most challenging in this job was not organising the subcommittees, as you may think, but it was getting the schedule from the instrument responsible to send the invitations out to users in time. From a research management perspective, I felt that working with scientists is like herding cats. Certainly, it helped a lot that I have been an instrument responsible and still took on some local-contact duties. Thus, I was mainly successful to get it done smoothly, but I also did not hesitate to find people in their various 'hide-outs' from instrument cabins and labs to cafeteria and canteen. My mantra was interacting with people directly and trying to make the administrative aspects as easily accessible as possible. At the ILL, we were one of the first to introduce web proposals and use mailing lists to disseminate information. I vividly remember attending the first world-wide web conference at CERN in 1994. Actually, this was when I worked at the ESRF (for 18 months during the long ILL shutdown) setting up their user programme and doing their first beamline book: red compared to ILL's yellow book. When I returned to the ILL the collaboration with ESRF continued for a while, but unfortunately the attempt to have joint user administration did not succeed in the long term (due to institutional politics).

Return to the ILL

Full of new ideas and with increased responsibilities (now head of scientific support) I took on external communications. The ILL annual report was changed to a smaller, more scientific format, a new logo was introduced and we launched a science communication programme. I always enjoyed organising workshops and I appreciated that this was my last activity before I left the ILL in 2000 to the Netherlands.

ILL scientists have long been almost exclusively male, so my feminism led me to create a support group called LIS (Ladies in Science) whose symbol was the homophone flower. Jane Brown, one of the very first female scientists at the ILL, was very supportive. Things have since progressed with 30% of women instruments responsible or co-responsible in 2022.

The Netherlands

Moving to the Netherlands, I left neutrons behind and embraced research management, becoming the secretary general of a university alliance, the IDEA League (then comprising Imperial College London, TU Delft, ETH Zürich and RWTH Aachen), but my multicultural experience at the ILL was a great attribute for this job.

Down under

In 2006, I returned to neutrons, at least for a bit, in my final work-place, the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) in Sydney. There are quite some similarities to the ILL, but it is a government institution and turned out to be rather bureaucratic and risk adverse. Finally, I got involved in ANSTO's activities of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) concerning nuclear education in the Asian region. Naively, I thought that I had quite a good multicultural background, but I quickly learned that Asian cultures are much more diverse than European countries which use at least the same characters in writing. Nevertheless, with my 'Euro' English I was alert to misunderstandings, became well accepted and took real pleasure in learning about new cultures. When I became Editor of Neutron News (2008-2013) my connections from ILL times combined with my recently acquired Asian relationships were an enormous plus in getting people to write contributions for the magazine.

Finally

Now, looking back after 15 years in Australia, a 7-year stint in the Netherlands and retired for 3 years, I still find that my years at the ILL, and in France, were the most exciting, transformative and enjoyable part of my life. With ILL's extension for another 10 years, I wish it well; I hope that many people will appreciate its special atmosphere and experience a wonderful time as I had.

October 2021, Herma Büttner