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We all do better when we work together – The international EconBiz Partner Network: Improving research, access to subject information and international cooperation in economics and business studies

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“WE ALL DO BETTER WHEN WE WORK TOGETHER” – THE INTERNATIONAL ECONBIZ PARTNER NETWORK: IMPROVING RESEARCH, ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS STUDIES

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Abstract

The German National Library of Economics (ZBW) runs the subject portal EconBiz.de, one of the largest search-portals for economics and business studies and related subjects. The international EconBiz partner network initiated by the ZBW is a strategic partnership for improving search experiences and various network activities. It enables research institutions and libraries to interact and find solutions for challenges that all or many partners face (e.g. access to information).

This paper will present the idea behind as well as the benefits of the partner-network. The first steps in establishing the network, some detours on the way, lessons learned and plans for the future will be described.

Keywords: Subject portal, international network, networking, collaboration, partnership, academic libraries

Introduction

“We all do better when we work together” is supposedly a quote by Bill Clinton. It may be a platitude but it is also true in many cases.

There is a lot of evidence in the literature as well as on websites commenting on networking that potentially huge benefits are involved. Small Business BC lists the following five general benefits of networking: 1. Shared Knowledge, 2. Opportunities, 3. Connections, 4. Increased confidence, 5. Raising your profile. These general benefits of networking not only apply to businesses but also to networks that have no interest in economic gain. [Small Business BC]

Doz and Hamel go even further when they state: “Strategic partnerships are not only an option but a necessity”. [Doz & Hamel, 1998] In our experience they are not primarily a necessity but an enjoyable way of working together and finding ways to improve tools and services.

In this paper I will describe our subject portal EconBiz and our reasons for and efforts in establishing an international partner network. The motivation for a network will be explained as well as our first steps. Some insights into our detours and lessons learned will also be provided before I describe the benefits we gained from networking.

Background: Leibniz, the ZBW and the Subject Portal EconBiz

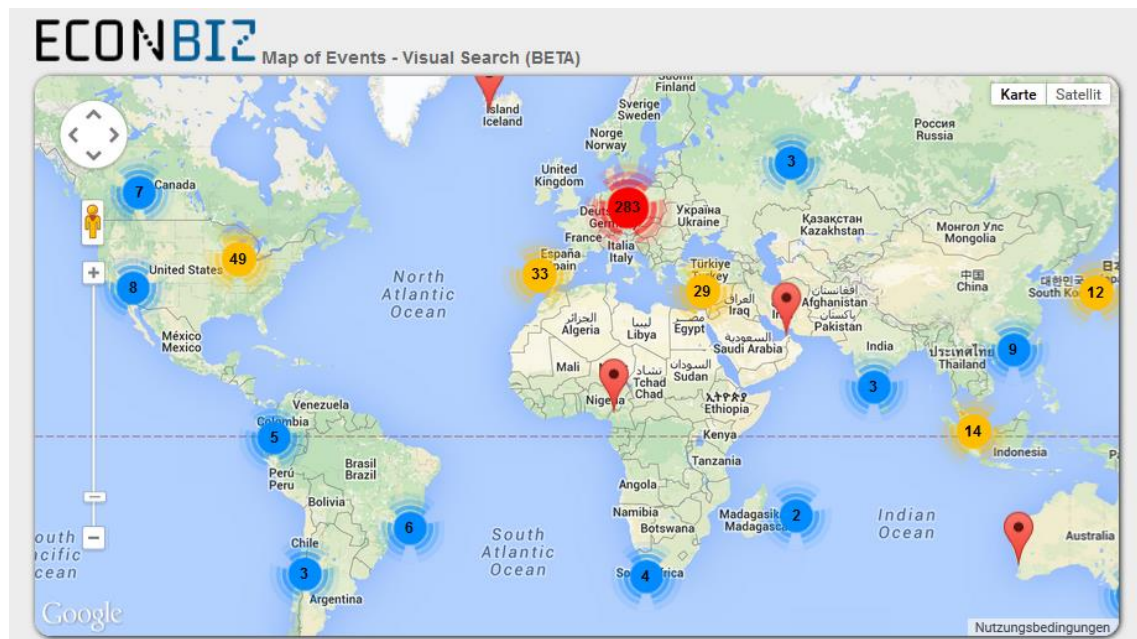
The German National Library of Economics – Leibniz Information Centre for Economics (ZBW) is part of the German Leibniz Association. “The Leibniz Association connects 89 independent

research institutions that range in focus from the natural, engineering and environmental sciences via economics, spatial and social sciences to the humanities. Leibniz institutes address issues of social, economic and ecological relevance. They conduct knowledge-driven and applied basic research, maintain scientific infrastructure and provide research-based services.” [Leibniz-website] As a Leibniz institute the ZBW is a publicly funded institution that is assigned to serve Germany’s research community in economics and business studies. Since Leibniz encourages its member institutions to proceed on an international path and to support the visibility of German research abroad we decided to establish an international partner-network to support these efforts. Since the whole research and publication process becomes more and more international, it is important for the supporting infrastructure institutions to support this process by procuring relevant information from all parts of the world and by staying up to date on international developments.

The ZBW runs the subject portal EconBiz, one of the largest search-portals for economics and business studies and related subjects. EconBiz covers over 9 million title records. About one million of these records are leading to open access full-texts. The portal offers simple and advanced search options as well as faceted filtering. By including the research guide EconDesk into the portal we offer personalized help in the search process via chat, mail or telephone. EconBiz-Apps for iPad, iPhone and Android smartphones are available, although the portal itself has been optimized for mobile use as well.

The most prominent feature of the portal is the search for academic publications. We try to show the best availability options for each result set. In order to do this, we provide links to open access PDFs wherever possible but we also include link resolving systems etc. to show availability in libraries via WorldCat or German referencing and link resolving systems.

The EconBiz calendar of events covers conferences and summer schools etc. in the area of economics and business studies from all over the world in cooperation with Resources for Economists (RFE) by the American Economic Association (AEA). A visual search for events shows the current distribution of future events covered.



Img. 1: EconBiz Visual Search for Events in Economics and Business Studies

The International EconBiz Partner Network

The international EconBiz partner network initiated by the ZBW is a strategic partnership for improving search experiences and various network activities.

It enables research institutions and libraries to interact and find solutions for challenges that all or many partners face (e.g. access to information). Finding partners for potential projects is also an important role of the network.

Events hosted by partners are promoted through the EconBiz calendar of events. This ensures greater visibility for the events and enrichment of the calendar at the same time. The promotion of ZBW's library services and improved visibility of German research in the partner countries is a welcome effect for ZBW whereas the partners gain access to a wealth of quality publications. The partners and ZBW work together to develop the leading portal for subject information in economics and business studies.

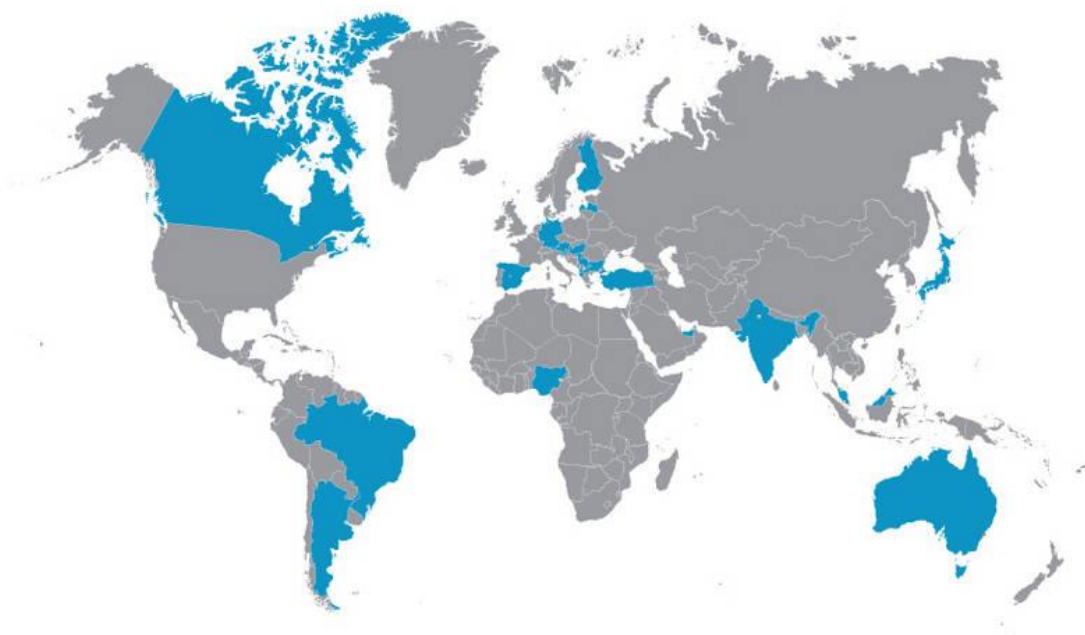
The target groups for the network are university and other research institutes working in the fields of economics and business studies and related fields as well as libraries that cover these subjects.

The Beginnings: Reasons to join the network and early detours

The idea of a partner network evolved at the end of 2011. It took shape in 2012 when the first partner institutions joined. In 2015 the network consists of 23 partners in 23 countries.

The first partners were institutions that were already closely connected with the ZBW. The director of the ZBW also used his personal network to get the network started. During the early days of the network we learned that we to make the benefits of the network transparent to potential partners and their institutions and also to provide some tangible benefits. We produced a first leaflet with reasons on "Why become a partner of the EconBiz network?" Among the reasons listed were the annual student competition as well as a free ticket to the Global Economic Symposium, an event partnered by the ZBW. The option to use the calendar of events to promote conferences etc. from the partners' institutions, regions or countries internationally was another benefit. At the same time our service was improved and made visible in the partner institutions.

In addition, there is always the option to use the network to find partners for joint projects. In some cases the partners also join forces in supervising PhD-thesis etc.



Img. 2: 23 partner countries in 2015

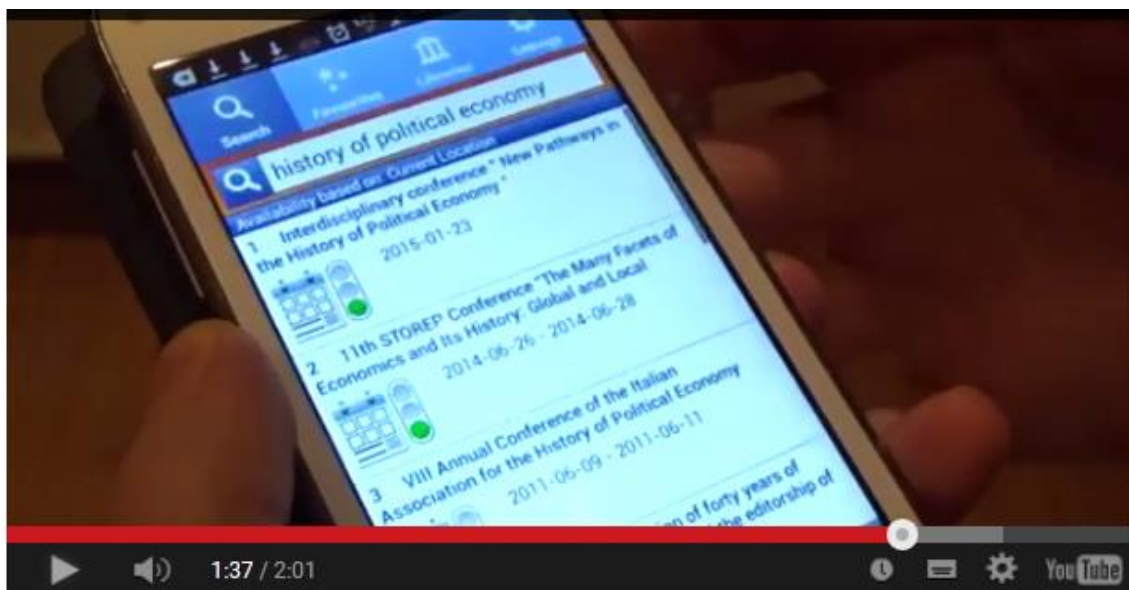
While starting the network the promotion of our search portal was an important point for us. However, access to licensed or printed texts and showing the right options to access the texts were a big challenge. We already knew it was not easy, not even on a national level, to offer a comprehensible way to access non-open-access material. At first it seemed easier to us to offer a separate portal with open access material only to avoid tricky questions of access. We made a copy of our portal, called it EconBiz Open and used it for our international partner network. After a little while we realized that this was confusing not only to our partners but even for ourselves as well, so we abandoned this path and established one portal for all. This portal now has a quite prominent option to select open access material only to spare users from remote areas the frustration of finding a lot of material but finding no way to actually get hold of these publications.

Also, in the first year, we thought about offering different versions of our portal to different partner countries, to use e.g. colors or pictures according to cultural preferences. This idea was never fully developed because the possibility of numerous portals seemed too complex to realize.

The Annual Student Competitions

The student competitions are a way to get students involved with ZBW's services as well as an unobtrusive approach to improve the students' information literacy. When we established the competition in 2013 we were quite ambitious and had several multiple choice questions on how to use the portal and on some aspects of information literacy. We learned that it was better to keep it short and simple in order to get more people involved. The questions should be simple enough to be understood by non-native speakers. Also, in the first year, we asked some questions that required some basic knowledge of search operators or some effort to find the required information. In the second year we reduced the number of questions dramatically and the number of participants rose accordingly. At the moment, it is more important to us to get more people involved and communicate our services. The standards can be raised again when the network and the competition are well established in many countries.

Every year, we also ask the students to be creative. This gives us some very nice presentations etc. that we can use for marketing. These creative parts also make it easier to differentiate between participants who otherwise have the same number of points after answering the questions.



YouTube Clip of Dávid Grüll, 1. International Winner
Img. 3: Winner video of the 2015 competition

Communication in the Network

The annual partner-meetings give all partners the opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss current topics with likeminded institutions and give us insights into the topics that are important for a culturally diverse community. The meetings as well as the annual student competition also provide us with user feedback to improve our services.

One feedback from the first partner meeting was that the partners wanted a facebook group to exchange news etc.



Img. 4: Public Facebook Group

Benefits for ZBW and the Partners

A “Sense of community & legitimacy” and “Communicate with like minded people” are important – yet intangible - networking benefits according to Lake and Erwee. [Lake, 2005] These intangible benefits will always play an important role for the people participating in networks even if they cannot be measured. Of the benefits of networking mentioned in the beginning, the most important ones for us are: Shared Knowledge, Opportunities and Raising our profile.

Apart from helpful user feedback by our partners and the general sharing of knowledge and news the more tangible benefits are marketing aspects or raising our profile within an international community. We not only received some nice marketing ideas from the student competitions. In addition, the partners promote our services in their countries through advertising the competition, through linking to EconBiz, including the search-bar or search-widget into their websites or teaching classes on EconBiz.



Img. 5: Search bar and search widget included in Corvinus University Library website

The linking to EconBiz by our partners is also beneficial in terms of search-engine-optimization (SEO) since the partners are mostly situated in university networks and the big search engines favor websites that are linked to by universities.

Bergquist writes: “When these alliances succeed, they open up whole new worlds for the participating partners: new products and services, new markets, access to resources, smarter ways of doing things.” [Bergquist, 1995] While these benefits seem to be true primarily for businesses, they can also be applied to non-profit-organizations seeking greater visibility and ways to improve their services.

Many of the actual benefits could not be envisioned in detail in the planning of the network. If one of the partners has an idea for a small project or wants to apply for a big project or programme and needs partners from specific countries or regions the network is a means to find potential partners quickly. E.g., one of our partners currently develops a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) and finds it very attractive to be able to use the network to distribute information on the MOOC once it is online.

There seems to be also evidence that networking and innovation are positively linked. [Pittaway et al, 2004] We hope to stay up-to-date on international developments and hot topics in subject related research through our network in order to constantly improve our services.

One of the advantages of our culturally diverse network is that the partners are not competitors in any way. The open exchange of knowledge or of solutions and best practices in different countries can give partners ideas on how to approach specific tasks without the risk of making a competitor stronger. “In fragmented settings like networks, the potential for collaborative advantage depends on the ability of each partner to bring different resources to the group.”

[Saz-Carranza, 2012] Having a common goal of excellent research opportunities but diverse backgrounds and expert knowledge of specific regions or languages etc. gives the partners a good setting for successful cooperation. The partners likewise find it very beneficial to exchange views and solutions or best practices on topics that are relevant to them.

Future developments

We will work on winning new members for our network by contacting researchers, institutions and libraries with a high profile in economics and/or business studies and related subjects.

The EconBiz services will be further enhanced in the future by developments from current projects. One of these projects is the EU-project EEXCESS designed to bring the content to the user without the user necessarily looking for specific content. [EEXCESS website] Visualization techniques and recommender systems are important aspects of EEXCESS. Features developed in the project will be included in the EconBiz portal and EconBiz content will be pushed through EEXCESS recommenders. We will use our growing partner network to bounce ideas on EEXCESS and other developments to get the partners to try out features etc. and also to act as content providers if possible.

Conclusion

“Collaboration is most likely to succeed when people and organizations connect with one another in a sense-making process that does justice to the relevant interests and is targeted at a significant ambition. The major challenge is to create enabling conditions for this.” [Kaats & Opheij, 2014] We hope to be able to do this with our network.

The establishment of an international partner network proved to be very beneficial for us and we would like to encourage other institutions in similar situations to also establish their own networks or - if applicable - to join our network.

Acknowledgements

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EconBiz Visual Search for Events in Economics and Business Studies:
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EconBiz calendar of events: <http://www.econbiz.de/Events/Results>

EconBiz-Apps: <http://www.econbiz.de/eb/en/econbiz-mobile/>

EconBiz Partner Network: <http://www.econbiz.de/eb/en/about/econbiz-partner-network/econbiz-partner-network/>

EconBiz International Student Competition: <http://www.econbiz.de/eb/en/about/econbiz-partner-network/student-competition/>, ; video URL of winner video 2015: <https://youtu.be/sjHtdlSXk4>

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