

Press releases 2010

"For me, the future starts today" - an interview with Johann-Dietrich Wörner, Chairman of the DLR Executive Board

25 November 2010



Johann-Dietrich Wörner, Chairman of the DLR Executive Board. Credit: DLR.

The German Aerospace Center's (Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt; DLR) highest management body, the Senate, will be in session on 25 November 2010 in Braunschweig for its Annual General Meeting. The DLR Senate consists of 33 members drawn from the worlds of science, business and industry, as well as representatives of state institutions. During the meetings, the DLR Executive Board will report to the Senate on the activities of the past year, decisions will be taken and the direction for the coming year will be set out. On the occasion, we interviewed Johann-Dietrich Wörner, Chairman of the DLR Executive Board.

Mr. Wörner, you have been the Chairman of DLR for almost four years. Where do you see yourself and DLR itself at the present time?

The DLR Senate meeting in Stuttgart four years ago nominated me as Chairman. At the time, I really had only a vague idea of what I was getting myself into, and I was worried if I would be up to the job. I was also concerned whether, as a civil engineer, I would be able to gain the trust of DLR experts and find my way in such a completely new environment. And I'm sure I wasn't the only one to have such doubts! As for myself, I can give a very positive answer to the question about my position. I was made very welcome and I enjoy my work in and on behalf of DLR enormously. I hope that I have succeeded so far, and that I will continue to make a relevant contribution to DLR – particularly in the development and definition of DLR's new corporate strategy in collaboration with all DLR staff, which will have an effect over the long term. The positioning of our interdisciplinary research activities, our 'DLR@UNI' university cooperation project and our graduate programme are just a few components of this strategy, which is close to my heart.

Is there anything that particularly fascinates you?

I was always fascinated by aeronautics and spaceflight – and this is what DLR stands for, but I was fascinated as well by the general mission of bringing research and space agency activities together under one roof. Our complex aeronautics, space, energy, transport and security research programmes are more fascinating to me now than ever. But also the cultural aspects of DLR, especially the people,

working in so many areas, and their commitment to discovering new things and developing, building and managing new systems, never cease to excite me.

What has been the biggest challenge in your work as Chairman?

In the beginning it was certainly the need to understand DLR, its people, structures and processes. My fellow directors, and also many other colleagues, made this first, essential step much easier for me. Then there was – and is – the challenge of positioning DLR as a whole, and continuing to develop its autonomy with clearly-defined goals.

And if you glimpse into the future - where do you think DLR will be in ten years?

Our new strategy lays out this perspective. In short, we want to position DLR nationally and internationally as an architect and key partner in all our areas of expertise and we want to cooperate as equal partners with other Space Agencies and research organisations around the world.



DLR: Knowledge for tomorrow. Credit: DLR.

Do you still have time to think about your vision, given your daily commitments? How much of the visionary aspect of your work is truly realistic?

The Management Board is certainly concerned with imagining the future – we discuss these matters regularly, and not just with DLR's Institute and Division Heads. However, the trick is to find the right balance between what is desirable and what is feasible. Visions that are too remote or utopian are not motivating; they can even have a discouraging effect. On the other hand, if we do not formulate challenging goals, no goal-oriented, motivating developments are possible. Visions also form the basis for strategies.

What does the term 'strategy' mean to you?

The purists have a clear definition for it; a strategy consists of tactics, vision and mission. For me, a strategy sets out a future direction and answers the questions: What are we? What do we want to be? What must we do to be what we want to be?

What is your strategy?

For me, there are several aspects of key importance. DLR is a research Center, a Space Agency and a Project Management Agency at the same time. 'One DLR' stands for the unity of our various areas of activity and research – our research themes – for unified quality standards and quality assurance, for a DLR-wide human resources policy and for an appropriate level of transparency. And we mustn't forget the title and positioning of DLR to be an architect for aeronautics and space, as well as an expert on energy and transport issues, and our cross-program, integrated security research.

Strategy is always a matter of vision and the future. What does 'future' mean for you?

For me, the future begins today. DLR's slogan 'Knowledge for tomorrow' expresses this perfectly. Today, we are developing knowledge; the concept of 'knowledge' includes information, processes, products and management. The temporal part of the expression refers to 'tomorrow', which is immediately ahead of us, and on the other hand, is also oriented towards the more distant future.

Every year DLR starts and completes projects and missions. What was the highlight of last year, from your point of view?

One highlight? That would not do justice to DLR. Certainly, our activities in relation to the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjalla got a lot of attention. But the flight of the Antares powered glider with a fuel cell as its energy source, the maiden flight of our A320 ATRA research plane, the recent first measurement flight of the HALO atmosphere research aircraft, the successful launch of the TanDEM-X satellite mission with its sensational formation flying, our research into cryobrine on Mars – brine deposits that might support life – the SOFIA mission in partnership with NASA and its first observation flight ... and there's so much more to tell! And that's what makes DLR what it is and what makes it so exciting for me – a wide range of activities and outstanding science.

DLR doesn't go about its business in an ivory tower; it has to deal with new challenges every day. What problems is it facing at this time?



SOFIA over the NASA Dryden Aircraft Operations Facility in Palmdale

The much-used phrase 'there are no problems, only challenges' is particularly true for us. Our position in international competition combined with our use of partnerships and collaborations means that DLR has to set itself a policy of invention and innovation. The tools for this are programme and investment management, and also a number of support processes. In our relations with the outside world, I also hope that we will be able to ease some of the external restrictions on our work, in order to better fulfil our mandate.

You were President of the Technical University of Darmstadt; today you're the head of the biggest German research organisation. In both cases, cooperation with business was essential. What interdependence do you see between science and industry?

Although competition provides a demonstrable increase in performance, in my opinion, relations between business and science should always also have a collaborative, partnership-based component. In our different roles, we can make significant contributions to solving global problems together.

In your work there are other relationship networks. What role should politics play in science?

The bottom line is that the demand on science to research, discover and develop as actively as possible needs institutional and individual freedom to create new ideas through motivation, competence and creativity. In some areas, and this includes aeronautics, space, energy, transport and security, there may also be political and strategic goals. The challenge for political stakeholders and decision makers is to define these goals in such a way that the political will is evident, but the necessary freedom is not unduly reduced. Politically defined strategy statements, which set out general goals and guides, are more demanding and difficult, but also more meaningful than detailed requirements and guidelines for individual cases.



TanDEM-X and TerraSAR-X flying in formation

Does DLR have to adapt, or in other words, does it have to obey the requirements of society – openness versus the ivory tower?

The proverbial ivory tower crops up from time to time during discussions, and often in combination with the statement: "that's too academic" – to disparage scientific work. This refers to an apparent lack of an immediately practical application. But experience shows that this division between fundamental and applied research and development is based on an unrealistic – and unscientific – view of the matter. Even the very academic Theory of Relativity has proved its practical value on many occasions. If we were unaware of the relationships between gravitation, space and time, our satellite navigation systems would suffer from massive position errors. The same will be true of many current areas of research, whose future importance cannot be foreseen.

Some personal questions before we close:

What is the difference between a DLR Executive Board member and a DLR employee?

I've actually never asked myself that question! (laughs) Both are expected to perform their work in the service of the organisation. The board members are responsible for the whole of DLR, whereas an employee is only responsible for his or her current task. But obviously, the contribution of each employee is of the greatest importance to the entire organisation. I personally hope that all our employees are genuinely interested in DLR as a whole.

What if a genie turned up to grant you three wishes?

I've only got two. First, I want to continue doing this fascinating, exciting work at DLR to the satisfaction of all my colleagues and the outside world, so that the work of the organisation can continue. And second, I wish to be able to push through our strategic goals politically, where necessary, while maintaining DLR's operational autonomy.

Are you sure there are only two?

Well, if the genie is still around, I would have one more wish. I want to be able to fulfil the first two wishes together with my colleagues on the Board, and still have some time to spend with my family.

Related Contacts

Andreas Schütz

Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt (DLR) - German Aerospace Center
Corporate Communications, Spokesman
Tel: +49 2203 601-2474
Mobile: +49 171 3126466
Fax: +49 2203 601-3249
E-Mail: andreas.schuetz@dlr.de

Contact details for image and video enquiries as well as information regarding DLR's terms of use can be found on the DLR portal imprint.