

GerBI Core Facility Management Course for Imaging Specialists

A Tailor-Made Soft Skills and Leadership Training for Scientists in Core Facilities

On June 23rd through 27th 2014, the second German BioImaging Core Facility Management Course for Imaging Specialists took place on the World Heritage Site Reichenau Island close by Konstanz, Germany. German BioImaging has hired hfp consulting to develop and conduct a 3.5 day workshop which focuses on the specific demands of core facility managers that come along with this complex profession and are typically not part of traditional scientific training curricula.

German BioImaging (GerBI) is a nationwide network of German imaging core facilities and research groups, which is currently supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG). It was initiated in 2010 with the aim of fostering interaction and exchange of information within the German bioimaging community (Imaging & Microscopy 4/2012). More and more imaging core facilities have been established during the last years to provide access to expensive and complex instruments such as advanced light microscopes for all scientists. The position of core facility leaders is not as established and well defined as that of e.g. professors and principal investigators, and positions are filled with scientists or technicians who have different career backgrounds and work at different levels of independence. Tasks of core facility staff include

instrument maintenance, the provision of access, service, and training for the users and management of the facility budget. Typically, between 50 and 300 core facility users per year are facilitated in their research thanks to the scientific advice of facility personnel who helps them planning their projects, preparing samples correctly, carrying out the actual microscopy experiment and also analysing and interpreting the obtained image data. In some institutes the costs of imaging core facilities are partially covered by user fees.

The German BioImaging Workgroup „Staff Training“ was formed in 2012 to develop continuing education programmes for imaging core facility staff. Amongst others, a „Job Shadowing“ initiative, and technical courses organized together with microscope manufacturers were established. Furthermore, GerBI hired „hfp consulting“ to develop and conduct the „GerBI Core Facility Management Course for Imaging Specialists“. In preparation of the course, GerBI representatives and the trainer team of „hfp consulting“ analyzed together the diverse career paths and working environments of imaging core facility leaders. Financial and administrative aspects of core facility management were also discussed and included into the course programme. hfp consulting is a worldwide

leading provider of tailor-made leadership training for researchers. Teams in Europe, Israel and the USA are specializing in helping scientists in leadership positions to be better managers, communicators, and mentors. During the workshop for imaging specialists, professional challenges such as the diverse role definitions of facility managers, conflicts with users, difficult negotiations with suppliers or within the organization, budgeting or calculating fees are addressed. Participants have the opportunity to collegially exchange about best practices and acquire new skills they can implement immediately after the course in their work environment.

A first course for scientists working or planning to work in a German imaging core facility took place in October 2013. The second course, which was extended by half a day as recommended by the trainers and participants of the first course, took place in June 2014 and was open to all nationalities.

The underlying motivation for attending such a course was very nicely described by Dr. Nicolas Dross (Nikon Imaging Center, University of Heidelberg), one of the 2014 course participants: „Having no problem with advanced optical microscopy techniques, maintaining the various systems, testing equipment performance or organizing and teaching microscopy



Fig. 1: A group of course participants present their business model.



Fig. 2: Representatives of two groups of participants are conducting negotiations about the appointment of new core facility staff.

courses, I find it however hard to organize and balance my other roles in the facility, in particular administrative work. During my academic formation, I was never taught the basics of administration or business economics, nor given the ability to learn how to effectively delegate tasks, negotiate with companies and users, or to establish facility management needs and priorities. [...] However, those are key skills needed these days to manage a large, heavily-used core facility, which are a must for facility staff members.”

Course participants were of different levels of experience: some had been heads of core facilities for many years, others worked as facility staff, and some were postdocs who were planning to work in an imaging core facility. Topics were approached practically. Short theoretical inputs were followed by extensive exercises. To take a concrete example, after a short theory unit of business models, participants were divided into small groups and had to elaborate their own business model which they then presented to the other participants as shown in figure 1. A few months after Dr. Christian Kukat had attended the course in 2013, he was appointed the head of the FACS & Imaging Core Facility of the MPI for Biology of

Ageing in Cologne: „My first task was to elaborate a business plan for the not yet existing facility, and the course helped me greatly to comply.“

Another concrete example is shown in figure 2: Representatives of two groups of participants are conducting negotiations about the appointment of new core facility staff. Before, each group together with one trainer had elaborated a negotiation strategy. One group overtook the role of the core facility head. Its aim was to convince the institute’s administration to hire an additional person. The other group prepared the strategy of the institute’s administration.

The courses achieved a superb evaluation result. Most participants rated the course as „excellent“, and found that it was of highest relevance to their professional development. Comments by the participants include that they liked „the exchange with people who are in a similar position“ or that the workshop „covers most aspects needed to manage a core facility“. Furthermore, participants reported that when facing a difficult situation months after the workshop, such as a conflict in the team, they „went back to the handout to read how the conversation should be done“.

The next course will take place from 8-12 June 2015 on Reichenau Island located on Lake Constance.

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