

Big data doesn't have to be stressful

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Experts from Magdeburg host systems for universities and teaching worldwide at SAP UCC

"A tennis player trains in clothing made from technical textiles with integrated sensors. The sensors provide data on his sequence of movements. If intelligent programs evaluate this data, including individual parameters for the sportsman in real time, the result can be put to targeted use in the same training unit in the interests of optimising of his movements." – The description set out by Stefan Weidner of the SAP University Competence Center Magdeburg may not yet be a reality, but it could become one soon. "Databases work exceptionally quickly with the products from the German software group SAP," explains Weidner, who has a degree in computer science, before he emphasizes: "These days, it isn't just the major companies and IT experts that are using big data, but almost everyone."

A SAP service for academic education

Most researchers, in this case sports scientists from Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg, don't have to use sophisticated IT programs and floods of data, but can advance their own specialist fields with their own expertise – thanks to the SAP University Competence Center, or SAP UCC for short. "We provide IT systems that have been developed for the exclusive purpose of research and teaching and focus on all of the administrative matters," explains Stefan Weidner. Weidner is the commercial director of the SAP UCC at the Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg. Of six centres of this kind in the world, Magdeburg is by far the biggest. "We are big because we are competent," proclaims Weidner.

An all-around no worries package

He can still remember his time as a student in Magdeburg in the 1990s: "The SAP courses were often cancelled because the lecturers couldn't cope with operating the sophisticated computer technology in addition to providing teaching on the complex subject matter," he explains, before telling us that it was scientists from Magdeburg who actively supported the initial idea of the software development firm SAP from Baden Württemberg: the founding of SAP Service Centers for vocational and academic education. The Service Centers have the task of managing all the tasks associated with the IT systems so that the teachers and students can focus on their respective specialist fields. "IT departments in major companies outsource a considerable amount of their SAP operations in central, professionally operated computing centres. Transferring similar structures to universities was a forward-looking idea which couldn't, however, be adopted from the commercial sphere on a one-to-one basis," explains Stefan Weidner, taking an example: "In the world of business, one member of staff works on one order or an invoice after another. In a learning situation, 20 or more students simulate the same process simultaneously. Without a sophisticated teaching concept, this means every system is overstretched."

In 2001, SAP, the American (USA) IT firm Hewlett Packard Enterprise, the local subsidiary of T-Systems and the Otto von Guericke University (OVGU) Magdeburg founded one of the first SAP University Competence Centers. Convinced of its necessity in the early years of the digital revolution, the professors from the Faculty of Information Technology at the OVGU pushed ahead with the development of the centre. "Until 2007, we only oversaw German customers. Nowadays, the customers include educational institutions in Europe, the Middle East and Africa," explains Stefan Weidner, before telling us that the users amount to some 150,000 students and 4,000 lecturers from specialist fields that use large volumes of data: economists, sports scientists, engineers, IT experts, medics, geologists ... The users also include industrial customers who are involved in research projects.

From big data to smart data

The SAP all-around no worries packages are by being created by 30 Data Scientists in Magdeburg. Is the job of Data Scientist a new profession in the digital era? Weidner tells us that the extraction of knowledge and the creation of added value from data are, in fact, new challenges that the industry 4.0 and the internet of things have brought in their wake. "The next level up from big data is smart data. Machines and things communicating with one another without including people." It was on the basis of this premise that the SAP University Competence Center Magdeburg made its name as the first SAP Big Data Innovation Center in 2014.

"We are also responsible for developing teaching resources and learning environments which genuinely make big data interesting and understandable," explains Weidner, and in this sense, his target group isn't just students. At information events and appearances at trade fairs, anyone who is interested is welcomed into the new and unfamiliar world of data. And it's a world that's also exciting, because the team led by Stefan Weidner is full of creative ideas surrounding the topic of "Digitisation at your fingertips".

Digitisation at your fingertips

The SAP University Competence Center Magdeburg is attending the CeBIT in Hanover this year with a digital manufacturing system in a modular format. Their design partner is the company Fischertechnik GmbH, which has been focusing on the latest technical developments as topics for its modular design kits for several years, and which have long since found enthusiastic use beyond children's bedrooms and in schools as well as the worlds of education and research.

"With the example of a bicycle computer, we can demonstrate how digitisation is also driving individualisation," says Marcel Himburg. As a Research Associate at the UCC, the digital manufacturing system is the kind of development project that he oversees. The customer enters their choice of colour on their smartphone – and then, everything runs as if by magic: a vacuum crane collects the blank from the warehouse. This is followed by the painting, drying, quality control and delivery – or rejection in the event of failure. The system communicates with itself and also corrects itself if an error occurs. Of course, it isn't steered by itself, but by SAP. The Magdeburg service team also plays a role: "We also stage faults in order to demonstrate how effectively the system manages errors," explains Marcel Himburg with a smile. www.sap-ucc.com

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