

# Living work and organizational psychology: A practitioner's retrospect and look ahead

Interview with Ute Schmidt-Brasse, founder of EWOP InPractice

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## Introduction and about the interviewee

Late October I had the honour of interviewing Ute Schmidt-Brasse here in the offices of Black Box / Open (BBO), Nürnberg, Germany. Ute had travelled 250 kilometres to see us from her home, and she was curious to see how Nürnberg had changed since she had lived and worked there in the 1970s for the Siemens company.

Ute is an enthusiastic work and organizational psychologist the retired owner of PSYCON Psychological Consultants Germany. Ute received her diploma in psychology majoring in Occupational Psychology at Munich University in 1973 and was certified as a Chartered Psychologist by the Professional Association of German Psychologists (BDP) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie (DGPs) as a Work, Business and Organizational Psychologist in 1990 (when this charter was created). In 1997 she was awarded a distance learning Total Quality Management certificate from the University of Kaiserslautern.

Ute put her academic training into reality by working as an employed psychologist in industry for several years before establishing herself under her logo PSYCON (Psychological Consultants) in 1988, specialising in personnel, team and organizational development, coaching and intercultural training. She worked with both large and small companies from heavy industry, chemistry, banking, insurance, as well as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and charitable organizations – across all organizational levels. She also served as assistant lecturer with several German and East European universities. It was always crucial to her, in her work, to link practical application with up-to-date academic theory. From 1992 onwards she regularly participated in national and international conferences resulting in shared work reports and contributions to several books and articles. She was active until 2014 when she retired.

Since 1973 Ute has been engaged in the BDP Occupational Psychology section serving regionally and nationally. She was one of the German founding members of EAWOP and filled different functions within EAWOP (Executive Committee, Task Forces and founding and producing special issues of InPractice). In 2005 Ute was elected an Honourable member of the Ukrainian Association of Organizational and Work Psychologists, and in 2013 an Honorary Member of The Polish Association of Organizational Psychology. In 2008 she became an Honorary member of the section Work and Organizational Psychology of the BDP.

Ute has attended all the EAWOP congresses, being keenly involved in many activities, especially those involving practitioners. She is the co-founder of InPractice and in the interview you will hear about how the journal began.

Prior to the interview wanting to make this an interactive experience we introduced the BBO staff members describing their studies, position, tenure, and fields of interest. Ute introduced herself describing her career starting from studying Psychology in Munich, working in several (international) organizations and founding EAWOP and InPractice. We brainstormed questions with Mrs. Schmidt-Brasse noting these on the white wall and clustering them into themes (see Figure 1). These were: EAWOP; career path; advice for young consultants, managing challenging situations and favourite methods of working.

*Keywords:* work and organizational psychology, history of EAWOP, formation of InPractice, advice for young consultants, good working practice, the consultancy cycle, workplace change, career path

## The interview

**Colin:** *Today we have an honoured guest; Ute Schmidt-Brasse. You are warmly welcome here at BBO. It's a great pleasure to talk to you as you are the founder of InPractice; and we are now in the 15th edition. In this interview I would like to talk about getting in touch with EAWOP about practitioner events, about InPractice in general, and also about your work and your life as an organizational psychologist.*

*OK, first, I would be interested in how did you become a work and organizational psychologist?*

**Ute:** Well, I studied psychology and specialised in work and organizational psychology. I had the possibilities to do that because it was not very common at that time. When I started, in 1972, work and organizational psychology was a very new thing, with only one place where you could study, in Munich. Here at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, I studied with Professor Arthur Mayer and his team (Oswald Neuberger, Lutz von Rosenstiel and Karl Berkel). I also had the chance to attend lectures in work and engineering psychology at the Technical University, Munich. We were not too many people on the programme, and we got to know each other well; studying and eating together. This was one of the things that was very interesting for me because I really could take part in things and be involved with the Institute.

Figure 1  
Interviewing Ute (with permission)



**Colin:** *Can you tell me what drew you to wanting to work with the people in the first place; and how this influenced your practice?*

**Ute:** I always was interested in the different reactions of people to their surroundings and how they could be influenced to improve communication and cooperation. When I began working with a company I used to walk through the premises to meet people, so that I knew what they were doing, how they felt and what their language and their surroundings were like. I wanted to know *what they do*, *what they tell each other*, what is missing for them and what is angering them. All of these things I noted and used as a reminder for me.

I liked to spend my first day in any organization working with the people there; I got to know more about what is happening that way. Normally, I went with a superior and followed them wherever we went in their normal practice, and I had a look to what the employees did, and I listened to how they spoke. I also tried to understand what

techniques and processes were being used; and what they were working on. But, of course, they were the specialists!

In another company I worked with the people directly on a production line for 14 days. I got involved in their work process; making electrical equipment for washing machines. This way I really knew what they did, and how it felt, how it smelled and all these things. It was really interesting. Each person had their different job to do, and part to play in the process; and I had to get into that. And of course, I had to be quick, otherwise I would have slowed them all down on the production line. Not only did I work with the employees I was dressed like them, arrived at the beginning of the shift, and left at the end of the shift. Sometimes we went to have a drink together afterwards or something like that; so, I really joined in with this group. The production manager and his engineers were very impressed by this strategy because they saw that people got to know me and to trust me, and they started to ask me why certain things were happening in the workplace. This was really about trust building, which is very important for the psychologist. What was interesting to see was that many people don't think a psychologist is practical at all.

**Colin:** *That's a very good point. We have already put together some ideas that we would like to talk about. I kind of destroyed the procedure because it was one of the last questions – your advice for young consultants. I think it's a very good advice to give a young consultant to do exactly that: first, be part of the staff, mingle among the staff, talk to them, get in touch. So, what other advice would you give a young consultant?*

**Ute:** Firstly, not to give the impression that you think you are better than them. I think that's very important, not to be over-powering or over-bearing. Uh, I am just one of you – and I'm not better or more learned; because they know their work much better than you do. Also, to acknowledge that what they do is important so they really think we can do it together. That way you get to your goal much quicker than you would do otherwise. They must not feel like they are being taught; they must really feel they are being involved.

**Colin:** *Interesting, so even if you have an academic background and studied many complex things, it is important not let other people feel you have learned more than them; or have more insights into what is going on.*

**Ute:** Yeah, it's a bit difficult because they expect they will learn something from you. So, you should not show "Well, I'm better". But of course, on the other hand, they know

that I'm paid to offer knowledge and experience to help improve work performance. It's important to build understanding that what I bring is good for them. This will mean improvements afterwards, for instance, in method or strategy, or how to work and behave; because sometimes they have no strategy, and they just want to carry on doing what they have always done. But first, there must be appreciation; I'm a human being like you. And then, this is something I can bring to you, and you bring me other things, and together we will have valuable insights about your work.

**Colin:** *I get the concept and I experience similar things to give added value to the organization. It's all about valuing people and bringing some new ingredients into the organization that people can take and learn and thrive.*

*I would like to go back to the reason why we're here today. I'm a co-editor of In Practice and I'm very happy that we can talk about the origin of the journal. The first thing I would be interested in is how did you get in touch with EAWOP and when that was?*

**Ute:** I think it was in the late 1980s.

**Colin:** *How many people were involved in EAWOP at that time?*

**Ute:** Robert Roe from the Netherlands, of course, and Karel de Witte from Belgium and later José Peiro from Spain and quite a lot of other people. I got there standing in for Helmut Methner who was head of the Occupational Psychology section of the BDP at that time; and was engaged and responsible for the German input. There were several meetings that he was not able to attend so I went instead of him. And uh, well, I stayed there for quite a long time after that.

**Colin:** *Was that at one of the bi-annual congresses?*

**Ute:** No, this was before those 'official' bi-annual congresses – they were just meetings that today you might call a 'Task Force': collecting, considering, discussing suggestions and plans in order to attain a common goal: to build a European Association for Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP). There were only three country associations represented at the beginning: Britain, The Netherlands and Germany – and additionally France. Some of these meetings became two-country conferences (e.g., German-Dutch, French-German). There had been previous conferences in Nijmegen, The Netherlands (1983), Aachen, Germany (1985), Antwerp, Belgium (1987) and Cambridge, UK (1989). It was at a conference in Rouen, France in 1991 when the preparing group put this all together; and this was the official start of EAWOP.

There were several arguments as you would imagine: about the official language of the association (English), with discussion of second and third languages (French and German, but this would have been too expensive to translate all the sessions); and the cost of membership (too expensive for some countries compared to their available resources). These were dark points in the history of the founding, trying to keep every country association on side. Unfortunately, we lost some of the French colleagues, who wished to concentrate on the French speaking Association Internationale de Psychologie du Travail de Langue Française (AIPTLF).

**Colin:** *My first EAWOP Congress was in 2013 in Münster, and although InPractice already existed, it was only later I found out that there was as a journal for practitioners. Perhaps you can tell me about how the journal started.*

**Ute:** Yes, EAWOP already had one journal; but I must go back a bit further. EAWOP is an organization in its foundation made for both academics and practitioners, in order to stimulate the co-operation between scientists and practitioners working in Europe in the field of work and organizational psychology. But if you look closely, you always see many more academics than practitioners. For quite a time Henry Honkanen from Finland and I were the only practitioners in the Executive Committee (EC); for about eight years. Then Angela Carter joined the group, and she was half a scientist and half practitioner. Both of us wanted something that serves the practitioners: that was the roots for InPractice. EAWOP's EC asked me to think over what we could do and how it could be done. At first, I was on my own, but then Angela came to help me with her views. I had one intern with me at that time and together the three of us started to pin down ideas and actions which I presented at the next EC meeting. We had a suggestion for the logo, too. Well, it was a bit different to how it is to now, but you must start somewhere.

I had the thought that this journal could be something which brings academics and practitioners together in common tasks. For example, a practitioner activity of mine could be examined by an academic colleague; we could discuss it and they could give advice or offer some measurement to support my work. Or the other way round: I would try to apply their theoretical input and we would evaluate the outcomes. In this way there could be a discussion between theory and practice which hitherto had been missing. The bridge over the gap is not always there. I had suffered some bad experiences in this direction, and so I thought it was important to bring theory and practice together and make them work together and benefit from each other.

**Colin:** *This is a strong and important perspective, and I can assure you that the energy you put in with Angela is still there. There are a lot of things going on in this direction. For example, in 2019, when we had our last conference in Turin, we had a large kind of Bar camp; an open space event.*

**Ute:** Yes, I was there, and we met.

**Colin:** *So, you know that we try to get a lot of people together. Turin was successful, and people were telling us at the next congress we should do a larger event. This is the Science + Practice stream (S+P) that you will see in Glasgow on Thursday 13 January.*

**Ute:** Yes, but it's quite new; and we have been a little apart from each other for a long time. But I have the impression that it's really getting better, and academics and practitioners are understanding that they need each other. Because if an academic creates theories and doesn't put them into practice, they don't know the value of their theory; or should they continue with it or not? On the other hand, some practitioners may forget what they learned in their studies at university and do not keep in touch with theory and will just do what they think their clients want or think would be practical. I really don't think this is the job of a practitioner. They should be a scientifically trained person all the time; but not a scientist; and they should not forget that. And this must be the measure of their success as a practitioner.

**Colin:** *So, we are talking about the importance of evidence-based practice. Looking at our questions I would like to ask you what is your most favourite method you've applied?*

**Ute:** Well, it is the Problem-Solving Process. The idea is several years old, and although I haven't used it for a while its eight stages are still with me: a) analyse the situation; b) define your goal; c) look for alternatives; d) specify the goal to follow; e) execute the necessary paths; f) check and control; g) verify your results; and h) evaluate and give feedback.

I always tried to teach people this process and to follow it closely. But there are several 'light' versions by different people that are shorter and quicker processes; and they look smarter. This is when they don't think about situation and goal thoroughly and only a three-part circle emerges (task, execution and verification); and this is not enough. If you use the shorter approach you won't get to where you could get.

**Colin:** *So, it's like you will not be able to finish a triathlon if you just swim? And that probably applies to a lot of methods that if you take a shortcut, you will leave out something very important.*



**Ute:** Yes, I think the most forgotten thing is evaluation, in my view.

**Colin:** *We experience this quite often, when we have a workshop atmosphere, and everybody's engaged and energised; with lists of things and goal definitions. And then the next day, at work, with all the appointments, Zoom calls and team meetings; these plans just dissolve.*

**Ute:** I once made an experiment. I asked the owners of a company "Do you think that all your managers know what the company goal is"? They said "Yes, they all are working for it". Well, I said, "No, I don't think they know". We argued for a bit: and I suggested this activity. We asked all the employees write down what the goal of the company was and how to achieve it. The results were very interesting: There was no one set of statements that agreed. They mainly had something to do with goals, but none about how they should be met.

**Colin:** *We would get a similar thing if we asked some people in an organization what is their purpose? If you asked three different people you would get three different purposes or none, sometimes.*

**Ute:** Then you mustn't wonder that employees are not engaged with what they do and how they are directed towards the company's goals. It's not possible...

**Colin:** *So, the Problem-Solving Process is the idea behind the full range of goal setting; to include evaluating and redesign. If this is one of your favourite working models; what is your least favourite?*

**Ute:** Well, there are quite a lot of 'in vogue' things which I can't bear. I try to forget them as soon as I can.

**Colin:** *Let's look at another interesting question on the board: You've been in the arena of applying work in organizational psychology for how many years?*

**Ute:** Well, since 1973, when I made my exams.

**Colin:** *So, it's almost 50 years back...*

**Ute:** Well, in the last years I did not do so much....

**Colin:** *Let's call it four decades; that's a long time. My conclusion is that you liked it very much because you have done it for so many years.*

**Ute:** You are right – and I would do it again...

**Colin:** *Great, this links to another question. What would you have liked to change in your career?*

**Ute:** I would have liked to have been more part of the company and not a consultant from outside. I think I could do more important things and give more important stimuli if I was in the company because I would have known more about the processes and what happens. If you come from outside, you are not really a member of the process; you only look at cuttings and not the whole. I also would have liked to be in the company to be a valued part of it. Sadly, quite a lot of companies don't value what psychologists can offer.

**Colin:** *Yes, I get that it's not your motivation to be a fashion figure, a decoration of the management office. I agree also with the doubts you have, too. I once asked my mentor Klaus Moser, when I was early in my career, do you think I should be a consultant? Would it not be better if I would start in an organization and worked there for 15 years and then become something? He said, I understand your perspective; but it's a matter of sample size. If you begin as a consultant, you're going to meet a lot of organizations, see many different perspectives, maybe not so deep, but still, you have the chance to get in touch with many organizations. While, if you start one organization, your sample size would just be one. This helped me to overcome that inner conflict.*

**Ute:** With me, I was in three companies before I was a freelance consultant. I think that was good, because of course, you get quite a lot of perspectives and learn how to help people solve their problems and so on. But afterwards, I think I would have liked to go back into a company and...

**Colin:** *Changed it from the inside out?*

**Ute:** Yes, yes. If it is necessary, of course.

**Colin:** *But to be a member of the organization and to be a part of the change.*

**Ute:** Yeah. Because I think you get more trust if you apply these methods – and at the same time, you suffer the same. Otherwise, they could say: *"Ja, die hat gut reden und muss es nicht selber durchmachen!"* ("Well, she can tell us much but needs not go through it!")

Further, psychologists must understand the business perspective. I remember one top manager who said to me: *"Say it in money – say it in dollars!"* That was the management perspective. And of course, as a consultant, you must think this way, too.

**Colin:** *What I find particularly difficult, and maybe our readers find it difficult, is to translate psychological methods into everyday language. How do you do that? How do you get people excited about psychology in the workplace?*

**Ute:** As we said in the beginning of our talk: use their language, their 'pictures', and their narratives. And to be enthusiastic yourself is one of the most important things. I remember, I was at a party, and somebody asked me what I did as a psychologist; and what I loved about it. I told them about my work and what I could do and what benefits they could get out of it, and so on. And afterwards, one of these people came to me and said; "Well, is that really what you do?" And I said "Yes, of course". They said "Would you please come into my company? And help me do this?" It's the best thing of all; to really show them you love your work; and believe you can really change things.

Of course, you must be always up to date with methods and processes. That's why I always try to get new information and learning. In addition to my university studies, passing and applying my Advanced Diploma in Housekeeping (comparable to a master craftsman in industry who is allowed to instruct and train apprentices – a special German system) was one of the things that brought me a lot of insights; another was the Quality Management Certificate at University of Kaiserslautern.

**Colin:** So, you are saying life-long learning is important?

**Ute:** Yeah.

**Colin:** For example, the EAWOP Congress is a perfect environment for that. We appreciate the work so much because we have the chance as practitioners to come together with scientists, with practitioners, and with people who share similar views and concerns. Yeah, and to come up with new ideas.

**Ute:** Yes, I agree and since they have existed, I have been to every EAWOP Congress; and that's quite a lot.

**Colin:** And they are a lot of fun, aren't they?

**Ute:** Yes, of course.

**Colin:** I would like to ask you how to get people excited about your work and to get people engaged? We were talking about some differences in perspectives of how people in organizations have perceived psychologists maybe 20 years ago and today. But what I find particularly interesting over those 40 years, if you go back, is what were the problems that organizations had and what are the problems now? So where are the similarities and the differences?

**Ute:** I think one of the problems now is that nothing is sure; you don't know what is going to happen tomorrow. So, what you need to do tomorrow can be different. I think it's very important to make companies more flexible and adaptable, and not to think along rigid lines; that things must always be done like this.

**Colin:** *So, there is no one way to success?*

**Ute:** No. Perhaps there are other ways to achieve the same results. We don't know; but we must try it. I think this was something which was not thought about when I started.

**Colin:** *Is it the thought now? Is there a broader perspective on innovation and trying different things and be open towards others' views?*

**Ute:** Well, now I only can say what I read, and I have the impression that some companies understand. But not all of them; depending on their size and the age diversity of the employees. I think things are getting more flexible. If I look at my sons, for instance, who are in companies, and they will share these thoughts.

**Colin:** *So, today you think organizations may hold a broader perspective on people, and on creativity; along with self-management and self-determination in organizations. But these influences stem from psychology and how this has been applied in organizations...*

**Ute:** Well, look at the things that have happened since we have been living with Covid-19. This has opened up and changed the workplace more than anything else has done for 40 years. This style of working is something we have been trying to get it introduced into companies, for years.

**Colin:** *So, all we needed is a virus!*

**Ute:** And now it happens. I think there is the development. Not only change, but development also.

**Colin:** *So, rapid change needs crisis first.*

**Ute:** Not necessarily. But sometimes it helps, yes.

**Colin:** *So sadly, we must think about the end of our talk. I would like to ask you something that everyone here is keen to know; and indeed, so will the readers of InPractice. What is your advice for life and happiness? So, what is your secret for being happy, staying happy?*

**Ute:** To be realistic, I think; and not to want too much. But, on the other hand to want to do new things, too. And not to forget to think about what you can do for yourself, I think this is very important; because if you don't trust and take care for yourself, how can others trust you? It's not possible. Also, don't always have in mind what could be bad; or what could go wrong. We need to trust in future; and be positive thinkers.

There's a word from William J. H. Boetcker (often misattributed to Lincoln) who in his "10 Cannots" 1916 said: *"You cannot help men permanently when doing for them what they can and should do for themselves."* This is something I often had as a picture in my PowerPoint slides. And I think it's very important for leadership, communication, cooperation and so on.

**Colin:** *So not setting your own standards too high and noting the standards of others. But if your standards are too low you might not be motivated...*

**Ute:** ... and then don't get where you could go.

**Colin:** *So, on the other hand, you need to be able to envision what can happen in the future; and then keeping a balance of dreaming what you could do but, not expecting too much from yourself.*

**Ute:** Yeah, some people would say this is work life balance.

**Colin:** *Speaking of work life balance – I thank you very much for the interview; I hope you haven't perceived this as too much like work. More as part of your life. I have also learned that Nuremberg has been a part of your life; so, have a great weekend.*

**Ute:** Thank you.

Figure 2

Concluding our interview with Ute (with permission)



## Participant evaluation

After writing up the interview I asked the staff at BBO how they found their experience. Their response was that they had all had an inspiring dialogue with Ute. There was lots of valuable advice from an experienced practitioner for every one of us. We are very thankful that she came a long way from her home to our office in Nuremberg to meet us.

Ute has encouraged us to be persistent, confident, and willing to be part of the organizations that we work with. She particularly emphasised the value of a deep dive into organizations culture and functioning. This is something we want to reinforce in our practice even more in the future.