



# THE INSIDERS

**zeb started life as a spin-off from the University of Münster.  
It is one of the biggest financial advisory firms in the country today.**

Text: Nils Wischmeyer

This story ends with an inflated pufferfish (really). It begins in somewhat less spectacular fashion – in a modern, oval-shaped office block on the outskirts of Münster. This is the headquarters of zeb, whose name originally stood for ‘Zentrum für ertragsorientiertes Bankmanagement’, the German equivalent of ‘center for profit-oriented bank management’. Inside the building, dark-gray carpeting runs through the rooms, many of which are furnished with a black desk in front of a whiteboard with a selection of marker pens. If you didn’t know that this was one of Germany’s most important consulting firms, you’d be forgiven for thinking that these could be university professors’ offices.

But behind the modern façade and a moniker that is anything but a household name among the population at large lies nothing less than Germany’s third-largest management consultancy. A total of 1,000 people work for zeb.rolfes.schierenbeck.associates, to give the company its full name, in offices around the world, from Münster to Moscow to Zurich. The group generated revenues of 192 million euros last year, making zeb Europe’s biggest advisor to banks, insurance companies and other financial service providers. There’s barely a savings bank or cooperative bank in the market that hasn’t engaged the consultancy at least once over the past quarter of a century. And many of the big name banks – from Deutsche Bank to Commerzbank – have also called in the firm’s strategy and management consultants over the years.

The fact that zeb is practically invisible to the wider public in spite of all this is no accident – these consultants work different to so many of their rivals. This firm doesn’t push itself to the fore with all the attendant noise and hype. It’s an inconspicuous part of the industry, a hidden insider.

The company’s ability to live off its reputation and the network it has built up throughout the German banking scene puts zeb in a very special position.

The consultancy primarily advises financial institutes who are looking to develop a new strategy, restructure their business model, establish a core banking system, digitalize their business processes or reorganize branch sales. Yes, such engagements may sound dry to outsiders, and even some of the young consultants joining the firm don’t find the idea of them particularly exciting, but that doesn’t bother Professor Stefan Kirmße in the least. The company’s Managing Director – who sports an alert demeanor, little hair and no necktie – inhabits an office on the eleventh story of zeb headquarters and points out that, “We are exceptionally successful at what we do. We see ourselves as partners for change.”

When zeb came into existence some 25 years ago, the thought of the company reaching such heights did not enter anyone’s mind. At least not to begin with. Founded as a spin-off of the University of Münster, it was initially just a project being run by business professors Bernd Rolfes and Henner Schierenbeck, who drafted in a few students to help. Schierenbeck, now professor emeritus, was a pioneer in the field of banking controllership, a hot topic in the financial world in the early nineties. The duo are still known internally as the ‘banking pontiffs’. Schierenbeck himself rarely got involved in the operational business. He left that to Rolfes, who had one main goal: to show that he could get a startup off the ground as well as anyone else could.

## A CLOSE-KNIT NETWORK

The first office opened in 1992 in a former doctor's practice situated in a rear courtyard location in Münster. Rolfes had his own office, while four Ph.D. students squeezed into the room next door. "It was like a continuation of student life," says Managing Director Kirmße. "We were able to try things out and were expected to 'just do it'."

Almost all of the students who worked there in the early days were writing their doctorate under Rolfes or Schierenbeck. Many of them signed their first ever employment contract with the new consulting firm upon graduation. Others went into the German banking world. All of them were united by their shared background of studying under Schierenbeck or, later, Rolfes. And so an old boy (and girl) network very quickly sprang up spanning the whole industry. The former students of the banking pontiffs still get together to this day to share experiences. And many alumni approach zeb with consulting mandates. People just know each other, pure and simple.

As the consultancy grew, so the network expanded and branched out – consultants who joined zeb from the banks naturally brought good contacts with them. And of course it still works the other way around: Any consultant who expresses a wish to leave zeb and join a financial institution is actively supported in doing so. "We'd rather have one of our consultants go to a client than to a rival consulting firm," says Burkhard Hanke, Head of Recruiting. A dedicated Career Center was opened for this very purpose in 2017. The main thing is that the network keeps on growing.

German reunification was a stroke of luck for the young company. In the former East Germany there was no fixed pecking order as yet, no Boston Consulting Group, no KPMG. This gave the smaller consulting firms a chance. The first contract Bernd Rolfes landed in 1992 was a project for the turnaround and restructuring of the Sparkasse savings bank in Halle, which was facing major challenges in the wake of reunification. And it was a success because Rolfes and his team worked their way deep down into the market. Which is something that financial institutes still value to this day: "When we've got zeb in, they don't just spend their time in the C-suite – they actually go and talk to the staff on the ground, across all levels of the organization. They're the ones who know the details," says Gerd Meyer, spokesman for Stadtsparkasse Düsseldorf.

This mentality is reflected inside the organization, too. At zeb you won't find any 'insecure overachievers', as the smart and ambitiously keen young consultants from US consulting firms are often derided. What you will find are genuine experts. Every VP, every director uses the word 'expert' when talking about zeb. One can well imagine some consultant seated in the second row speaking up in a meeting in order to correct an arithmetical error. Basically, reasoning beats hierarchy.

That one project for the Sparkasse became dozens, then hundreds – consulting mandates for savings and cooperative banks still form the core of the company's business today. Employee numbers rose as fast as revenues: The original five consultants had already mushroomed into a hundred by 1998. The firm moved into its own office building on the outskirts of Münster in 2001.

Through all of this, the banking advisors always remained true to their roots. For all its growth, zeb kept the focus firmly on what it does best. "Our consultants don't work on automotive projects on Mondays and pharmaceutical jobs on Fridays. We focus exclusively on financial services," says Kirmße. Drilling deep down into a single industry – it's this that differentiates the Münster firm from most other consultancies.

## A LOYAL, HIDDEN ADVISOR

Another thing that stands out about them is that you never hear of zeb consultants 'shaking up the industry', giving good advice, teaching people a lesson, or even talking about former clients. In fact you don't hear of zeb at all. A public appearance by the company's founders is about as common as a big newspaper interview with Angela Merkel. And for good reason: One wrong utterance might upset the industry – and that would be a catastrophe.

"Loyalty is one of the cornerstones of our business. We have to stand by what we say and do," says Head of Marketing Christiane Diekmann. If the company were to be seen as disloyal, that would be disastrous. Unlike most of its rival firms, zeb can't just move into a different industry. The consultancy thrives on reputation and trust and on the fact that banks think of the Münster firm as experts whenever they have a problem. And it's this reputation that the consultants charge good money for.

Blogs like BankingHub and Fintech Hub by zeb, written by experts for experts, are used as platforms to keep the industry regularly informed of the latest trends. The studies published by the financial specialists have long been considered important publications. And the consultancy also invites Europe's top decision-makers and their clients to join them several times a year to discuss regulatory matters and the like. Among the welcome guests are Andreas Dombret, Member of the Executive Board of the Bundesbank, and Felix Hufeld, President of Germany's Federal Financial Supervisory Authority (BaFin), as well as former Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble.

Contact with policymakers and the financial services watchdog has become increasingly important in recent years. Many of the decisions that are so crucial to banks are made by the Bundesbank or BaFin itself, making it vital for the consultancy to nurture contacts in these institutions, too.

These days, the former university spin-off covers the entire value chain in the financial services industry: from strategy consulting to the final implementation of IT systems. Pure controllership, which was a key focus in the early years, has since taken a back seat, to be replaced by strategy and management consulting.

## A CONCEPTUAL DELIVERER

A focus on implementation has always been part of the company's self-conception. zeb's original name, which translates as 'center for profit-oriented bank management', was intended to imply that very thing. Managing Director Stefan Kirmße borrows an analogy to make the point: "It's like hiring a star architect to build your house – it's just no use if the heating's not going to work." zeb sees itself as architect and installer in one. And earns a great deal of praise from clients as a result. As Stephan Schüller, former spokesman for the general partners of Bankhaus Lampe, puts it: "For one thing, their deliverables are always based on sound theory. And for another, zeb has a very strong focus on actually delivering them in practice. We value that."

The university spirit nevertheless remains strong in many ways. People at zeb are rarely concerned with status. You're just as likely to see smart suits at zeb.tower as you are casual T-shirts or sweaters. The archive shelves are the same ones you'll find in any dusty university library.

Everyone is on familiar terms with each other, overtime is frowned upon. The reward for racking up ten years with the consultancy is not a pair of gold cufflinks but a bicycle.

The company's annual meeting is fittingly called zeb.uni. It's a forum for employees to spend two days sharing experiences face to face in various formats. One of the most popular attractions is known as the 'fishbowl': Six chairs are placed in the middle of the room and the employees gather in a circle around them to debate a range of predetermined topics. If you want to speak, you sit on a chair, present your arguments and then step back into the audience. It's an academic exchange of the kind you'd encounter in a debating society.

Despite the enduring sense of university tradition, much has changed over the past 25 years in consequence of the firm's sheer size. It's harder to just 'try things out' when 1,000 jobs depend on it. And it's a long time since all new consultants came from the University of Münster or wrote their doctorate under Rolfes or Schierenbeck. The whole company is more professional now. "What we endeavor to do today is set the standards in the industry," says Stefan Kirmße. The spectrum of topics they cover is also broader. Just recently, they opened a new digital lab called 'Tabularaza' to advise financial service providers on how to tackle digitalization.

zeb joined forces with the Steinbeis University to establish zeb.business school in Berlin. Opened in 2014, it's a place where experienced bankers can earn a master's degree or a doctorate part-time. Bachelor's degrees are a recent addition to the curriculum. Run by one of Schierenbeck's former students, the business school gets most of its students from the corridors of the nation's savings banks, cooperative banks and private banks. They are taught by a range of professors including Kirmße and Rolfes. The bankers bring in their professional experience and perhaps a new consulting mandate or two. Thus the Münster network grows and grows.

And how does the pufferfish come into it? Well, when you're standing in the elevator after a long day at zeb headquarters, you can't help but look up at the poster on the wall. It shows a puffed-up pufferfish, all yellow spots on a brown body. Printed underneath in white block capitals, the message reads: "Join experts not big heads." //

## RANKING BANKING SECTOR

**Award-winning: clients and competitors rank us among the top 3 consultancies for the banking sector**



“brand eins” study: best management consultancies in Germany 2018

MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY	PEER RECOM-MENDATION	CLIENT APPRAISAL		MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY	PEER RECOM-MENDATION	CLIENT APPRAISAL
BCG – The Boston Consulting Group	•••	★ ★ ★	among the top ranking management consultancies for banks	4C Group	•	★ ★
McKinsey & Company	•••	★ ★ ★		adesso	•	★ ★
<b>zeb.rolfes.schierenbeck.associates</b>	•••	★ ★		bzp – bierend, zeller & partner	•	★ ★
Bain & Company	••	★ ★ ★		Capgemini Consulting	•	★ ★
Deloitte Consulting	••	★ ★ ★		Eurogroup Consulting (EGC)	•	★ ★
EY Advisory	••	★ ★ ★		...	•	★ ★
KPMG Advisory	••	★ ★ ★		WSFB-Beratergruppe Wiesbaden	•	★ ★
Oliver Wyman	••	★ ★ ★		AXXCON	•	★
PwC – PricewaterhouseCoopers	••	★ ★ ★		barisco Risikomanagement	•	★
Q_PERIOR	••	★ ★ ★		Capco – The Capital Markets Comp.	•	★
Roland Berger	••	★ ★ ★	compentus/	•	★	
SMP Strategy Consulting	••	★ ★ ★	Consileon Business Consultancy	•	★	
Accenture	••	★ ★	...	•	★	
d-fine	••	★				
Horváth & Partners	••	★				
BankenImpuls	•	★ ★ ★				
BearingPoint	•	★ ★ ★				
...	•	★ ★ ★				
Ritzenhoefer & Company	•	★ ★ ★				

**KEY**  
 ••• Recommended more often than average  
 •• Recommended often  
 • Recommended  
 ★★ ★ Above average  
 ★ ★ Average  
 ★ Below average

Online survey of 7,259 experts (partners, principals and senior managers, and in some exceptional cases, including project managers, from management consultancies), as well as approx. 1,500 executives; Source: brand eins, Thema: Consulting, April 2018, p. 98

## RANKING INSURANCE SECTOR

**2018 ranking: we are now among the top 3 consultancies for the insurance sector, mainly thanks to strongly improved client appraisals**



“brand eins” study: best management consultancies in Germany 2018

MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY	PEER RECOM-MENDATION	CLIENT APPRAISAL		MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY	PEER RECOM-MENDATION	CLIENT APPRAISAL
BCG – The Boston Consulting Group	•••	★	2018: a giant leap forward	EY Advisory	•	★
McKinsey & Company	•••	★		EY InnoValue <sup>1)</sup>	•	★
<b>zeb.rolfes.schierenbeck.associates</b>	••	★ ★ ★		KPMG Advisory	•	★
Deloitte Consulting	••	★ ★		msg life <sup>2)</sup>	•	★
PwC – PricewaterhouseCoopers	••	★ ★		Outcome Unternehmensberatung <sup>3)</sup>	•	★
Q_PERIOR	••	★ ★		plenum	•	★
Accenture	••	★		Sopra Steria Consulting	•	★
Bain & Company	••	★				
Horn & Company	•	★ ★ ★				
Horváth & Partners	•	★ ★ ★				
PPI AG	•	★ ★ ★				
AAA Auctor Actor Advisor	•	★ ★				
BearingPoint	•	★ ★				
FINCON	•	★ ★				
IBM Business Consulting	•	★ ★				
Oliver Wyman	•	★ ★				
4-advice	•	★				
Consileon Business Consultancy	•	★				
ConVista Consulting	•	★				

**KEY**  
 ••• Recommended more often than average  
 •• Recommended often  
 • Recommended  
 ★★ ★ Above average  
 ★ ★ Average  
 ★ Below average

1) Part of the EY group; 2) Part of the msg systems group; 3) Cooperation partner of Baker Tilly  
 Online survey of 7,259 experts (partners, principals and senior managers, and in some exceptional cases including project managers, from management consultancies), as well as approx. 1,500 executives; Source: brand eins, Thema: Consulting, April 2018, p. 105

