

Mail without Mailmen

Report “Mail Services and Modern Information and Communication Technologies“ on the Development of the Letter Market / Four of Ten Persons Do Not Send Paper Letters Anymore



Providers of mail services will have to adapt their business strategy to the decrease in classical letter correspondence. (Photo: Laila Tkotz, KIT)

The amount of classical letter correspondence in Germany is decreasing. Electronic mails and messages increasingly replace conventional correspondence, tax declarations are submitted online to the tax office, and private correspondence in particular is transmitted by communication means other than ordinary mail. According to the study of the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT), mail companies may respond to this change of the market by developing their strengths in logistics and other services.

The new possibilities of communicating via the internet are used extensively by many people. This largely influences the amount and type of letter correspondence. Greeting cards, invitations, orders, and invoices are replaced by electronic mails, SMS or web forms issued by authorities and companies. “The share of letters sent by private customers is small and decreased constantly in the past years,” emphasizes sociologist Ulrich Riehm, who managed the study project of the Office of Technology Assessment with the German Bundestag (TAB) that is operated by KIT’s Institute for Tech-

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nology Assessment and Systems Analysis (ITAS). A representative poll organized by TAB revealed that four of ten persons in Germany do not send paper letters anymore. “By 2020, the amount of letter-based correspondence is expected to decrease by 13 to 29 percent,” Riehm says.

According to the report, mail companies might respond to this development by adapting their business strategies to their strengths. These are special competencies in logistics as well as a good reputation as a transmitter of confidential information, which was acquired over centuries and results from the legally required privacy of correspondence. Moreover, mail companies have many contacts to clients in all areas of society and vast experience in the operation of information technologies.

According to the TAB report, such a strategy might also include hybrid letter models, which combine the conventional letter with the electronic one. Mail companies already offer secure e-letter portals and complex e-letter solutions for companies and private customers.

Mail companies are specialized in shipping and might deliver medicine, books, correspondence of public authorities or food in addition to letters and parcels in the future. This is already done by the French mail service. Mailmen would then be valuable contact persons for ill and elderly people and might establish contacts to other helpers, if necessary. As the decrease in letter correspondence will result in a reduction of jobs, extension of the service spectrum will result in new perspectives for the employees of mail companies.

The study was made on behalf of the Federal Parliament, which is interested in particular in how area-wide, legally guaranteed “universal mail service” of sufficient and equal quality can be maintained for all citizens, if letter correspondence will decrease further. Riehm is in favor of a new conception of the universal mail service that ensures the freedom of choice between conventional and electronic letter. “If this freedom of choice is guaranteed, groups of the population would not be excluded from letter communication, because they do not have access to the internet,” the sociologist says. As the letter volume in Germany is expected to decrease gradually and not to drop dramatically as in some other countries, there is sufficient time to prepare necessary adaptations and to discuss them together with politics, science, and the public.

The **TAB report** “Mail Services and Modern Information and Communication Technologies” is summarized on the internet at:

www.tab-beim-bundestag.de/de/publikationen/berichte/ab156.html

In connection with the study, the following **book** was published: Ulrich Riehm/Knud Böhle, Post ohne Briefträger, Sinkende Briefmengen und elektronische Postdienste als Herausforderungen für die Politik, Reihe Studien des Büros für Technikfolgen-Abschätzung, Bd. 39, Edition Sigma, Berlin 2014, ISBN 9783836081399

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