What to do in the sabbatical?

To most people, the word sabbatical generally means time out or travel. Six months or a year of doing nothing, just taking it easy. Not so for TRUMPF employee Fabian Fröhlich. In 2017, he took two years off from work. But he didn't use the sabbatical to travel and instead did a master's degree. Small spoiler: He did take a trip as a reward after graduation.

But let's start from the beginning: "I did a bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering at the Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University [DHBW]," says Fabian. TRUMPF acted as his practice partner. After graduation, he worked in country management as a project coordinator at the TLD. "After two years, I had a growing desire to do a masters. I wanted to expand my horizons and see things without TRUMPF glasses for a change."

Rocky road to a master of science

But applying for the master's degree was already proving to be rocky: "I had done my bachelor's degree at a college, so I didn't get credits for many courses and therefore had a lot of catching up to do." Especially "easy-to-fail subjects" like higher mathematics or technical mechanics were a major challenge for Fabian at the beginning. "The university didn't believe I was capable of finishing my studies in two years. That spurred me on even more." And Fabian proved them wrong: within 20 months he graduated with a Master of Science in Technology Management.

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This ambitious schedule had a price: "During the summer months, for example, I found it very hard to find the discipline to study." Six major exams were taken at short intervals and immediately afterwards he wrote his thesis and dissertation at the Fraunhofer IAO. "I only managed it by learning at the neighbouring University of Hohenheim, in the library located in the

cool castle cellar," said Fabian. He took breaks from his studies to visit the nearby ice cream parlour in Plieningen. "By the end of the summer, I knew every flavor of ice cream they had."

The big advantage: Further training during a sabbatical means financial security

He spent the remaining time of his sabbatical on a tour through Scandinavia – some traveling was a must. Fabian and his girlfriend Miri traveled for almost two months through Scandinavia in a station wagon converted into a 'mobile sleeper'. "I liked the unspoilt nature there. In the rugged north there is a prevailing sense of peace and serenity, contentment and respect. And time simply doesn't matter there anymore, when the sun never really sets in summer."

Fabian and his girlfriend Miri traveled for almost two months through Scandinavia in a station wagon converted into a 'mobile sleeper'. (Source: Fabian Fröhlich)

For Fabian, completing his master's degree during a sabbatical had several advantages: "I was financially secure and could return without any pressure to TRUMPF, a dependable employer. This was an especially important plus point for my return in September 2019 as the economy began to experience a downturn last year. Fabian chose the three-year model for his sabbatical. He saved for four months, then came the two-year sabbatical phase, and now, back on the job at TRUMPF, he is in the second savings phase lasting eight months.

During his time at the Fraunhofer IAO and in his thesis, Fabian dealt with so-called frugal innovations. "In short, these are simple, robust, user-friendly products and services that are high quality and affordable. For example: furniture from Ikea or the MotelOne hotels." He examined the frugal innovations of high-tech companies and developed a strategy for a company on how a "Western premium manufacturer" can capture new and existing markets with frugal innovations and sustainably anchor the products in its own portfolio.

He presented his results as a scientific publication in November 2019 at the symposium on vision and technology planning in Berlin. "The reward for hard work often comes afterwards," he says. Such is Swedish coolness, which he has also acquired: "The experience of the master's thesis has also made me calmer and more thoughtful at work," he says. "You can achieve a lot if you want to." What should never be missing, however, despite all the discipline: "You should use your free time as much as you can to do your own thing and get away from the daily routine. It's good for the soul and your sense of inner peace, especially in turbulent and stressful times."