



Photo: Frank Vinken

Blank Space

Someone did quite a job tidying up here. Even the curtains are all pushed neatly to the same side. The blue of the individual image elements harmonizes almost too well. But wait: Couldn't they have also set the chair backs at the same level? And why are the number signs on the booths so mixed up? Where are we, anyway? In a deserted call center? At a polling station? Is science being done here when no one is looking? Let's reveal the secret: The image shows the oldest lab for experimental economic research in Europe, the BonnEconLab. Scientists have been studying human economic behavior here since as long ago as 1984. To date, nearly 30,000 people have participated in their experiments. The Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods also regularly uses the lab.

Research subjects with a penchant for experiment can earn money by "playing" the test games at the BonnEconLab. Whether as market participants, as bidders in an auction, or in negotiations: the test subjects continually make more or less successful decisions. Their success, on which the final reward for the individual participants depends, is influenced to a substantial degree by the decisions of their fellow players. Chance also plays a role – just like in real life.

Experimental economics was long a controversial subject within the field of economics. With game theory came the first economic experiments in the 1960s. But people were slow to realize that experimental findings must be used more and more as a basis for economic research. Today, experimentation is a recognized research method in economics – and German researchers were at the forefront right from the start.