AUTUMN 1986 SAW THE START OF THE SURFNET PROJECT ORGANISATION. INITIALLY IT PRIMARILY EXISTED ON PAPER, THOUGH VARIOUS PEOPLE LIKE KEES PRINS OF BSO/PARTNERS WERE ALREADY WORKING ON NETWORK PROJECTS HERE AND THERE. IN NIJMEGEN EARN HAD BEEN STARTED UP, A EUROPEAN RESEARCH NETWORK. BUT THERE WAS NO OFFICE YET, THERE WERE NO STAFF AND THERE WAS A LACK OF MONEY. ALTHOUGH THE DUTCH GOVERNMENT HAD AWARDED 300 MILLION GUILDERS FOR THE PERIOD OF 1987-1990, THE MONEY HAD NOT YET BECOME AVAILABLE. PORTFOLIO HOLDER HANS ROSENBERG OF UTRECHT UNIVERSITY DID NOT HAVE SUFFICIENT MEANS AT HIS DISPOSAL TO FINANCE ACTIVITIES. THE HIRED EXPERTS WERE OFTEN KEPT WAITING FOR PAYMENT, WHILE THE UNIVERSITIES’ STAFF COLLABORATED PRO BONO. BUT EVENTUALLY, IN THE SPRING OF 1987 A START WAS MADE TO SET UP AN ORGANISATION IN LINE WITH GOVERNMENTAL GUIDELINES.
CHAPTER 3

SURFNET: THE ORGANISATION
SURFNET: THE ORGANISATION

SURF Foundation, the collaborative organisation of computer services for higher education and research in the Netherlands, was founded on 25 March 1987. All fourteen universities agreed to purchase network services from the future network company for a period of four years regarding the SURF Foundation and SURFnet. His many connections in The Hague made him eminently suited to act as a liaison between the political sphere, which provided the subsidies, and the organisations, which had to carry out the plans. The foundation’s office was given a clearer structure when Van de Graaf took up his position. Over the next months he created the SURF organisation, while in the meantime the preparations for SURFnet were in full swing.

It was decided to appoint a two-man team as Directors for SURFnet. This structure went back to the computer centres, where generally one Director was responsible for the administrative-commercial side, and the other for technology. Candidates for the new positions were Boudewijn Nederkoorn and Kees Neggers, who at that time formed the Board of Directors of Radboud University Nijmegen’s computer centre. They were both closely engaged in the SURFnet project and were frequently spotted at the office at Leidseveer 35. Boudewijn Nederkoorn was a member of the SURF guidance
It was decided to appoint a two-man team as Directors for SURFnet.

committee and Kees Neggers participated in various network projects within the SURFnet project. Like SARA in Amsterdam, the computer centre in Nijmegen played an important part in the development of networks. It was no coincidence that the Dutch hub of the European EARN network, an IBM initiative, was founded in Nijmegen. Nijmegen was close to developing its own network.

Boudewijn Nederkoorn says in a retrospective in 2003:

*We could go either of two ways. SURFnet went its own way, so did Nijmegen. We then decided to try and move it to Nijmegen. (...) We did not succeed. We then proposed to Rosenberg we move from Nijmegen to SURFnet in Utrecht, as we thought it so important. Rosenberg discussed this with everyone and they agreed.*

And so Boudewijn Nederkoorn and Kees Neggers decided to move from Nijmegen to Utrecht and to take up the directorship of SURFnet bv. Their appointment was to start on 1 January 1988. In the meantime they were writing a strategic plan. On 1 January 1988 they took over from project director Kees Prins. Meanwhile Foundation Director Gerrit van de Graaf needed to overcome a last obstacle for the foundation of SURFnet bv. It had been agreed with Minister Deetman that PTT would be closely involved with SURFnet, and would participate for 49% in the new limited company. But the PTT Board of Directors did not cooperate. It sabotaged the signing of the shareholders agreement, to the despair of Van de Graaf. He could not find out why PTT would not sign.

Finally in a conversation it transpired that in the opinion of the PTT Directors the universities simply would not be able to set up such a project. And they were loath to become involved in a future bankruptcy.

Gerrit van de Graaf and Hans Rosenberg then agreed with PTT that in case of failure there would not be any bankruptcy proceedings. If it should come to that the joint venture would be silently liquidated after the creditors had been paid off. Moreover PTT wanted guarantees that they would be allowed to keep selling their telephone switches to the universities after the imminent liberalisation of the market. Van de Graaf and Rosenberg guaranteed this, though they had no authorisation to do so.
The SURF office at Leidseveer 35 almost burst at the seams

What was important to them was that nothing was going to stand in the way of founding the limited company any longer. On 5 October 1988 Hans Rosenberg for Stichting SURF and A. Dek for PTT signed a collaboration agreement that was to lead to the foundation of a limited company.

In the meantime, however, from 1 January 1988, SURFnet bv i.o. (being founded) had started its activities, for the time being as an organisation supported by the SURF Foundation. SURF made two offices at Leidseveer 35 available, but already in February SURFnet moved into a new office at Godebaldkwartier 24 in the Cluettinckborch office tower in Hoog Catharijne, at a stone’s throw of the old office. The limited company was finally established on 26 January 1989 – after the privatisation of PTT.

The SURF Foundation took a 51% interest in the new company, the remaining 49% were owned by PTT, called (KPN) after privatisation.

The staff. Even in the project stage the offices at Leidseveer 35 were buzzing with activity. The hired consultants from Kees Prins’s BSO/Partners were leaving to make room for a new team of permanent staff, who were needed to build up SURFnet in the years to come.

Jan Bakker, member of staff of SURF Foundation, was closely involved in 1987. In 2003 he remarked:

*After a few months of being employed at SURF Foundation I witnessed the rapid hiring of Directors and staff of SURFnet, then still a part of a project organisation. The SURF office at the Leidseveer was almost bursting at the seams.*

The people who were hired were mostly young, recently graduated academics with a back-ground in technology or ICT. This was done partly through contacts in the academic world and partly by placing adverts. By the end of 1988 two Directors and thirteen staff were em-ployed at SURFnet. They would be the core staff for a long period of time.

Erik-Jan Bos is among these staff members of the earliest hour. Exactly twenty years later he looked back with fondness:

*The atmosphere was one of a select group of enthusiasts: Let’s go for it! We were all young academics, only Kees and Boudewijn were our seniors by half a generation. We felt we were single-handedly going to put data communications on the map, and we were really going to support higher education.*
Erik Huizer, who was hired by the SURF Foundation as from 1 May 1988, and hired by SURFnet as an application developer, also thinks back on those first years with pleasure:

What was fun at the beginning was the pioneering spirit. A brand new company, a new subject, enthusiastic people. It had an incredible ambience. I remember well that when we became a limited company, as staff members we organised a fake strike when Boudewijn and Kees came back from the signing of the official documents, just for the fun of it.

A flat structure, short lines and intensive communication were characteristic. The members of staff showed extensive involvement and responsibility. This company culture was characteristic of SURFnet, and in order to retain it it was decided to restrict the growth of the staff and to subcontract as many operational tasks as possible. Even so, SURFnet did not escape gradual growth. The number of staff had increased to 22 by 1993.

Two years later the organisation was extended when on 1 February 1995 the SURFnet Expert Centre (SEC) was founded.

Under Erik Huizer’s lead SEC was offering SURFnet’s expert knowledge to third parties at market prices. SEC staff was also employed to work on SURFnet projects. SEC was turned into a limited company, becoming a 100% subsidiary of SURFnet on 1 January 1996.

To everyone’s surprise many of SURFnet’s customers also became customers of SEC. For a fee many universities asked SEC to design a network infrastructure, to develop services or to provide training courses. KPN, which was establishing an Internet division at that time, was SEC’s major client. For KPN SEC built an infrastructure, provided training courses to staff and set up an organisational structure.

The founding of SEC was the trigger for a review of the SURFnet organisation. The departments were restructured.
In 2000 SURFnet had a staff of 40

Account managers were appointed to establish closer contact with the institutions and a separate Product Management and Marketing Department was set up to increase awareness of SURFnet services among the clients.

A second immediate consequence of the founding of SEC was the fact that the offices became cramped. A more spacious accommodation was found on the fifth floor of the Radboudburcht office tower, also in Hoog Catharijne. The move took place on 6 June 1995.

In the Radboudburcht the organisation kept growing. A separate Publicity Department was established in 1997 which took on SURFnet News (SNN), which has started that year, public relations and other communication tasks. In the following years the SURFnet organisation continued to expand rapidly. Both the number of departments as well as the number of staff increase. In 2000 SURFnet, including SEC, had about 40 members of staff. A workers’ council was instituted due to this increase. A major cause of the expansion was the start of the GigaPort project in 1999. This project also had an impact on SEC. SURFnet needed so much manpower for the GigaPort project that the SEC activities increasingly became internally oriented. This prompted the decision to reintegrate SEC with SURFnet.

The increase in the volume of services and a growing staff required a more hierarchical organisation. Managers were appointed to lead each department.

The growth and improvement of the SURFnet organisation continued to proceed in the 21st century, with a staff of 60 by 2007. In 2005 the fourth floor of the Radboudburcht was added as office space. From then on SURFnet had twice the original office space, a room for training courses and a large meeting room for meetings and seminars. A videoconferencing room was set up and the existing multimedia lab was extended as well.

**SURFnet and the users.** From the start SURFnet was a task-oriented organisation aiming primarily to provide a reliable network and network services to its target group, the higher education and research community. Its primary users are the academic staff at universities, polytechnics and research institutes.

Already in the initial project stage SURFnet realised that the services it had provided since early 1986 were far from user-friendly. The User Support Department went to work.

The first SURFnet Bulletin, filled to the brim with (technical) information and the latest news, was published in June 1987 in order to provide the SURFnet and EARN
users with the necessary technical and other information. The first issue totalled 2,000 copies. It was published regularly, usually four times a year, until 2007. Other means were the SURFnet Guide and a large number of special (project) publications. Obviously, the SURFnet Guide was reviewed regularly. The 1993 edition, published at the end of 1992, was even awarded a prize for “The Best Book Designs of 1992” by CPNB, a promotional foundation of publishers and booksellers. The SURFnet Guide was replaced in 1998 by the SURFkit CD ROM, of which 40,000 copies are distributed each year. SURFnet News, a weekly electronic newsletter, was started a year earlier.

Looking back from the present, it is hard to grasp that when SURFnet started many potential users needed to be convinced to use the network. For instance, in 1991 56% of the non-users indicated that they did not need any network facilities for their work. Many of those that did use the network were not aware that they were connected to SURFnet. This was the reason that the SURFnet Support team was set up for a period of four years. This team made a tour of the country to inform users on how to use the network, or as it was phrased in the 1992 Annual Report:

The SURFnet Support Team left a trail of demonstrations, information meetings, training sessions, manuals and excited users.

The project Student Workplace Access (Studenten Werkplek Ontsluiting), which was also started in 1991, aimed to study the ways in which students could use SURFnet and other networks from their own homes using the television cable network and a PC. When Boudewijn Nederkoorn presented this idea at a conference he was accused of wanting the impossible. It was considered absurd to expect that each student would own a PC. The underlying thought was that they could not afford such luxury. A couple of years later the idea turned out not to be absurd at all. In 2001 large student housing complexes in Delft were connected to SURFnet using fibre optics. These very fast connections also allowed the students to watch Internet television broadcasts. The first broadcast of Campus TV took place in May of that year.

3.6 The staff of the SURFnet Expert Centre (SEC) in 1995, with Erik Huizer on the far left.

3.7 SURFnet issues several publications to inform the users of its network, 1989.
Through all kinds of projects SURFnet aimed to persuade more and more groups of end-users to upgrade to a fast connection to its network. They were successful. The explosive growth of the Internet and especially the World Wide Web after 1994 suddenly put SURFnet in the limelight. The media jumped all over this new phenomenon and it took little time before almost everyone knew what the Internet was. Among other initiatives, SURFnet responded to this increasing interest by organising the “We provide knowledge” conference and its corresponding exposition in the RAI Amsterdam, in collaboration with SURF Foundation and Pica Foundation. It was a great success that also attracted the attention of the national news broadcasts. Another successful activity of the User Support Department, renamed Product Management and Marketing in 1995, are the SURFnet Relation days: two-day events that are held every other year at which the SURFnet contacts of the connected institutions gather for an informal meeting.

Proceeding without KPN. KPN had been purposefully selected as the partner in the new organisation. At that moment in time founding a successful network company was impossible without the support of the telephone network and the technical knowledge of KPN. Initially KPN had been sceptical about the rationale of an organisation such as SURFnet. In their view their own telephone network was sufficient to create a datacommunications network. SURFnet Director Kees Neggers says:

*When SURFnet was being founded - and ISDN was just emerging - KPN seriously thought that SURFnet would be superfluous when every university had a digital telephone switch. That would provide complete digital connectivity.*

Even though it was forced upon them by the government the collaboration between SURFnet and KPN worked reasonably well. Both organisations benefited from each other’s knowledge and experience. However, the liberalisation of the telecommunications market in the nineties sometimes created uncomfortable situations. SURFnet was forced to tender large projects according to European regulations. KPN, a shareholder, had to compete for the order just like other providers - and occasionally they lost. Especially in the early days this was hard to stomach for an enterprise that had always held the monopoly and regarded itself as the most suitable provider for networks. Sometimes emotions flared up, as when SURFnet decided on the purchase of network switches for SURFnet’s first own network: SURFnet2.
Gerrit van de Graaf, Director of SURF, remembers this difficult situation very well:

_The careful process indicated that Northern Telecom were the best candidate, not KPN. KPN’s leadership was furious when they found out that they would not be given the order. It was an insult._ (…)

_Well, said Boudewijn Nederkoorn, I’ll give KPN one more opportunity to present their proposal. The presentation took place, and again it fell short. That is the only time I ever saw Boudewijn close to tears. Then the people at KPN said, we’ll take this to the Ministry. The Minister eventually decided not to take action. Those were very emotional times._

Irrespective of the difficult start, the collaboration with KPN turned out very satisfactory. At crucial times KPN had the courage to stand up for SURFnet, which allowed SURFnet to manifest itself internationally through the connections that KPN provided. After a while KPN also saw SURFnet’s potential against the background of the tempestuous development of the Internet. Even so, the marriage between SURFnet and KPN did not last. Ironically it is SURFnet that wanted to sever the ties to the mother company, while KPN wished to retain its successful subsidiary.

The start of the GigaPort project at the end of the nineties was the reason for SURFnet to become a 100% SURF subsidiary. This new network also had to be tendered out and SURFnet was feeling increasingly uncomfortable about KPN competing for orders while holding 49% of the shares. SURFnet wanted to become more open to other providers.

KPN however refused to part with its share in SURFnet, but was willing to continue the development of the SURFnet4 network that it provided. The tendering problem was solved by founding a separate limited company for the GigaPort project, GigaSURF bv., as a 100% subsidiary of SURF Foundation. Telfort was awarded the construction of the new network.

3.8 Boudewijn Nederkoorn presents the first SURFnet Guide 1993 to Robert Janz, Chairman of the ICP meeting.

3.9 Pien Verhorst (left), a member of the SURFnet Support Team, in full swing.

3.10 SURFnet’s corporate style was changed in 1992. The new logo would be used until 2007.

3.11 Gerrit van de Graaf, Director of SURF Foundation gives Minister Wim Deetman a tour of the exposition ‘We provide Knowledge’, 1994.
Eventually KPN decided to sell its shares to SURF Foundation and acquire the SURFnet4 network at the same time, on 31 December 2001. The next day saw the merger between SURFnet and GigaSURF, in which SURFnet took on all activities and the name GigaSURF was abandoned. SURFnet had now become a 100% subsidiary of SURF Foundation owning its own network: SURFnet5. Clearly the ties to KPN still remained, though less close than before. The most important aspect of this partnership became the acquisition of fibre optic connections.

At the beginning of 2007 SURF Foundation, and its subsidiaries SURFnet and SURFdiensten decided to jointly manifest themselves as a unity through a single corporate style and a single publication. At that occasion the administrative office of SURF Foundation was renamed SURFfoundation. Later in 2007 a single joint SURF portal was created to provide access to all underlying SURF websites and the single joint quarterly magazine *SURF* was launched. This marked the end of *SURFnet Bulletin*.

**A new Board.** In a sense the structure of the SURFnet organisation remained the same as in the previous twenty years.

In 2007 it still had a rather flat structure, with some 60 staff members with short lines of communication in six operational departments and one support department. The strategic and tactical network management was still undertaken in Utrecht, while the operational tasks were outsourced. An approach that had worked to the satisfaction of all parties involved for twenty years.

**Boudewijn Nederkoorn took his leave of SURFnet after twenty years**

Kees Neggers and Boudewijn Nederkoorn still acted as Directors. The division of responsibilities, in which Boudewijn Nederkoorn managed the administrative and commercial tasks and Kees Neggers was involved in the technical development and the international contacts, functioned very well and was sure to be maintained in the future. As both Directors were approaching their pensions, they had been taking measures to safeguard the continuity of leadership. Erwin Bleumink was appointed as a member of the SURFnet Board in September 2006. He was well known in Utrecht. As a consultant of the Stratix consultancy agency he had been around at SURFnet for seven years.
Erik-Jan Bos, an employee from the very start and manager of the Network Service Department, joined the Board in early 2007, while Boudewijn Nederkoorn left SURFnet in September 2007 after twenty years. Kees Neggers was to take on the position of General Director, in addition to his current responsibilities, until his departure in a few years’ time. In this manner the two new Directors would have the time to learn the ropes. This marked the intention of having a pair of Directors lead SURFnet in the next twenty years as well.


3.13 Erik-Jan Bos becomes a member of the Board in early 2007.

3.14 Erwin Bleumink, member of the SURFnet Board since September 2006.