Ben van Scherpenzeel, Director of Nautical Development, Policy & Plans at the Port of Rotterdam, is passionate about continuous improvement with a focus on ports and shipping in every aspect: nautical, logistical, economical and social.

Ben’s past experience onboard vessels of Shell and Holland America Line, together with the knowledge he has gained of the port since 2004, has been applied to initiate and develop many different projects that have had a positive impact on the port’s ecosystem and further afield across the shipping industry.

Container throughput at the Port of Rotterdam has risen significantly in Q1 2018 to 3.5 million TEU per quarter. What are the reasons for this success?

The continued growth in container throughput is a confirmation that Rotterdam has taken an increasingly important position in the maritime connection networks of large shipping companies. We are seeing a somewhat more measured growth after the significant growth last year, and this is entirely in accordance with our expectations.

What are the challenges of Marine Spatial Planning in the context of the Port of Rotterdam?

For traffic approaching the Port of Rotterdam we’ve worked hard together with our national authorities and all stakeholders at sea to create sufficient space for safe navigation and wind farms. In the port passages we’ve concentrated on deepening the river towards the Botlek area.

The current situation is time consuming as overview of nautical services (pilots, tugs, linemen), cargo services and vessel services (bunkers, waste, etc.). However, departure time depends on many parties: most of all terminal operations, but certainly also bunker operations or any other critical service a vessel needs to complete before departure, e.g. delivery of medicines.

What are the three key elements that define productivity at a port terminal?

Swift exchange of vessels, production per hour, and avoiding idle time when commercial operations have finished.

Severe weather conditions can impact port operations. How do you minimise the down-time at the terminal?

ShoreTension is available in Rotterdam, allowing ships to remain alongside safely under adverse weather conditions.

Is Blockchain a solution to increase port efficiency?

Last year the Municipality of Rotterdam and the Port of Rotterdam Authority jointly started BlockLab, a field lab for Blockchain. Blockchain technology offers considerable potential to change the way we manage supply chains. Its main contributions will be increased compliance and transparency, better tracking of orders and assets, and finding more effective ways of resolving trust issues.

High-impact is therefore to be expected within the domains of supply chain finance and cross chain collaborations—especially when chains are decentralised and involve numerous stakeholders and transactions. BlockLab puts Blockchain technology into practice. The Lab develops the use of cases with alliances of engineers, developers, system players and end users.

Is the port fully aligned with the demands of the ocean supply chain?

We’re working together with GS1 to connect to the supply chain standards, allowing better resource planning in warehouses and factories.

How is the increasing size of ships shaping your plans for the port?

Ten years ago we already designed the Maasvlakte for the ships we have today. We already applied more and stronger bollards, based on the new IACS guidelines which will enter into force this year.

In your view, how do you see Brexit affecting the Port of Rotterdam in terms of capacity?

We all agree that Brexit will have its challenges, however, the Port of Rotterdam is treating this matter as a top priority and is fully committed in talking to all stakeholders (Dutch Government, Customs Authorities, local businesses, etc.) with a focus on contingency plans to ensure that the transition will go as efficient as possible.

What future plans do you have for the port?

The Dutch port infrastructure has been elected best port infrastructure in the world by the World Economic Forum for the sixth consecutive time. A good infrastructure is essential for a port’s growth and development. Billions have been and will be invested in the expansion of the intermodal network, the construction of Maasvlakte 2, quays, state-of-the-art terminals and ICT systems and the Offshore Center Rotterdam to name a few. But next to the physical infrastructure, the digital infrastructure is of major importance. By creating transparency across the chain and by sharing data, we can further increase the efficiency and reliability of the logistics chain.

The Port of Rotterdam Authority invests 150 to 200 million euros per year in its port infrastructure.

Important investments for the coming year include the development of the Hartel Tank Terminal and the changes to the port railway via Thamesweg, eliminating the clash between transport by rail and ocean-going vessels.

Port call inefficiencies result in unnecessary delays costing billions in lost revenue and CO2 emissions. How has the Port of Rotterdam optimised vessel calls to maximise efficiency?

This will be achieved by working on maximum cargo on board by online depth information, available as of 1st June 2018. This will mean taking into account ‘Just In Time’ arrivals by exchange of ship planning – platform to exchange has become life: Pronto. Fundamental for both data exchanges is to have standards that work for shipping port to port worldwide, so parties do not build in unnecessary safety margins as they fully understand and trust the information provided.

Please talk to us about the importance of information exchange between all parties in the logistics chain:

The departure time is the cornerstone to port logistics. Most departure time dictates the arrival time of another vessel, and that arrival time is key for planning resources for nautical services (pilots, tugs, linemen), cargo services and vessel services (bunkers, waste, etc.). However, departure time depends on many parties: most of all terminal operations, but certainly also bunker operations or any other critical service a vessel needs to complete before departure, e.g. delivery of medicines.

What are the reasons for this success?

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