The port of Antwerp: how do we create an outstanding experience for future employees?

ESPO Award 2015 on Societal Integration of Ports
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Introduction

The port of Antwerp is of huge economic importance for the local region and for Flanders. Some 60,000 people are directly employed in the port itself, while the shipping and logistics activities in and around the port generate employment for more than 150,000 people in the region. Behind the more well-known port activities such as loading and unloading ships there lies a complex logistical process, extending from producer to consumer across international boundaries.

The port of Antwerp is a promising future employer, operating in a national and international setting, and so it is important to let people know about this. It all starts with getting young and old alike interested in the port and its various activities. This means we have to organise interesting, informative and attractive events and activities, both for the general public and for potential employees. In addition we are constantly expanding existing collaboration arrangements and developing new ones with schools, colleges and universities. Since more than 60,000 people are directly employed in the port area, the various initiatives and collaboration arrangements must of course be organised with the involvement of the entire port community. All these initiatives are based on a single, shared value, namely belief in the future generation! In the long term we seek to attract sufficient numbers of talented young people with the right qualifications.
To achieve this the Port Authority collaborates closely with its numerous partners. Later in this presentation you will discover our different partnerships. The focus on young people is one of the social themes into which the Port Authority puts great effort. In fact it forms one of the specific objectives in the Port Authority’s 2014–2018 Business Plan, namely tackling the social theme of “young people.” This in turn is based on the vision that “People make the port.” The port is the largest employer in the wider Antwerp region. The day-to-day efforts of all these employees are crucial for the success of the port. The port’s very good labour productivity and the high level of education and training mean that the human factor (human capital) plays an important role in making the port of Antwerp attractive as a place for companies to locate. It is very much in the interests of the Port Authority and its partners to maintain this climate of confidence, and so it devotes serious efforts to ensuring a steady supply of motivated, qualified and talented employees.

Below we present our numerous initiatives aimed at inspiring young people to discover the port as a good, reliable and attractive employer. **The port of Antwerp is a unique place in terms of work environment and work experience.** This unique experience is created by intensive collaboration with various bodies including primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities.
The challenge: young people and what they know about the port

One of the biggest challenges facing us is to make people familiar with the port and its activities. Collaboration between the port and primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities can lead to more young people and students forming a positive image of the port as a potential employer. However, various surveys have shown that we need to deploy even greater efforts to make the port more attractive.

The annual survey carried out by the Port Authority among local people, to determine their image of the port and how much they know about it, shows that many of those asked are interested in working in the port. This includes non-native Belgians living in Antwerp. However, this interest is not reflected in the proportion of people actually employed in the port. The lesson from this is that the entire port community must keep up a constant effort to tell people about activities in the port, so as to promote the image of the port as an attractive employer.

“Informing young people and making them enthusiastic about a job in the port means enabling them to learn about the port at first hand, including logistics and industry. If they are well informed then they can make the right choice of what to study,” says Pascale Van Hoecke, the Port Authority's HR manager. “Technology has always had a firm place in final-year studies. For logistics this is less the case, and so we in the port must persuade the education authorities to give it a full place in the curriculum.”

In March 2015 Alfaport – Voka (the organisation that represents the port and logistics sector within the Flemish Chamber of Commerce) organised a first workshop in collaboration with a number of companies in a joint exercise on “employer branding.” In this way Alfaport seeks to involve logistics employers explicitly in the task of raising awareness among young potentials and attracting them to the port. But how do you “sell” the port to potential employees at the moment when they are choosing which courses to study? It all has to do with employment in the port. The exercise which is still under way should highlight various areas of shared interest to make the idea of working in the port more attractive.

“I believe strongly in the ‘employer branding story’ put forward by the port community,” says Alfaport – Voka manager Stephan Vanfraechem, “because we can tell a single, attractive story for the port and logistics sector. Individual companies can then refer to this in their own way for their recruitment campaigns.”

A recent survey carried out by Ipsos (December 2014) on behalf of the Port Centre reveals a wide gulf between how young people and their teachers see the port on the one hand, and how companies and other organisations within the port community perceive themselves on the other. The Port Centre is a visitors and information centre to the port, the industry and the logistics in Antwerp. The visitors live a unique port experience by participating in one of the guided visits in the port area and the interactive exhibition. For this purpose the Port Centre can rely on 85 port guides.
In this survey a total of 400 pupils/students and 53 teachers/lecturers were interviewed before and after the port visit. The interviews covered pupils and students in different study areas, including primary school pupils (36%), the first two years of secondary school (42%), and the last two years of secondary school and higher education (22%).

The survey revealed three main challenges that face the port community as a whole:

- **Out of sight, out of mind**: the port is far removed from the daily lives of young people, outside their comfort zone and field of experience. Their perception of the port is “lots of water, ships and containers.” Unfortunately they are not aware of the very large number of companies located in the port and the huge variety of jobs on offer.

- **No brands that impact young people directly**: in recent years the main trend in the types of company in the port has been towards small and medium-sized B2B firms. These companies aren’t immediately familiar: they don’t ring a bell. Furthermore they don’t appeal to the imagination, despite the fact that many of these B2B companies supply the raw materials or products that young people consume in their everyday lives.

- **Intensified security since 9/11**: putting a barrier between port companies and the general public. Companies have to comply with strict European and national regulations, leaving them very little room for flexibility. All company visits have to be organised in line with the relevant legislation. Gone are the days when young people could wander around the quays and observe the activities from close by, at their own initiative.

The survey also highlights the importance of **making port visits a real experience**: the picture that people have of the port and its activities must be improved by **giving the port a face**.
In general we can say that we have to make the port visible once more and keep the doors open, so as to make young people interested in working in the port. We have to give them a clear picture of the companies and their activities. In collaboration with its various partners Antwerp Port Authority is doing everything possible to get young people back into the port.

What we are trying to do is to make young people, school pupils and students “feel at home in the port.” The port of Antwerp strongly believes in all its partnerships within the port community, and will constantly put its weight behind new and existing initiatives that create confidence in the port as an employer. Later in this presentation you will read about the various initiatives aimed at convincing families, young children, teenagers, the 18+ and the students about how the port is such a great place to work. Everyone in the port community is involved in this effort.
The port of Antwerp, hand-in-hand with families
For the Port Authority and its partners, discovering the port starts in the cradle! Or rather, in the baby buggy. Safe in the bosom of the family. Taking the family along for a visit to the port should be a carefree day out. Of course, organising port visits is also a way of latching on to the normal concern of parents for their children’s choice of career, later in life. But if you yourself have never worked in the port, you don’t have any idea of the huge range of jobs and employers, or the opportunities for employment in specialist port activities. Parents are able to give their children an accurate impression of the port from a very early age.

In addition to various one-off events such as the Flemish Ports Day (we will be participating for the fourth time on 20 September 2015), the “Deurganck dock lock walk” in 2014, the Port Run (a new running competition to be held on 12 September 2015 with a 15 km course around the port), regular favourites among the public are the MAS Port Pavilion and the bus tours of the port.

**MAS Port Pavilion**

When families organise a day trip to the port of Antwerp, they can start their visit right in the city centre! This experience in the former docklands starts with the MAS Port Pavilion at the foot of the MAS Museum.

The Pavilion affords an initial introduction to this major international port that is a constant hive of activity 7 days per week, 365 days per year. Visitors learn in an interactive, modern and attractive way about the structure of the port and the various types of companies and jobs that it has to offer.
Bus tours of the port

The Port Authority has been organising bus tours for the past two years now, based on the concept of letting families become acquainted with the port in a child-friendly way.

Families with children can discover the port in all sorts of entertaining and indeed hilarious ways. The educational but humorous bus tour of the port follows a scenario written by the Belgian playwright Dimitri Leue, known for his many plays for children. The name of the tour is “Handhaven” (a play on words that either means “hand port” or “to handle,” depending on your point of view). It is given by the Night Crab — theatre collective with three young actors— playing three guides who take their audience with them around the port. On the way they tell about the port, drawing on their creative skills. The gag is that two of the “guides” are still learning their job, which affords plenty of opportunity for humour. But together they offer an unforgettable port experience. The programme is due to be repeated this summer, in view of the great success in 2014.
The port of Antwerp, hand-in-hand with children
The “Handhaven” bus tour takes us to the efforts made by the port of Antwerp on a daily basis aimed at school children, specifically primary school children aged between 10 and 12.

“Handhaven” as school performance

In view of the wild success of the “crazy but educational” bus tour, the Port Authority has decided to offer it for schools in the month of September. It has sent letters to primary 5 and 6 teachers in Flemish schools offering to put on the performance free of charge. All that the schools have to provide is the bus transport. Success is assured; all available slots are already fully booked, and so 644 pupils from 13 Antwerp schools can look forward to discovering the port with “Handhaven” over a period of 10 days.

From the explanations by the guide during the Port tour I think it could be fine to come and work in the port of Antwerp.

Frederik Balen, (12), primary 6
The Port Centre, the port for real

The Port Centre was set up in 1988 as an educational facility focusing on the port in all its aspects. Over the years the Port Centre has developed greatly in order to reflect changes in society and the economy. At the end of 2013 the Port Centre re-wrote its vision and mission in consultation with the entire port community. Since then the main theme running through its programme is job promotion, in particular as regards choice of studies and job. The emphasis lies on discovery of the port and getting people interested in port jobs. In 2014 the Port Centre had more than 44,000 visitors.
Pupils from primary 5 and 6 can enjoy two types of port excursion starting from the Port Centre:

- The “Port tour” is an educational tour of the docks on the right bank of the Scheldt. An experienced guide takes the pupils around the docks, alongside ships big and small, through the terminals and past warehouses. The pupils are treated to among other things explanations about the petroleum industry, the chemical industry, the dry docks, and storage and handling of steel, ore, cars, fruit and grain. The tour is supplemented by an educational pack for teachers and pupils that they can use to prepare for the tour beforehand and to remind themselves of the experience afterwards. The excursion takes the port of Antwerp closer to the world of 12-year-olds in a light-hearted way. The City of Antwerp contributes towards the costs of the port tour organised by the Port Centre. All schools in the Antwerp city area are given a “Port pass” that enables them to take part in the excursion free of charge. In this way teachers are encouraged to take their class to the port for a whole day.

- The “Shipping classes” are aimed at encouraging pupils to consider working in the port or the port area. The idea is based on other types of “real life” classes organised by primary schools (e.g. forest classes and sea classes) and lasts a week (from Sunday to Thursday). In this case the focus is bringing the world of shipping and the port closer to the everyday world of the children. The pupils “train” to be a captain and in so doing find out about the various maritime occupations.
The port of Antwerp, hand-in-hand with youngsters (12–18)
When it comes to communicating an “experience of the port,” secondary school pupils are more of a challenge for the port community. The younger children have a vaguer idea of “what I want to be when I grow up,” and so they are curious about all aspects of port activity. The older ones by contrast are more interested in particular aspects, but paradoxically they may not be aware of the great variety of jobs on offer. We therefore focus on specific projects for pupils in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd years of secondary school, with tailor-made introductions to the many different jobs in the port of Antwerp.

The port of Antwerp is well aware that 12 to 14 year-olds are already making an initial choice of school subjects which will influence their later direction of studies. The port starts to develop interest in the world of the port at around this age. The Port Centre offers two types of programmes for secondary school pupils:

- **“The port in landscapes”** is aimed at General Secondary Education pupils and is linked to the subject of Geography. The excursion takes the form of a practical lesson, showing the teachers and pupils how the port plays different roles in different landscapes (e.g. the transition between the port and natural areas, polders, and port industry) and illustrates the importance of the people responsible for these port activities.

- **“The port in technology”** is aimed at pupils in Technical or Vocational Secondary Education, with a one-day excursion focusing on the technical aspects of the port. The emphasis is on interaction and touchy-feely experience. During the busy programme of activities the pupils are able to design their ideal port, with lots of practical examples and challenging hands-on activities from which they learn how to make “their” port run like a well-oiled machine. The pupils visit the Berendrecht and Zandvliet lock complexes and are shown the Port Authority’s tugging operations. The programme itself is supplemented by an educational pack provided by the Port Centre with preparatory and follow-up class work. This has the further advantage of helping the pupils to remember more from the visit.

We want to send visitors home with a “Wow!” feeling about the port.

**Outside on the ground is where you learn most about what the port means in daily life.**

Philippe Demoulin,
*The Port Centre director*
The port of Antwerp is particularly concerned about young people aged 16 to 18, especially those entering their last year of secondary school. These pupils in General, Technical and Vocational Secondary Education will soon be embarking on further education or entering the job market, and so it is important to help them in their choice of direction. The port community has an important role to play, acting as the link between the schools on the one hand and the port as a future employer on the other.

However, there are differences between the needs and expectations of General Secondary Education pupils on the one hand and Technical/Vocational pupils on the other, and so the Port Center takes a different approach for each of these target groups. Young people who are about to choose a particular direction of higher education frequently hesitate between the different possibilities that are open to them. They are easily influenced, and prefer to look around before making their choice. Those on the other hand who are about to enter the job market directly from school generally have a good idea already about the industry or trade that they would like to enter, and so they are more interested in meeting potential employers.

- “Young Port” offers study-oriented and job-oriented programmes for the two respective categories, to interest them in a career in the shipping, logistics or industrial sector in and around the port of Antwerp. The emphasis is on offering an attractive experience as a first introduction to the port and its job opportunities. It also promotes the “SenSe” (secondary-after-secondary) training courses. For both excursions, Young Port hosts a school lesson focused on study and job options.

- “A Port full of Challenges” is a programme for pupils who want to pursue further education, focused on the challenges facing today's shipping, industrial and logistics sectors. Various company visits and invitation seminars are aimed at persuading young people to choose a field of higher education that leads to this dynamic, innovative world.

- “A Port full of Jobs” by contrast is aimed specifically at young people who do not want to go on to further education after leaving school. As well as visiting companies they are able to chat with employees and employers in different sectors, seeking answers to questions such as “What is your working day like?”, “Can you combine your job with a family?” and “Is it possible to start at the bottom and work your way up?” In this way they get a clearer picture of the potential work environment.

- “Port in action” combines a tour of the port with a tailor-made company visit. The young people get a unique look behind the scenes and visit terminals where coffee beans are stored, bagged and sold, where bananas arrive by reefer carrier, or where huge rolls of steel are handled: the possibilities are endless! During the visit an expert guide provides all sorts of interesting information about different branches of industry, logistics processes and shipping activities in the port. The educational team draws up tailor-made programmes to suit the preferences and background knowledge of the group. For example, the programme offered to vocational students who plan to enter the transport industry is very different from that offered to science students.
In the meantime the Port Centre and its partners are constantly thinking up new initiatives, but in all cases the main objective is to offer young people an enjoyable yet informative day out in the port.

One new initiative due to start in September 2015 is the Sustainable Port excursion aimed specifically at 16 to 18 year-olds. This is linked to the final year studies in Geography, the aim being to persuade teachers and school principles to include the visit in their curriculum. Subjects covered during the visit include globalisation, town & country planning, and maintaining support among local residents. The definition of “sustainability” (or “sustainable development”) in this case is taken from the UN report entitled “Our Common Future.” From this perspective, sustainable development is development that meets the needs of today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The programme of the visit makes connections between this definition and the efforts (and results) that can be seen in the port. The emphasis is on the “3 Ps” (People, Planet and Prosperity), which we try to demonstrate and explain at each stage in the excursion. In other words, we try to demonstrate how the youngsters’ talents will be useful in future. At various points during the excursion the pupils are encouraged to think critically about sustainable development. With this guided tour we show the pupils the reality on the ground, with an approach to suit their age. We want to send them home with a “Wow!” feeling about our port.
The port of Antwerp believes in the future generation

For young people aged between 12 and 18 it is important to build a strong relationship between the schools and the port community. The latter puts great efforts into persuading schools to emphasise the links with the port and logistics in their lesson material, especially in the final year. The success of this can clearly be seen from the number of visitors to the Port Centre: **in 2014 nearly 30,000 pupils were given an introduction to the port.** That’s 70% of the total number of visits organised by the Port Centre!

Given this success, the port community places a great deal of confidence in the Port Centre. In this way we are building bridges between young people and port companies in an educational yet entertaining manner.
The port of Antwerp, hand-in-hand with young adults (18+)
International trade and logistics are an integral part of the modern economy, and will become even more important in the future. Flanders is the gateway to Europe, and so trade and logistics are basic to our economic policy. Against this background Antwerp plays a very significant role. Among other things the port is a major source of employment. This is a role that we are glad to play, and we therefore support the various initiatives aimed at assuring a constant supply of suitably qualified labour and raising the name recognition of the port.

If they are sufficiently well informed, then young people are able to make a well-considered choice of job for the future. In other words, education and training are of crucial importance. Unfortunately, however, too few young people at present are opting for careers in technical or logistical fields, and so Flanders is faced with a crippling shortage of newly-qualified people in these areas.

The port of Antwerp is a strong advocate for the requirements of the labour market and the need to bring education into line with all aspects of it.

It plays this advocacy role by collaborating with various educational institutions in Belgium. In addition we go deeper into the problem of not being able to fill specific jobs in the port, a problem that sharply illustrates how young school-leavers who do not wish to go on to higher education are missing out on job opportunities in the port. Frequently they are simply unaware that such jobs are open to them, which means that the school curriculum in technical and logistical fields should be better tuned to these needs. Also promoting the additional technical and logistical training for job seekers and young unemployed people is necessary.

The Port Authority in collaboration with various partners offers a structural response to this problem with “Talent Stream”, a job and training facility aimed at assuring future-oriented employment and meeting job requirements on the part of job seekers and employers alike, in consultation with the education partners.
Collaboration with universities and colleges

The Port Authority collaborates with universities and colleges to bring students closer to the port, even in subjects where the link may not be immediately obvious. The Port Authority considers it important for lecturers and students to have an understanding of what goes on in the port, despite the port being literally out of sight and so also out of mind.

There has been a formal collaboration agreement between the Port Authority and the University of Antwerp since 2008, the main provisions of which were renewed in January 2015. Under the terms of this collaboration project, current challenges facing the port find their way into teaching options in the different faculties. Recent examples of areas in which the port collaborates with the university include integrated water management in the Scheldt and in the docks, the way the port is experienced by local residents, cost chain modelling and sustainability reporting. These and other challenges often provide inspiration for students looking for a subject for their thesis (bachelor’s or master’s).

It also frequently happens that experts from the Port Authority are invited as guest lecturers to share their practical knowledge with the students. In another initiative, since 2014 - 2015 the Port Authority supports the new master’s course in Security Science at the Faculty of Law, by sponsoring the “Port Authority Chair of Security Science.”

Another good example of social integration between Antwerp Port Authority and the University of Antwerp is the innovative learning platform for socially responsible enterprise. By means of guest colleges the Port Authority and the port community are able to focus on sustainability in port operations. In this way the University of Antwerp seeks to focus greater attention on sustainable development in education. “Education for Sustainable Development” is the wider (global) frame of thinking behind this initiative. Thus, Environmental Science students study a practical environmental problem in the port area.

Similarly there is a collaboration agreement with the Antwerp Management School (AMS). In 2011 the Port Authority and AMS signed a Memorandum of Understanding aimed at attracting top talent to Antwerp and its port, developing “competence centres” for multi-disciplinary research and building up know-how, and developing networks linking the worlds of science and business. Under the terms of the agreement, each year several AMS students carry out consultancy projects in collaboration with the Port Authority focusing on specific areas of policy. Through projects such as these the students come into contact with the world of the port and logistics, and contribute to building up know-how in various fields within the Port Authority and the port itself. In the meantime the port participates in various networking events for AMS students and alumni with the aim of making the port better known among these target groups.
Finally, each academic year the Port Authority offers **internships for students from various Flemish universities and colleges** (University of Ghent, Catholic University of Leuven and Karel De Grote Highschool) dealing with different subjects.

In particular the Port Authority collaborates with **Antwerp Maritime Academy** to further develop knowledge of the shipping world among future seafarers. This is essential to ensure that Flemish youngsters will continue to play a leading role in the nautical sector in future, and that expertise in this area can be further developed and put into practice. Antwerp Maritime Academy has close links with the University of Antwerp and is covered by the same collaboration agreement, under which it carries out projects for the Port Authority and lends assistance with specific nautical problems.
The availability of enough highly trained and motivated employees is an important advantage for the port of Antwerp. It is therefore very much in the interests of the port to assure the further availability in future. But just as in other sectors the port companies have for the past few years been faced with a “war for talent” in which it is becoming more and more difficult to fill vacancies, especially for some types of key job.

The port companies have therefore taken various initiatives — both individually and collectively — to assure the supply of talent in future. They encourage young people to choose a field of study that leads to a job in the port, and offer various employment programmes to guide unemployed persons towards available jobs in the port. But despite all this, unfortunately, some vacancies in the port cannot be filled. In the past there was too little coordination between the various initiatives, so that they lost impact. Talent Stream is aimed at assuring a good supply of skilled labour for the port of Antwerp, specifically in the logistics and industrial sectors. With this initiative the port seeks to ensure that enough potential employees find their way towards the available vacancies in the port, today and in the future.

Talent Stream takes the form of a partnership between the Port Authority, local authorities such as the City of Antwerp and Province of Antwerp, employers’ organisations (Alfaport-Voka), the education sector, the Flemish jobs agency (VDAB) and various training institutes. It boosts the profile of the sector, raises awareness of it among young people and job seekers and guides them towards jobs in the port and logistics.

It also sets up various initiatives and participates in others aimed at persuading young people to choose fields of study connected with logistics.

We want to inspire young people and give them a realistic impression of what the job entails, what they’ll actually be doing on a day-to-day basis.

Mieke Coppieters,
Talent Stream coordinator
“Welcome to a transport of delight” is another annual event for school leavers (General/Technical/Vocational) where Talent Stream provides practical information about the port and jobs in the logistics sector, as well as related fields of study. The event consists of various interactive workshops for practice in job applications and interviews, examples of lectures at BSc level, a “job roundabout,” company visits, a tour of the port, visits to the MAS Port Pavilion and finally a quiz about everything that the young people have learned during the day. The Port Authority and the various other companies in the port are very glad to lend their collaboration to this initiative.

In January each year the Flemish Ministry of Education organises Study Information Days in all the Flemish provinces. At this event, pupils in their last year of secondary school can learn about the wide range of study options and job opportunities that are available to them after leaving school. At the last such event in January 2015 Talent Stream promoted an “Interactive discovery tour of the port” as an attractive way to make students curious about a job in logistics.

Finally Talent Stream also plays an important role for teachers in secondary schools, adult education and the Pupil Guidance Centre. Training Days are organised for the teachers to make them aware of the prospects that the port has to offer for their pupils. In this way the teachers in turn are able to introduce their pupils to the diversity of the port.
Conclusion

All these initiatives by the port community help to give young people a better image of the port and make them keen to work there in the future.

By providing a unique experience in and around the port in a dynamic, innovative and educational way, the port of Antwerp seeks to attract a diversity of talent.

Visits to the port generate a feel-good factor thanks to the varied collaboration between the Port Authority, the Port Centre, Alfaport-Voka, primary and secondary schools, colleges, universities and finally Talent Stream. Sixty thousand people who enjoy working in the port of Antwerp: that’s the picture we want to give!

In this way the Port of Antwerp will continue its efforts aimed at attracting future generations to its unique world of shipping, logistics and industry.