



Jo van Nunen is professor of Logistics at Erasmus University. Over the last 30 years his research has had repercussions worldwide and has been instrumental in changing the face of his field. Why does this eminent professor eulogize the city of Rotterdam and its port?

The word “port” still conjures up quixotic images of manly stevedores unloading precious cargoes from exotic lands, and enriching the city with the sweat of their collective brow. Bustling and hard-working it may be; old-fashioned it is not. “What thrills me about the Port of Rotterdam is the decision structures, the technology and the management issues. Transport is a very advanced business; it is high-tech, global and multi-cultural,” Van Nunen says. He points out the advantages of the port’s location for the European and global markets, and its impact on global supply chains.

Marrying Business with Academia During his long and distinguished career, Professor Van Nunen’s work has not only bridged the gap between business and academia, it has succeeded in bringing about a marriage of the two; a long-term symbiotic love-affair in which each depends on the other. “Most of our research is done in conjunction with industry.” High-tech challenges continually emerge in the fields of communication and information, virtual organization, e-market places, transport and logistics and virtual agents to name but a few. Furthermore, new issues arise, like the question of trust, the safety of information exchanges, and the ethical boundaries of the possible. “The problems are international and involve many types of activities and institutions,” Van Nunen explains.

Van Nunen has worked with prestigious organizations such as Heineken, KLM, Rank Xerox, Nedlloyd, and the Port of Rotterdam. The EDI (Electronic Data Interchange) game, for example, was an early training tool developed for the control of multimodal global transport. It allowed people to experience the strategic issues involved in automatic information exchange, power structures, and transformations in the technical infrastructure. Hundreds of groups of managers have used it.

Worldwide acclaim All these activities engender new questions for research, and many seminal books and articles written by Professor Van Nunen and his team were the result of looking at

Transported by Rotterdam

**Jo van Nunen: a long-term
symbiotic love-affair**

PHOTO: JACQUELINE DUBBINK

practical problems. The questions generated astoundingly good answers. Van Nunen is actively engaged in training the next generation of researchers. He is Chairman of the Department of Decision and Information Sciences, program leader within Erasmus Research Institute of Management (ERIM), and involved with the TRAIL research school in Delft.

The attention he lavishes on these activities is reflected in the caliber of work the Erasmus University produces. "Rotterdam has one of the best research programs in The Netherlands," he proudly announces. "Three times in recent years, our PhD students have been acclaimed for writing the best thesis worldwide." The work produced by the University has been instrumental in effecting changes in business practices. The prime necessity to achieve this, insists Van Nunen, is a good group. "I only hire people who are better than me, or shall we say 'I outsource non-core competencies!'"

Structured Decisions For the MBA, Van Nunen teaches the Management Science course. He says it's great fun because students from a variety of backgrounds and cultures support each other. "A feeling for logistics is essential to managers. Also, many of the processes they have to decide on have configurations that are represented in logistic processes even if they're unrelated. So my students also learn structured decision making, and to handle practical challenges in a scientifically sound way."

Van Nunen has a long list of publications to his name, is involved in dozens of activities, has two daughters and two grandchildren, and is constantly traveling- so much so that he couldn't remember all the countries he and his wife had been to last year. Luckily, he survives quite well on about 5 hours sleep a night. Still, the dynamics of what he does is so vast that he cannot keep track – "my 3,000 students do that, and then tell me. We're a team. The amazing thing is I'm paid for it!"

Dynamism & Experimentation In terms of Logistics, Rotterdam is an international hub: It's inventive, it's international, it's in



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perpetual flux. Van Nunen's career mirrors the growth and complexity of Rotterdam and its port. The sense of dynamism and intense experimentation is so embedded in the city's way of doing things that it has almost become a tradition. "When I first came to Rotterdam in the 70's it was like having a huge playground on my doorstep. The things that we do at the University today create new control structures for that playground." ■