Make it happen!

by Mitja Caboni, *Acceleration Manager, PortXL*

Established in Rotterdam seven years ago as the world's first port accelerator, PortXL is dedicated to growing the economy while sustaining the ecology through innovating the port and maritime ecosystems. The organisation's main activity is running two concurrent yearly programmes. First is an acceleration track to help start-ups scale their business. Second, a business fast-track to assist scale-ups in connecting with potential clients and having a soft landing in the Rotterdam maritime ecosystem. The selections for the 2022 programme will take place on 6-7 September (check the infographic to see our impact over the past six years). Here are some key takeaways from our *2021 PortXL Impact Report* (as well as a peek into a recent event when nature has met innovation).

Ten companies from eight different countries took part in the 2021 PortXL programme. Last year's cohort engaged in the first PortXL hybrid programme. With COVID-19 restrictions in mind, the agenda was planned to have an alternating schedule of live and digital weeks to accommodate the cohort's international part. This flexibility meant we had people from Australia tuning in and participating, making them feel part of the community. The 2021 cohort went on to sign nine collaborations during the contract signing ceremony, with four more confirmed in the following months.

Reefy & the Rotterdam Reef project

The most recent highlight has been **the Rotterdam Reef project**, where the start-up Reefy has signed a contract with Boskalis, the Municipality of Rotterdam, and Rijkswaterstaat (the Dutch Directorate-General for Public Works and Water Management) to test a modular artificial reef system that protects the shore from large ship waves, at the same time stimulating nature.

Since the end of 2013, the Municipality of Rotterdam, Rijkswaterstaat, the Port of Rotterdam Authority, and the World Wide Fund for Nature have been working together to create sustainable, natural riverbanks in the Nieuwe Waterweg and Scheur. One way they do this is with clean residual materials from the construction industry. Breakwaters are needed as foreshores to keep these natural banks in place and protect them from the waves of ships and the currents. Rijkswaterstaat and the Municipality of Rotterdam are looking for more sustainable solutions than the usual quarry stone. By testing these reef innovations in collaboration with Reefy, the Municipality of Rotterdam and Rijkswaterstaat hope to find a resilient and sustainable solution to restore the natural values in the tidal area of the river Maas.

International efforts

Global ports are strongly connected and share similar efficiency, sustainability, and digitalisation challenges. PortXL's mission to innovate harbours for sustainable growth is not merely a local ambition; we want to extend our reach to international seaports and help them realise their innovation plans to the fullest. Furthermore, it is exciting to work on maritime innovation abroad and learn and experience how Rotterdam is valued.

Quebec & Auckland

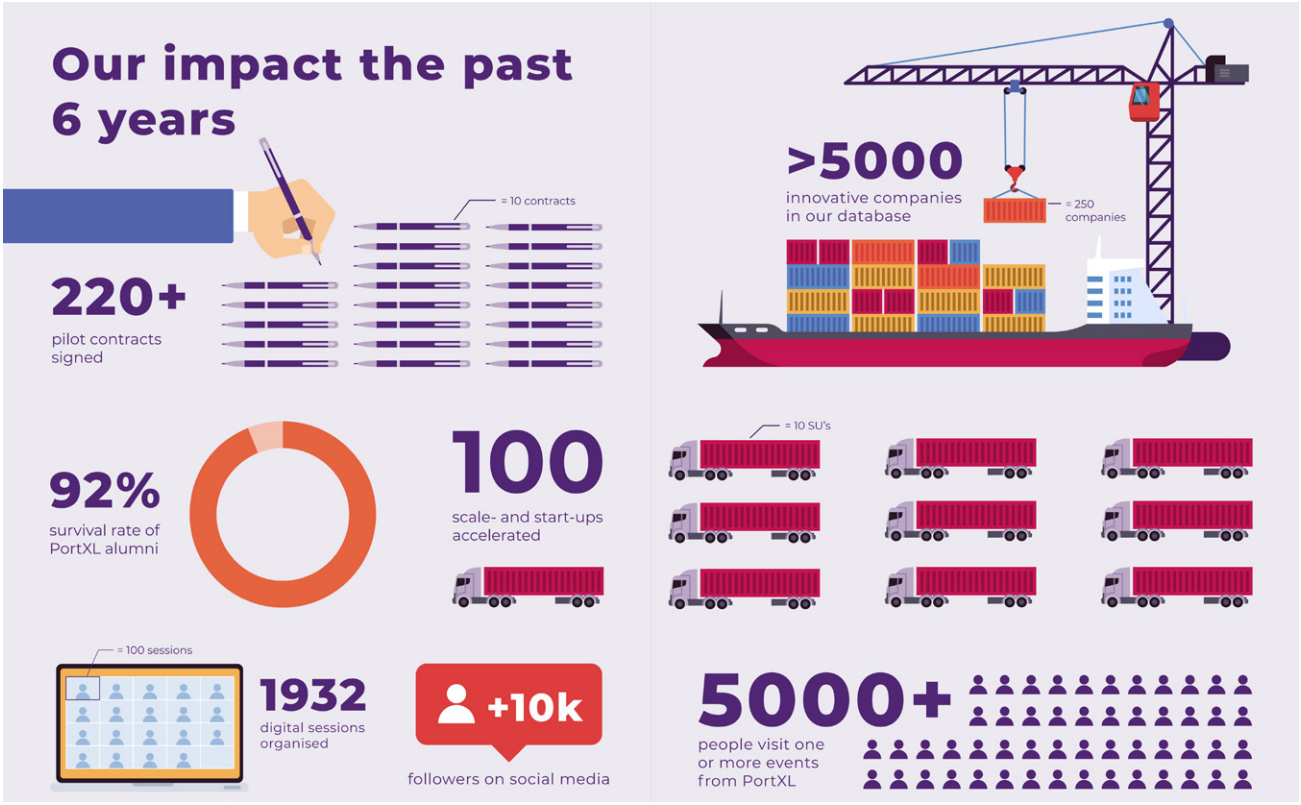
Using our experience with innovation and community building in Rotterdam, we successfully conducted a feasibility study with the Port of Quebec on establishing a port ecosystem in this Canadian city. After a few insightful workshops with the ecosystem, we presented a report with an implementation roadmap. The Port of Quebec is now considering the following steps, and we are optimistic about continuing our support with their future innovation journey. Quebec Port Authority's CEO Mario Girard had the following to say, "The open innovation management process is different from procurement processes and is new to most companies. In order to establish more mature open innovation management processes, it will be beneficial to set up a community in the ports and maritime industry that enables innovation in a collaborative way."

As in Canada, we conducted a successful feasibility study in New Zealand with the Port of Auckland. The collaboration was challenging, with the time zone difference playing a substantial part, but we persevered and delivered the report after engaging in workshops with the Auckland port community.

Taranto

The Faros accelerator lights the way for blue economy innovation in Italy. The organisation is accelerating seven pre-seed & seed phase start-ups this year, helping them grow and validate their business models. The best teams will have access to further investments. The programme will last for four months, during which the start-ups will participate in open innovation activities, develop a pilot project with corporate partners, and receive a pre-seed investment in equity up to €65k.

Faros has been set up by CDP Venture Capital with a|cube and with the support of the Port of Taranto, among other partners. A total of €4.0m has been invested into the accelerator. PortXL's previous cooperation with the seaport and our combined efforts to create an innovation hub in the southern Italian city have played a significant part in the start of Faros. PortXL's role is that of a strategical partner, and we will support operations with our expertise.



SPEED

This European Interreg project aims to build an ecosystem for smart port app development in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and the UK, bridging the gap between the worlds of European ports and the nascent data science – IoT market. PortXL is a proud partner of SPEED, and we have been participating in workshops and events organised so far, as well as hosted expert sessions during the 2021 programme. SPEED's contribution and support throughout the agenda were greatly appreciated.

AspBAN

The EU-supported Atlantic Smart Ports Blue Acceleration Network (AspBAN) is a project focused on developing a dynamic acceleration platform, helping EU Atlantic ports work as blue economy hubs. By becoming the main playground for developing new blue businesses, EU Atlantic Ports have the opportunity to diversify their revenue sources and work towards a sustainable ocean economy. Ports are one of the primary interfaces with the ocean, which means they will play a strategic role as launchpads for a new generation of blue companies. PortXL is proud to be one of the founding partners of AspBAN, and we look forward to sharing our experiences and working towards stronger maritime innovation in the EU.

Secretary-General of Fórum Oceano, the Portugal Blue Economy Cluster, Ruben Eiras, said of the initiative, "The main idea is to build – metaphorically – a blue Silicon Valley that uses the port as a network base for building a European & Transatlantic connection, using the ports as acceleration platforms, innovation hubs for blue economy business."

Forward to the future

The industry has significant challenges ahead of it, affecting the economy and ecology, the main ones being energy transition and digitalisation. The search for new maritime fuel is an endeavour that will shape shipping in the coming decades. The digitalisation of operations will aid knowledge transfer from one generation to the next – and improve the quality of work overall.

We all like to fantasise about how wonderful the future will be, with zero-emissions and futuristic appliances, but the journey there is the challenging part. One step at a time, technology development, testing and piloting are helping us along this path. The key is not to be discouraged by setbacks but to strive. Rotterdam prides itself on being the city with rolled-up sleeves and a 'Make it Happen' attitude, and we hope to inspire multiple global clusters to embrace open innovation. ■

PORTXL world port accelerator

PortXL was founded in 2015 in Rotterdam with the vision of cultivating a spirit of innovation within the global maritime industry. We want to change the way people think about the maritime sector. This is why PortXL is an ecosystem of start- & scale-ups, corporate partners and mentors – all change-makers, creative thinkers and problem solvers who work collaboratively to disrupt the status quo. Click **portxl.org** to discover more.