

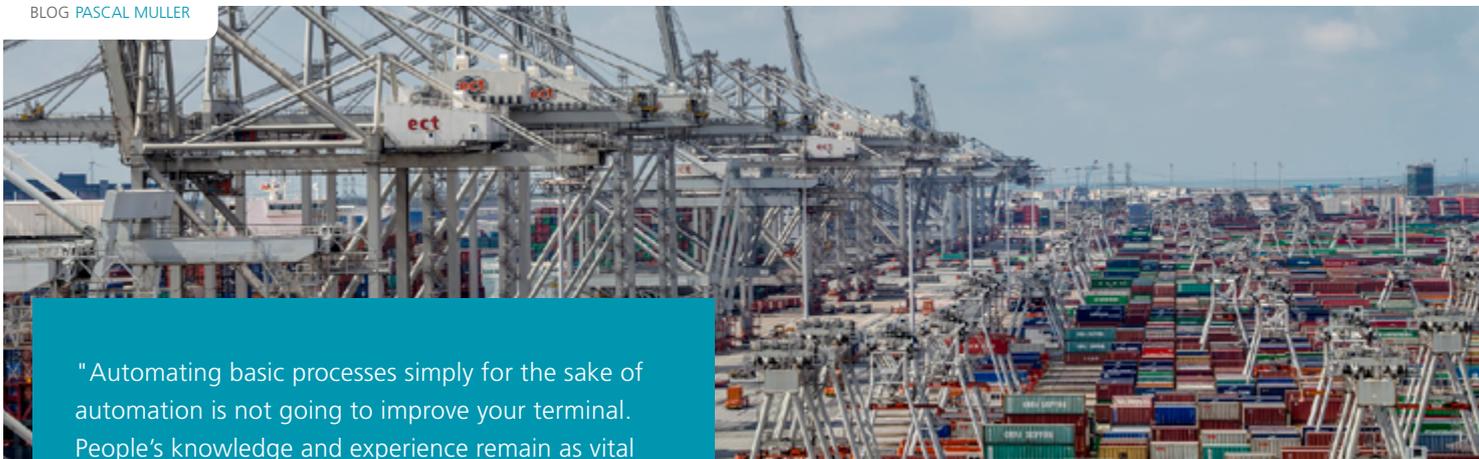
Challenge yourself as an engineer at ECT

PASCAL'S CHALLENGE: remaining the most technically advanced terminal

Pascal Muller, engineer at ECT



The Hutchison Ports ECT Rotterdam (ECT) container terminal is located in the Maasvlakte industrial area, directly facing the North Sea. Large cranes are in operation on the site, loading and unloading containers, while automatic vehicles drive back and forth. ECT is one of the leading and most advanced container terminal operators in Europe – a position that ECT, backed by ICT Group, is determined to maintain.



"Automating basic processes simply for the sake of automation is not going to improve your terminal. People's knowledge and experience remain as vital as ever, just in a different way."

Maritime planning application

ECT is the developer and operator of the first fully automated facility of its kind in the world, and their processes are continuously enhanced and refined in order to maintain this high level of automation. Pascal Muller, employed by ICT Group and currently working as a Software Engineer at ECT, has been closely involved in these operations for the past several years. "My focus over the past three years has been on optimising maritime planning processes. Whenever a ship arrives, we know how many containers, and what types of containers, need to be unloaded from and loaded onto the vessel. Pascal developed a software application that both controls the loading and unloading process and handles administrative tasks. "Stability is a factor you need to consider when loading and unloading containers. If the weight is not distributed properly, it could cause the ship to tilt. To ensure processes in the terminal run smoothly, the number of operations should be kept to a minimum, and containers should therefore be stacked as efficiently as possible. All these factors are incorporated in the software applications we develop, while the planners also still have some measure of control over the process."

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Optimisation

In order to maintain a 'human touch' in automated loading and unloading processes, Pascal has been gathering feedback from both users of the equipment and from the planners. By working closely with his coworkers, he aims to continuously improve the system. In fact, it's hard to keep up with the sheer pace of innovation in this industry: reducing crane cycle times and changing the driving mode of automated vehicles are just two examples of changes that require the software to be updated. "It's essentially a domino effect: if we manage to get X right, we might be able to achieve Y, and so on. And ECT needs to stay on top of these developments." But Pascal feels it's important not to jump the gun: "Automating basic processes simply for the sake of automation is not going to improve your terminal. There are certain types of jobs that people manage to do with such precision that machines and software are no match for them, really. People's knowledge and experience remain as vital as ever, just in a different way."

Mixed landscape

Customers have an ever-increasing need for information, ranging from a container's current status to all kinds of other data. "New bits of software are added all the time, and our job is to make these updates interact in the background with older parts of the software, or with applications from other providers. The fact that we're dealing with a mixed landscape requires that we're familiar with all the systems and what they can and can't do, and then to work on using and deploying those systems more effectively. It would be fascinating for anyone to see the sheer scale and level of technical sophistication of an automated container terminal, but what makes it so exciting for me personally is that I'm aware of the decisions that facilitate it and the complex processes that keep it all running."