

COMMUNITY

The Dutch recipe for innovation: Collaboration, independence, and a non-hierarchical mindset

Marc Hendrikse, chairman of the Dutch governmental top sector High Tech Systems & Materials, shows the origins of Dutch innovation

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Marc Hendrikse, Photo © Bram Saeys



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Bart is the co-founder and co-owner of Media52 (publishing IO+) and a Professor of Journalism at the University of Groningen. He is responsible for all the branches of our company—IO+, events, and Laio—and focuses on commercial opportunities. A journalist at heart, he also keeps writing as many stories as he can.

Did our quality as traders bring the Dutch so much wealth in the Seventeenth Century? No, the Dutch Golden Age was based on innovative technology. And that's still the same today, said Marc Hendrikse, chairman of the Dutch governmental top sector High Tech Systems & Materials, at the International Precision Conference in Veldhoven. Hendrikse provided a compelling analysis of why the Netherlands still excels in high-tech innovation. "If the Netherlands wants to continue its high-tech success, it must foster its culture of collaboration and its non-hierarchical way of working. And, of course, we need continued investments in innovation."

Dutch innovation & IO+

IO+ is focused on Dutch innovation. We offer a platform to the people and organizations that aim to solve the big challenges of our time. And to those who help us understand the concept of innovation itself. That's why we're happy to give the floor to Marc Hendrikse.

In his speech, Hendrikse explored how the "Dutch way of innovation" is deeply rooted in history, culture, and collaboration, forging an ecosystem where innovation thrives.

Hendrikse highlighted that the Dutch approach to innovation emerged not only from technical brilliance but also from the necessity to work together. This cooperative mindset traces back to the 17th century's Golden Age, which he noted began with Cornelis Corneliszoon's ingenious invention of the crankshaft in 1597. This breakthrough dramatically boosted productivity, allowing the Dutch to construct ships faster and dominate global trade.

"Thanks to Corneliszoon, there were five thousand sawing mills in 1670; we had more ships than anyone else on earth." From this era forward, innovation and prosperity have gone hand in hand in the Netherlands.

A culture of cooperation and non-hierarchy

A distinctive feature of the Dutch innovation system is its non-hierarchical culture. Hendrikse emphasized that this collaborative spirit allows specialists from diverse fields to engage directly with each other, fostering an environment where everyone, from technicians to PhD holders, can share input openly. He shared how, in the Netherlands, "the one making a part can communicate directly with the PhD in physics who designed the part." This non-hierarchical, egalitarian culture has been key to the Dutch ability to create groundbreaking high-tech systems.

This is Dutch innovation

In the run-up to the 2023 Dutch Innovation Days, annually held in Enschede, we asked some of the key players within the Dutch innovation ecosystem what they thought was distinguishing Dutch innovation. In a three-part series, we explored this concept's content, opportunities, and limitations. Here's the result, thanks to Peter Oosterwijk, Hille van der Kaa, Jeroen Wijering, Bram Nauta, Carina Weijma, Khashayar Mansourizadeh, Cees Links, Martin van den Brink, Fred Roozeboom, Maarten Steinbuch, Marc Hendrikse, Ton van Mol, Bert-Jan Woertman, Frank Eijssens, and Yvette Ruts-Wolters:

- 1 - Resilient, anti-hierarchical, collaborative, fast, open, and always impact-oriented: is Dutch Innovation really so special?
- 2 - Innovation thanks to the Dutch down-to-earth mentality.
- 3 - The urge for impact is driving innovation in the Netherlands

Not only do the Dutch emphasize vertical collaboration within organizations, but they also excel in horizontal teamwork across disciplines. "Our engineers, physicists, and chemists often debate solutions," Hendrikse noted, but always with mutual respect. This open and candid interaction is fundamental to the systems engineering expertise that defines Dutch high-tech industries today.

The role of infertile soil and independence

Historically, the Netherlands' infertile soil – especially in Brabant and the Eastern part of the country – and limited natural resources created a shared need for self-reliance. This fostered an independent mindset that pushed communities to support one another, a trait Hendrikse believes is embedded in the Dutch DNA. This resource scarcity and desire for autonomy catalyzed innovation and led to a collaborative spirit still alive today. Hendrikse referred to Philips' early years as a key example, recounting how the company's commitment to research and development spurred the growth of a high-tech ecosystem in Eindhoven.



Marc Hendrikse on Dutch Innovation, © Bram Saeys

Supply chain model

Over time, the Dutch approach to production evolved, with Philips spearheading innovation but gradually spinning off companies like ASML, FEI, and NXP, which have become giants in their own right. Hendrikse described how the Dutch system shifted from complete vertical integration to a flexible, collaborative supply chain model. This adaptation enabled companies to specialize and work alongside others, maximizing expertise at every step. Today, the Netherlands boasts a robust network of supply chains, with many Dutch firms holding critical roles across global industries.

Improve competitiveness

Hendrikse closed his speech by emphasizing the importance of continued cooperation and investment in innovation. The Dutch vision, he argued, is about more than just technological success; it's about creating a fertile environment for long-term growth.

The Netherlands' unique blend of collaboration, independence, and non-hierarchical culture has become a high-tech innovation model. As Hendrikse noted, this ethos drives the Dutch to "accelerate innovation power and improve competitiveness."

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