

At the Helm

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23/11/2018 Andrea Eck has a job that would quicken the heart of any car enthusiast. A member of the Board of Management of BLG Logistics, she is the director of its Automobile division. She gave Porsche Consulting a look into the very heart of this global logistics company—the car terminal in Bremerhaven.

One of the world's largest car ports, it handles millions of vehicles a year. Eck is now modernizing its transport chains. One of her main priorities is digitalization.

Andrea Eck leads us through a hall built in the 1980s with a surface area of five hectares. New Porsche cars in white protective covers are lined up in precise rows to her left and right, ready to embark upon journeys across the seas. They are shipped from the port of Bremerhaven to customers in the United States, the Middle East, and Asia. Eck is a member of the Board of Management of the Bremen-based BLG Logistics Group AG & Co. KG, with special responsibility for its automotive network. She knows the industry inside and out, having spent many years in charge of vehicle logistics for the Volkswagen Group before joining BLG in 2017.

The terminal can accommodate 95,000 cars

Eck loves cars, whether they be large sedans or small sportsters. And the terminal in Bremerhaven is a veritable paradise for automotive fans like her and her team. It can accommodate 95,000 cars, lined up precisely in space saving rows. In fact, its grounds, which are about as large as 330 football fields, are known as Europe's largest parking lot. Thousands of new vehicles pass through here every day, around the clock and throughout the year. Managing Director Sören Krüger and Head Operations Director Thomas Rech supervise the everyday routines. “More than 2,000 employees move eight million cars a year here,” says Krüger, a Bremerhaven-born mathematician who loves his job. “Every day at the port is different and exciting,” he adds. “That's because we always have to contend with the wind and waves—and because car makers have been expanding their product ranges and raising their requirements.” Meeting these challenges in economic ways is one of the strengths of the BLG car terminal.

An excellent place to see how this works is from the top floor of one of the eight enormous six-story parking garages. Trains loaded with cargo from automobile manufacturers roll up to the garages on delivery ramps. The brand new cars are driven off the carriages in convoys, checked for possible damage, and lined up for their voyages across the seas. Twenty-six freight trains bring 5,000 cars a day from the factories to the loading facilities in Bremerhaven. The new vehicles then proceed like columns of ants into the bowels of the ships on the nearby quays. Sometimes several of the world's largest wheeled cargo ships are docked at the port at the same time. Known as roll-on/roll-off vessels, their innards resemble multi-story parking garages. Cars can be driven on board quickly through their rear and side doors. Deck guides ensure they are parked very closely together. Around three quarters of the cars are exports headed primarily for China, North America, and South America. Around one quarter are imports, mainly from the U.S., Japan, and Korea. Most of the cars are cleaned, inspected, and fitted with special options in one of BLG's three technical centers before being dispatched to truck, trains, or smaller boats.

Andrea Eck she is setting up something like a terminal network 4

In order to modernize these transport chains for the future, Eck is now going a step further. She is setting up something like a terminal network 4.0 for this seaport, which is more than a century old. “We started standardizing and digitalizing our process chains last year,” reports the experienced manager. All of the parts of BLG's car network—from car production to customers, with 20 sites throughout Europe—are to be incorporated into one IT network that covers orders, customer data, car and transport status reports, space utilization, and timetables. “This data pool will give us an enormous level of transparency for all the processes in the network,” says Eck. “We can monitor our needs and capacities, and make our processes both more stable and flexible.”

In the future the network is even expected to encompass external factors, such as weather data, traffic advisories, and changes to shipping schedules. Plans call for establishing an AI-based, self-learning early warning system that can identify potential disturbances such as hazardous weather conditions. By 2020 BLG's planning team expects to have a multi-touch table that models the complex car terminal

and can be used to control its processes and simulate different scenarios. The driving crew will receive their instructions via smartphone. As Eck explains, “We are guided by the vision of simplifying the logistics for our customers, which means making the processes more transparent, streamlined, and robust—which in turn will make our customers themselves more successful.”

BLG places a priority on progress

Some of the digitalization ideas have grown out of a project with Porsche Consulting. “For predictive planning it’s important to consider the entire process chain,” says project director and consultant Carsten Kahrs. He and his team helped to develop the farsighted plans as a basis for future software solutions that will improve networking with ship owners, optimize parking space, and reduce car movement. “Productivity at the terminal has been noticeably enhanced,” says Managing Director Krüger.

BLG places a priority on progress. The company therefore invests in its own five-member innovation team. It tests new technologies such as drones, data headsets, 3-D printing, scan gloves, and robots in 100-day projects. The logistics company is also preparing for the advent of self-driving new cars. “We’re sure we’ll be seeing autonomous cars that can also communicate with each other,” says Eck. She explains that the industry has a vision of new cars automatically navigating their individual logistics paths onto freight trains and ships. So BLG is already making relevant test spaces available to manufacturers. After all, the port grounds are a uniquely protected space without any traffic lights or children at play. “Our grounds are a superb place for manufacturers to test many new developments,” says Operations Director Rech. The many possibilities include control models, big data applications, and power supply options for electric cars.

But BLG board member Eck is also convinced that there will be many things that cars will not be able to handle on their own, from organizational matters to how they are secured on freight trains and trucks. Completely new business models are also conceivable. “We are prepared and are engaging in close dialogue with our customers,” says Eck. “We have both the experience and the technologies.”

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