
10 TIPS FOR MARITIME START-UPS

CHALLENGES IN THE ROTTERDAM REGION

**ROTTERDAM.
MARITIME CAPITAL
OF EUROPE.**



Growing your business involves funding, networking, recruitment, branding and more. Learn from start-ups that have already made the leap forward how to do this and how the business climate in the greater Rotterdam area offers a fertile ground to grow your start-up.

ROTTERDAM, YOUR START-UP AND BUSINESS GROWTH

“BUILD A GOOD NETWORK FAST, FOR EXAMPLE VIA ONE OF THE ACCELERATORS IN THE REGION, SUCH AS BUCCANEER DELFT OR PORTXL. THEIR PROGRAMMES AND EVENTS CAN GET YOU IN TOUCH WITH A LOT OF INTERESTED PARTIES IN THE MARITIME, OFFSHORE AND ENERGY INDUSTRIES. YOU HAVE TO GET TO KNOW THEM, THEY HAVE TO GET TO KNOW YOU AND THOSE ARE TWO DIFFERENT THINGS. ROTTERDAM OFFERS A LOT OF OPPORTUNITIES TO DO BOTH.”

Leon Haines,
Co-Founder at Reefy

“IT’S A GREAT IDEA TO CONSISTENTLY REACH OUT TO YOUR FELLOW START-UPS AND EXCHANGE EXPERIENCES. CALL THEM, GO FOR A COFFEE, HAVE DINNER AND TALK ABOUT EVERYTHING YOU ENCOUNTER, WANT TO DO OR NEED TO HAVE – DON’T BE AFRAID TO BE TRANSPARENT. IN MY EXPERIENCE YOU CAN REALLY HELP EACH OTHER WITH MANY ASPECTS OF BOTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT. AND THE SOONER YOU HAVE A PROVEN CONCEPT, THE SOONER YOU ARE READY TO SCALE.”

Gjalt Lindeboom,
Managing Director at Seaqualize



“TO SCALE UP SUCCESSFULLY IN ROTTERDAM YOU NEED TO STAY FOCUSED. STAY TRUE TO YOUR INNOVATION, YOUR PRODUCT, INSTEAD OF BRANCHING OUT TOO FAST TO AN ENTIRE PORTFOLIO OF PRODUCTS. IT’S EASIER TO GROW WHEN YOUR FIRST DEVELOP AND TEST ONE PRODUCT FOR WHICH YOU BUILD MARKET APPROVAL AND TRUST. ONCE YOU HAVE THAT YOU CAN BROADEN YOUR SCOPE.”

Sebastian Hamers,
Co-Founder and CEO at Sealution

HOW TO GET FROM START-UP TO SCALE-UP?

GROWING YOUR START-UP AND MAKING IT A SUCCESS CAN BE HARD. YOU NEED TO TEST, VALIDATE, IMPROVE AND THEN SCALE YOUR INVENTION, YOU NEED THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO GROW AND MOST OF THE TIME YOU'LL NEED FINANCIAL HELP TOO. HOW TO DO THIS? HERE ARE SOME TIPS TO HELP YOU GROW.

When your start-up is growing to the next level, becoming more mature, it is both nice and necessary to get some help. This download gives you practical tips to get assistance and grow, incl. advice from start-ups that have gone before you and have already entered the scale-up phase.

These tips are especially useful for the Rotterdam port area and its surroundings – a region filled with ports, shipbuilders, manufacturers, knowledge institutions, all types of technical,

service and research suppliers, energy companies, network and interest associations, start-up accelerators, investors and, of course, challenges to be solved!

Maybe your solution is the answer to one of these challenges... if you can scale-up fast enough, realising organisational stability at the same time. Here are some tips that might help you do just that.



1. FUNDING

One way to get funding for your start-up business is to pitch to venture capitalists (VCs) or angel investors. This may sound a bit scary, but that's what they're there for and they're always on the lookout for promising businesses. In the Rotterdam region you'll find a few VC firms, such as Mainport Innovation Fund, Rotterdam Port Fund and InnovationQuarter. You can also check out platforms such as Leapfunder or Seedrs, which allow start-ups to connect with investors online.

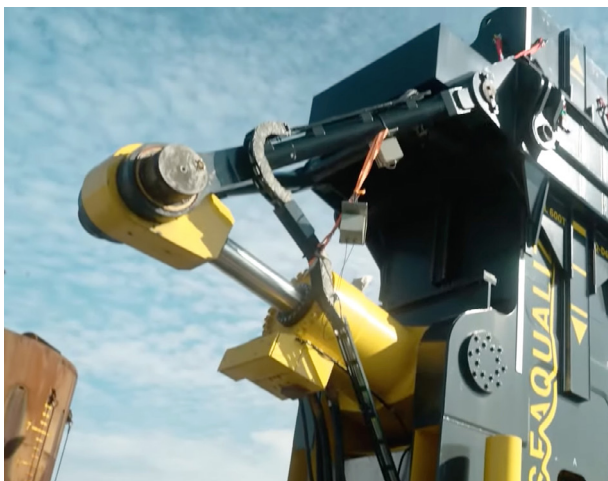
Sebastian Hamers, Co-Founder at Sealution

(below-deck connectivity solutions driven by IoT technology) agrees that reaching out to venture capitalists is a good idea. For your first round of funding, he especially recommends to contact individual angel investors and 'Smart Capital' firms. These are mostly small-scale VC studios consisting of successful entrepreneurs who have set up a fund together with the aim of investing in promising start-ups. "These people have a lot of experience, as they are former CTO's, CFO's etc. This way, you get both funding and an informal advisory board at the same time. Our experience is that they will really help you by sharing their network and knowledge. One of our investors even went to Singapore to do pitches for us!"

Gjalt Lindeboom, Managing Director at Seaqualize

(a scale-up in the offshore heavy lift industry), has an additional tip: "There are many subsidies available to speed up the energy transition. My tip is to arrange this yourself, not with the aid of a broker. Just get in touch with the Regional Development Agencies and apply for a subsidy in your own words. Take IQ Capital for example. They work with businesses from the lowest to the highest TRL's (Technology Readiness Levels)."

Leon Haines, Co-Founder at Reefy (which provides sustainable coastal protection solutions) adds: "A good way to fund your company in the early stages is via 'convertible loans'. For example, via Unique, a fund in the Rotterdam region that helps start-ups fund their early concept. The interesting thing is that you can either pay it back or convert the loan to shares for the participants – people who clearly believe in your solution if they take that option."



2. PEOPLE

To attract quality personnel in the maritime industry, it's important to establish your company as a reputable and innovative player in the field. You can do this by showcasing your technology, partnerships and industry expertise via your website and newsletter (the 3 'owned channels' that you control 100%) and of course social media channels.

You can also attend maritime events and conferences (such as the Rotterdam Maritime Week, Europort, Offshore Energy, Hybrid & Electric Marine etc.) to network with potential candidates. Another route is to leverage social media and (free) job boards to promote your job openings and reach out to potential candidates regularly. And don't miss out on Venture Cafe Rotterdam! This weekly gathering where entrepreneurs, innovators and investors connect and exchange ideas is also a source of potential colleagues. However, you go about it, the bottom line is 'action'. Let it be known far and wide that you are hiring and who you are looking for.

Leon (Reefy) adds to these options: "Use your own network.

When we grew from 2 founders to 6 full-timers, we got them all via our own network, especially people we already knew at Delft Technical University. Most of the people who joined us had originally gone off to work for big corporates, but decided they would rather be working in an organisation aimed at realising a sustainable economy and energy supply. That's where we came in. So, don't forget your old classmates."

Gjalt (Seaqualize) agrees with this: "We recruited most of our team from the personal network of the 3 founders. Mind, the process was such that our team now consists of 15 white men. Hence my advice to start-ups – and ourselves – is that when you expand it is wise to not only focus on hiring fast, but on diversity too."

Sebastian (Sealution) also thinks that diversity is important and that includes diversity in age. "We started with 3 founders; now we're a team of 8 people. As a start-up I think you have to look for people who believe in your story, your goals and who are not looking for the 9-to-5 life. To find colleagues who fit with your small organisation, you have to be clear in your messaging. Especially in the beginning everybody will have multiple roles; so, be clear about that in your job descriptions and you'll attract people who are attracted to that. Also, make a lot of publicity and be very active on LinkedIn. PR is really essential, both for recruitment and for attracting clients and investors. We are often found because of it, which makes the recruitment process easier."

"There are many people out there looking for a new challenge. This certainly includes people with 10-15 years of working experience looking for a change, for work that aligns with their personal beliefs. This group brings a lot of experience to the table. They often have a drive to make it all work and can bring stability, because they have already seen a lot. Last, having experienced workers in your team can be instrumental in building trust with professional external stakeholders."

3. CUSTOMERS

To get your first customers, you can leverage your connections in the maritime industry and attend industry events to meet potential clients. You can also consider offering free trials or pilot projects to attract early adopters.

Gjalt (Seaqualize) advises start-ups to do the latter in particular: “You have to look for options where and when your technology can be applied. What works well in my experience is to build prototypes. Build, test, show, repeat. Just call and email prospects and companies you would like to become your clients and ask them to come over and have a look. Many of them will, as most of them are interested in new technology anyway. That way you’ll get relevant feedback fast and it can open the door to test the next prototype together.”

Leon (Reefy) adds to this: “Get involved and take part in innovation pitches and contests. There, you will be seen by potential client and you’ll also receive direct technical and commercial feedback on your innovation. Joining accelerator programs is also a good idea, for example PortXL or the Erasmus Centre for Entrepreneurship, both offering Rotterdam-based accelerator programs.”

Sebastian (Sealution) agrees that accelerators can propel your start-up in the right direction. “When we were in PortXL, both the programme and the mentor network delivered a lot of contacts and PR for us and that’s how we got our first client. Your first client or partner is very important, because it allows you to generate proof of concept and you begin to understand what it means to build up good relations with prospects. Also, every time you test your product, you have the opportunity to create photos and videos which you can then use to publish about your innovation and interest even more people.”

RIGHT, NOW THAT WE’VE COVERED THREE IMPORTANT TOPICS EXTENSIVELY – GETTING CLIENTS, COLLEAGUES AND MONEY – LET’S CONTINUE WITH A FEW MORE CONCISE TIPS THAT CAN HELP YOU GROW.

4. FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is becoming increasingly important in the maritime industry. Investors and customers are increasingly looking for businesses that prioritize sustainability, either because they want to be ‘greener’ because they believe in it and see commercial opportunities or because they are forced by legislation. Either way, this (global) development provides you with ample opportunities: you can grow by helping your clients change.

Even if your solution is not sustainable in itself, it can still help your clients become more sustainable by creating savings for them – for example in time, fuel, materials or other resources. Also, whatever it is you do, you can work in a sustainable way, e.g. by investing in sustainable technologies, work practices, manufacturing processes etc. Of course, it makes sense to communicate your commitment to sustainability to your stakeholders – as long as you’re not greenwashing.

5. SETTING UP YOUR OFFICE SPACE AND HOUSING

When your company starts to grow, you’ll often find yourself in need of office and/or work spaces, even if your team can work remotely a lot of the time and especially if you have to manufacture a physical product. Then it’s a good idea to check out the options and contacts offered by the Rotterdam Port Authority.

THIS PAGE GIVES A LOT OF INFO ABOUT SETTING UP SHOP IN THE ROTTERDAM REGION. IN THEIR OWN WORDS: “FROM START-UP TO MULTINATIONAL: EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SETTLING DOWN IN THE PORT OF ROTTERDAM.”



6. 'MY FIRST CRM': BUILD A STAKEHOLDER DATABASE

If you want to expand your network, you can't start early enough with building a (provisional) CRM system. Most start-ups forget this, but it is essential for rapid growth. For one, you can inform literally everyone who takes an interest in your solution by simply sending them an email regularly stating the latest developments, however small. This is a good way to keep people interested, especially those who want to work, buy or invest with you, but cannot do so at this time.

It also makes things easier when you enter the scale-up phase or go beyond that – you already have a database of stakeholders and have already learned to work with a CRM. By the way, many CRM companies offer big discounts for

start-ups. Do this now and everything is there for the moment you really get traction and suddenly don't have time anymore to set up the necessary internal systems to keep up. Last, a newsletter is a direct communications channel between you and your prospects.

7. LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY

Consider investing in technologies such as automation, teamwork/planning software and artificial intelligence to improve efficiency, reduce costs and enhance safety. Like with a CRM, it's easy to start and experiment now you're still small, so you can scale up fast when the time comes.



8. GO PUBLIC/BE VISIBLE

Show yourself and your business to the world by using social media, word of mouth and, if you have the funds, paid advertising. In addition, create a website that shows who you are, what you do, why you do it and especially answers the main question of your potential clients and investors: 'What's in it for me?'. Of course, publish news, blogs, test results and visuals on your website, in your newsletter and on social media – and send it to relevant media.

If this is a challenge, ask a maritime marketer to help out or come in for a sparring session. There are several freelancers and specialised agencies in the Rotterdam region (and beyond) who deliver dedicated maritime marketing and branding services. They can take a lot of work off your desk. However, you can also simply ask them for advice, because there's a lot you can do yourself. For example, ask for a quote each time you run a test with a client, partner or institute and show that quote on your website.

9. INTERNAL ORGANISATION

Preparing for growth means letting go of the notion that you have to do everything yourself – and esp. the thought that you are the only one who understands, so you can't possibly hand over work to others...

Here's some advice from Sebastian (Sealution):

"In a start-up things are often a bit chaotic and the founders have multiple, often overlapping roles. When the time comes to scale your organisation, you need clear goals and roles and start building individual teams, such as sales, HR, business development etc., even if those teams consist of only 1 or 2 persons in the early stages. By defining and dividing clear responsibilities you build a solid base upon which to build a larger, more complex organisation. My advice is to start thinking early about the division of labour, which brings rest to you and your team members – you don't have to think about everything anymore and can therefore focus on the tasks that you need to do. Another advantage is that you can introduce the desired corporate culture. What kind of a company and employer do you want to be? Letting your organisational culture grow 100% organically might mean it runs off in a direction you did not expect or want. It pays off to actively think this through and create a great, stimulating internal culture."



10. FIND PARTNERS, JOIN NETWORKS

Rotterdam and the wider port and industrial area is home to several organizations, associations and events focused on the maritime industry. The Netherlands have a strong national maritime cluster and several regional clusters in which people and companies from all levels and niches know how to find each other. You can tap into this existing network by joining them or visiting their events. It will expand your network fast!

Here are a few notable ones, but there is much more:

- Netherlands Maritime Technology: a network of Dutch maritime technology companies and research institutions.
- Maritime Delta: a collaboration between businesses, research institutions, and government organizations in the maritime sector.
- Rotterdam Maritime Services Community: a platform for maritime service providers in the Rotterdam region.
- Buccaneer Delft: an energy transition accelerator serving "start- & scale-ups in the ever evolving energy & maritime sector. We **accelerate growth, connect, inspire** & help **realize potential**." Buccaneer regularly organises network and knowledge sessions.
- Drecht Cities: a regional cluster of several cities around the Maas River and commercially and logistically closely tied in with the port of Rotterdam. They form, in their own words: "A tradition of craftsmanship spanning more than six centuries. A close-knit community built on loyalty, trust and hard work. And a culture based on pragmatism and collaboration."

Many other organisations exist, including the ones mentioned earlier in this download. Once you get in touch with one of them, you'll soon find out which ones are useful for your purposes. **Gjalt (Seaqualize)** has some additional advice: "It works a treat to maintain regular contacts with your 'competitors' and established companies involved in the same market or technology. Just give them a call, have a coffee, go for lunch and talk: How did your test go? Do you by any chance know a structural engineer looking for a job? Why do you go visit that particular event? You'll see that this does wonders for your networking capabilities."

Last, **Leon (Reefy)** has a tip that is relevant to both growing your network, your recruitment efforts and your client portfolio: "Delft is the marine construction capital of the world. Take for example Delft Technical University, MARIN and Deltares. They offer research facilities, run experiments and have an incredible amount of knowledge. There's also a huge brainpool of engineering students. It's almost an unfair advantage! In this respect, the Delft science cluster is the benchmark of the world and when you settle down in the Rotterdam area, you can reap incredible benefits from it."

IN CONCLUSION

THE TIPS MENTIONED ABOVE CAN HELP YOU BUILD A STABLE FOUNDATION FOR COMMERCIAL, KNOWLEDGE, FINANCIAL AND PRACTICAL GROWTH. ESPECIALLY FOR SUSTAINABLE START-UPS THERE ARE EVEN MORE OPTIONS IN THE GREATER ROTTERDAM AREA.

There is the will and the infrastructure to make the energy transition a reality. Developing that infrastructure and scaling energy-related solutions does pose its challenges, though, and that's where you come in.

Are you looking for a place - and customers - to bring your sustainable solution to life?

[Watch these 3 short videos](#)

Good luck growing your company and don't forget to have fun in the process!



ABOUT 'ROTTERDAM MARITIME CAPITAL OF EUROPE'

ROTTERDAM'S REGIONAL PORT CLUSTER AND WIDER MARITIME ECOSYSTEM IS HOME TO ONE OF THE MOST COMPLETE, INTEGRATED AND INNOVATIVE MARITIME NETWORKS IN THE WORLD. OUR GOAL IS TO WORK TOGETHER ON PIONEERING SOLUTIONS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE SECTOR'S ENERGY TRANSITION, DIGITALISATION AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY.

WANT TO SEE FOR YOURSELF?

Have a look at the Rotterdam [Interactive Transition Map](#). It shows 70+ projects aiming to achieve a CO2-neutral port.

To achieve our ambitious decarbonisation goals, we team up and pull resources to create the most innovative and sustainable maritime cluster in the world. And you can become part of it too.

Is your company active in the maritime, offshore, port or energy industries, then contact us today! Please reach out via maritime@rotterdam.nl or visit www.rotterdammaritimecapital.com.

Our specialists will answer your questions and/or get you in touch with partners and stakeholders that will help you 'set up shop'. We're here for you!

MORE INFORMATION:

City of Rotterdam

attn. City development corporation/ Team Maritime
P.O. Box 6575
3002 AN Rotterdam, The Netherlands
maritime@rotterdam.nl
www.rotterdammaritimecapital.com

Rotterdam Partners

Jorn Douwstra
Business Manager International Trade & Investment
j.douwstra@rotterdampartners.nl
06 - 41816322
www.rotterdampartners.nl

Deal Drecht Cities

Stan Uildriks
Projectmanager Marketing
stan@dealdrechtsteden.nl
06 - 43974730
www.dealdrechtcities.nl

Port of Rotterdam

Postbus 6622
3002 AP Rotterdam
+31(0)10 252 1010
www.portofrotterdam.com

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