

## 4. A forklift as a driver of innovation

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Innovations have completely overturned practices in our family firm a few times.

The first precursor of our company produced wooden crates for milk bottles and wooden barrels for butter in 1891. My grandfather started there in Assen in 1933. At that time there were no pallets, simply because forklift trucks didn't exist.

When one of the directors went to the United States for a wood trade fair after the Second World War, he also bought a forklift there. He thought it would be handy for internal transport. He hadn't taken account of the fact that that forklift would stand unused on the site for the first few months because the workshop doors were too narrow to carry the planks in crossways.

There will have been people who thought that that forklift was a buying mistake. But six months later it resulted in an order to design a kind of loading board on which new users of forklift trucks could place their load. And so the first pallet was created in the Netherlands.

It really was a radical innovation for our company: the transition from butter barrels and crates to pallets. And when we further developed the pallet later on, it turned out to be a radical innovation for the entire manufacturing and shipping industry. Butter barrels are no longer used at all, and crates are all made of plastic nowadays. But the use of pallets has seen massive growth.

The Europallet (European standard pallet) arose in its current form more than 50 years ago, and has undergone no innovation since. Even the thickness of the nails has remained unchanged. But there has been innovation in how it's used. In the 1990s we were confronted with the first packaging legislation. Companies were obliged to take back their packaging materials, including pallets.

At that time my father started renting pallets to customers from the chemical industry: it was not the pallet that was sold, but its use. This was another big innovation for our company. The rental of pallets has since expanded further (more than two-thirds of our total turnover) and our innovations lie particularly in the provision of customer-specific or sector-specific rental solutions.

It's clear that innovation is essential for companies' survival. We also need to ensure that we modify or refine a business model or a product in good time. We need to remain alert to external developments.

But how do you 'do' innovation? It's not a question of just pressing a button.

Innovation means being prepared to reinvent yourself. In my father's time, innovation was triggered by a request from customers in the chemical industry. But many good ideas also arise within the organisation and in collaboration with suppliers.

Picking up those signals becomes ever more difficult as the company becomes bigger and more international. In my grandfather's day, contact with the workers was much more direct and he could pick up an idea straightaway.

Therefore, the trick is to find a way of allowing those good ideas to rise to the top.

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