

Interview with Kevin Stephens, Founder & Chairman, Project Professionals Group (PPG)

We sat down with Kevin Stephens, Founder & Chairman at [PPG](#), to talk about his experience of AntwerpXL this year. He also shared his thoughts on where the breakbulk industry is heading.

Industry Insights

What challenges and opportunities do you think the world of breakbulk will face in 2020?

IMO 2020, which will regulate a 0.5% global sulphur cap on marine fuels, takes effect on 1st January 2020. I'm particularly interested to see what impact this has on freight rates. Business growth might also be at risk as a result of trade wars and geopolitical events. The industry must be ready to adapt to the changing circumstances.

It will be important for the freight industry to navigate its fragile marketplace. In the context of closures, joint ventures, takeovers and acquisitions, this might mean companies need to reassess business models, overall capabilities, financial strengths and overall purpose. The project forwarding sector is facing its ninth year of downturn. This might push its more inexperienced players to revert back to the core business of general freight forwarding.

The industry will also have to react to skills shortages and its ageing workforce. The last decade has seen a severe shortage of experienced, skilled and professional personnel, particularly within the project forwarding sector. Investment in staff training has to increase dramatically.

Are there any trends, specific to your region, that are set to become more prominent?

Australia is like the rest of the world in that its breakbulk boom has slowed. Many major construction and mega infrastructure projects have been completed and new business is stalling. Still, I expect this trend to turnaround in the next 12-24 months with well-attended events like AntwerpXL proving there is still an appetite for breakbulk.

What new industry innovation or technology has impressed you the most?

I am always impressed with organisations that spend money on getting their employees to experience project transportation and management first-hand. It might not sound particularly innovative, but in an age where it is all too common for employees to stay sitting behind their computers, the act of human and social interaction, which is vital in establishing long-term business partnerships, is being lost.

Visiting representatives from shipping companies, stevedores, surveyors and clients, at jobsites and ports, enables a full perspective and better understanding of the industry.

What are the biggest issues specifically for your organisation?

The number of project forwarding networks has grown significantly in the past decade. More competition means we are constantly working to maintain our good reputation and stand out from the crowd.

What has been your organisation's biggest accomplishment and what achievements are you most proud of?

The success of our project cargo forwarding training course is something we're very proud of. As the first of its kind, designed specifically for the professional development of people involved with project cargo logistics management, it was fantastic to partner with AntwerpXL this year to hold courses in conjunction with the event's project cargo exhibitions. Over 550 participants from over 100 countries have received their certificate to date and we look forward to increasing this number as the years roll on.

We're also proud to be holding our 11th annual conference this year in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

This is a tremendous milestone and reason to celebrate.

Where do you see the business in 5 years' time?

I see PPG growing, developing and continuing to deliver value to its members. We have a fantastic advisory board who are very experienced and well positioned to deliver this goal.

How does your organisation view continuing professional development (CPD)?

Over the past three years, it has become apparent that bosses are failing to upskill their employees, which is a worrying trend for our industry. PPG regards training as an essential part of a company's growth and development. People are the main asset to drive success in any business. I urge decision-makers to consider training as an investment in the ongoing success of their business and as an incentive to retain talented employees. Employees perform better and are more loyal to companies that value their growth.

Thoughts on AntwerpXL

What made the event particularly effective in your opinion?

Given that it was AntwerpXL's inaugural year, I was immensely impressed by the sheer volume of participation. Over 100 companies exhibited their latest innovations and developments and the show floor was bustling with activity. I have attended several breakbulk events around the globe and AntwerpXL proved itself to be world-class.

What impressed you most about the event's exhibition?

The calibre of the exhibitors – industry-leading organisations from all over the world, such as C. Steinweg Belgium N.V., Grimaldi Group and Fast Lines Belgium, were present to discuss new ideas and launch new products and services. The layout of the show floor was also well thought through, enabling me to meet many new friends, colleagues and peers.

How well were you able to network with industry professionals and do business?

AntwerpXL provided plenty of opportunities for me to hold fruitful discussions with like-minded peers. In fact, I met several companies that have since joined PPG as members in countries where we were previously not represented.

Would you recommend that other organisations outside of Europe attend AntwerpXL 2020?

Definitely! We were so excited to learn that the AntwerpXL event will continue in 2020 and beyond.

What key trends do you expect to be prominent at AntwerpXL 2020?

The state of breakbulk's global economy. How should the industry respond to recession, booms, busts, slowdowns, mergers and acquisitions? How should the industry manage decreasing profit margins? These are questions that will need answers and I'm sure that AntwerpXL 2020 will gather the greatest minds in the industry to share insights and best practices.

How did AntwerpXL support you in your job?

The show organisers, Easyfairs, were wonderful supporters of PPG and our project forwarding education programme. The event was perfect for us to promote the programme to our targeted audience. We look forward to building a long relationship with the event in the years to come.

About PPG

Managing general and project cargoes on a global basis, the scope of services it provides embrace all the elements of the logistics chain from factory collection right up to delivered destination site.