

Stijn Nijhuis, awarded

# LEADING ENTREPRENEUR & GOOD NEIGHBOUR

He started his first business in an attic in Almere, together with the boy next door, Koen van Geffen. Today, Stijn Nijhuis is the CEO of Enreach, that includes the company he co-founded, formerly known as Voiceworks - and works in an architect-designed, self-built, sustainable office in the dunes. Stijn is no stranger to success. Voiceworks has been listed several times in the Deloitte Fast 50, and last year Stijn was elected Entrepreneur of the Year, praised by the jury as 'the Elon Musk of the future'. Much has changed since the attic days. But for this successful, international telecom & ICT market leader, Almere has always been a constant factor in his successes.

TEXT MELANIE PARKER-ZWANZIGER PHOTOS MAARTEN FEENSTRA

## You don't have to go to the Zuidas to find a challenging financial position

From his office on the top floor of the brand-new building, he looks out over the glistening waters of the IJmeer. The beach beckons. The contours of the metropolis of Amsterdam are visible on the horizon. 'Our company has been in Almere since day one', says Stijn. 'A logical choice. Many of our employees live here. Three of them were even among the first hundred inhabitants. We are now the largest ICT employer in Almere. In Amsterdam, we would be one of many. At the same time, we are easily accessible from the capital city. You can be in the centre of Amsterdam in 20 minutes. And if you prefer the train, the station is just around the corner. You can reach Amsterdam Central Station in 15 minutes and Amsterdam Airport Schiphol in half an hour. Moreover, you get value for money here. Almere is much more affordable than Amsterdam.'

### From babysitters to pioneers

Entrepreneurship is clearly in Stijn's blood. He and Koen started their first business in primary school days - a babysitting service. 'Nobody hired us', he says with a broad smile. 'But there was a solid marketing concept behind it. As teenagers, we started building websites in Koen's attic room. We advertised on buses in Almere. When that market collapsed, we moved into private web hosting. Voice Over IP (VoIP) - calling via the Internet - was just emerging. Our third partner, Egbert Groot, came up with the idea of placing the telephone exchange in a data centre. Not only for our own use, but also for the neighbours. Koen and I immediately saw a business opportunity in this! Whereas previously the ICT infrastructure was left to gather dust in the basement, we centralised it in the data centre, for an increasing number of small businesses. We were pioneers and we went for it in a big way, from the start. It's still the core of what we do.'

### Office above the church

'With the arrival of Egbert, the attic became too small. My mother found our first office through the local newspaper. In Almere Filmwijk, above a church. We were not allowed to work on Sundays, and hosting porn was prohibited. We didn't do the latter, but we did work on Sundays,' he grins. With the fourth founder, Ruud van der Aar, on board Voiceworks was started in 2005. 'We moved to a professional office in the Literatuurwijk district. We were the first company in the Netherlands to make VoIP available to SMEs. Initially via resellers and wholesalers. It was an inspired move! Usually, an SME buys its telecoms through a trusted contact in the neighbourhood. Most of the time, they've been using the same supplier for 20 years. As a young, hip start-up, you can't easily change that.'

### The Netherlands soon became too small

Voiceworks continued to devise and develop innovative communication and collaboration solutions for SMEs, and became the market leader in the Netherlands. They develop their services on the KPN and Vodafone network. 'I dare say we have been leading the field in fixed-mobile convergence for ten years. We were ahead of the game from the start.' The Netherlands soon became too small. Enreach was created by bringing together fast-growing, successful companies to form a single, strong European group. Together, we offer Converged Contact Solutions - the integration of telephony (fixed and mobile) with, for example, video chat and contact centre techniques. A rewarding takeover process!

Voiceworks was so successful during its period in the Literatuurwijk district, that it outgrew these



premises after ten years. 'The limit was reached with two hundred employees. Construction was in a dip in 2015. I was looking for a building plot in my private capacity. That's how I ended up in the Duin district. Both property developer Amvest and the municipality were immediately interested.' Finding an investor for the premises was difficult. He gazes at the other side of the IJmeer. 'Just try to find an investor for a commercial property outside Amsterdam. In the end, Koen, Egbert and I were able to finance it ourselves. Before we decided to build, we also looked at the

## If you have a good idea, you are immediately set free

city centre. An existing building would have cost a lot less, but would also be more difficult to access by car. In Duin you are close to the motorway. We wanted to maintain optimal accessibility.'

### Relaxed beach vibe

He stands up with enthusiasm. We walk through the open-plan offices. Young people, visibly relaxed, are at work everywhere. The game room is empty at the moment, but we hear there's a lot of commotion here during Thursday afternoon drinks. From an imposing, open wooden staircase, which can also serve as a theatre, we walk into the restaurant. The Duin beach vibe theme has been well-applied here. Blue tables

with wicker chairs are separated by hanging boat ropes, with rough, white-painted wooden panels adorning the walls. The catering staff serve a healthy lunch every day.

### Want to work in Nice, Helsinki or Malaga? No problem!

'Voiceworks has always been like a family. Good atmosphere, hard work, and having fun together. Since its inception, Enreach has employed around 1,200 people across Europe. This brings with it challenging, high-level positions. Not only technically, but also, for example, in finance. You don't have to go to the Amsterdam's Zuidas financial district for that. Tired of Almere for a while? No problem, you can work from our offices in Nice, Helsinki or Malaga the following week...' He takes an orange from the fruit bowl. 'Even if you work from your holiday address! We sincerely don't care where you work from. As long as you contribute to the goals of the company.'

### Power to the employee

We walk further through the building. Daylight streams in from all sides. The entire facade is made of glass panels, which are repeated in the interior. 'Transparency fits our company. For example, in 2017 we made Voiceworks holacratic. It's a business model in which everyone can contribute to the way the organisation functions and is shaped. We've let go of the traditional manager-employee hierarchy. Employees themselves have the power to shape their roles and environment. If you come here as a new employee just out of school and want to reform a department or develop an innovative idea, you are





immediately given the freedom to do that, unless it is shown that that would be detrimental to the company. Reversing the burden of proof means the new generation of employees can have immediate impact on the company. They don't have to wait for ten years. It's great! As a result, the energetic start-up culture returned, taking the place of independently operating teams.'

### Almere must keep going!

The view from the back of the building is of a construction site excavation. 'Almere is full of promise, but... you have to follow through and completely fulfill your plans. That doesn't always happen. This is not only due to the municipality, but also to the entrepreneurs and residents. To fulfil that promise, you don't just have to build roads. Facilities should also be kept up to date. Make sure there are catering businesses. And facilitate those entrepreneurs, so that they will still be in business after one and a half years. If a restaurant operator expects to have full tables from day

one and has to pay full rent on top of that, things are bound to go wrong. Such a pity to see that. There is a lot of potential in Almere.'

### I could not have done this in another city

Stijn has also been involved in construction in his private life. 'After selling our first self-built house, we decided to walk that road again. Building under private commission suits me well. Being able to design your own house and business premises with an architect is one of the great advantages of Almere. I could not have done that in another city. Private commissioning does require a lot from people. Customised solutions result in longer lead times and higher construction costs. What we need in the Netherlands now - in order to address the needs of the current housing market - is volume. Almere is optimally positioned for this. Half of Almere Poort still consists of sand, even though it has been there for twenty years. It could happen faster.'

## Above all, we are also part of the Almere society

### Sustainability is a must

In addition to being an architectural masterpiece, the building is also a showcase for sustainability. The roof is covered with solar panels, while a heat pump heats the building in winter and cools it in summer. The building has triple-insulated glass. No electric car? Then there's unfortunately no place for you in the car park under the building, between all the fast chargers. 'I think it is logical that if you put up a building or a house these days, the roof should be full of solar panels. Considering the climate challenges we face, I'm amazed that this was even a choice.'

### A paid day off, to do volunteer work

'Sustainability is also about diversity and inclusiveness. More than thirty per cent of the employees of our company are women. That's quite a lot, but it is not yet fifty per cent. As a technical company in the Netherlands, this is also difficult to achieve. We are planning this at European level. And how to become carbon neutral. We're also part of the Almere society. We want to give back, through sponsoring. So, for instance, we sponsor the theatre company, Vis à Vis, which is just around the corner. And, together with Rabobank Almere, we are main sponsors of the CSR programme of the professional football club, Almere City FC. Together with the players, we organise social projects that contribute to a more fun, safer and more enjoyable city. And once a year, every employee gets a paid day off, to do volunteer work. In short, we behave like a good neighbour and employer.'

### Perform above and beyond

One question remains - what is your business goal? 'Besides doing a turnover of a billion?' he asks with a broad smile. 'In the end, I want the company to run itself. And that I'm mainly needed to push it in the right direction for growth. If I were not in the office for six months, I'd still want new products to be launched, with which we can pleasantly surprise our customers. That is why our purpose is 'Create Contact Magic'. If you don't perform above and beyond customer expectations and only deliver what they expect, then you are replaceable. We go one step further! We are always looking for people who have the same goal.' In CEO role, he continues, 'If that's your, please check our vacancies and contact us! ●

### This is Stijn Nijhuis

**19-02-1981**  
Nijmegen

**1987 tot 1993**  
OBS De Peperbus

**1993**  
Goois Lyceum

**1999**  
Free University  
Amsterdam

**2000**  
Co-founder,  
Redhosting BV

**2005**  
Co-founder & CEO,  
Voiceworks

**2013**  
Nyenrode Business  
University (mini MBA)

**2018**  
CEO, Enreach

**2019**  
Almere City FC, Advisory  
Board Member

**Married**  
two kids