

# “One-stop service”

FLZ could take over coordination of calls by inland waterway craft at Hamburg terminals.

INTERVIEW Sabine Zilski

Prior to allocating berths, Hamburg container terminals expect to have timely notification as well as precise details on cargo volumes and the stowage situation and digital data communication. Inland waterway shipping companies want equal treatment at terminals on berth bookings and to be able to rely on stated clearance times. The expectations of both sides sound feasible and should go hand in hand. Yet to transform these wishes on day-to-day handling of inland waterway craft into reality will require some optimization. Here the Hamburg Feeder Logistics Center (FLZ) could fulfil an essential function. As a neutral body between shipowners and terminals, it offers to coordinate calls by inland waterway craft and optimize communications. FLZ was set up by the two container terminal operators HHLA and EUROGATE. With direct access to container terminal systems, since 2009 it has coordinated terminal rotations of feederships in the Port of Hamburg.



Gerald Hirt, Operations Manager of the Hamburg Feeder Logistics Center (FLZ)

**Gerald Hirt:** “We can see into the systems of the four Hamburg container terminals and are in regular contact with duty shift supervisors. This means that we notice immediately if a ship is unloaded and loaded earlier than planned. We can then consult them on possible use of a gap for handling an inland waterway craft. On the other hand, we can also see if a ship is arriving late and unable to keep the time slot allocated to her at the terminal. Then we check whether later handling is feasible or whether waiting time will be needed, in some cases they can call at another Hamburg terminal first. Should the rotation be altered, we naturally check on the repercussions for stowage planning and can intervene on that. It’s our philosophy always to have a Plan B up our sleeves and to present solutions. For the inland waterway skipper that means having a neutral service provider who rapidly spots disruptions to operations, can react 24/7 if something is not going to plan, can speed up clearance and continually optimize port rotation and stowage planning.”

**Mr Hanke, among other services Börde Container Feeder (BCF) offers regular container transport by inland waterway craft between Hamburg and the economically active areas around Magdeburg and Haldensleben. What advantages do you see for your business in a central coordination point such as the FLZ?**

**Hergen Hanke:** “One considerable advantage should be swift and reliable clearance in Hamburg. Currently we are working on agreements with up to eight handling facilities that all have their own requirements and conditions for handling

**Mr Hirt, with the FLZ you are offering to take on a central coordination function for calls by inland waterway craft in Hamburg. How did this idea come about and precisely what jobs will the centre take over?**

**Gerald Hirt:** “The idea of extending our coordination services for feederships to inland waterway craft had already come up when I joined FLZ more than three years ago. The basic idea of our Logistics Center is to optimize communication between terminals and shipping lines and to offer a central interface accessible round the clock, whether for rotation planning, berth coordination or stowage planning. Instead of dealing with four different contacts at four terminals, for example, with us inland waterway shipping companies would simply have one central partner to contact in Hamburg. They could gain just as much as feeder operators. So it obviously made sense to expand our range.”

**How, precisely, can inland waterway shipping companies profit from your neutral coordination centre?**

*inland waterway craft. Should a delay occur at one terminal, we also miss time windows at the next terminal. That means a need to coordinate with the large number of partners we communicate with.”*



Hergen Hanke, Managing Director, Börde Container Feeders

**Do you see any disadvantages or risks in outsourcing coordination of berths, handling times and stowage planning?**

**Hergen Hanke:** “With operating and controlling inland waterway ships as our core competencies, we are understandably a little wary of outsourcing. On top of that come the different operational requirements of personnel deployment on inland waterway craft, which you cannot compare with those for seagoing ships. So far the FLZ has had no experience with this. So we need to find contractual arrangements that are advantageous for both sides.”

**Mr Poser, Walter Lauk Group is a well-established provider of transport services and internal port repositioning by inland waterway craft in Hamburg. Along with FLZ, in August you embarked on a pilot project on the feasibility of a central coordination point. Do you have any anxieties that this could endanger jobs in your firm?**

**Sebastian Poser:** “We are initially simply testing the FLZ’s offer for our internal port transfers. We estimate that the required input corresponds to a quarter of a job. In that area we see a central coordination point as providing relief rather than competition. On inland waterway shipping, with loads being transported into the hinterland, the picture could be different, but first we’d need to test the individual scenario.”

**Gerald Hirt:** “In any case the core business of an inland waterway shipowner should be cargo acquisition. If we provide relief on communicating with the terminals and stowage planning, they can step up concentration on that.”

**What were the decisive reasons for you to take part in the pilot project and what advantages are you anticipating for your business?**

**Sebastian Poser:** “We have been discussing this project on and off with FLZ for over a year and we find this an interesting idea. The whole back and forth of coordinating terminal calls in Hamburg is a considerable stress factor and is very time consuming. When we get FLZ on board they can take over coordination with the terminals, giving us more time. Being able to look into the container terminals systems will enable FLZ to have a constantly updated overview of berth occupation and enable them to pinpoint gaps where our ships could be handled. We expect this will cut the waiting time at terminals that often occur in our transport chain. Our schedules can then be kept much more accurate.”

INTERVIEW





Sebastian Poser,  
Senior Manager  
with Walter Lauk  
Ewerföhreerei



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**Where do you see the greatest challenge in putting the project into practice?**

**Sebastian Poser:** “For us, in repositioning, speed and flexibility are crucial. In addition, stowage planning is very demanding, as weight distribution on inland waterway vessels when landing and loading containers must always be kept in mind. Even one loaded container more or less can have an effect on stability in the water. For inland waterway vessels, the diversity of cargo creates the greatest difficulty. Requirements differ a great deal for transporting general cargo, bulk cargo, or containers. We also often have very tight time windows for handling at the terminals, sometimes only 30 minutes. On top of all that we often do not know today what cargo awaits us tomorrow. Then we must react very fast, requesting changes of custody at the Customs, compiling loading documents, informing the terminals and so on.”

**Hergen Hanke:** “I see standardization of the specific requirements for inland waterway vessels another major challenge. Demands by shippers mean that inland waterway shipping is constantly being required to carry optimization, so far through internal measures, ensuring transport runs are still commercially worthwhile. Carrier flexibility can rapidly suffer from any disruption of processes.”

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**What are the costs for inland waterway shippers, if they use FLZ’s services?**

**Gerald Hirt:** “As a first step, we want to run a three-month test stage free of charge with all the shipping lines who are interested. We should together examine all current processes and check

the extent to which practical implementation of our scheme makes sense. Just as we’ve been doing with Walter Lauk since the end of August. We have also run a first trial for the Port of Braunschweig. Only after evaluating the test stage at the end of the year can we together work out the costs that will be involved in continuing our cooperation.”

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**How will the test stage continue?**

**Sebastian Poser:** “For a start we shall need to evaluate the test stage together with the FLZ. Then we shall decide on whether to carry on, and to what extent. The fees are naturally an important factor. Any additional costs arising will need to be calculated for the individual containers and charged to our customers – cooperation with the FLZ should not lead to our no longer being competitive with our charges.”

**Gerald Hirt:** “We naturally hope that we can continue with these initial positive steps and find customized solutions for Walter Lauk and other shipping companies that are interested. If the project makes good progress, we could even envisage extending the system in the long term to lock administrations in the Elbe region. The locks are frequently the reason behind unpredictable delays for ships – repeatedly causing long waits or cancellations. We could for example be able to keep tabs on availability and perhaps even coordinate bookings for specific time-windows for lockings. On the Danube the Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure is testing a system for recording ships’ arrival times at locks as part of the TEN-T project CoRISMa. A similar project involving timely notification is currently running on the Kiel Canal. This would open up completely new possibilities for more reliable time planning for inland waterway shipping.”

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**One frequent criticism from inland waterway shipping companies is that Hamburg container terminals often defer scheduled handling times for inland waterway ships at short notice, causing long delays. The terminals for their part criticize short-term bookings by inland waterway ships and deviations in the container stowage situation. Do you think FLZ could contribute towards eliminating these shortcomings on both sides?**

**Sebastian Poser:** “Yes, I think it can. With one-stop operation, the communications chain is faster and more transparent. Everybody will gain from that.”

**Gerald Hirt:** “That’s what we should claim. While we cannot influence berth allocation, we see possible bottlenecks in terminals systems and are presenting forward-looking, efficient solutions. The terminals are grateful if we supply regular updates on whether or not the inland waterway craft will manage to reach the quay punctually. We intervene precisely whenever unexpected changes occur at short notice – whether in the shipping company’s schedule or terminal berth availability.”

**Hergen Hanke:** “There we have the real problem! Basically our ships can be punctual, but unfortunately disruptions repeatedly occur on the waterways that we can neither influence nor allow for in scheduling – defective locks, for instance. For optimizing processes and information flows, we need more acceptance on the part of the terminals and inland waterway shipping. To be able to deliver a stowage planning report at least one day before arrival in Hamburg, we need a fixed EDP connection between inland waterway vessel operators, terminals and the FLZ. This link will also need to be suitable for delivery of timely reports on any delays or volume changes arising.”

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**Do you have one last personal word for our readers?**

**Sebastian Poser:** “Like Mr Hanke, I see a great need for action on digitalizing processes. Up to now we have worked on call-up and with handwritten loading documentation. The whole communications chain must be standardized. My IT colleagues are working hard on a digital interface to the terminal systems. We want all data to flow into the terminal system via the interface. We are planning to be ready next year and then we’ll see what happens next.”

**Hergen Hanke:** “Basically I assume that with FLZ in the driving seat, optimization of handling processes for inland waterway vessels should be feasible. Although at the moment, inland waterway shipping is fighting very different problems like the general infrastructure conditions, i.e. bridge heights, lock length, technical outages in the locks and much more. These repeatedly lead to unpredictable delays in inland waterway shipping.”

**Gerald Hirt:** “Whether a project like this is a success or a flop depends on whether people trust in it. In the feeder world there were initially reservations. Today, however, we enjoy access there to the operational systems run by our customers and partners. I only wish that we could continue to write this success story for inland waterway shipping as well.”

**Many thanks for a very informative discussion!**

