



FROM LOCAL GENERALIST TO
INTERNATIONAL SPECIALIST

The Steep Growth of H.Essers

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A switch in strategy is posing a number of challenges to Belgium's biggest transport company. An inside look at a business that aims to grow by limiting its range of business activities.

After almost 100 years in business, the logistic services provider H.Essers has just taken what could be the turn of a lifetime. 'In recent decades we've vastly extended our activities by offering services like warehousing', says CFO **Lieven Leenders**. 'That now accounts for 25 percent of turnover; the bulk is still from transport. The warehouses and trucks are all ours, which has brought strong growth year on year. To maintain that growth we are investing heavily. This year, our investments will reach 100 million euros *(based on projected turnover in excess of one billion euros: editor's note)*.'

The salient point is that H.Essers isn't planning to grow by broadening its range of activities in the coming years, but by specializing. Lieven Leenders: 'We've focused on pharmaceuticals and chemicals in the last two years, two sectors where the ADR, GMP and other directives create enormous warehousing and transport complexities. Our ambition is to offer our clients a one-stop-shopping experience which makes our market position unique.'



Lieven Leenders
CFO, H.Essers.

GEOGRAPHIC GROWTH

The focus on pharmaceuticals and chemicals is no coincidence. H.Essers has been working for about 10 years for the sector, which saw a powerful surge recently. The logistics services provider benefited, for example, from transporting the bulk of the coronavirus vaccine production.

Specializing in chemicals and pharmaceuticals means limiting the types of activity, but extending them geographically. In recent years, H.Essers made acquisitions in Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany, integrating warehousing, crossdocks (points where goods are loaded directly without warehousing) as well as transport activities. Meanwhile, the group operates in 19 countries, the majority in Europe.

We allow our employees to grow with the company

BIGGEST PRIVATE EMPLOYER IN LIMBURG

From an essentially Belgian group, H.Essers has grown into a European player in just a few years. That heaps on the challenges for the company, which, with 7,500 employees, is the biggest private employer in Limburg.

'Acquisition is not purely about grouping businesses from a legal standpoint, but also about implementing our HR vision and strategy locally to create a close family in terms of culture,' says Senior Talent & Development Manager **Anne Van Horebeek**. 'In our department, we have translated the corporate strategy into an HR policy, in which we allow our employees to grow with the company. By creating a workplace where our people can become the best version of themselves, we continue to evolve into a talent- and people-oriented organization.'

FROM OPERATIONAL TO STRATEGIC

An important switch can also be seen in Finance. 'The role of the headquarters in Genk is now completely different,' says Lieven Leenders. 'We no longer manage Finance teams in different countries directly, but we oversee and control business development.'

In this decentralized approach, every country gets its own Finance department. For headquarters this means a totally new role. While the focus used to be on 'group finance' and 'controlling', we now concentrate on 'international finance': tax, country follow-up, balance sheet reviews, etc. 'We've gone from doing to knowing what was done,' says Lieven Leenders.

In addition, the company's larger scale plays a role. 'Processes and automation are becoming more important', says Leenders. Plus: the market is getting more complex through growing legislation and sectoral changes.

PERSONAL GROWTH

'We were quick to come up with a vision,' says Lieven Leenders, explaining how Finance dealt with all these changes and challenges. 'Besides setting up local departments for each country our strategy was to employ subteams. The company had become too big for one team to oversee everything. The big advantage is that we can now let talented people evolve. That is really important for us.'

'Personal growth is something we emphasize across the company,' adds Anne Van Horebeek. 'We do it by designing growth paths, for example. Top warehouse workers can become shift supervisors in this system. To focus on strong leadership, we offer our 400 managers a continuous training program We are increasingly investing in structured succession planning in which we prepare employees for the next step. It will increase mobility in our organization even more, bolstering us to meet future challenges.'



Kristel Vanhees,
Senior Manager Group
Controlling, H.Essers;



Left to right: **Nina Van Orshaegen**, Project consultant, TriFinance; **Lieven Leenders**, CFO, H.Essers; **Kristel Vanhees**, Senior Manager Group Controlling, H.Essers; **Katrien Juchtmans**, Business Manager, TriFinance.

FULL SPECTRUM OF FINANCE-ROLES

For the logistic services provider, TriFinance consultants wear several hats. In the Finance-team their roles range from business controller, finance business partner, or consolidation specialist to team leaders..

'That flexibility, combined with knowledge of our business, is what we are looking for,' says Lieven Leenders. 'In our situation in particular. You can't schedule a takeover. It happens when the planets come into alignment. But when it does, you have to shift gear quickly. For a fast and seamless integration, TriFinance is our dream partner. They provide specialists for a specific project, and fill the gaps left behind after internal moves.'

CHALLENGES ABOUNDING

It is obvious that growth at H.Essers won't stop any time soon. Lieven Leenders sees the evolution to intermodal transportation as the next big trend. The focus on sustainability means that trucks will only be used for shorter journeys. For longer stretches, rail or water transport will be preferred. 'The warehouses we are currently building have trimodal access,' says Lieven Leenders. 'They are accessible for road transport as well as rail and water, which, as you can imagine, complicates transshipment.'

Through her HR lens, Anne Van Horebeek understands the challenge facing H.Essers in terms of systematically achieving this ambition. 'Everyone is on the same page when we say people need to develop, but that clearly implies more training and monitoring. At the same time, there is the daily pressure of handling the trade volumes. None of this alters the fact that entrepreneurship is truly stimulated at H.Essers. You get lots of opportunities, but you have to grasp them yourself.' That attitude is indispensable in a business growing as rapidly as H.Essers.

We offer a continuous training program for our 400 managers

Awesome to link the figures to the business

Nina Van Orshaegen
Project consultant, TriFinance



It is more than an analysis job

One of the TriFinance consultants at H.Essers is **Nina Van Orshaegen**. She joined in November 2021 as General Accounting Teamleader, without any managerial experience. 'It was a tough start,' Nina says. 'Obviously, you have to prove yourself to your team. The first monthly close made it all come together.'

After eight months, a new opportunity came along. 'One of my team members was promoted,' says Senior Manager Group Controller **Kristel Vanhees**, now Nina's manager. 'We urgently needed a replacement, and TriFinance suggested Nina. We were extremely pleased with the recommendation. She knows the business, the people, the processes and the systems.' 'It is more than an analysis job,' says Nina. 'The newest element is the communication with the business. I think it's awesome to get the chance to link the figures to the business. Are there any ways for us to do even better?'

Using TriFinance's **Living Me Inc.®** platform, Nina can set her own ambitions for the medium-to-long term. She gets regular reviews and coaching. 'The process produces a lot of useful feedback,' she says. 'There are lots of takeaways. In my case, I learned that I can't stay in my comfort zone for too long.'



COMMITTED TO RETENTION

As the biggest private employer in the Belgian Limburg province, the tight labor market also impacts H.Essers. The war for talent is intensifying, especially in a sector that is constantly evolving. Drivers and warehouse workers are more than ever “bottleneck professions” and there is also a lot of turnover in these segments.

‘To attract new talent, we have to be constantly creative and address new target groups, strongly focusing on diversity and inclusion, among other things,’ says Anne Van Horebeek. ‘But the talent war also demands full commitment to retention by being an attractive employer and investing in lifelong learning.’

The logistics service provider fulfills this promise with, among other things, its own H.Essers Academy, an annual health program and the ambition to obtain the ‘A Great Place to Work’ certificate this year.

**To attract new
talent, we have to be
constantly creative**



**Focus on the future
of your business,
leave your mark
with TriFinance**

INSPIRED BY THE STORY OF H.ESSERS?

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