



Altachem Harelbeke: where digitisation brings calm - and people still make the difference

17 March 2026, 21:02

Filiep Vincent

By Lieven Eeckelaert, Workitects

As part of the [project AMR4FOOD](#) - in which Flanders' FOOD, Sirris and Workitects are exploring how autonomous mobile robots can provide realistic, human-centred added value - we visited **Altachem**. Although Altachem is not a food company, their down-to-earth, step-by-step approach offers a keen insight into what works when you seek to use digitisation and mobile robots without losing the human touch.

Altachem, a world leader in valves and application tools for PU foam, received its second Factory of the Future award in 2026. This recognition was partly thanks to its investments in smart manufacturing, a paperless shop floor and the introduction of AGVs that have completely redesigned the company's internal logistics. Yet it turns out that the real innovation is not the robot itself, but the way employees now experience their work. **The arrival of one seemingly simple AGV - known internally as Wall-E - has changed not only the physical flow, but also the dynamics on the shop floor.**



‘We didn't want to replace a human being. We wanted to give people better work.’

The team in Harelbeke consists of thirty employees, with production that experiences large seasonal fluctuations throughout the year. Working on that scale, every change is noticeable.

Wouter Van Haute, Operations manager: ‘We didn’t opt for an AGV to replace anyone. It was about reducing the burden on our people. It is just more valuable to have a person doing quality control rather than dragging pallets.’

Dempsey Desmet, Supply Chain Specialist, adds: ‘The first thing we said was: Wall-E is here to support your work, not take over. That clarity creates trust, and we needed that trust, especially at the beginning.’

From threat to ally

As with any technological intervention, there was **suspicion at first**. The warehouse manager, who had been managing the logistics flow until that time, initially saw the AGV as a risk. At first a machine moving autonomously around the shop floor, day and night, feels unpredictable. There were also initial teething troubles when it was introduced: the initial flow was simple, bugs emerged and settings had to be fine-tuned.



This process was supported by the **preparations** Altachem had made with Sirris: mapping logistics flows, testing with UNS and MQTT to achieve a reliable data flow, and looking objectively at areas where an AGV would really add value. As a result of that exercise, the implementation was calm and realistic, not forcing the use of technology in areas where the underlying context was not yet in place.

It was precisely that slow, systematic approach that made the difference.

Dempsey Desmet: 'We started very small. A single route and a single type of movement. We did not expand until that was working in a stable way. That gave everyone time to get used to it.'

The tipping point came when the warehouse manager began to notice that Wall-E had mostly created a greater sense of calm. The AGV moves slowly, predictably, and carries on working quietly during the night. 'These days he even calls Wall-E his assistant,' laughs Wouter. 'That says it all.'

Calm, safety and a shop floor that can breathe again

Meanwhile, the effects on the shop floor are undeniable. In the past, ad-hoc buffers were used but now everything has its own place. The floor plan is able to breathe again. '**The AGV makes things calmer**,' says Wouter. 'It moves at its own pace, without stress or hurry. That calmness influences the whole team.'

Safety has also improved. Accidents in which a person with a pallet truck catches something or has an unexpected collision no longer happen. That effect is difficult to express in terms of ROI, but Wouter says, 'I is at least as valuable as the time saving'.

It has also drastically reduced the response time during machine shutdowns. A large screen in the production hall shows which machine has stopped working and why. Operators wear a watch that vibrates when a fault occurs, so they do not have to be constantly vigilant when they are on the line. 'That makes a huge difference,' says Dempsey. 'Now **an operator can really focus on the work**.'



‘Operators need to be the boss - not the puppet.’

Combining the AGV and the 24Flow control system has resulted in a new way of working. The operator decides where a pallet needs to go, and Wall-E does it. **The system offers guidance, but does not take over.** ‘They need to feel that they are the ones in charge,’ says Dempsey. ‘Not the technology.’

That way of working fits perfectly with what Wouter calls “framed freedom”: autonomy within clear boundaries. Processes, data and visualisations create the framework; within that framework, people are given space to make effective decisions. ‘Freedom only works if everyone understands

where it begins and where it ends,' Wouter says.

The underlying administration - scans, records, tracking - has mostly disappeared. What remains is a way of working that is closer to the core activity: quality control, reconfiguring, process monitoring, orderliness and cleanliness. These are tasks that add real value while also providing varied work.

'Now our people do less hard slogging and more skilled work. That gives them a sense of satisfaction.'

Richer jobs with more wide-ranging roles

Altachem did not need to hire an additional warehouse manager. With the AGV taking over a lot of logistics, the existing role just became more wide-ranging. Employees still load and unload and prepare orders, but now they alternate these activities with quality control, reconfiguring or machine support. They move around the plant in a flexible way and are better able to handle peak loads.

'They wear multiple hats,' says Dempsey. 'And that works surprisingly well. For a small organisation, that kind of agility is so valuable.'

A lighthouse within the group

The site in Harelbeke now serves as an example for other sites within the Lindal Group. The combination of **people orientation**, **digitalisation** and **pragmatic learning** has made Altachem a lighthouse plant, a **role model** for how smaller production companies can still modernise in a future-oriented way. This perfectly reflects the reasons why Altachem has already been recognised on, and an



Get your basics right

No technology without a foundation. Before Wall-E rolled its first metres, Altachem had invested in 5S, Wi-Fi stability, clear master data and simple, visual systems. 'An AGV can only work in an environment that is organised in a clear way,' says Wouter. 'If the underlying situation is a mess, it will just stop. It's that simple.'

They also always have a fallback in place. If Wall-E is not available for any reason, operators can take over the flow manually. Confidence in technology should never be at the expense of operational continuity.

In conclusion: technology doesn't make things better unless people benefit from it

The arrival of Wall-E has brought calm, safety and clarity to the shop floor. However, the biggest change lies in the way operators experience their work: more autonomy, more professional skill and greater variety. Technology has become a means to make people stronger - not the other way around. 'That is the thing that makes me most proud,' Wouter concludes.

'We didn't just introduce an AGV. We have made an effort to improve the way we work.'

Active in the food industry? Discover AMR4FOOD

Through the AMR4FOOD project, Sirris supports food companies in assessing the feasibility of AGVs and AMRs for internal logistics. The project focuses on food-specific challenges such as hygiene requirements, humidity, low temperatures and certification constraints.

Interested in learning more or joining the steering group?

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Authors



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