



Ton de Kok has been the director of CWI since 2020. Before that, he was Professor of Quantitative Analysis of Logistical Management Problems at Eindhoven University of Technology, a position that he now holds part-time. After obtaining his PhD, he worked for 7.5 years as a consultant at Phillips.

THE STRENGTH OF CWI

Ton de Kok, the new director of the national research institute for mathematics and computer science, Centrum Wiskunde & Informatica, has always taken a keen interest in real-life problems. 'Applying the abstraction of mathematics to the chaos of real life is a challenge, but it yields great results.'

By Reineke Maschhaupt

Image Elodie Burrillon

How did you end up at CWI?

'After almost thirty years of being a professor at Eindhoven University of Technology, I was asked for this job. Following my PhD, I worked for a while at Phillips. Since then, I have retained a fascination for operational processes in industry throughout my academic career. Since 1946, CWI's mission has been to do fundamental research that benefits society. My approach fits in well with that. I'm not as surprised as others might be when confronted by the chaos of real life.'

What did you find at CWI?

'My vision is strongly oriented towards thinking as an outsider looking in. But you must first know where your strength lies. In February, we celebrated the 75th anniversary of CWI and that was fantastic, despite COVID-19. It was really well organised, in a professional studio. The people who work here are incredibly proud of the institute. I'm really impressed by how relevant the research done here is: cryptography, diagnostics for medics and energy issues. And very basic, but one of the most important challenges within computer science: storage and retrieval of data.'

How do you see the future of the institute?

'As an NWO Institute, we fulfil a national role within the research community of mathematics and computer science. Some people in that community think that we do not fulfil our national role well enough. I take that criticism seriously. With my management team, I am now making a tour of all mathematics and computer science departments in the Netherlands. I want to itemise the strengths of the entire research community so that I can reshape CWI's national role within it.'

What are CWI's strengths?

'Quantum computing is currently an important subject. In 2015, CWI and the University of Amsterdam launched QuSoft, a research centre for quantum software. The work of several CWI researchers in the field of machine learning has acquired world fame. The same is true for cryptography and optimisation. In addition, we play a role in attracting young talent, which – after a thorough research training – we subsequently send to the universities too. The Netherlands has many professors of mathematics and computer science who once spent some time working at CWI. We have a genuine incubator role.'