



Investment in Quality Personnel – an Inescapable Cost

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Abstract

Shipping has always been an international industry - it has now become global, arguably the first global industry. Shipping has been in the vanguard of globalization, with the consequent opportunities and threats for both capital and labour. Significantly, it has played roulette with lives, cargoes and the marine environment.

A ship, representing tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars in capital investment may be in the hands of a poorly trained, poorly paid and reduced crew. Few companies until recently considered the necessity for a strategic manning strategy. In fact few today have such strategies. The demise of the traditional ship owner and the growth of the ship manager has resulted in a 'manage for today and don't worry about tomorrow attitude in the industry' with respect to manning.

Increase in vessels' sizes and the advent of containerization, coupled with investment in training by the traditional maritime nations in the early 1970s, satisfied the growth in world trade. The collapse of the Soviet Block added to the impression of an endless source of trained marine professionals. Further east, India, Philippines and China appeared to be a stream that would grow into a river to satisfy the industry's endless quest for ever cheaper labour.

The current manning crisis in the shipping industry is a consequence of market failure. Few companies train sufficient for their own requirements, some make a token gesture, others do not train at all - seeking to recruit those trained at the expense of others.

It is not only an issue of 'quantity' but also one of 'quality'. Technological change initially results in some 'deskilling', but with advancement new skills are required. This is so in shipping. The asset value of some vessels, coupled with the punitive penalties now associated with pollution incidents, is a persuasive factor in the need for quality personnel. This, however, is not typical of an industry that has hereto been able to limit liability and escape the sanctions common to shore based industries.

The Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Convention 1978 as amended sought to ensure minimum standards throughout the world, instead it gave creditability and respectability to lesser qualified marine professionals and so lowered standards.

The lack of investment in quality personnel has consequences for the wider shipping industry, with a shortage of skilled marine professionals to fill essential positions in shore management, and the manufacturing and service sector of the shipping industry.

Shipping often complains about a bad press. The image presented to the public is of incidents of pollution associated with sub-standard shipping. There is an enduring reluctance to address the issue of sub-standard operators. Equally there is a reluctance to address the issue of both quantity and quality of marine personnel.

Investment in quality personnel should not be an option but a necessity to a continuing profitable business.