

## THE SIRC COLUMN



**Victor Gekara,** a postgraduate research fellow at the Seafarers' International Research Centre, looks at the difficulties of persuading young people to consider a career at sea

**T**he pool of available seafarers in traditional maritime nations has been drying up for a long time now and efforts to reverse the trend seem to bring little success.

In the UK, two main theories are advanced to explain the failure to attract the required number of young people to a career at sea – lack of interest and lack of awareness.

The lack of interest, it is argued, arises because young people are not willing to get into professions that are as physically demanding and emotionally draining as seafaring. At the age at which they are expected to embark on a sea-going career, most of them don't like the idea of the stresses and strains of such hard work in difficult conditions and away from home,

family and friends for three or more months running. And, unlike 20 or 30 years ago, young people in Britain today have access to a wider variety of career options ashore which, though challenging, do not involve half the stress and strain of seafaring.

Lack of awareness, on the other hand, is put down to the fact that shipping is little known to many people today, Britain being no longer a shipping and seafaring society. This was exacerbated by the total neglect of the industry in the 1970s and 80s when fleets were declining and training stopped.

Now, three decades later, the new generation has no idea what goes on in shipping. They are not aware of the career opportunities and prospects that exist. Both the government and the industry have failed to publicise these opportunities and, what publicity there is, usually focuses on the dangers of the sea thanks to the extensive press coverage of the occasional accident. In addition, the 70s and 80s void left behind

a diminishing and ageing pool of seafarers, most of whom are unhappy with the neglect of the industry they once loved.

One union official points out: "The 70s and 80s were really, really bad...the industry completely shut down the training of new people. We have what we call our lost generation – a cohort of seafarers that was just never recruited. They are just not there. This created a void that probably explains the manning problems and recruitment difficulties now."

There is some evidence that the choice of a seafaring career often runs in families but, unfortunately, today many older seafarers from traditional maritime nations say they would not recommend their children to go to sea. As one put it: "I wouldn't encourage my child today to go to sea. I was there for over 15 years and I can tell you, nobody cared about seafarers as long as they were doing their jobs. Once something went wrong, though, everybody was breathing down our bloody necks!"

So which of these two viewpoints – lack of interest or lack of awareness – is correct, or is neither?

If we go back to the idea that there is a lack of interest in seafaring among young British people, then we must ask ourselves why. British training colleges and the shipping companies which recruit and train cadets in the UK do not seem to think that there is a lack of interest. Judging from numbers of applications they receive each year, they are more inclined to think that the problem lies somewhere beyond the initial interest. For instance, many of the cadets drop out of training before completion which clearly indicates disillusionment with the realities of the job as opposed to an initial reluctance to go to sea.

One college said: "We get the right numbers initially, so I wouldn't say that there is no interest. Considering the circumstances, we are getting the numbers we want. However dropout levels are high and

increasing."

The great majority of the cadets soon discover that a job at sea is stressful and strenuous. The introduction of legislation which tends to criminalise seafarer has not helped. And thanks to the new security code, seafarers are no longer able to get shore leave in many ports, which enhances the fatigue and stress. Perhaps we should wonder that any UK cadets stay at sea given all this and considering the opportunities available ashore.

The idea that there is a lack of awareness, on the other hand, fails to acknowledge the fact that, whereas there was lack of publicity and a failure to recruit and train in the 70s and 80s, the Merchant Navy Training Board is putting a lot of effort into publicising careers in shipping. A number of shipping companies are also engaged in vigorous recruitment drives. In some parts of the UK, especially the traditional seafaring areas like Liverpool, Southampton, and Glasgow, awareness of seafaring as

# Recruits in need of a better deal

a potential career is higher and the seafaring spirit is being revived. Yet many in the industry will now readily admit to a failure to reach the UK's recruitment targets.

Both arguments, therefore, though not entirely unfounded, do not seem to adequately explain the "disappearance" of the British cadet from the world fleet and, furthermore, it is probably incorrect to see this as a UK or developed world problem. The global pool of officers is shrinking and the supply from overseas may not sustain the industry for long. The Indian pool is drying up, the Chinese supply is barely enough for their growing national fleet, and there are signs of a shortage in the Philippines. The tendency to opt for so-called cheap labour abroad instead of recruiting and training locally may therefore shortly prove futile as standards and wages go up everywhere, propelled by the imminent shortage, tighter regulations, and the fact that many owners are now becoming more quality and safety oriented.

So what then is the solution to

a diminishing supply of suitably qualified seafarers for the global fleet? I would suggest that the industry needs to make a sustained effort to improve the employment terms and conditions of seafarers in order to create a rewarding profession. The industry must demonstrate that there are proper, lucrative, and fulfilling career opportunities at sea so as to attract the right type and quality of people, and it is encouraging to note that many shipowners are moving in this direction. As one human resources manager of a shipping company recently pointed out to me: "We here promise all our cadets jobs on our fleets as long as they perform well in training. But most importantly, we want to work with happy people so we do everything to make our seafarers happy with our terms and conditions."

So perhaps, despite the pessimism of certain shipowners, there is still hope but, quite clearly, a lot still remains to be done and it will take the deliberate, concerted action of governments, owners, and global regulatory agents to make this happen. It must all begin with the question: how do we make the job of a seafarer more attractive, less stressful, and more rewarding?