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# The vital question of shipping's image



**Why is the shipping industry not successful in creating a better image among the general public? Is the present shortage of qualified seafarers worldwide in any way related to this poor impression of the industry? Dr Jaime Veiga, of the Seafarers International Research Centre in Wales, highlights some issues relating to the image of seafaring and the effect this might have on recruitment.**

The image of the shipping industry has not always been the most positive. Over the years, but in particular recently, comments along the lines of the following have been used to describe the industry: the shipping industry is dirty; there is exploitation of crews; tankers are a risk to the environment.

These type of comments are usually used in the media in the aftermath of major shipping disasters. They tend to be used in the non-specialised press, especially where oil pollution is involved. If the press tend to highlight the worst part of the industry, politicians of all shades also use those occasions to promote the adoption of legislation which is often completely ineffective and irrelevant to the real causes of the incident. The fact that the shipping industry is mostly in the headlines only when there is a disaster is a real cause of concern because the perception the public forms of

the industry is therefore biased.

Although most goods transported around the world go by ship, the general public is not aware of the industry's role, how it works, the qualifications of the people who work on board the vessels, or how a merchant vessel operates.

Until the age of containerisation it was common for vessels to stay for long periods in port and the populations living there were familiar with the presence of vessels. Today, most ships, while in port, operate in terminals far away from the city centre and their stay is reduced to the minimum. Furthermore, if the populations have no contact with the vessels, the crew in turn often do not have the possibility of going ashore. The following are illustrative quotations taken from interviews with crew members:

"As chief officer I could not go ashore during the last 4 months."

"The terminal was located so far away from everything and not even transportation to go ashore was available."

Ignorance about the industry has further consequences. Recent SIRC studies suggest that the majority of those working at sea chose the career mostly because of family roots. A few others chanced on that career. There does not appear to be proper marketing on the part of ship-owners and other interested parties in the shipping industry. The following is a quotation of a seafarer that reflects a typical situation:

"When I applied to the merchant navy many people were saying 'Navy what?' They were thinking I was in the Royal Navy."

If the industry is not visible it is hard to recruit new entrants. In May 2000, an International Shipping Federation (ISF)/Baltic and International Maritime Council (Bimco) study mentioned a shortage of 16,000 officers (4 per cent of the total workforce) and predicted a 12 per cent shortfall of 46,000 officers by the year 2010. A previous study by the Federation of Transport Workers' Unions in the European Union and the European Community Shipowners' Association, which concentrated on the European Union, estimated a shortage of 13,000 officers in

2001 and of 36,000 officers in 2006.

Although the first study predicts a surplus of 255,000 ratings in 2010 (30 per cent of the total work force), a recent SIRC study pointed out that very different systems of education and training of ratings exist worldwide and that not necessarily all the present ratings are qualified to work in the international fleet.

As a direct consequence of the shortage of seafarers it is becoming difficult in some countries to fill shore-based posts that had previously been occupied by former seafarers.

The shipping industry is failing in the recruitment of seafarers and at the same time is failing to demonstrate the importance it is playing in world commerce.

What is to be done? Most of the responsibility is in the hands of shipowners. However, the other players in the shipping industry, such as maritime administrations, trade unions, seafarers and international organisations, also have their role to play.

There would be advantages to shipowners in changing their marketing strategy and opening the industry and their vessels to the general public. Guided visits to vessels, promotion of TV programmes with positive information about the industry and a better access to the media would all be positive steps. As a crew manager said recently: "When I was a child I used to visit the big passenger vessels of the 1960s. They were there in the port.

Today that does not happen anymore."

However, marketing alone is not enough. The problem is not limited to the image of the industry and to recruitment. It is also necessary to retain those seafarers already working at sea.

Evidence points to the fact that this can only be achieved if working and living conditions are improved and contracts are reviewed. From a quick glance into the most common type of contracts it is possible to see that the majority of seafarers are on voyage contracts where there is too weak a connection with the company.

There are clear situations of exploitation. Many seafarers are also obliged to stay on board for long periods. Up to one year is common for Asian seafarers, and when they disembark they are simply unemployed and have to look for another job instead of enjoying time with their families. These circumstances affect retention rates as many seafarers tend to look for other career alternatives after a very short period at sea.

Another negative aspect of the shipping industry image occurs in relation to women seafarers. Despite positive policies in a few companies, women who work on board are often dismissed if they get pregnant, and maternity leave does not exist in most cases.

Education and training also have an important role. An industry that needs to show a good image has to invest in proper education and training.

Until the adoption of the international convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) 78, the systems of education and training were basically left to individual countries. With the adoption of STCW 78, an international standard entered into force but soon it was realised that it was not being properly implemented. Different countries had different systems. The amended STCW 95 is an important tool to improve education and training standards. It is still at an early stage and it will take some time to establish how successful it can be.

To conclude: improvements in the image of the shipping industry are in the interests of all, including most obviously the seafarers. For shipowners there are also several advantages in promoting improvements. In fact, the different parties would gain enormously.

Marketing strategies applied commonly for other purposes can be used to benefit the shipping industry and would allow the general public to see its positive aspects and the contribution of the industry to world commerce.

The fact that shipowners have to compete at international level does not help in improving the living and working conditions of seafarers. However, if nothing is done, then the situation may worsen even more and the image of the industry will be beyond improvement. Recruitment of young people will be even more difficult and retention rates may be expected to drop even further.



"MANY seafarers tend to look for other career alternatives after a very short time at sea." (Photo: SIRC photographic archive)