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The shipping industry has a challenge to meet if it is to recruit and keep good quality seafarers

in the future, says Dr Jaime Veiga of the Seafarers' International Research Centre

THE seafaring profession has always involved a different way of life. It is a diverse activity in which absence from family and friends and the inability to take part in activities available to other people has to be accepted.

At different periods in history, the profession has been regarded in different ways. In ancient times seafaring meant involvement in commercial activities; at the time of the discoveries seafarers were in the forefront of progress, and today it is still a profession that can provide a better way of life for families, especially for the sons and daughters of seafarers from developing countries.

Seafaring has always been a dangerous activity and many seafarers have lost their lives while making their contribution to the world economy. Consequently, it should be an occupation where safety is of paramount importance. But, as

What sort of seafarers do we want?

Richard Cahill, an historian of shipping, wrote in 1990: "Safety has never ranked very high in the scale of priorities of those who own ships". This was particularly true during the 18th and 19th centuries and, until the middle of the latter, shipowners and their agents were not liable to criminal penalties for safety failure at sea. The law imposed no criminal liability on the shipowner who failed to manage, refit or equip his vessel properly, or who sent it to sea overloaded or undermanned. Of course, things have now changed.

Today we have an international regulatory system and maritime safety legislation covering almost all aspects of a vessel's operation, including a particular attention to the training of seafarers. Enforcement is also more effective, especially in certain parts of the world where port state control is more efficient. Yet, the number of vessels found with critical deficiencies during inspections and the still high annual number of accidents and deaths suggest that much must still be done.

Since the beginning of the

20th century, people have chosen the seafaring profession for different reasons. Up until the 1960s and 1970s, in a world with not many possibilities for travelling, the seafaring profession offered the chance of finding out more about other countries and cultures, something that was not easily available to the majority of the population. Relatively long stays in port, short distances from city centres and a considerable number of crew members enabled a better knowledge of the world. This was particularly so for those seafarers who came from countries which, for political reasons, were more closed to the world, as was the case in my native Portugal.

However, economic development in the West, containerisation, open registers, logistic concepts such as "just in time", and reduced crews have all added to a drastic change in the nature of the profession. They have also affected recruitment to the industry. Today, there is an identified shortage of seafarers, mainly officers; crews are multi-national and employed from anywhere in the world, with a

great number coming from south-east Asia. They have little time to spend ashore, and tend to work different lengths of contracts, according to their nationalities. At the present time it is also clear that, despite the amendment of the STCW convention and the improvements in maritime education, certification and training, the systems implemented by the different countries are not exactly the same.

It is therefore important to reflect on the future and avoid a repetition of errors. In the present context two questions cannot be avoided: what do we want the seafaring profession to be, and what kind of people do we want to attract to the seafaring profession? It is in this context and to help in providing answers that SIRC is working within the European Commission-funded Maritime Transport Co-ordination Platform, leading a group of experts in human resources and maritime education and training. Together with colleagues from other institutions in Europe, and with funding from the European



The need to attract good quality seafarers requires the shipping industry to have an open mind and a forward looking mentality. (Photo: SIRC library)

Commission, we are discussing the problems of the seafaring profession under the umbrella of four main areas: the image of the shipping industry; sustainability of the maritime skills base; social and working

conditions; and performance influencing factors.

In the first area – the image of the shipping industry – the group has been studying how much the bad image of the industry is impinging on

recruitment, and the crucial issue of criminalisation of seafarers which is not only unfair, but may also pass the wrong message to possible recruits.

The second area – sustainability of the maritime skills base – covers recruitment, retention, training and the promotion of qualified personnel to the maritime transport sector. Under this heading the group has been looking at the consequences of shortage of seafarers both at sea and ashore, and also at the effects the enlargement of the European Union will have in the European seafaring market.

Social and working conditions concentrates on labour matters, occupational accidents, health and safety. Under this area, compliance with the ILO convention 92 (which concerns crew accommodation onboard ships), the status of European seafarers from the accession countries when they work on board European vessels, and shore leave restrictions have all been assessed.

The final area – performance influencing factors – includes those factors that may affect seafarers' professional

performance, such as fatigue, inadequate workload, watchkeeping and rest periods. Under this area we have been looking at watchkeeping practices particularly in short sea shipping vessels.

This group intends to provide the policy-makers and the shipping industry with reliable material that would allow those responsible to take decisions to consider all aspects.

We have to accept that the seafaring profession has changed considerably. It is also clear that it will not be what it was in the past. However, it needs to attract good quality seafarers, and this requires an open mind and forward-looking mentality on the part of the industry. It is crucial to highlight the positive aspects of the profession and to make sure that the negative areas of the profession are considered, facilitating also the promotion of good employment practices already in place in some shipping companies. These can take the form of reduced periods onboard, support to families, social systems for seafarers and their families, email and internet access, etc. The fact that a group of experts is looking regularly at the problems, and should be able to come up with suggestions, can only be seen as a positive development for the seafaring profession.