

Getting the People Side Right

Towards a People Strategy for the Marine and Maritime sector

The Maritime Growth Study calls on Maritime UK to take the lead in creating a 'skills strategy' for the maritime industry. The purpose of this short paper is to suggest that the strategy should be bigger than 'skills', with a much wider embrace of the people side of the industry.

How do we make sure we have the people we need, now and in the future? Not just to maintain what we have now, but to win new business, to grow.

That's a much bigger question than 'how many more sea-going officers do we need to train?', or 'how many more engineering places do we need?'. Training is a means to an end; skills are an essential part of the picture, but they're only part.

The Maritime Growth Study charges us with creating a 'skills strategy' for the sector, but if we are to make the most of this opportunity we need to ask the right questions, and the right questions are much broader. They're about getting enough of the right people, and training them not just to get the basics right, but to help us open up new opportunities. They're about retaining them and harnessing their full ability, throughout their careers. And they're about doing all of that in a fiercely competitive international market. We need to be good at this to succeed.

The officer cadet market illustrates the issues well. Do we have a "famine", as the latest edition of the Nautilus Telegraph puts it, reflecting BIMCO's estimate that the worldwide officer shortage will rise to 147,500 by 2025? Do we have ships in the UK that cannot sail because they can't find enough crew? No we don't; so what, exactly, is the problem?

Do we have, perhaps, malnutrition rather than famine? The ships still sail, but Masters and their employers are having to accept officers and ratings with rather thinner experience than they judge to be right - enough to meet minimum requirements, certainly, but not enough to improve business efficiency, or to help shape the next business opportunity.

Or they have to pay over the odds for agency crew, denting profitability and therefore scope for re-investment. Or they're taking people who will do what's needed for a voyage or two, or a year or two, but who are of no longer-term use to the business, or to the wider industry in the UK (for example because they are based overseas and their long-term plans are to settle back home, not in the UK).

The UK will not succeed by trying to sell on price, in the officer market or in any other. But do we need to be quite so expensive? And if we do, are we really offering the full extra value which will persuade international companies which have a worldwide choice that they are better to have a

good complement of British officers when they could choose cheaper alternatives who are, on paper at least, as well qualified?

And if our people really are that good, can we not find a way of building an export market for them (and foreign earnings for the UK), complementing the home market? If a good number get the chance to make their way overseas, earning a good living and building a good career, that, too, will ultimately benefit the UK.

Similar questions apply ashore. Are there, for example, companies - in building, or repair, or services - holding back from bidding for new business because they lack the skills to fulfil an order, or a new contract, if they win it? Probably.

Are there companies using people for marine-related work who have not been to sea, when someone who has been would be better for the job? Or does the opposite apply, and are there companies following the well-worn path of preferring a former Master when the better answer in business terms would be someone trained for the role with exactly the right skillset?

These are hard questions, but it's important to remind ourselves that the Maritime Growth Study was about the big question of how to grow the UK's maritime business. It was about long-term prosperity – with, it was good to see, a very clear view that people are central to that prosperity. So if we are to shape an enduring strategy for the people side of our industry, we need to probe these and other questions like them very carefully to build the right actions on top of the right analysis.

The research work set in train by the Growth Study should give us a good start. DfT is “refreshing its assessment of the requirement for seafarers in the UK maritime sector” (to quote the words of the relevant recommendation). DfT is also looking again at SMarT, with that work informed by evidence of how SMarT is used now.

Under the banner of Project Ulysses the Marine Society and Sea Cadets, Maritime London, the Merchant Navy Training Board, NAUTILUS and Trinity House will shortly publish their research into what shore-based employers want from former seafarers coming ashore.

We also now have the latest instalment of BIMCO's five-yearly analysis of the state of the world's seafaring labour force.

So by the Autumn we should have a good deal more evidence on which to build a strategy. We suggest that when we have that new body of research, properly analysed, we should then set ourselves the task of creating a broad-based people strategy for the marine and maritime sectors, which will encompass our remit to create a skills strategy, but go beyond it.