The labour market for seafarers is not set to improve dramatically over the next few years, says Bernardo Obando-Rojas, research associate at the Seafarers International Research Centre.

From the perspective of seafarers, a shortage is good news for the reasons mentioned above. If the shortage is critical enough, even unsuitably qualified seafarers may find a job. But this is the current state of the labour market? This question has to be approached by examining demand (jobs on offer) and supply (seafarers available).

Turning first to demand for seafarers, the best indicators are the number of ships in the world fleet. There is a direct correlation between ships and jobs for seafarers. As shipping is an industry composed of many sectors, each operating under different market conditions, the growth of the fleet in each of them varies. The manpower demand from each sector is also different according to the specialised skills required.

Looking at the different sectors, the only one that is currently expanding fast and will continue to do so in the medium term is the gas sector because of increased consumption worldwide. The speed of this expansion is in line with the expectations surrounding the fuel of the future. In the medium term, the gas sector is expected to create more job opportunities than suitable job offers. It exists when there are more job offers than suitable job demand. This situation is not likely to improve in the near future. Bulk carriers have a reasonable year, as demand from the Far East, China in particular, has managed to keep the market afloat. The refrigerated sector has experienced a prolonged downturn, with the market now dominated by alliances and companies. Survey and cable-laying have had a continued depressed period, with many ships laid-up or converted to other types of ships. General cargo vessels continue to operate mainly in niche trades and with very narrow profit margins.

Statistics show that the general cargo fleet is decreasing as more ships are scrapped and fewer are being built. Therefore, the general cargo sector has decreased in general as political unrest in some countries; the slowdown in the world economy; and the increased exploration and exploitation. According to maritime economic forecasts, the number of ships in the world merchant fleet will register a very moderate growth or may even decrease over the next two years. Taking only the world fleet as an indication, the net effect on seagoing employment is that few new jobs will be created over the next two years. This outlook is just a general indication as uncertainties which no one can foresee, such as climatic conditions or political unrest, can all have an effect on demand for shipping.

But even if there are no new jobs, a manpower shortage can still occur if there are not enough seafarers to replace those who leave the industry on the grounds of qualifications, age or health. Low recruitment levels is an issue in most developed countries where seafaring has lost its appeal to many young people. In the medium term, the emerging generation of seafarers will not be able to replace the existing population of seafarers has a very low growth rate, so in many sectors, each operating under different market conditions, the growth of the fleet in each of them varies. The manpower demand from each sector is also different according to the specialised skills required.

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