

THE SIRC COLUMN



Dr Bernardo Obando-Rojas, research associate at the Seafarers International Research Centre, looks at how seafarers can make themselves more employable in a fiercely competitive labour market

SIRC's previous column examined the general outlook for the shipping industry over the next three years. In general terms, the size of the international merchant fleet will not increase. Some maritime economists even forecast a reduction in size by 2005. The most likely effect on the labour market for seafarers is that there will be fewer job vacancies. This will make the labour market highly competitive as there will be more applicants than vacancies available. Those who are less qualified, therefore, could find themselves squeezed out of the labour market.

Most seafarers do not know what is happening in shipping markets. They may only realise their company is in crisis if made redundant or when wages go unpaid. In times of recession, crewing costs have always been a soft target for operational cost reduction. Employers may decide on a variety of cost-cutting measures such as lowering or freezing wages,

lengthening tours of duty or hiring cheaper crews.

There is not much a seafarer can do to influence shipping and labour markets. However, there is much an individual can do to ensure that, even if the labour market tightens, he or she will still be sought after by employers.

The clue to accessing the best employment opportunities lies in the specialised structure of the industry. The regulatory framework for training and certification of seafarers reflects this trend. Under the STCW-95 convention, training and certification requirements depend on the type of ship and function performed aboard. Technical developments on ships and, in some cases, accidents are likely to be matched by new training and certification regulations.

Ship specialisation has permeated the labour market. A quick scan of seagoing jobs reveals a high demand for skilled and specialised individuals. In contrast, there is no great demand for the "general purpose" seafarer, i.e. the officer or rating who has only the minimum qualifications and no in-depth skills on any particular type of ship.

There is no shortage of general purpose seafarers worldwide. In fact, their number is increasing as new

sources of labour enter to compete by offering cheaper labour. This is leading to rising unemployment in traditional labour supplying countries. The real shortage lies in skilled seafarers.

But how can a seafarer maximise his or her employment potential? The most effective way of rising above the crowd is by becoming a skilled professional in a specialised sector.

There are three general ways of acquiring skills:

- First, by formal training either ashore or aboard. This can take the form of classroom teaching, distance learning and computer-based training.
- Second, by learning from your own experience and that of others.
- Third, by learning from your own mistakes and those of others.

The formal training process, i.e. through teaching and assessment, is in any case a requirement for most seafarers under the STCW-95 convention. Training varies according to the type of ship, function and level of responsibility. Training does not come cheap and cost is a major impediment for many seafarers.

While there are many companies which will assume the cost of training, the reality is that many seafarers have to pay for themselves

all, or at least a proportion, of their training costs. This leaves the unskilled seafarer in a vicious circle in which he or she is unable to find employment because of lack of training and, in turn, cannot access further training because of lack of money to pay for the fees.

In the face of this reality, it is wise to treat training as a personal investment, say similar to setting up a business venture. The difference is that skills are for life and the return on investment will exceed that of most business ventures. Developing a training and skills portfolio requires careful planning and perseverance.

It is always worth finding out about what potential sources of funding exist by contacting employers, trade unions, educational aid organisations, government agencies and training establishments. If none of the above sources proves effective, the next step is to draw up a saving plan geared to covering the costs of further professional development through formal training.

A good starting point as to what type of training to choose is to look at the job market for an indication of which skills are, or will be, in shortest supply, and examining which of the available options can best match your abilities and

interests. The career paths of successful professionals in the industry can also serve as an inspiration and a valuable guideline as to what training to pursue.

There is also the option of pursuing maritime-related higher studies, at vocational, degree or post-graduate level. This will broaden the horizon and will increase the chances of being employed ashore in the maritime industry.

It is worth bearing in mind that training establishments should be recognised by the maritime administration issuing the certificate or endorsement and, in some cases, by the potential employer. There are many training establishments not recognised by the relevant authorities or employers. Other establishments will charge large amounts of money for substandard training. In either case, the seafarer will end up with a certificate which is not useful for obtaining a job

On the other hand, learning from our own experiences and mistakes, or from those of others, is free of charge. It does require, however, having an inquisitive attitude and seizing every available opportunity to improve knowledge and skills. Many seafarers think they can learn little from routine work or from their colleagues. However, both ways offer

an excellent opportunity for continuous learning.

Seafarers are also advised to make themselves familiar and learn from the educational resources that may be available aboard. This may take



EVEN routine work can offer opportunities for continuous learning. (Photo: Graeme Cookson)

the form of manuals, procedure guides, publications, videos and computer-based programmes.

The next question after obtaining qualifications is to find a good employer. Many seafarers work for substandard companies simply because they don't know how to search or apply for jobs with reputable employers. Sending poorly written CVs and applications is the best way to go unnoticed. There are many books published on the subject of writing CVs and information can also be found on the internet. Applying for jobs for which the applicant is not suitably qualified is equally ineffective. Even the best written CV is worthless if there are no skills to back it up.

To summarise, the prudent seafarer needs to have in place a strategy which will allow him or her to become more employable and attractive to first-class employers and cope in a fiercely competitive market.

The best way forward for seafarers is to embark on a programme of continuous self-motivated training in the workplace and by attending relevant shore-based training which will set them above thousands of other job applicants worldwide. Regardless of the outlook for 2003 and beyond, the long-term problem in the industry is one of skills and quality as opposed to quantity. Employment opportunities will always exist for those who are prepared to build up a solid training and skills portfolio.