



A Wake-up Call

The marine crewing crisis meets the heightened regulatory climate.

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An aging workforce and the exploding global demand for mariners have combined to create the perfect storm, which has already robbed the maritime industry of its core of officers, and leaves in its wake few viable candidates to take up the slack. This is not news to most maritime industry executives, but what should really worry the American marine operator? The international maritime personnel shortage will exacerbate the U.S. flag situation.

The American mariner, long thought to be overpaid, is now being actively sought for a wide range of foreign-registered marine platforms. A markedly weaker U.S. dollar has opened the door for foreign tonnage operators. Additionally, STCW¹ requirements, implemented

What's the bottom line? A markedly decreased window of opportunity for lower-tonnage credential candidates has merged with the reality that today's maritime academy graduates only go to sea at half of the numbers seen only 20 years ago. Worse, those who do go to sea are typically not staying.

Crewing Your Marine Platform 1968-Style in a 2008 World

Even as the number of STCW-qualified mariners increases at a faster rate than the general mariner population, today's astute maritime executive recognizes that the traditional, time-honored methods of recruiting, training, advancing, and—most importantly—retaining mariners are all but obsolete.



The Pacific Maritime Institute. All photos and graphics courtesy of MITAGS/PMI.

at the beginning of this decade, significantly changed how an able bodied seaman could aspire to become a mate. In the past, sea time, radar training, and passing the Coast Guard examination was all it took. Today's changed standards require a total of about 20 weeks of specific course work, which can cost nearly \$20,000.

Until only recently, a crewing manager had few options when trying to grow a fleet and/or augment the stable mariners available for assignment. With the hawsepip² option for the upwardly mobile mariner virtually gone because of regulatory issues, many firms predictably began recruiting from their competitors.

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A CASE STUDY IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Real results, just in time.



PMI's full mission shiphandling simulator.

PMI's tug and ship simulator configuration.

The most significant change to how mariners are educated in this country in more than a century was born when maritime employers in Seattle came together to discuss the issue of recruitment and retention and collectively decided to support an apprenticeship model through PMI's workboat academy. This program combines 25 weeks of classroom, lab, and simulation instruction with one year of structured onboard training.

The Training

The first academic phase consists of two weeks of training, encompassing survival skills, personal safety and social responsibility, first aid, firefighting, leadership, rules of the road, line handling, and related simulation.

Following this initial orientation, the apprentices start the first sea phase, where they are given 12 weeks to receive eight weeks of actual sea time. This first sea phase period is probationary, and the majority of the apprentices are paid a flat rate of \$845.

After two months, the apprentice is evaluated by the vessel's officers, a port captain, and the workboat academy. If the company is comfortable with the apprentice's performance and he/she has completed onboard training, the apprentice is elevated to full-time status as either a deckhand or deckhand/cook and is paid the going day rate for all further sea time.

The balance of the workboat academy training includes another 20 weeks of classroom and lab training, as well as three weeks of simulation training that is coordinated with 10 additional months of actual sea time. Successful graduates of the program receive a mate 1,600 GRT near coastal or a mate 500 GRT ocean license (depending

on sea service), with a mate of towing endorsement (if the corresponding sea time and towing officer assessment record was accomplished on a towing vessel) and applicable STCW certification.

The Investment

Millions of dollars have been spent to ensure that PMI's two-year workboat mate program has the best possible equipment and course curriculum. A multi-million dollar, interactive, 330-degree, full mission tugboat simulator is an important part of the new curriculum.

Riding the bow wave of the early success enjoyed by PMI and its partner companies, PMI's parent and partner training facility, the Maritime Institute of Technology and Graduate Studies (MITAGS), has built its own simulator. MITAGS has also implemented this training program based on the vocational apprentice model that is already delivering dividends for PMI's partner companies.

Results

PMI's industry collaboration debuted in June 2006 with a class of seven cadets and marine operators from Dunlap Towing, Seacoast Towing, Sause Brothers, and Western Towboat. A second class, now increased to 18 cadets, has kicked off with other industry players joining in, including Foss Maritime, Crowley, Sirius Maritime, and Harley Marine Services.

The work platforms are as varied as the students themselves. Some work on the West Coast to Hawaii runs, some from the West Coast to Alaska, usually involving barge and tow or offshore supply vessel operations.



In 1968, and with considerably more mariners vying for a decreasing number of seagoing slots, this was a satisfactory solution. Today, it serves only to drive up the cost of putting a qualified hand aboard. Beyond this, the vast majority of marine operators do not have a formally structured in-house training system. Hence, the mariner stolen from the competition is an unknown quantity.

So, other than “borrowing” from your competitors, what are your other options? You can hire recent graduates from a traditional maritime academy or attempt promoting through the traditional hawsepipe. Each method has inherent drawbacks and merits, success stories and failures.

Another viable option: the vocational approach to mariner training. For those operators not inclined to spend millions of dollars setting up an internal training mechanism, it is now time to incorporate this method of recruiting into standard operating procedures.

Vocational Training Starts With Identifying the Ideal Apprentice

Who is a good candidate for vocational training? As it turns out, recent classes at the Pacific Maritime Institute (PMI) include a history teacher, movie cameraman/editor, tugboat shipyard worker, the son of a port captain, the son of a tugboat company owner, and the son of a marine pilot. In essence, none have any formal or significant seaborne training.

The apprentice model has therefore taken all of them from ground zero, just like the maritime academies, but with a key difference. This model focuses on a vocational approach, with a more mature candidate who is theoretically determined to achieve a career on the water.

PMI’s program advisory committee, comprised of staff members and participating companies, identifies target candidates. Often these include displaced workers, those seeking a second career, and retired military. The program is also designed to identify those who are looking for an entry point into the maritime industry. The candidate is then educated about the industry and the specific companies that are engaging apprentices. Perhaps the most important aspect of this process is that the final selection is made by the company, not the training institution.

Creating Brand Loyalty on the Boat

Partner/sponsor companies that participate in the apprentice system are deeply concerned about recruiting

and retaining qualified and motivated talent. Many sponsor companies offer tuition reimbursement programs. In this manner, apprentice cadets who stay with their sponsor companies after finishing the program will have their training loan paid off over a three-to-five-year period.

Therefore, companies sponsor apprentice cadets in an effort to train and retain good talent. Retention and brand loyalty then follow as a natural progression. However, the apprentice training changes a great deal more than the way the workboat officer is trained. Established apprentice programs have already shown that it is possible to facilitate the movement of less affluent candidates to aspire to a wheelhouse view of life at sea and to work at jobs and companies they love.

The Vocational Mariner: Focused, Committed, and On Board

The early returns are in, and the news is good. United Ocean System’s John P. King, director of safety and support services, says emphatically, “The workboat mate program has become an important part of our recruiting and retention efforts. The work that PMI does to pre-screen the candidates has proven superior to our previous efforts. The instruction is first-rate. We are anxiously awaiting a comparable program on the engineering side.”

Regardless of the type of vessel being manned, the number of candidates needed to keep pace with the growing demand will have to more than double. The benefits of an apprentice system that breeds loyalty cannot be discounted. In fact, this reinforces what we should already know—the best way to develop competent and loyal mariners is from within, using an apprentice system that is as old as time itself.

About the author:

Mr. Gregg Trunnell is the director of the Pacific Maritime Institute, Seattle, Wash. He holds a master 1,600 GRT license, a chief mate unlimited license, and a bachelor’s degree in marine transportation and business administration. He is currently studying at Seattle Pacific University for a master’s degree in non-profit leadership management. Mr. Trunnell’s most recent project focused on assisting companies and other organizations with recruitment and retention issues. Under his direction, PMI has created a new division—the workboat academy. As of January 2008, the workboat academy had 70 students enrolled in the two-year apprenticeship program, where they are working to achieve a mate 500 or 1,600 GRT license, with the STCW and mate of towing endorsements.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping code.
- ² See related article in this edition.