

There's no shortage of mariners for the good jobs

Your article on a supposed shortage of professional mariners ("Help Wanted," October 2005) misses the big picture.

Most of the jobs in maritime that are going unfilled today are characterized by wage and benefit packages, as well as by overall working conditions, that are markedly inferior to those available to professional mariners in the unionized sectors of the industry.

Admittedly, new and more stringent licensing and certification requirements in the offshore supply and towing industry are having an effect on the manpower pool. The fact that mariners must foot the bill for some, if not all, of the required training is also a factor in drying up the supply of properly qualified mariners.

Another important factor is that companies across the industry, in a relentless drive to cut costs, are reducing manning levels, a practice which inevitably leads to increases in workload and fatigue. Reductions in manning result in long hours on duty, the risk of fatigue-related accidents, and possible criminal sanctions against mariners.

Why the shortage of qualified personnel? The answer can be found in the law of supply and demand that characterizes our market economy. Why should a young man or woman making a choice on a future career path accept a job that entails being away from home for long periods of time — frequently in accommodations that are far from ideal and often treated as a potential terrorist by our own government, terminal operators and others — when he or she could have a better life with the same or better wages ashore?

One interviewee in your article who hit the nail on the head was David Freiboth, national president of the Inlandboatmen's Union, who pointed out that since the industry has been increasingly shifting to non-union "there's less and less economic encouragement for employers to keep wages and benefits up." I agree with David's

assessment that "people are just going other places" because "it's not worth it."

On the heels of the spate of Jones Act waiver requests that followed hurricanes Katrina and Rita, one question springs naturally to mind: Is the "mariner shortage" simply a straw dog created by those who seek to promote the entry from overseas of mariners from economically depressed countries willing to work under conditions that are far from ideal and significantly inferior to the conditions that trained, qualified and professional American mariners have the right to expect?

There is, in fact, no shortage of qualified professional mariners for the well-paid jobs with good working conditions offered by Jones Act companies such as Matson, AHL and Crowley.

Capt. Timothy A. Brown
*International President
International Organization of
Masters, Mates & Pilots (MM&P)
Linthicum Heights, Md.*

More on the mariner shortage

I read with interest the article "Help Wanted." What was not covered were the actions of the employers in making their own situation worse.

I recall during the last downturn in the oil patch when my company laid off a large number of employees after promising that they would not do so. This was after being told that although our pay is a bit lower we could count on continuing employment. Most found out they were being laid off when a company representative came on the boat and told everyone they had an hour to pack up and get off. All talk of loyalty stops when the bottom line might not be as much as hoped for and we are told "it's a business decision."

The toll of the layoffs in human terms was a heavy one. Finances were strained and spouses who managed the family income were deeply angered not only at the layoffs but at the lack of notice. Many who had ridden out similar situations in the past vowed that they would not return again — and their spouses were even more adamant. Less than 10 percent did go back when

they were later called to return to work.

If we are to retain people in our profession, then companies cannot afford to continue to regard their employees as just a number when the bottom line is threatened. Also, when one adds up the cost of hiring and training new personnel, the time it takes new hires to become qualified and truly effective at what they do, the potential loss of income due to accidents and mistakes made by new personnel, and the strain it places on captains who have to work with poorly trained personnel, it seems more cost effective to keep people employed during the time it takes for the market to recover. At least when it does recover, manning would not be a problem. Moreover, the company that keeps its employment promises to its crews will be at the top on the list of those who are looking for a job and more importantly have career decisions to make.

As long as we have CEOs who only think in terms of dollars and who do not balance that view with the very real problem of holding on to the crews that make the money for them and care for their expensive equipment, we will continue to drive away some of our best people — the ones who always seem to have other employment options.

Colin Corcoran
Covington, La.

Manning issues have added to the lack of mariners

Find it hard to believe that some people still care where an individual gets

WorkBoat encourages readers to write us about anything that appears in the magazine or pertains to the marine industry. To be published, letters must include the writer's address and a daytime phone number.

Send letters to:

MAIL BAG

P.O. Box 1348

Mandeville, LA 70470

Fax: 504-891-4112

E-mail:

workboat@cox.net

their training and experience. What matters most is that the individual has the experience and training combined with the desire to apply themselves and a good work ethic.

What mariners should be concerned with is not driving a wedge between us, but instead asking how the maritime industry has forced the Coast Guard to allow the reduction in manning that exists today thus requiring more from those of us that are left to man the vessels. More work for the same pay equals less pay.

In my opinion the shortage of mariners is due to the way the industry has treated us, like second-rate citizens even though we are responsible for the operation, care, maintenance and repair of multimillion-dollar vessels. I, too, am a hawsepiper that has managed to earn an unlimited chief's license. My last vessel was a coastwise tanker where the engineers were expected to and did crawl under the engines to

clean and muck the bilges. Why? Because the engine room was only required to have a chief and two assistants, but no oilers.

Thank the Coast Guard and the bean counters for the state of the maritime industry today. Remember, it's not about the journey of the individual, it's about the individual.

Mike Merrill

*Chief Engineer Unlimited
Los Angeles, Calif.*

Work schedules are another reason for mariner turnover

I read recently in *WorkBoat* about the mariner shortage in the industry. I was surprised that there was no mention of the real reason people are quitting the industry.

Most marine work schedules are such that you spend more time on the ocean than at home. People who work on the offshore platforms can do their

jobs until retirement because of the 14 (on) and 14 (off) day schedule, while people on boats work either two weeks out/one week home or four weeks out/two weeks home. This schedule usually gives two options to a family man — divorce or quit your marine job.

Nearly all vessels in Europe are on half-on, half-off work schedules, and a person can make a career out of this.

For young single guys looking for adventure, the present schedule seems like a good time. But if you want to get married and your wife wants you to be home, a 14 and 14 schedule would work much better. This work schedule gives everything better balance. If you were to check with the few companies that work like this, you would see that they have less turnover of crew than companies with four weeks out/two in schedules.

Erling Lea
Katy, Texas