

## Crewing crunch approaches crisis point

THE maritime industry has no plan to cope with the shortage of trained, competent crew, but it has so far been spared the full effects of the "crewing crunch", a leading industry figure has warned.

Hong Kong Shipowners' Association managing director Arthur Bowring told the opening session of the SeaTrans Asia conference in Shanghai that the crew shortage was a result of fleet growth in the past three years, which had outpaced desperate attempts to plug the staffing gaps.

These have included promoting junior officers and even having training staff return to sea service.

"How could we have predicted that so many units would be added to the world fleet in three years with almost no scrapping?" he asked. "Five years ago we were wondering if there would be enough money to replace the tanker fleet with double-hull ships by 2010, or whether adding one yard in Korea might upset the supply-and-demand balance."

Mr. Bowring added there was "always the expectation that we would muddle through because that's what we do, but fleet growth has turned this into a crisis".

The typical reaction was to promote as many seafarers as possible, but this was very risky for the health of the industry.

"The real shortage is going to bite soon," he continued. "Are we prepared? No. Do we have a plan? No. And as a result, we risk the direct threat of new regulation."

He said the immediate result would be big business for those selling fraudulent certificates of competency and that poaching and promoting would continue, as shipowners and managers struggled to cover their commitments.

"You wouldn't run a factory this way, you wouldn't run an airline this way."

Mr. Bowring said that by next year the crewing crisis could be acute enough to prevent ships sailing, but owners unprepared to risk losing charter revenue might apply to their flag states for single or multiple-trip exemptions to operate without the required complement.

Moreover, he warned that pollution incidents or casualties that found that operational failures were to blame might encourage pressure groups to make the case for more unilateral regulation, citing ships as a threat to the environment.

"Some large containerships carry as much fuel as a small tanker. If there is an incident that finds the certificates were there but the crew was not, it could be an excuse to retrofit double hulls to fuel tanks," he said.

Mr Bowring said the industry should take steps now to retain experienced crews. That meant improvements in pay and conditions, more direct employment and better benefits for staff.

SOURCE: Neville Smith - 27 November 2007 Lloyds List

### **Life at sea is just not as much fun for today's generation**

Letter to the Editor - 27 November 2007 Lloyds List - From Capt. C. R. Kelso

SIR, It was reassuring to read in Lloyd's List of 21 November (Spreading the careers word) that the number of trainees entering the system in the UK is expanding. But, as the article on the adjoining page rightly says, "retention is [the] key issue for Merchant Navy training", and unless that issue is recognised and dealt with very quickly, the current competent-manning crisis will steadily worsen.

Why did so many of "our" generation stay at sea throughout their working lives and seek promotion to the pinnacle of their discipline? And why today are so many young trainees and junior officers seeking an alternative career? These are the questions that should be addressed before the retention problem can be rectified.

Through various associations I have an opportunity to speak with young seafarers of different backgrounds and nationalities. When they are asked about their career intentions, their responses differ little.

Life at sea is not what they expected and few have any intention of seeking promotion to senior grades — master or chief engineer.

The reasons for their disillusionment seldom vary. Lack of opportunity to go ashore, loneliness aboard the ship, unfamiliar food, fatigue, poor communication facilities, claustrophobic accommodation, little opportunity for study and long periods of engagement are the most frequently voiced reasons for getting out, but there are others.

Cadets speak of being used as night watchmen in port and long hours of gangway watch "because we can speak English". A female officer told of "getting down the gangway four times in four months — three times to read the draft and once to the dentist". A Polish chief officer spoke of not getting ashore once in a six-month period of engagement.

No longer do I tell them of my first ship — an 8,000 tonne general cargoship with a British crew of 68 and soccer, cricket and rugby teams, with ample time in port to challenge local teams and still go to the mission dance in the evening and escort the young ladies home to their parents!

Undoubtedly, the inability to go ashore, do shopping, meet people and see the world is the most commonplace complaint. In port, sea watches are maintained and, coupled with the need to catch up on sleep, prevent even short runs ashore.

Today's frenetic industry, with minimum multinational manning, offers little opportunity for change, so perhaps a little lateral thinking is needed.

Years ago it was not unknown for many UK liner companies to employ staff officers in some UK ports. These company men were ashore for a variety of reasons — retirement, illness, domestic, study and so on — and were frequently employed to relieve the sailing officers for a short leave during the in-port period.

Today's officers would almost certainly welcome a similar arrangement whereby one or two of them would be relieved for the short in-port period to afford a much-needed break from the monotony and loneliness of shipboard life today. It is feasible and would make a difference.

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