



**Steve Cameron** assesses the imperatives to achieving better recruitment and training practices in the ports sector.

The process of consolidation in the ports industry is expected to continue. Who what or when is difficult to forecast but the trend is still there; it's just a question of the market regaining its appetite. This affects all sectors of the transport industry, the views of employers and employees and how they see the job market and their future prospects. Are the general assumptions about the job market actually correct? And how will this affect careers, staff retention, and management development?

Until recently, the shedding of jobs has provided employers with a pool of trained and experienced staff available almost off the shelf when needed. The effect of this was summed up by one director we have recruited for. He was sufficiently honest and succinct to recognise the key issues when he said: "I want a manager with ten years experience but I'm only willing to pay for five".

A similar situation exists for those just starting their careers. Some employers want graduates with two or three years experience but are not prepared to tap into the rich flow of young people available with good transport-related degrees, keen to prove themselves and develop their skills but still lacking the initial experience. Clearly we cannot have it both ways.

In recent years our industry ashore and afloat has made huge technical advances. The standards of trained professionals continue to rise as do the pressures and management skills required of today's managers. They have to be able to analyse a mass of data, make quick decisions and ensure they are communicated in a manner that will motivate an often global or multicultural team to carry them out effectively. This environment should provide an attractive career path for managers, yet companies in many parts of the world are noticing a skills or management succession gap within their organisations.

Finding seafarers to provide experienced and mature management for land-based roles is, today, almost impossible. And trying to recruit the brightest and best graduates is often difficult, given the competition from other industries that appear to offer a more clearly defined career path, glossier prospects and better training.

Sectors of our industry aware of these issues are now defining the solutions. The top five global port operators are well focused and resourced on management training. This is essential, not just to ensure they attract and retain good managers, but also that they continue to improve the service levels that will enable them to compete successfully for new business in a highly competitive environment.

But will the rest of the industry be bold enough to invest in the structure needed to develop and retain the managers of tomorrow?

Associated British Ports, the UK's largest ports operator, has just completed 18 months of an ongoing project, using its experienced senior managers to mentor more junior employees. This passing on of knowledge and career development has proved so successful that the process is being refined, upgraded and continued as a vital ingredient for its management succession planning.



■ P&O Ports training institute: no boundaries

# Could Do Better

At P&O Ports where, until recently the rate of expansion has been significant, it is perhaps surprising that the provision of good staff to keep pace with their expansion seems to have been less of a concern. Margaret Pickworth director of HR explained that their original base in Australia continues to provide good quality and well trained staff as the ports industry in Australia has remained well advanced with its resources and its approach to training. This she believes has been driven by country competitiveness. Perhaps the need to counter restrictions caused by strong waterfront unions has also stimulated the process.

The P&O approach to training is of continuous learning (i.e. lifelong), with recognition that all prior learning is good and that there are no boundaries. This must be extremely motivating for terminal staff as it provides them with equal opportunities and support to move into and through the ranks of management alongside management trainees.

## MAGNET AND MAGNUM

APM Terminals runs two levels of aptly named management training programmes, the Magnet course for entry level graduates and the Magnum programme that provides industry professionals with leadership training. As these two prestigious courses draw managers from the group's resources around the world, APMT is managing to avoid management succession problems.

Started four years ago, the Informa Group has been developing a series of maritime distance learning courses and tailored seminars. The Diploma in Port Management has been developed with British Ports Industry Training and its supporters include the International Harbour Masters' Association and the National Sea Training Centre. The mix of 750 students that have enrolled, range from those in their early 20's in their first job, often as part of a management recruiting programme. to junior or middle managers and at diploma level, middle to senior managers. Informa is planning to build on this by offering a Masters

degree programme which they expect to be available within three years.

Whilst all this demonstrates the commitment and progress at the global ports level, what is happening at more regional level? Captain Rodger Macdonald, director of maritime studies at the UK's National Sea Training Centre, believes that training to supervisor level should be mandatory as it is in the construction industry. He believes there are still too many examples of untrained port labour working on ships, especially in smaller ports. He also suspects, despite many new regulations, that seafarer standards have actually declined as there is less attention to the traditional cargo handling skills in today's modern container industry.

Also as older, experienced workers (often ex-seafarers) retire from ports there is no incentive to train the new labour force that lacks the necessary skills. In the event of an accident leading to death in the UK, companies can now be tried for corporate manslaughter. Perhaps this will encourage more organisations to carry out risk assessments that will lead to a sharper focus on suitable training.

## EMPLOYEES FROM DIFFERENT TRIBES

Because of the global nature of the business coupled with the ease of 21st century communications, we all expect to be able to communicate instantly with each other around the world. Thus we tend to assume that we automatically understand each other and share the same values. Imposing a corporate management style from an overseas culture on an unsuspecting local workforce is not necessarily going to work. Managers posted to Africa for the first time have to quickly appreciate the sensitivities of employees from different tribes with a clear tribal hierarchy working alongside each other in an office where the hierarchy may be different. Trying to explain these to your HQ overseas is yet another challenge.

This dichotomy of global practices versus local culture is an interesting issue that we will have to continue to grapple with. "At what point do you think globally or locally whilst aiming to deliver

consistently high standards throughout a global organisation?" asks Margaret Pickworth. P&O Ports tries to nurture its management locally to avoid these issues. Organisations that have bought into port operations and have tried to impose a management style based on a different culture have found it can lead to frustration and the loss of experienced and well-trained managers.

As the combination of globalisation and consolidation continues within the ports industry then perhaps cultural differences will become less of an issue as better trained and travelled global ports managers emerge. Do we already need benchmarking of the different training standards around the world so that recruiters are able to understand and compare the levels of expertise of a port manager from Sydney with those of one from Shanghai, Singapore or Southampton? I look forward to the day when global benchmarking of port management skills and training enables managers from less developed regions such as Africa, where due to the lesser degree of containerisation workers have been able to develop general cargo handling skills, to be valued and sort after by developed world ports where these skills are fast disappearing.

The Sea Vision programme, launched by the UK's Chamber of Shipping this year, addresses management succession planning, seeks to highlight the importance of our industry and to counter the loss of maritime skills. Its aim is to promote the professional career path opportunities that exist ashore and afloat.

A career in the ports industry today provides exciting challenges, international travel, and the opportunity to manage people and situations involving a diversity of cultures and backgrounds. As such it ranks amongst the finest and needs to be recognised as such.

Steve Cameron is principal of Cameron Maritime Resources, a specialist provider of services to the maritime industry that includes HR consultancy, recruitment, executive searches, coaching and management training. See [www.cmrsupport.com](http://www.cmrsupport.com) for more information.