

Technology and the human element

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Putting the emphasis on the human element – seafarers and ship managers – is a relatively new departure for the international maritime community. And while being compatible with the more traditional approach, in which engineering and technological solutions were sought to foster the cause of safety and minimise the consequences of marine casualties, a different approach is now required.

The dramatic changes in shipping which have taken place in recent years had technology at the forefront. Advances in engineering and technology permitted the development of larger, faster and more complex ships than have ever been dreamed of previously, while, the containership was developed and it, too, has been caught up in the ‘bigger is better’ syndrome.

With these developments, safety issues were generally linked to the standards required for ships’ hull and equipment design. Stemming from this comes the long list of excellent technical innovations which the shipping community can be justifiably proud of. Yet, while significant gains in safety have undeniably been made, unfortunately casualties and incidents still do occur, as we all know.

Where does all this take us? In my view, we should applaud the safety improvements which are attributed to technology but if we are to achieve further gains, we must put the same amount of effort and energy into the one area begging for attention and that is ‘people’ – the so-called human element.

On a ship, the human element can provide a weather eye for difficulties ahead, a calm, unruffled response to situations as they develop and those indefinable qualities known as good

seamanship: or it can be frail, lacking in competence, ability and concentration. People remain a basic component with all their strengths and weaknesses; they can both cause a disaster and prevent it. Our task is to sort out the issues and to build on the strengths and correct the weaknesses. This means that matters concerning people – seafarers in particular – need to be woven into the fabric of all international regulatory regimes. Not enough thought has been given to desirable attributes such as mental and physical strengths, attitudes and personality to enable this century’s mariner to command a modern ship loaded with current and future technology.

The march of technology is very rapid and is challenging the expertise – and indeed the very existence – of the mariner. This uncertainty is driving mariners to seek mid-career changes creating a shortage of experienced senior officers who could be role models to the juniors.

I have one gnawing concern and that is why intelligent, well-trained, highly-skilled and experienced professional seafarers make critical mistakes despite the advances in technology which have been designed to make them more efficient and, by inference, safer in the way they operate. It is extremely important that we should get to the root of this question so that we can introduce corrective measures. In all likelihood there is no simple answer or single factor but rather a combination of several separate elements coming together at one time. Certainly fatigue, boredom, health, familiarity, carelessness, family problems, pressure to meet schedules, shipboard living conditions and so on can all play a part. [See pp 23-26: Editor.]

Attracting, retaining

The other important requirement is to attract and retain the right type of young people who can be moulded into seafarers with the right attributes to make efficient and reliable watchkeepers.

The next challenge is to recast our education and training systems to develop these young minds so they become diligent,

alert, knowledgeable, efficient, capable and reliable officers. Shipowners will have to provide a good work environment and service conditions to attract and retain good talent. Governments, shipping companies and educators/trainers have to work jointly to achieve these goals.

What is required is a more in-depth analysis of the ‘people problem’ in the shipping industry which goes behind the apparent causes of accidents and determines to what degree the unique occupation of seafaring has to bear on the apparent unexplained lapses by skilled mariners. According to the latest statistics 80 per cent of marine accidents are due to the human factor.

This conference has given us the opportunity to discuss many of the issues relating to the human element, and the outcomes will enable delegates to make better decisions themselves, and to assist the NI in its international work of supporting those in control of seagoing craft and the risks they must face.

But as an example of unacceptable risks, I want, on behalf of the NI in New Delhi to express our deepest concern with regard to the detention of two officers in South Korea, Captain Jaspreet Singh Chawla and Chief Officer Chetan Syam. I am sure justice will prevail and the judiciary won’t succumb to the heavy pressure weighing on it. At the start of this conference, we want to convey our complete solidarity and appeal for justice. We need to convey that seafarers are not criminals, engaged in polluting the sea or incorrigible law breakers.

■ For the latest developments in this case see Nautalex, p 32.