



How to attract the brightest and the best in Hong Kong

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The final installment from our brand new magazine being widely distributed across Hong Kong Maritime Week.

Like many other maritime centres worldwide, Hong Kong faces a 'war' for talent, especially as its existing pool of expertise is not expanding at a fast enough rate. It must therefore look to grow its own domestic workforce equipped with relevant skills, as well as bring in more ready-made external talent.

That's the view of the Hong Kong Shipowner Association's Wellington Koo, who feels that as far as growing local skills is concerned, "Hong Kong has done fairly well in maritime education, thanks to the local universities and the Vocational Training Council. Together with many local shipping companies, they have made good use of the government's Maritime and Aviation Training Fund, HK\$500m (\$64m) in total, to offer well-designed training programmes to equip young people to join the maritime force."

Meanwhile, Hong Kong has spared no efforts in attracting suitable talent from overseas, he continues. More recently, the government has taken the HKSOA's advice to expand the 'Hong Kong Talent List' to attract high-quality professionals to pursue a career in, and to address the development needs of, Hong Kong, through the various government migrant admission schemes. Specifically, so far as maritime is concerned, a new category of 'Ship Finance Professionals' has been introduced under the expanded scheme, and the scope of 'Marine Engineers and Superintendents of Ships' has been expanded, with certain experience requirements relaxed as well.

Hong Kong retains its advantages of being the most international city in China

As regards attracting overseas talent in the first place, Fleet Management Limited (FLEET) managing director Dr Kishore Rajvanshy maintains that Hong Kong continues to be a very attractive location for both singles and families, with low income tax rates and a great geographical position within Asia, as well as being a very liveable city, with something for everyone – nature for those into hiking and beaches, great dining and entertainment options and excellent schools, to name a few drawcards.

Ultimately, "it's up to individual companies to ensure we are offering competitive salaries and benefits, a great work culture and pathways for career progression," he says. "This is top of mind for us as we seek to engage and retain the best in the business.

"Shipping as an industry also need to continue to tap into the local Hong Kong talent pool by promoting and showcasing opportunities within maritime," he continues.

"FLEET actively supports internship programmes and other initiatives to give high school and university students a glimpse of the industry and what's it's like working in shipping."

The Maritime and Aviation Training Fund has indeed played an important role in nurturing talents for the maritime industry, agrees Modern Terminals' Horace Lo. His company has been supporting the effort by taking up a number of interns and offering terminal visits to others under the fund's internship scheme. After all, it is important to ensure the continued prosperity of the industry, he reflects, and hence the government must have relevant policies to support the continuous development of the industry. "At Modern Terminals, we aspire to be an employer of choice through a people-centric talent acquisition, training and development strategy," he adds.

Greater GBA talent exchange

Enhancing Hong Kong's position as an international maritime centre relies heavily on the development of industry talent, observes shipowner Wah Kwong's Capt. J.F. Zhou, and to this end he advocates greater exchange of maritime talent within the Greater Bay Area (GBA), with a focus on advancing school-enterprise cooperation. In May 2023, on behalf of the HKSOA, an agreement was signed with the Guangzhou Navigation College to cooperate and jointly promote maritime education and training within the GBA, he relates. Both sides are now developing tailor-made maritime training programmes for Hong Kong's shipping companies.

In addition, Wah Kwong has been involved in setting up an Ocean Business School and international smart shipping centre in Shenzhen, designed to promote maritime cooperation across the GBA. "We believe more support and funding for collaborations between industry and GBA educational institutions would incentivise programmes in nurturing maritime talent, both seafarers and shore-based professionals," explains Zhou.

A 'Maritime Services Traineeship Scheme – Legal' is also being launched, relates Ince & Co's Rosita Lau, as a pilot to support Hong Kong's high value-added maritime services, under which solicitor firms and barristers practicing maritime law can apply for employee subsidies to train up junior staff. Furthermore, the government is stepping up various immigration schemes to encourage overseas talent to come and work in Hong Kong, she adds.

What other hubs are doing

But all this is still not enough, feel many local observers. "To attract the brightest and the best we need to see what markets like Singapore and Dubai have to offer and

how we stack up against them," recommends KC Maritime's Gautam Chellaram. "The clustering effect is intensifying for the maritime community in the region," chimes Brian Yam of International SOS. "Other governments in the region have been proactively attracting talents by various kinds of incentives. Hong Kong should step up efforts in attracting and retaining commercial principals, which shall then attract more shipping entities to come."

Continuing the thread on competition with rival hubs, Lloyd's Register's James Forsdyke says: "The war for talent generally comes down to one thing: How much are you able to pay, and here Hong Kong has a great opportunity now to reinvigorate its global talent proposition by understanding how costs are skyrocketing in neighbouring maritime centres. It feels like opportunity is afoot, as Hong Kong looks to build back from its talent exodus during 2020/21. Similarly, the hardened Hong Kongers who stuck out the hard years are reaping the benefits today – lower costs of living and accelerated opportunity for promotion in the professional capacity due to the need for talent."

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Government must step up

Latitude Brokers' Vanessa Toucas, however, feels it should not be left to the private sector alone to offer competitive packages to attract/retain talents to Hong Kong, either from within or from abroad. "Companies from the maritime sector need the support and a drive from the government to increase the attraction of Hong Kong," she says, since the brightest young talent are looking for good quality of life with all that entails in terms of accommodation, entertainment, medical care, schooling, etc, and on these aspects the Hong Kong maritime industry is competing with companies in cities like Singapore, Copenhagen, Hamburg and London, all of which arguably have more to offer in this respect. "We have seen a significant change in expectations from younger staff," she relates, "and there's a mismatch between those expectations and Hong Kong's offering for the softer issues, which have to be addressed."

As an extension of this argument, Cetus Maritime's Tabitha Logan believes the city would benefit from an independent and statutory body specifically to promote Hong Kong as an international maritime centre. "Having the perspective of the actual

shipping companies will mean that the government's efforts are more targeted to what the industry need," she says, "and more agile with strategies and policies to attract talent."

For example, the government could provide support to maritime companies to help them develop and implement diversity and inclusion initiatives, she suggests, as well as better aligning its financial incentives and marketing efforts to what maritime companies are actually looking for. "If Hong Kong attracts the best companies to set up here, then this will in turn make it an attractive city for young professionals to come and seek work," she reasons.

"Hong Kong's talent pool is diverse, highly educated, and extremely dedicated to their jobs," BSM Hong Kong's Firoze Mirza begins by saying. However, hard skills in areas such as IT and technical experience, especially aboard ship, are notably lacking as far as sectors like shipmanagement are concerned. "We as BSM are actively engaging with educational institutions to promote maritime education and attract young talent," he says. "In addition, we are collaborating with industry associations and organisations to enhance the sector's reputation and visibility. Within the Hong Kong maritime community, we are working consistently on creating a strong culture of professionalism and excellence within the industry."

We need to see what markets like Singapore and Dubai have to offer and how we stack up against them

SeaQuest Shipmanagement's Vinod Sehgal agrees on the need to present Hong Kong as an attractive working and living environment for young people, which includes promotion of inclusivity in terms of gender equality and cultural diversity, and for the maritime industry to better promote itself. But he feels other strategies are needed too, with scope for the government to invest more in training schemes in order to "encourage and financially support universities and institutions to innovate, research and develop digitisation, AI, sustainability, decarbonisation, alternative fuels and other maritime related cutting-edge technologies."

Overall, the Hong Kong maritime industry "has to promote its uniqueness in a very global industry," concludes SeaKapital's Kenneth Lam, but nevertheless still has some strong cards to play. The Hong Kong government has in recent time introduced measures such as the Top Talent Pass Scheme to help companies based in Hong

Kong, including those that are in the maritime industry, to attract and retain talents, he reminds.

Also, "Hong Kong retains its advantages of being the most international city in China," he points out. "The Greater Bay Area not only provides a pool of talents that is 10 times the size of that of Hong Kong, it gives rise to a unique opportunity for talents across the globe to develop a wide variety of careers under the concept of One Country, Two Systems."

In other words, with the economic advances seen by China over the past few decades, few would want to bet against the future employment prospects that the mainland and Hong Kong together may hold.

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