

TRAIN or PERISH

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It's that time of the year again: Admission time! With Cut offs in the news, wonder what we have in our industry or don't we have cut-offs at all? In true democratic way: All are Welcome, with loads of money please: bank loaned or not; yup, that can be arranged too!

Yes we need cut offs of the necessary kind. If the administration, regulator, industry and end users would not and cannot do it, the market would do; in its own unfriendly way. Realities aside, let us understand the compulsions. In an overpopulated, underemployed, opportunity-short India –with right to education and educated employment (going back to '60s for Engineers and then Doctors etc) -all are welcome to teach and train. Whether there is demand or not is not the concern. The fittest survives, in any field.

Like for the IT industry, the need and opportunity is to retrain the paper qualified ones of dowry eligible variety- to employable standards –over and above STCW. Another market created by necessities, of course!

What can the wise men (well informed industry veterans) do about it at all? For one, get good policies implemented and orders executed, not doubting the intentions, if indeed they were/are well meant. But please verify if that the big C word of corruption has permeated all levels beyond redemption? (on the B&C front, winds of change are blowing and none are gonna be spared by pulling out new and old skeletons from cupboards; Lokpal will get enshrined. And those who deal with countries where anti-bribery laws are in force, better clean up their den and act). And the problems have come back to roost? Perhaps the whole industry – sectors and segments- are hand in glove (like the politicians of any hue), not expecting any corrective measures, and so cleansing aint gonna be easy!

For, approvals, strength, equipment, infrastructure, faculty, placement, inspections, audits, grading et al seemed to have got us nowhere at all; perhaps got us everywhere, in fact. For, equal opportunity for genders - upcountry cousins and remote hinterland villagers included, is the political diktat and administration's brief. So there is no question of restricting numbers and locations. Whether job opportunities exist or will be available is a moot point, as in all other fields where unemployment is a given.

Any case, Training (read educating) institutes, recruiters, managers and owners have been selecting, screening, psychometricing and inducting from Kohima to Kutch, and Ladak to Lakkadi. Haven't really heard or probably none have ever been turned down for want of seats, marks, funds or commitment. For the government wants to promote equal access and equal opportunities too, under any and every scheme that is politically palatable; the IMU extending its reach into established and entrenched systems. But the President herself has recently called for educating/training employable youth and not as paper-qualified.

The methodology followed has been creating the need and opportunity to `segment' the market into varying qualities. The best and better ones have TMSA like self-chosen quality and best practices to differentiate. Well that's how the industry is managing, anyhow! To that extent even the shipmanagers are not free of guilt –by association, alliance, knowledge, proximity, if not abetting. To meet explosive requirements of boom times, they were privy and party to dilution of all norms and common sense, dispatching the undeserving, untrained and less trained to ships for the seniors to manage somehow. (Contextually, it need be emphasized that what the industry requires is trained material and not educated job seekers with Degrees not worth the paper that they are written on, in back pockets).

That's how and when the wise men have got involved, after managing anyhow for quite a while and running short of confidence in themselves -to teach, train, mentor and watch- their supporting level and the wards that board -counting days and money. The results of the foregoing are well reflected in increased incidents, accidents, claims and losses, despite ISM, best practices, audits, superintendent visits, Club inspections etcetera.

That takes us back to the post war booms and how the industry and developing nations managed to overcome hurdles in their path. Yes, we had reservations of the written and unwritten types even in Dufferin (even after the Bombay party hijacked majority of seats relegating some IIT/NDA/Sainik Schoolites to wait list/rejections). We have had SC/BC and one or two each from littoral and other states based on scholarships, education fee reimbursements etc, so that fairness and justice were seemed to have been done.

But the real challenge was the direct recruits, their safety and training. SCI and GESCO had coped well with demand outstripping projections – during a ship a week delivery- and foreign owners/managers plucking the trained and qualified ones from Seafarers' Clubs, Harbours and Airports. We did have dedicated training ships – general cargo ships and tankers- with committed high calibre Masters & Chief officers religiously imparting and mentoring training on board. And that's what indeed had earned us the name and competitiveness in seafaring. Most Indian seafarers of those decades would and do swear by and owe allegiance to their training and mentoring (and education to LBS College).

Regardless, we did cope well with bust and booms of 70s, 80s, 90s, with the half decade boom of last decade straining elasticities beyond supply-demand imaginative forecasts. True too that the top of the line shipmanagers had/have set up their own training institutes during their growth path. However, of late whether it be the good, average or mediocre ones, all are focused on re-training the substandard to bring them up to reliable levels.

So what are the projections, prognosis and corrective measures that can be applied? For sure, training and mentoring aboard cannot be reasonably expected what with the workload of ISM driven/created documentation, lack of adequate rest hours, minimum manning, short contracts and cost cutting in reduced demand bordering on crash. The added risk apart from the many changing careers early is that the senior ones too are leaving due to lack of reliability of the junior ones. Low retention vide confidence crash!

Taking training back to where it belongs –induction level- is the right and only choice. Train, Train and Train need be the mantra and slogan. Let those who cannot and do not deliver the finished product that the market expects, perish. De-recognising approved institutions not fulfilling placement criteria and market requirements could be an option, since the educated but inadequately trained may have nowhere to go after spending time, money and their youth, because the pre-sea ones haven't the opportunities to fit in anywhere else by changing tracks. (They will badmouth too and so the industry will not be able to attract the category they would prefer; it indeed is clear that, like the three defence services, merchant navy is not the first choice anymore). Or do we wait till our reputation is at stake -of being cast off from White list- like Georgia shown the yellow card and the Phillippines put on notice? European Commission's vetting of maritime training in India might raise eyebrows on jurisdictional issues, but take it as a timely blessing in disguise to raise the bar. Best of luck.

PS: Can the industry and its associations get the authorities do best in everyone's long term interests? Amen.