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MR HENG, on opportunities and threats for the marine industry. He urges shipping companies to invest in the training and upgrading of seafarers' skills and not rely on the poaching of staff trained by rivals

RELUCTANT TO GO: Many Singaporeans are unwilling to spend long periods at sea, say industry players.

Labour shortage could hit booming maritime sector

Expected shortfall of 27,000 staff by 2015 due to larger fleet, bigger ships

BY NICHOLAS FANG

THE booming maritime industry is set to become a victim of its own success.

A critical shortage of qualified personnel that could hurt industry growth is emerging as more ships are being ordered, and ever larger vessels are hitting the high seas.

Lots of fairly well-paying jobs with bright futures are opening up – but many Singaporeans are reluctant, for instance, to spend long periods at sea, industry players say.

The staffing problem in an

industry often seen as being unglamorous is a global one. NTUC deputy secretary-general Heng Chee How said the global industry is set to suffer a shortfall of about 27,000 seafaring officers by 2015.

Mr Heng, who is also Minister of State for Health, was speaking at the opening of the Maritime Manpower Singapore 2007 conference, the fourth in the series.

He said in his address that the maritime sector thrives on talent and skilled manpower.

"In an increasingly globalised and competitive business landscape, talent and skilled manpower are scarce resources that are quickly snapped up in all labour markets. It is not surprising therefore that the maritime sector is also facing a skills shortage."

He added that the shortage

is likely to hit specialised ships, such as tankers transporting liquefied natural gas, liquefied petroleum gas and chemicals, the hardest.

"The good news is that there are jobs aplenty in the industry looking for the right people to fill them.

"If more could be done to increase intake, reduce leakage and upgrade the capability of the workforce, the industry will be able to seize the opportunities and grow.

"On the other hand, this growing deficit, if left unchecked or inadequately addressed, would hurt growth and prospects."

He added that the industry, the Government and unions are working to improve the image of the industry.

Shipping has long been viewed as blue-collar and relatively unexciting when com-

pared with sectors such as information technology and banking.

And although the industry has been urged to redesign jobs in the yards and streamline processes to attract more workers, this does not seem to have solved the problem.

Mr Kenichi Kuroya, managing director of Japanese shipping giant K Line, said at the conference that the long hours away from home at sea were also not appealing.

"But salaries in the industry are rising. This means we are not having much problems retaining existing staff, but we still have to work to attract new people to join the industry."

Industry sources said that monthly wages for seafarers currently range from \$1,600 for newly trained officers to more than \$15,000 for ship captains.

One of the measures currently being undertaken to address the shortage of qualified, skilled seafarers is the Singapore Maritime Academy's (SMA's) CadetsPlus programme, said Mr Heng.

SMA is part of Singapore Polytechnic.

Mr Heng urged shipping companies to invest in training and upgrading of the skills of seafarers sailing their ships and not rely only on poaching staff trained by someone else.

"If everyone does so, the pool of skilled manpower grows and everyone benefits.

"Conversely, if everyone expects someone else to do the training and themselves to do the poaching, then the pool will not grow and the shortages can only get worse."

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