

Digital era opens opportunities in maritime industry for South African youth

The face of the maritime industry is being changed by technological advances and digitalisation, opening up opportunities, especially among the youth - rather than being a threat to South Africa jobs.



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This emerged during the second and final day of the South African International Maritime Institute (Saimi) Maritime Education and Training in the Digital Era conference in Cape Town on Thursday. The conference, organised by Saimi, was held at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and attended by leading national and global seafaring academics and employers. It brought together maritime industry players, government stakeholders and education providers to examine the impact of technology on the education and training of the country's future maritime workforce.

Graham Dreyden, representing South Africa's largest employer of local seafarers, African Marine Solutions (Amsol), said: "We don't need fewer people on board ships – we need smarter people on board."

Next-generation sea staff

Dreyden said the younger generation would find it easier to adjust and offer value in multiple roles in the shipping industry, adding that 35% of Amsol's 550 employees were classified as youth.

“Our challenge is how to prepare them for entering the industry. Big data and analytics will impact the whole shipping value chain and the seafarer’s capacity to manage data and make complex decisions.”

In another boost to the industry, a major private sector partner, Norwegian-based Klaveness Shipping Management, has identified South Africa as its new source of next-generation sea staff, after Romania and the Philippines, the latter of which supplies 400,000 sailors to the global fleet.

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Investing in South African maritime education and training

According to Klaveness’s head of crewing, Torbjorn Eide, the company has a long-term perspective on investment in South African maritime education and training, with engagement planned for the next five to 10 years. To this end, he said Klaveness had signed a skills development agreement with the South African Maritime Training Academy, in partnership with Saimi, and invested heavily in the country’s national cadetship programme.

“We see tremendous opportunities, both from commercial engagement and people development perspectives,” said Eide.

But, he warned, the current retention rate of 54% of trainees could force Klaveness to re-evaluate its position in terms of skills development within the next two years. “The quality of the candidate is not the problem,” said Eide. “We need to identify the right people for the industry. The sea is not for all and this is something we may need to address more proactively in the future.

“To put it in perspective, there is a surplus of 15,000 officers in the Philippines – that’s what South Africa is competing against,” he said.

Eide said proactive interventions included building relationships with traditional leaders and communities to help address high rural unemployment rates. “By recruiting future officers at an early age, from 16 to 19 years, and developing them through company-specific conferences, seminars and training programmes, we can secure a stable qualified crew roster and create careers for promising candidates.”

Technology and maritime sector growth

Opening the international conference on Wednesday, experts warned of a global shortage of 150,000 seafarers by 2025 and the exponential pace of technological development which would produce serious skills development challenges, and opportunities, for the South African maritime economy.

World Maritime University president Dr Cleopatra Doumbia-Henry highlighted the urgency of the situation and cautioned all industry players to adjust their sails and “think collaboratively instead of competitively”.

“As maritime countries, we should examine the needs of new technologies and tailor our maritime education to meet these needs and those for a sustainable future. It is not enough, and short-sighted, to educate tomorrow’s leaders based on today’s labour market,” said Doumbia-Henry.

Under the national government’s Operation Phakisa, the oceans economy is predicted to contribute R177bn to the GDP and between 800,000 and one million direct jobs by 2033.

SAIMI chief executive Professor Malek Pourzanjani said the maritime sector had a vital role to play in addressing the country’s unemployment and job creation challenges, but that skills development needed to keep up with the global digital

demand. “The digital revolution has changed all our lives. We must explore the changes required in maritime education and training to align with technological developments and meet global best practice standards,” said Pourzanjani.

He said that technology would also play a key role as the medium of instruction, with the rise of e-learning, distance-based learning and simulator training.

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