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Wanted: Fresh talent, start-ups to steer change in maritime sector



Miss Laura Wong, a political science graduate with zero engineering education, is now an operations executive at shipping agency Wilhelmsen. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

Non-maritime hires are part of industry transformation in the face of global competition



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When Miss Laura Wong decided to join the maritime trade last year, her fellow graduates and friends were surprised.

What does a political science graduate with zero engineering education have to do with big ships and heavy shipyard machinery, she recalled her friends asking.

The reason is the multi-billion-dollar industry is undergoing a sea change and wants to attract start-ups and young people like Miss Wong with little related experience but who are eager to get on the boat.

Underpinning this effort is the Sea Transport industry transformation map launched last year. By 2025, the sector's real value-add is expected to grow by around \$4.5 billion and create 5,000 more jobs.

Maritime and Port Authority (MPA) chief technology officer Kenneth Lim said fresh talent and new entrants are the key drivers needed to challenge the status quo.

"These new colleagues come in and say, 'hey boss, I can code something to do this faster', or 'we can use a drone instead'. They create a culture that wants to adopt technology, they are willing to... put up their hand to say yes to change," said Mr Lim, who was speaking to The Straits Times at the Singapore Maritime Week, which ends on Sunday.

Now an operations executive at shipping agency Wilhelmsen, Miss Wong sits in an air-conditioned office near the Central Business District using sophisticated digital software to manage ship schedules, a far cry from the sweaty, laborious reputation that the industry is trying to shed.

She also supports the firm's aerial delivery system, which uses Airbus drones to deliver items to berthing ships and is undergoing trials.

Mr Kenneth Chia, Singapore Maritime Foundation executive director, noted that 67 per cent of job positions on the Maritime Singapore Connect website do not require a maritime background.

In the face of global competition, Singapore's maritime trade needs to harness the creativity of millennials and the technical expertise of mid-career switchers, said Mr Chia.

Besides big firms like Wilhelmsen, Mr Lim said having start-up firms enter the sector is another way to spur the hiring of young people and mid-career professionals from other industries.

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VETERAN SHIP BROKER MARIANNE CHOO

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But there is still a long way to go, with only around 40 marine tech start-ups in Singapore out of the less than 300 globally, estimates Professor Wong Poh Kam, senior director of the National University of Singapore Entrepreneurship Centre.

The marine start-up ecosystem is hampered by the lack of domain knowledge among tech innovators, as well as the lack of seed funding from investors, many of whom do not understand the ins and outs of the maritime sector, said Prof Wong.

This is why start-ups have to seek external expertise, said maritime veteran Marianne Choo, who co-founded maritime tech start-up Claritecs. Nearly half of her team comprises software developers from tech and manufacturing companies who are skilled in predictive analytics and programming.

They helped build artificial intelligence software BunkerMaestro, which helps streamline the current but cumbersome pen-and-paper-based ship bunkering operations.

"Not every start-up will have the right solution, but it is inspiring to see traditional maritime corporates sweep away the cobwebs and embrace new ways of working," said Ms Choo.

Correction note: This article has been edited for accuracy.

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