

# **Skill Requirement for the Realisation of Maritime Hub Status in Sri Lanka**

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## **1. Introduction**

The global maritime sector has been growing rapidly in order to meet the increasing demands of world trade. This rapid development in world trade has led to interdependency among countries, and to an increased competition among different of the logistics chains. In this context, Sri Lankan ports play a major role in connecting the sub-continental region in view of supporting the local transshipment business, and the Sri Lankan government is looking to transform the country into a strategically important economic centre by developing the island into a maritime hub.

Skilled and knowledgeable personnel are among the key factors of achieving greater productivity, and thereby the attractiveness, of any logistics supply operation, making human resource development a vital requirement for the country to realise hub status. Planning for human resources, in today's context of the rapid advancement of technology and the emergence of concepts like globalisation, is not only concerned with hard skills but also with soft skills such as creativity, flexibility, risk attaining, innovativeness, and problem solving. Competitive knowledge and skills are needed for the labour force to become effective.

The present study aimed at identifying the perceived skill requirements of Sri Lankan enterprises involved in the ports and shipping industry, and at evaluating the existing labour force characteristics against the real demands stimulated by the desire to achieve maritime hub status.

## **2. Literature Review**

As explained by Smith (1980), competent employees are organisational level factors that have the potential to contribute to the economic benefit of a firm, while the knowledge, skills and attitudes are recognised as competencies required for the effective performance of their duties (Pinto and Walker, 1978; Hayes, 1980).

Studies on logistics professionals have revealed that there could be several such important skills, ranging from technological skills to organisational and interpersonal skills, that are required for companies to be effective (Murphy and Poist 1991).

### **3. Methodology**

Data and information on internationally-demanded managerial skills the maritime labour force is expected to possess were gathered by surveying secondary sources and literature. Information pertaining to the current maritime work force and the human resource requirements of enterprises were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted by administering a questionnaire. Moreover, information also was collected through a survey among pioneers engaged in the maritime sector in Sri Lanka. The sample was selected with the help of maritime directory of Sri Lanka 2012-2013. This study, being a qualitative research, non-probabilistic sampling method was adopted, while data gathered were tabulated and analysed using Excel.

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

Agents being the entities linking the logistics chain, the first phase of this research attempted to identify the preferable recruitment criteria adopted by the agents operating in the maritime sector. The findings revealed that 70% of the respondents do not consider gender as an important criterion in recruiting employees. But, 65% of the companies give preference to the age category of 24- 27 years. According to the respondents, this age group is believed to be physically strong, more efficient, more educated on average than the other age groups. 95% of the companies preferred single persons over married candidates at the point of recruitment. The second phase of the research focused on identifying the duties of agents in the Sri Lankan maritime sector in view of perceiving the skills that are considered necessary to carry out the duties involved. According to the findings, a majority demands employees with a reasonable educational background and professional qualifications. A significant share (55%) of the employers reported that they preferred to recruit graduates. The respondents assigned high priority for team work, listening skills, being polite to customers and management skills. Self-confidence, problem solving skills and relationship building also were highly preferred by the shipping agents. 80% of respondents indicated these skills as required in order to realise maritime hub status. 70% of respondents reported flexibility also as an essential quality in this sector as not always does the shipping business run smoothly. These attributes are thus likely to be sought from applicants for executive jobs. Managers of almost all companies considered computer and internet skills as important; those being necessities in the modern online work

environment, particularly to monitor the day to day operation of organisations. English literacy is considered important with 75% of respondents assigning high priority to it. At managerial level, senior managers gave priority to skill types such as intuition and forecasting, delegation of work, computer and internet skills, creative thinking, analytical thinking and accuracy of work.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This research found that the skills required by shipping lines for different agency functions would differ, and could be categorised under skills and attitudes affecting performance. It emphasised that the agents are instrumental in adding value to the logistic services within the region and, to enable which, their human resource, imperative to provide a quality service to their customers, is a key factor. This research, based on perceptions of shipping lines, also finds that the skill requirements of the Sri Lankan maritime industry are not sufficiently met. Computer literacy, language skills, and more importantly team work and listening skill have to be improved among employees in the maritime sector. These attributes would assist the country to realise its aim of becoming a regional maritime hub. Study outcomes also suggest that recruiting people with professional qualifications or a degree at executive level would help. The government should improve the maritime industry's skill development activities as well, particularly when more and more job opportunities in the Sri Lankan shipping industry await qualified and competent candidates. Skill development programmes have to be expanded and upgraded. Sustainable systems that continuously assess the requirement of skills in line with new challenges in the industry have to be put in place. A better institutional setting which provides maritime education of quality and international standing is essential. Not only English literacy but also computer literacy should be developed in students. The students ought to be trained to acquire evolving attributes demanded by the global industry. This study also recommends to develop a comprehensive work force database for the maritime industry, which may prove beneficial in realising the maritime hub vision. These findings mean that candidates when entering the Sri Lankan maritime industry should possess positive attitudes, required educational qualifications and the essential components of industrial experience.

## **References**

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