

# Attracting good people to the shipping and ports industry: overcoming the odds

The shipping and ports industry is often perceived as a "hard" industry that is, at best, technical, dull and unglamorous, and at worst, dirty, manual and out-dated. This perception hinders the recruiting and retention of staff, especially good employees. That in turn results in a weaker workforce and poor morale, which threatens to undermine the industry even more.

**F**ortunately, this is only a misconception of the industry. Having joined this industry myself more than 5 years ago from a previous HR career in IT/manufacturing, retail and consulting, I find the shipping and ports sector charming in its own way, brimming with innovation and energy, and fraught with challenges that will provide a fulfilling career for anyone looking for a job in this sector.

There should be no reason why the industry

cannot successfully attract and retain good employees. We in the industry have the collective responsibility of turning the vicious cycle of weak workers with poor morale into a virtuous cycle of good workers with positive attitude.

I will speak from my experience as the Global Head of Human Resource and Corporate Affairs at PSA International, one of the leading global port groups, participating in 28 port projects in 16 countries across

Asia, Europe and the Americas, and with its headquarter in Singapore. We call ourselves "The World's Port of Call", a tagline borne out by the fact that we handled 63.2 million Twenty-Foot Equivalent Units (TEUs) of containers in 2008. PSA is a B2B service provider, as most companies in this industry are. We come face to face with goods and containers probably more frequently than we do other humans. But that does not make attracting good people into our workforce a low priority. On the contrary, we view HR as very strategic for the growth and expansion of the company and spare no effort to retain our people as part of a large corporate family.

To attract good people to join PSA, I cross-pollinate my previous work experience to re-brand PSA, from a successful Singapore-based company which previously belonged to the Singapore government, to a reputable MNC and an international leader in the ports industry. However, it is not the solid financial strength, the port IT leadership or the international presence of PSA that we brandish about, even though these are all important and necessary ingredients for success. Instead, we take the bold and creative approaches to highlight to the public how we value our People and Corporate Culture. We conscientiously and consistently portray PSA as a caring organization with a human touch to soften the corporate image. It is PSA, putting people first, above all else, that will make us an Employer of Choice.

Naturally, my HR and Corporate Affairs





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teams and I put in place communications strategies and action plans to attract and retain good employees which are summarized in the following headings below:

- The PSA Corporate Culture
- The PSA Value Proposition
- The Alignment of Communications

#### The PSA Corporate Culture

A great company inhabits a family culture. I would be presumptuous to call PSA "great" and neither does PSA have a family culture at this point. But that first sentence captures the goal and our emphasis in putting people first. We cannot realistically expect that all the 25,000 global PSA employees from across many countries, speaking a myriad of languages, would know one another as a family. However, if each employee, within the boundaries of his or her daily workspace, can regard his or her co-workers as members of a family, we would have arrived.

To get there, we have introduced the Fish! Philosophy to drive our global corporate culture change. Fish! Philosophy, which originated in Pike Place Market, Seattle/USA, invites employees to "CHOOSE to bring our whole selves to work". PSA leverages on the Fish! Philosophy as a common language to create a great workplace, focusing on bond-building, teamwork, camaraderie, excellent customer service, and personal ownership to adopt an engaged and positive attitude. Fish! is also the lever for internal branding: when employees are

positively engaged, they naturally become change agents to propagate their values and attitudes. All these actions will permeate through to the branding of PSA as the Employer of Choice.

The Corporate Culture we are building is also one which will show due respect to the unions our staff belong to. Indeed, it is a culture that builds trust and common vision, making choices that are good for the staff, unions and management.

#### The PSA Value Proposition

Having an attractive value proposition where all employees can be developed and successful within the organization is critical to attracting good people to the industry.

On a generic level, the Fish! Philosophy provides a framework for every staff to take charge of his or her destiny through his or her choice of attitude to bring to work. It also provides a framework for supervisors





and peers to recognize and appreciate a deserving staff, spurring him or her to do even better the next time. Over time, the people with the ability, attitude and attributes will move up the organization.

To supplement that, PSA contributes 2% of its payroll costs to the learning and development of our people to ensure personal growth through joint individual and corporate ownership of personal skills development. In addition, we focus on initiatives that help our employees develop their career and

talent through mentoring, career rotations and sponsorships for further education.

At yet another level, we introduced a Global Talent Program, which caters to our young, mid-level potential talents who have distinguished themselves in the company. The invitation to "be selected", is a compelling message for the talent pool to be groomed as Leaders of Tomorrow, and motivates these individuals to perform their best and excel.

The bottom line is that a motivated and engaged employee should find enough room to develop him or herself to the fullest potential – that is PSA's value proposition.

#### **The Alignment of Communications**

The consistent and concerted promotion of an "Employer Brand" is a key success factor in attracting good people to join a company. During the rebranding exercise at PSA, we carefully depicted the new MNC PSA: people-oriented, caring, global, happening, industry excellence and leadership, and customer-focused. We used different forums and channels of communication to market

that one "Employer Brand" to potential employees. Consistency in messaging is critical. Let me provide some examples below.

**PSA Corporate website:** The PSA Corporate website takes on a vibrant orange-gray-white colour scheme, providing an MNC modern look with an energised and happening feel to it. As some job applications come through the website, it is important that potential applicants have a good impression of it and the wealth of information it contains regarding our people philosophy in diversity, equal opportunity, leadership grooming and learning & development.

**Career roadshows:** We participate in career roadshows to promote our brand and to seek out suitable and potential candidates. Much thought and ingenuity go into each roadshow we participate in – customising the theme for the target audience, tailoring collaterals to highlight certain attributes of PSA, selecting an appropriate corporate gift for audience to remind them about PSA. I sometimes lead in such roadshows to connect with the people interested in PSA,



sharing some insights into specific HR topics to students and professionals. At other times, we “feature” existing employees (not drawn from the HR department) – they are our living testimonies of the sort of people-oriented company that we are. All these do take up effort and resources but they go towards building up PSA’s professional image and Employer Brand attributes.

**Internships:** Like many big companies, PSA takes in some interns each year. The internship is a classic approach to identify future employees with high potential who might be considered for permanent employment upon the students’ completion of their academic pursuits. It works both ways because while the employer has the opportunity to evaluate the intern, the latter gets to better understand and learn more about the organization, the people, the culture and the job requirements, and finally be able to make informed decisions about working with the company.

The internship, therefore, provides the student with a window into the company, a precious vista of the workplace, not based on the mission and values hanging off the wall, but based on live observation of people coming to work everyday. That same window view inculcates in the student an indelible impression of the company, whether good or bad. Thus, the intern is a powerful source of “word of mouth” testimony – and a crucial cog in the wheel of Employer Branding. We put the intern through the same paces we would permanent employees, showering them with respect, care and job challenges!

**Leveraging on Media:** As a matter of corporate policy, PSA does not give many in-

terviews to the media. However, we are alert to the possibilities afforded by the media in promoting the Employer Brand. Therefore, we capitalize on the occasional interviews to allow coverage for Employer Branding.

My success at winning two HR awards conferred by industry HRM publication last year and early this year also provides fortuitous opportunity to highlight the strength of PSA as an employer of choice. Perhaps, the most obvious conclusion would be that I would not have been successful as the Global Head of HR & Corporate Affairs in PSA if the company is not people-oriented and does not mean what it claims in its Employer Branding.

In conclusion, I would like to add two points by way of encouragement. First, PSA is ever learning and honing its skills in bringing on board the people who would choose to bring their whole selves to work. It will always be a challenging journey with no end because the job market is never static and job expectation differs from year to year. We made our fair share of mistakes during the process but we picked ourselves up, continued our journey and improve.

Second, what PSA has done, I would like to believe many other companies in the shipping and ports industry can also do the same. It will take much effort and determination to forge an employer brand and even more focused attention to promote the same brand. It will take patience and planning. It will take a while to get the whole act together. But one day, we will all arrive and the misguided impression of the shipping and ports industry will be put to rest forever. **II**

*Editor's Note: Caroline Lim is PSA's Global Head of Human Resource & Corporate Affairs. She is also a member of the Senior Management Council (SMC) of the PSA Group. In her global HR & Corporate Affairs portfolio, Caroline provides leadership in all HR aspects for PSA's operations in 16 countries around the world.*

*A well-rounded HR professional with more than 20 years of experience across consulting services, manufacturing and retail industries, her key strengths are in establishing HR as a strategic, turnkey management function, managing organisational dynamics, organisation development & culture, change management and HR mergers, acquisitions & integration. She is also a strong advocate in creating among her HR teams, a customer-focused environment that is proactive in offering HR solutions. In recognition for her numerous professional accomplishments, Caroline was conferred the "Best HR Leader" Award in 2008 and the Special Award for "Outstanding Contributions to HR" in 2009 by industry magazine HRM which represented views from organisation leaders and also views polled from those in the HR profession.*

*At PSA, Caroline has overall responsibility for the corporate branding and communications strategy for the company. Besides working closely with the media to build greater appreciation of PSA's business, Caroline also leads global efforts to deliver key messages through additional channels, such as staff and marketing communications, to strengthen the PSA brand as the "World's Port of Call"*