

Seaspan International Ltd.

Young deckhands anchored into safety

When it comes to safety at Seaspan International Ltd., everyone's aboard. In particular, young workers go through an intensive program to make sure that they have the knowledge and skills to remain safe at sea.

"Our number one operational priority is personal safety," says Captain John Armstrong, the marine transport company's Vice President of Marine Operations. "The young worker program is essential to achieve this."

The North Vancouver-based company used to hire trained workers but, with a diminishing and aging workforce, has had to explore new ways to crew its 45 tugs and 220 barges. In partnership with the employee union, Seaspan International Ltd. has developed a program that trains those who have never worked at sea.

To become a candidate for deckhand training, young workers must possess the necessary Transport Canada regulated qualifications and successfully complete a rigorous three-part screening process: an aptitude test, a fitness evaluation, and a land-based simulation.

For the simulation portion of the screening, young workers experience what it would be like to work as a deckhand in a safe and controlled environment. Using actual equipment from the workplace, young workers must demonstrate fitness, agility, and coordination by successfully completing the following tasks:

- Climb a rope ladder onto a barge
- Pull up a heavy wire, called a "bridle," with a hooked pole
- Secure the bridle onto the barge

After passing the screening process, young workers train for two weeks. Some of the time is spent in a classroom where they learn about policies, procedures, seamanship and nautical theory. The remainder of the time is spent on various training boats and barges in Vancouver harbour where the young workers learn how to become deckhands in a safe, controlled environment. The skills they acquire through repeated exercises are evaluated on a daily basis, as is their attitude towards safety and teamwork.

Young workers then go on a coastal tug for an additional two weeks, followed by a week on a shift tug in the harbour or river. During this probation period, young workers serve as an extra person on the boat and largely job shadow the experienced crew.

Once young workers successfully complete the entire young worker program, they are eligible to be hired for the company's operations – servicing all marine transportation services on the West Coast.

For Seaspan International Ltd., young workers anchor the future. Proper training plays a major part in their development and ultimately benefits the entire industry.

“Personal safety must always be the first priority,” says Armstrong. “It is our duty to ensure young workers get the skills and know the priorities to ensure we succeed.”