

Finding common ground

If you are from the Netherlands, you probably know the term 'Polderen'. If you are not, you definitely have something to learn.

According to Michiel Spitzer, senior communications consultant in Nederland Maritiem Land (the Dutch Maritime Network organisation), polderen is the glue that binds the famously interconnected Dutch maritime community together.

"Our members are very occupied with being connected," he confirms. "The essence of polderen is working together and finding common ground, and it is at the heart of everything we do."

Citing it as one of the keys to the country's maritime success, Spitzer continues: "There is a fine line between competition and collaboration, but the Dutch maritime industry has no problem with working together, even if they might compete in some areas. We are always seeking common prosperity."

Tech too

Not limited to human interaction, the philosophy permeates the community's thinking on all aspects of connectivity, including investments in the exploitation of connected technology. The Dutch government partially funds Joint Industry Projects (JIP) on maritime innovation projects, and NML acts as a facilitator in organising these JIP's.

"We try to facilitate mutual cooperation between research and education, industry and public interests," Michiel says. "The traditional triple helix, binding together the central elements necessary for economies to grow. And to ensure that innovations are market driven"

With emerging automation and robotification, NML also sees a pressing need to change the way the Netherlands educates their future maritime heroes. "They will need to know how to share information, and how to join that information with mechanical innovation. That will be the key to our success," Spitzer emphasises.

Connected diversity

For now, Spitzer reports that the network and its members are doing relatively well, largely due to the Dutch maritime industry's investment along the whole maritime value chain. But the downturn in offshore oil and gas is definitely furrowing brows in the community. How do they see themselves surviving, and thriving, in the hard times?

"Marine maintenance and retrofitting will still need bodies and minds," Spitzer confirms, "and so will the operation of offshore wind parks."

But beyond immediate economic concerns, one of the NML's main worries, and one they share with their colleagues in the Netherlands and around the world, is the urgent need to prevent 'brain drain' due to negative media coverage of the sliding state of the offshore oil business.

Station keeping

As to how to keep the best talent choosing maritime careers, Spitzer offers an alternative: "Dredging will always be important in the Netherlands, but it is also in global demand. It can compensate somewhat for the decline in offshore." Regardless, he concedes that the maritime industry is in for a struggle to find replacements for offshore oil and gas.

Still Michiel Spitzer has faith in his chosen field. The main attractiveness of the maritime industry for new recruits, as he sees it, the universal value of a maritime education.

"Once people get in to the industry, they don't leave," he testifies, "or at least they don't have to."

A maritime education provides a versatile package of skills, and Michiel Spitzer believes there will always be a need for that skill set in the industry.

"The world is growing, and that means the need for bringing people and things together will grow too." People staying together, working together, and pursuing common prosperity. That's *polderen*.

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