



THE MARITIME AND PORTS WORKFORCE OF TOMORROW: ATTRACTING, GROWING, AND KEEPING TOP TALENT.



INTRODUCTION

THE CHANGING TIDE IN MARITIME LEADERSHIP

The pace of change across maritime and ports continues to accelerate. Digitalisation, automation, and sustainability initiatives are reshaping port operations, while shifting trade patterns and regulatory pressures demand greater agility from leaders.

Alongside this transformation sits a critical workforce challenge. An ageing workforce, rising technological complexity, and competition from other industries have made attracting and retaining talent a strategic imperative. The port sector, long recognised as the backbone of global trade, now faces a quiet crisis: the risk of being unable to secure the talent needed to operate, innovate, and grow. Younger generations are not naturally gravitating toward the industry (research from Forth Ports), and many current employees report limited opportunities for development. Unless addressed, these pressures threaten to undermine long-term competitiveness.

This report examines the drivers of today's leadership talent challenges, shares examples of best practice, and sets out actionable strategies to help port leaders future-proof their workforce. New technologies offer efficiency gains, sustainability targets create opportunities for innovation, and global collaboration is opening fresh routes to growth.

Signs of cultural change are already emerging. At London International Shipping Week 2025, the Women in Ports Reception marked a milestone for the sector. Nearly 200 women and allies gathered at Trinity House, London, to celebrate the launch of the first formal mentoring scheme aimed at supporting and advancing female leaders. Host Nusrat Ghani MP captured the spirit of the moment with a clear challenge to the industry:

“Lead, innovate and inspire – we all need to pave a way for a brighter future.”



THE CULTURE OF PORTS AND MARITIME

The ports and maritime sector has long been shaped by its history and global reach. Traditionally, it has operated within structured hierarchies, with an emphasis on operational discipline and deep technical expertise. This foundation has provided stability, enabling the industry to navigate the complexities of global trade and maintain continuity during disruption.

Yet this culture has also revealed imbalances. Leadership teams across the sector often lack diversity, limiting the range of perspectives brought to decision-making. As digitalisation, sustainability, and shifting workforce expectations take hold, the need for more inclusive and representative leadership teams has become clear.

Evidence across industries shows that diverse teams are more effective at problem-solving, quicker to adapt, and better positioned to drive efficiency gains (McKinsey Report). For ports and maritime, embracing diversity is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic opportunity—unlocking innovation, strengthening resilience, and ensuring the sector is prepared for the demands of a rapidly changing commercial environment.

“We are finding it tougher than ever to attract top quality leaders, some join but can’t work in the complex environment”

Director, P & M

CRITICAL LEADERSHIP GAPS

Through our research and conversations with industry leaders, despite their importance, significant gaps persist across these areas:

- ✓ **Adaptive Thinking:** Many leaders excel in routine operations but struggle to respond effectively to sudden disruptions or emerging opportunities.
- ✓ **Digital Fluency:** The sector faces a shortage of digitally capable leaders able to fully exploit new tools and technologies.
- ✓ **Sustainability Leadership:** While environmental compliance is growing in importance, few leaders feel confident integrating sustainability into strategic decisions.
- ✓ **Inclusive Collaboration:** Leadership teams often lack diversity, limiting perspectives, slowing innovation, and hindering engagement with a multi-generational workforce.
- ✓ **Strategic Agility:** Leaders frequently face tension between immediate operational demands and long-term transformation goals, challenging decision-making under pressure.
- ✓ **Commercial Acumen:** Operational expertise is strong, but gaps in commercial understanding can prevent leaders from connecting day-to-day performance to broader business growth.

Bridging these gaps is not optional. Organisations that cultivate these capabilities will enhance resilience, drive innovation, and attract and retain the talent needed to compete in an increasingly dynamic global sector.

Forward-thinking organisations are responding with structured development programs, mentorship initiatives, and targeted recruitment strategies to strengthen leadership pipelines.



CASE STUDIES: PEEL PORTS GROUP, LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Caroline Wilson (Intuitive) met with Janice Hawkins, Head of Talent Acquisition and Claire McKay, Head of Learning & Development from Peel Ports Group to discuss leadership, skills, and diversity initiatives. The conversation focused on Peel Ports' recent progress, ongoing challenges, and future priorities in leadership development.

Leadership Development

Peel Ports has recently launched "Lead Forwards", a strategic leadership programme designed specifically for its business and aligned to its five-year strategy.

"Peel Ports are taking leadership development one step further and designing a bespoke strategic leadership programme in line with our five year strategy of becoming the best Port group in the UK."

Claire McKay, Head of Learning & Development, Peel Ports Group

Building on earlier initiatives that focused on basic management skills, Lead Forwards moves into more strategic territory. It will support 30 high-potential leaders across the business and is structured around five core themes:

- ✓ Retaining and developing existing talent through better career progression opportunities.
- ✓ Rebranding the sector to attract younger workers, career switchers and underrepresented groups.
- ✓ Modernising recruitment and workplace culture to align with modern expectations.
- ✓ Preparing for the impact of AI and automation so that workers have the skills needed for the future.

Participants will also receive individual coaching, with outcomes measured through pre- and post-programme 360 assessments to evaluate impact and return on investment.

Strengthening Core Management Skills

Alongside strategic programmes, Peel Ports has introduced a Management Suite of tools to provide new managers with consistent training in fundamentals such as managing absence, disciplinarys, grievances, performance, recruitment, and occupational health. Many leaders in the business had become "accidental managers" without formal preparation, so this programme ensures a stronger foundation. Notably, Peel is moving towards blended learning (mixing digital modules with classroom training), which is relatively new in ports where digital uptake has traditionally lagged.

Addressing Skills Gaps

Through recent skills gap analyses across different sites, Peel Ports identified several development needs, particularly among frontline to mid-level managers:

- 1 Retaining and developing existing talent through better career progression opportunities.
- 2 Rebranding the sector to attract younger workers, career switchers and underrepresented groups.
- 3 Modernising recruitment and workplace culture to align with modern expectations.

The business has recently gained apprenticeship provider status, allowing it to address these gaps directly by embedding core skills training and offering apprenticeships tailored to the sector's needs.

"People want to do a good job; they just haven't always been shown how."

**Janice Hawkins,
Head of Talent Acquisition**



Diversity and Talent Pathways

Progress has been made in attracting senior female talent, with several high-profile appointments in professional and technical roles. However, Peel Ports recognises that female representation remains limited in operational leadership, an area where cultural and structural barriers persist. Managers are being encouraged to broaden their view of potential candidates rather than hiring in their own image.

To build a stronger pipeline, Peel is exploring alternative pathways into frontline roles. Traditionally, employees progressed from physically demanding manual roles (e.g. stevedoring) into more advanced positions. However, recognising this model is less attractive, Peel is looking at options for opening alternative direct entry routes to create opportunities which may be more attractive for women and other underrepresented groups. They hope this will broaden the talent pool and ensure a stronger foundation for future leadership.

Some milestones from 2025:

- ✓ **Winners of the Big Logistics Diversity Challenge 2025**
- ✓ **Gold Accredited Membership with the 5% Club achieved ahead of schedule, with an 85% increase in apprenticeships**
- ✓ **94 Leaders trained in Inclusive Leadership**
- ✓ **25% increase in Peel Ports female workforce, now 20% of the senior leadership team are women**
- ✓ **More than 20 veterans welcomed into the business through the Armed Forces Network**

Future Priorities

For the next 6–12 months, Peel Ports’ main focus is on embedding Lead Forwards and evaluating its impact. Success will inform future iterations of the programme. In parallel, there is a strong emphasis on:



Attracting talent with the right skills and behaviours from the outset to reduce development gaps.



Continuing to expand gender diversity, including in operational areas.



Growing internal talent so that Peel relies less heavily on external hires.



Using apprenticeships and alternative pathways to create a broader, more diverse feeder pool for the future.





FORTH PORTS

CASE STUDIES: FORTH PORTS – BUILDING LEADERSHIP AND SKILLS FOR A TRANSFORMED FUTURE

Caroline Wilson (Intuitive) met with Natalie Dalglish, Head of Learning & Development at Forth Ports Group to discuss leadership, skills, and diversity initiatives. The conversation focused on Forth's recent progress, ongoing challenges, and future priorities in leadership development.

Overview

At the core of Forth Ports' evolution is a commitment to building future-ready capability. The business is transforming how it attracts, develops, and retains talent aligning people strategy with the skills needed for a digital, commercially focused, and sustainable maritime industry. Forth Ports is evolving into a connected, innovation-driven organisation that integrates people, technology, and purpose, creating a workforce ready to meet the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing sector.

The Evolving Skills Landscape

Each port operates with distinct commercial demands, but a consistent theme across Forth is the need to grow commercial and business development skills. This includes negotiation, contract management, market analysis and data-driven decision-making.

“We have a strong foundation in operational excellence and customer delivery, but the focus now is on developing strategic commercial, influencing, and future-focused leadership skills - the capabilities that will enable our people to shape markets, drive innovation, and lead confidently in an evolving maritime industry.”

Natalie Dalglish, Head of Learning & Development.

From Siloed Operations to Shared Talent

Historically, individual ports within Forth Ports operated in isolation, sometimes even competing for the same business. The move to a regional structure has brought teams together under shared leadership. This has enabled cross-port collaboration, regional oversight of talent, and a more agile approach to workforce development.



Building a Skills-Led Organisation

To ensure a sustainable talent pipeline, Forth Ports is delivering a two-year transformation programme focused on skills and capability development. The initiative aims to:

- ✓ Map and strengthen technical, behavioural, and leadership skills across the organisation
- ✓ Align skills with capability and leadership potential to support growth and career progression
- ✓ Provide a transparent view of skills gaps, succession opportunities, and internal mobility, enabling people to move laterally and build breadth as well as depth

This programme will support the 70:20:10 learning model and promoting self-led learning, giving colleagues the tools and autonomy to develop the skills they need, when they need them.

This skills-focused approach also enables what Natalie calls “transversal talent mobility” encouraging careers that move sideways and diagonally, not just upwards. By aligning skills development with capability and leadership potential, employees are empowered to explore different roles, broaden their experience, and build transferable expertise across the organisation.

“We want people to think differently about progression. It’s not always about climbing a ladder, it’s about building breadth and capability.”

**Natalie Dalglish,
Head of Learning & Development**

Leveraging Data and Technology

Another priority is data fluency. The business wants employees to interpret and apply insights from business intelligence and analytics tools, embedding data-informed decision-making into daily operations and apply insights from business intelligence and analytics tools.

Longer term, Forth Ports plans to use AI-driven dashboards to identify emerging skill gaps, predict future workforce requirements, and recommend personalised learning pathways. This integration of data and technology will ensure that workforce development remains agile, evidence-based, and directly aligned with business strategy, identify skill gaps and recommend personalised learning pathways for employees.

Embedding Leadership and Accountability

Forth Ports has introduced a suite of leadership programmes — Future Leaders, Emerging Leaders, Transformative Leaders, and Strategic Leaders — reaching from graduates through to potential future executives. These programmes focus on strengths-based leadership, accountability, and collaboration.

“Talent reviews are now conducted, using a consistent framework. We use the Lloyd’s 9-box model and a full talent review process. Each manager feeds into a regional view, so we can see strengths, gaps and future potential across the whole network.”

Natalie Dagleish,
Head of Learning & Development

Participants now join accountability pods and tripartite coaching sessions involving their manager and coach to reinforce behaviour change and build long term impact.

“We’ve had leadership programmes before, but they often faded after the modules ended. The pods keep the conversation going — it’s where change sticks.”

Natalie Dagleish,
Head of Learning & Development



A Culture of Trust and Psychological Safety

Cultural transformation sits at the heart of the leadership journey. Workshops on behavioural safety, psychological safety, and “just culture” have helped shift Forth Ports toward a more open, trusting environment.

The company’s first employee engagement survey in several years launched in 2025. The survey marks a renewed commitment to listening, inclusion, and continuous improvement, ensuring that employee voice remains a driving force in shaping the company’s culture and priorities, reflecting a renewed focus on listening and inclusion.

Industry Collaboration

Forth Ports plays an active role in sector-wide collaboration, working closely with Port Skills and Safety, the UK Major Ports Group (UKMPG), and the British Ports Association (BPA). The company regularly shares learning and best practice with other operators, including Peel Ports, to collectively strengthen industry capability.

“The future of our industry depends on collaboration, not competition. When we share expertise and develop talent collectively, we all move forward faster.”

Natalie Dagleish,
Head of Learning & Development

Summary

Forth Ports’ transformation demonstrates what’s possible when leadership development, skills strategy, and data come together under one vision. The organisation is building a skills-led, connected workforce ready to meet the commercial, digital, and cultural demands of the modern maritime industry.

Change in ports and maritime is no longer optional, it’s inevitable and accelerating. The real question for today’s leaders is not if they will respond, but how they will shape the future.



STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR MARITIME LEADERSHIP



Build Agile Leadership Structures

Enable fast, adaptive decision-making by creating flexible organisational frameworks and empowering managers at all levels.



Invest in Talent Development

Strengthen leadership pipelines through targeted training, coaching, and clear career progression pathways to attract and retain top talent.



Strengthen Sector Outreach

Improve public perception by engaging with schools, apprenticeships, and communities. Position the sector as innovative, sustainable, and future-focused.



Prioritise Succession and Mentorship

Identify future leaders early and foster cross-functional mentorship to preserve knowledge and diversify leadership.



Advance Digital Competence

Equip leaders with the skills to leverage technology and position digital fluency as a key attraction point for next-generation talent.



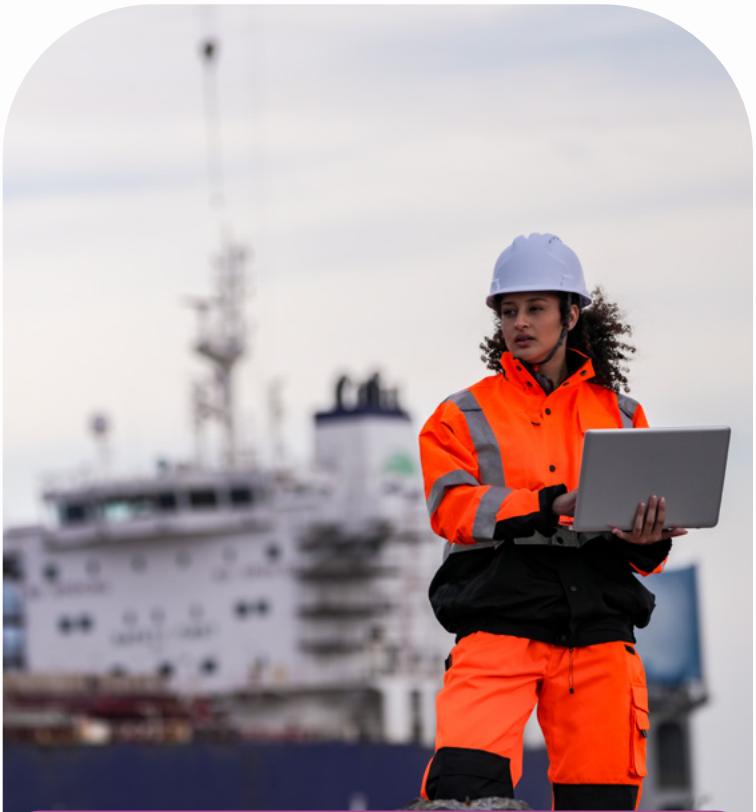
Lead with Sustainability

Embed environmental goals into leadership KPIs and strategy, reinforcing the sector's role as a responsible and forward-thinking employer.



Champion Inclusive Leadership

Build diverse teams and actively challenge barriers to entry. Broaden recruitment and highlight inclusive practices to expand the talent pool.



Evolving the Sector's Image:

- ✓ **Rebrand Maritime Careers:**
Promote roles as dynamic, innovative, and socially impactful.
- ✓ **Showcase Progression:**
Highlight real stories of career advancement to inspire and attract younger workers.
- ✓ **Leverage Employee Voices:**
Use authentic employee advocacy to build credibility.
- ✓ **Track and Measure Impact:**
Use metrics on recruitment, retention, and inclusion to refine approaches and demonstrate progress.

TRANSFERABLE LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM RAIL AND BUS

For the past 13 years Intuitive have been a trusted partner for well-known transport brands. The rail and bus sectors offer valuable leadership insights that can be applied directly to the ports and maritime industry. By translating these lessons, port organisations can strengthen leadership capability, improve operational performance, and future-proof their workforce.

While the comparison may not be immediately obvious, the relevance of bus and rail sectors to the maritime industry lies not in the vehicles themselves, but in how these industries approached the modernisation of traditionally male-dominated workforces.

In the bus and rail sectors, meaningful transformation occurred only when workforce challenges were no longer viewed solely as HR or compliance issues. Instead, they were reframed as strategic priorities critical to operational capability and long-term resilience.



LESSONS MARITIME CAN APPLY:



Leadership Development:

Traditional leadership pipelines were restructured to prioritise behaviours and values, such as collaboration, adaptability, and inclusivity, over tenure or purely technical credentials.



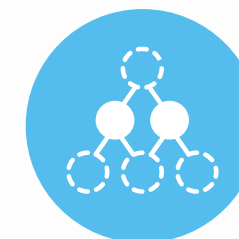
Inclusion as a Performance Driver:

Inclusion and belonging were embedded into the core of operational excellence, rather than treated as peripheral or optional initiatives.



Pathways to Progression:

New entry and progression pathways were created, enabling women and under-represented groups to access roles that previously required long apprenticeships or time “on the tools.”



Mid-Level Manager Capability:

Investment was made to professionalise and support middle management, addressing the widespread issue of “accidental managers” with limited leadership training, a challenge still common in port operations today.

Ultimately, the bus and rail sectors — often through difficult lessons — recognised that cultural and workforce modernisation are as vital to industry resilience as investment in fleet, infrastructure, or technology.

By applying these lessons, ports and maritime organisations can cultivate leaders who are agile, digitally competent, commercially savvy, inclusive, and capable of navigating transformation—ensuring the sector is prepared for a rapidly evolving landscape.

CONCLUSION: PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

The maritime sector stands at a crossroads. Rapid digitalisation, sustainability pressures, and evolving workforce expectations demand new forms of leadership. By investing in the right capabilities, addressing talent gaps head-on, and embracing the pace of change, organisations can move from reacting to disruption to shaping the future of ports and maritime.

THE INTUITIVE DIFFERENCE

At Intuitive, we specialise in executive search with a focus on modern leadership and diversity. After 13 successful years supporting the rail and bus industries, we're expanding our expertise into the ports and maritime sector.

We bring depth, trust, and genuine partnership to executive search. Our value lies in understanding the full picture — the culture, strategy, and future direction of every organisation we support. With deep expertise across the UK's transport and logistics sector, we connect clients with senior leaders who not only meet today's needs but shape tomorrow's success.

We're relationship-driven, not transactional. Every search is built on trust, transparency, and long-term commitment. Our 94% retention rate speaks for itself, the leaders we place stay, deliver, and make a lasting impact.

We extend our special thanks to Claire, Janice and Natalie for their invaluable insights and expertise that helped bring this whitepaper to life.



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