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Teamwork in sailing

Most companies are faced with two choices when seeking to build on their expertise: they can develop their own talent or they can buy it in from elsewhere.

Buying expertise can be expensive - particularly when recruiting for a permanent position. But sometimes, if the need is immediate and temporary or the specialist skills are in short supply, it might be worthwhile.

Traditionally, companies have tried to develop their own specialists but emerging markets and new business streams are forcing employers to modify their recruitment and development programmes. Outsourcing and the growth in external "talent pools" are beginning to offer attractive alternatives to the in-house product.

So what is the best strategy - building your own centres of excellence or buying in outside professionals?

Perhaps surprisingly, one activity that might offer some answers to this is sailing, which, with its emphasis on leadership and teamwork, has many parallels with recruitment and training in industry.

During the past few days I have been introduced to an experiment in crew training for offshore racing events that could shed some valuable light on this question.

Offshore and ocean yachting is a rarefied sport that, like motor racing, enjoys a healthy financial relationship with "aspirational" corporate brands. Companies will spend millions emblazoning their logos on some of the most exotic vessels afloat, competing for international trophies such as the Admiral's and America's cups.

It is difficult to describe the sport's big boat image as anything but elitist. A typical professional crew member or skipper on a top-class offshore racer would probably have been introduced to sailing as a youngster competing at club, then national, and sometimes Olympic level before turning professional.

Club-based sport is accessible to weekend sailors but the more exotic events tend to hire professionals with international reputations. This is the equivalent of companies renting the professional talent they feel they need.

Rob Cousins, managing director of Formula 1 Sailing, a Gosport-based yacht chartering business, has decided to challenge this accepted wisdom in the sport, backing a new race-training venture* proposed by Philippe Falle, the company's chief instructor.

Mr Falle skippered and trained the team that won the 2003 Royal Ocean Racing Club Offshore School Boat Trophy, a hotly contested event among UK sail training schools. Now he wants to repeat this feat with Formula 1 Sailing, backed by sponsorship from Volvo, the motor company.

But beyond this reasonable ambition is a much more audacious goal that he admits is something of a dream: to enter a team in the 2006 Rolex Commodore's Cup, a biennial event that attracts some of the world's best race teams. To represent Great Britain, the Formula 1 Sailing crew - competent sailors but relative race novices keen

to improve - would need to beat off some of the best professional teams in the UK, an almost unthinkable achievement.

"It's important to me that we start from scratch and don't helicopter in some rock stars as most teams do these days. I want people who will get up at six in the morning when the rest of the world thinks they're mad and give it everything to learn to race. If they work together week in week out they can form a close understanding," says Mr Cousins.

The proposal is a logical progression from the Global Challenge round-the-world yacht race for novice crews, created by Sir Chay Blyth. The race emerged from his personal frustration at the costs and high barriers to entry in existing races.

His belief that men and women unfamiliar with sailing could train together then compete against one another, racing around the world in identical yachts under professional skippers, proved a phenomenal success.

The Challenge races have bred some of the best racing skippers in the world such as Mike Golding, a former fireman, and Pete Goss, a former Royal Marine, but once the events have finished most crews tend to go back to their previous careers.

Mr Falle was a crew member in the 1996/97 race before skippering a Challenge yacht in one of its transatlantic races. Around the same time he became a sailing instructor, running his own small school in Southampton.

I sailed with him in the 1996 race so an invitation to join him with his new crew of race hopefuls last weekend seemed like a good idea.

Sunday in the Solent with winds gusting up to 30 knots was a real test of our enthusiasm. In spite of the obvious discomfort, I still think sailing is worth it because it has lessons that can be passed on in the workplace.

However, I remain dubious about office managers who take their work teams on sailing days as bonding exercises. No one should be exposed to a rough sea against their wishes. Even so, the way that sailing skills are acquired and the way that yacht crews interact with each other is a model for great teamwork.

One thing that was noticeable on Sunday's exercise was the element of competition that emerged among different groups working on deck.

This was a mixed crew and for some reason the sexes tended to separate themselves. It was possible to compare performances of these teams-within-the-team through certain manoeuvres. The level of boat speed that can be maintained during a tack, for example, is a useful indicator of crew efficiency and in this case the women beat the men.

These early training sessions will lead to team members finding their favoured positions. Although rotation of positions is important if crew members are to be familiar with every aspect of running the yacht, the demands of racing mean that each individual must be super-proficient at a particular skill such as helming, navigating, sail-changing or winching.

This harks back to the single-skill emphasis in assembly line manufacturing and military drill. Such drills persist because they are efficient but they can lead to boredom so skippers must ensure that their crews get varied experience to support

their specialities.

Another feature of the learning was strong communication. This did not, as you might imagine, involve shouting - even though a gale was blowing across the deck.

"Eventually I would expect the talking to subside as people start to work more smoothly together but just now it's important," says Mr Falle.

Can he turn a relatively novice crew into an ultra-competitive unit? If he can, then it would tend to vindicate those employers who concentrate their training efforts on home-grown employees.

The training regime may also point to various transferable lessons in the recruitment business, so, seasickness permitting, I shall be keeping a watching brief on the Formula 1 Sailing experiment in the months ahead.

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