

Is the maritime industry open to innovation?

Author: Anna Dzięczewska, Gdańsk Entrepreneurship Incubator STARTER

Dynamic changes in the market, global issues, and new development paths pose many new challenges to the maritime industry. These challenges are identified in areas related to energy, supply chains, environmental protection, sustainable development, or personnel training, among others. Responding to these issues, however, is becoming an opportunity to build a competitive advantage and truly participate in the processes shaping the future of the industry. How to properly identify challenges and how to effectively seek solutions that address them? The activities undertaken by a group of experts representing the maritime industry in Pomerania may be a good practice.

For over a year now, people connected with the Pomeranian maritime industry have been able to participate in the international BluAct project, whose main goal is to support entrepreneurship related to the blue economy. The second edition of this project involves four European port cities focused on the innovative development of the maritime industry in their regions: Piraeus (Greece), Gdansk (Poland), Koper (Slovenia), and Boulogne-sur-Mer (France). From the Gdansk side, the Gdansk Entrepreneurship Incubator Starter is a partner in the project. Project participants particularly care about strengthening the entrepreneurial and startup ecosystem in the maritime industry. Introducing innovative business ideas to the sector, inspiring young entrepreneurs, and supporting them in building their own companies related to this area of the economy are activities that have the potential to strengthen and modernize the local sector.

As part of the project, the URBACT Local Group (ULG) was created, which includes representatives of companies related to the sector, including DNV, the Polish Register of Shipping (Polski Rejestr Statków), Polenergia SA, GoodJob, DAMEN Engineering, as well as local government and scientific institutions: Marshal's Office of Pomeranian Voivodeship, Gdynia Maritime University, Naval Academy, and Gdansk University of Technology. The Gdansk ULG group defines and discusses the specific challenges of the industry in Pomerania during regular meetings. The practical outlook of the group's members, diverse experience and knowledge, and openness to the development of the blue economy have made it possible to identify the real needs and problems of the local industry and map out ways to solve them.

- Being a member of ULG is a kind of challenge and, at the same time, an opportunity because I can have a real impact on the blue economy in my region. During our meetings, we exchanged experiences related to the organization of business idea development programs, problems that can be encountered along the way, and good practices that are worth implementing, says Pawel Grobelny, Senior Surveyor at DNV Poland, member of the ULG group of the BluAct project.

- I was looking for a network of passionate people with whom I could share knowledge and experience, but also see different perspectives and challenges. Participating in the project and

working in the ULG group showed me how important it is to see things from a broader perspective and involve a wide range of stakeholders, both from business, local government, and administration, adds Alicja Jankowska, Marine Expert, Account Manager at MacGregor, a member of the ULG group.

Business idea support program

The process of finding solutions to identified challenges and generating innovative ideas can take many forms. It is often associated with large, time-consuming, and costly research projects. The ULG Group, however, has proposed a different approach based on the idea of business competitions. The challenges posed in such competitions are prepared by large companies, while working groups and startups are invited to participate and find solutions. These solutions can be implemented in the form of accelerator programs that offer business support or design marathons (hackathons).

The ULG Group, having defined the challenges of the maritime industry in Pomerania, invited teams to a business competition organized as part of the Techseed pre-acceleration program. This year's Techseed focused on generating innovative technological solutions to address challenges in areas related to ecology, energy, education, and information. The winning solution was the Mobile Monitoring concept, a smart water quality monitoring system developed by two companies from the Tricity area: SeaData and Camdrone. The solution was recognized for its versatility and support in environmental processes. The project also received a special award in the Energy area from Polenergia and Equinor. This award gives the project additional support from the scientific landscape and increases its chances of scalability. It is also an example of cooperation between a startup and a large company, which can result in the development of useful, innovative solutions.

Inviting a variety of market players, who often have not had the opportunity to conduct joint activities before, to collaborate brings tangible benefits to all involved parties. Multidisciplinary teams have better chances of creating more innovative, industry-developing solutions. Thanks to such activities, it is possible to transfer and use the experiences from different entities, but also from other industries. Another important factor is raising the attractiveness of the industry for young entrepreneurs and identifying it as a progressive area, conducive to professional growth.

- All activities carried out together with local companies and research and development centers, which lead to the generation of new concepts and the implementation of innovative solutions, will contribute to the development of the market potential of Pomeranian companies, says Paweł Mawduk, Offshore Wind Project Manager at POLENERGIA S.A., a member of the ULG Group.

The presence of youth is also significant for industry development

A key area within the challenges of the maritime industry in Poland is education. Educating future professionals, building the competencies that are in demand, or getting young people interested in professional growth in this sector of the economy are topics that raise many questions and emotions. There is a common problem with staff shortages or concerns about obtaining appropriately qualified employees. This applies to sectors traditionally associated with the industry, such as shipyards, as well as those more forward-looking for Poland, e.g. offshore.

While looking for solutions to these challenges, ULG experts have opened themselves up to working with a group that may represent the future of the industry - young people. Interestingly, these are not university students, who may become employees of the industry in the near future, but high school students. In their case, such activities are more of a long-term investment, the return on which may only come in a few years.

The Starter Incubator, which promotes entrepreneurship among students and teachers, is preparing workshops for high schools based on the knowledge of maritime industry experts, to introduce the subject of the blue economy and the opportunities for professional development and work in this area. In the future, as part of such meetings, it is also planned to invite industry experts to schools to talk about the practical aspects of work and development in the maritime sector, and to invite young people to study visits at local companies. Personal experience, real situations, tangible benefits - these are elements that are of great importance for building the interest and future choices of young people.

A very interesting form of meetings has also been initiated - the Maritime Innovaton, a two-day solution design marathon modeled on the idea of a hackathon. Here, too, high school students have been invited to create solutions for the maritime industry. Teams will be tasked with creating innovation concepts in response to challenges posed by the event's industry partners, the so-called challenge owners. Young innovators will benefit from the support of experienced mentors throughout the process. It is Pomerania's first maritime innovaton organized for young people.

- Innovaton takes participants through the process of creating innovative solutions and also allows them to develop ideas that are viable because they can be implemented. Young people get the best tools: agency and influence. This is already happening! - says Agnieszka Płoska, a specialist in creating and financing business projects.

Women in the maritime industry

The development of the industry is determined not only by technological innovation. Activities in areas of sustainable development include support for gender equality and empowerment for women. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals point to the huge role of women in improving the world and emphasize that their activities and leadership capabilities are key to solving global problems.

This perspective was also taken into account in the BluAct project's activities. More than half of the experts in the ULG group are women. This gives the group the opportunity to both incorporate a female point of view in its activities, as well as use the experience of the cooperating female experts in identifying local needs and challenges for the maritime industry. This is an example of the active inclusion of women in a variety of programs, mentoring and training activities, and industry events, which provides an important motivator for other women planning or already working in the maritime sector. The active presence of women is also helping to dispel the stereotype that it is a professional field exclusively for men.

It is worth noting here that the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has also been supporting efforts to increase women's participation in the maritime sector for more than a decade with its Women in Maritime program. Starting in 2022, International Women at Sea Day is also celebrated, this year under the theme "Training-Visibility-Recognition: Supporting a barrier-free working

environment". Set for May 18, this special day aims to promote the recruitment and sustainable employment of women in the maritime sector, elevate their rank, and address the current gender imbalance in the industry. BluAct participants actively joined the effort, presenting the situation of women in the maritime industry and speaking about supportive measures to foster positive change within the sector.

More than a year of cooperation of experts connected with the maritime industry in Pomerania resulted in a variety of experiences and ideas. Thanks to the involvement of representatives from different areas including business, science, and administration, it was possible to take a fresh look at the topic of the industry's development, the challenges it faces, and the search for good solutions. The notion of innovation is key here, although it does not only apply to technology, but also to working methodologies and taking action in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. Further work of the group is planned for next year - 12 meetings in thematic areas related to education, involvement of business institutions, or support for women, among others. The group is open and all people for whom the development of the industry is important are invited to join.

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