

# DIVERSITY LEADS TO MORE INNOVATION

**The maritime sector is under pressure. The labour market is becoming increasingly tight, while geopolitical uncertainty and technological developments continue to challenge the industry. How can we ensure that talent not only enters the sector, but also stays? How do we create a work environment where everyone feels valued and can contribute to their fullest potential? In an interactive seminar on 27 March in Utrecht, organised by the Maritime Masterplan of the Dutch Maritime Network (Nederland Maritiem Land), inspiring conversations, speaking examples and practical exercises led to more understanding about this subject for the participants and the sector in general.**

**B**y nature, people have a desire to belong – to be part of something meaningful and to feel connected to others. This is no different in the workplace. When individuals feel like they truly belong, they are more engaged, motivated, and fulfilled. A sense of belonging isn't just about being included; it's about being seen, heard, and valued for who you are. Diversity and inclusion are important subjects when it comes to keeping people on board.

The topics of inclusion and diversity are often still perceived as “woke” or politically charged. This perception can lead to polarisation and unnecessary confrontation, when in reality, most issues aren't simply black or white – they exist in the nuanced space in between. Engaging in open conversations with people from different backgrounds helps us gain a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives. These diverse voices add layers of meaning and colour to the broader picture, allowing us to see the subject in a more complete and human way.

## **Diversity and inclusion: What do they mean?**

Diversity refers to the presence of differences within a given setting. This can include differences in race, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, socioeconomic background, and

more. Inclusion is about creating an environment where those differences are not only accepted, but valued – where everyone feels respected, supported, and able to fully participate. A truly inclusive workplace doesn't just invite people in – it

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makes sure they have a seat at the table and that their voices are heard. Or to put it in a second metaphor: Diversity is being invited to the party, inclusion is whether people dance with you at the party. Together, diversity and inclusion foster innovation, strengthen teams, and lead to better decision-making and, thus, to better services and products.

It is often assumed that building diverse teams automatically leads to inclusion. However, true inclusion requires more than representation – it demands understanding. When people come from different traditions and habits, open conversations and mutual understanding are essential. Creating space for dialogue helps bridge differences and fosters a sense of connection and belonging.

## **‘Women are not allowed on the bridge’**

What does inclusion mean in the maritime sector's daily practice? Bertha Ooms, manager of maritime officer education at Hogeschool Zeeland University of Applied Sciences, shared a speaking example. While working as an intern in the engine room of a ship, she wasn't allowed on the bridge or at the captain's dinner, because she was a woman. While this speaking example of exclusiveness was unacceptable, inclusiveness manifested itself in a different way: the other (male) crew members witnessed the unfair situation and decided to also not join the captain at dinner, so in the end, the captain had to eat alone. Another example from my own experience was during my internship at a shipyard, for the University of Applied Sciences of Maritime Technology. During this internship, the focus was on the practical side: we had to learn all about welding and construction,

while working in different construction departments, workshops and on the ship on the slipway. The manager of the construction department put me in the training department (*leerschool*) and told me to stay there, because if I moved along different departments of the yard I was 'distracting workers'. Because the workers appreciated my learning attitude and I was interested in what they were doing, I soon integrated in the community of workers. I walked around with a camera so they started to show me situations that taught me a lot about shipbuilding. The manager was not pleased. While this situation is not an acceptable situation, it led to inclusion in the construction team.

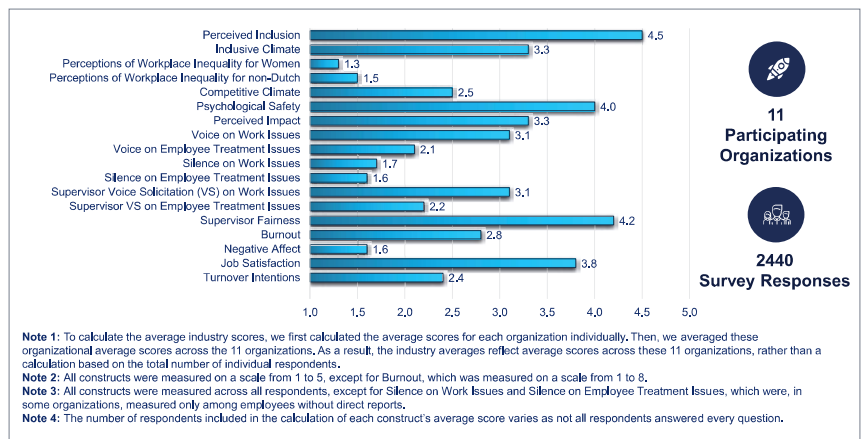
It's not about denying the differences between, for example, men and women – because those differences do exist. Take job applications, for instance: research shows that women often feel they need to meet all the listed qualifications before applying, while men are more likely to put themselves forward even if they only meet some. Recognising and understanding these differences leads to more meaningful conversations and, ultimately, better outcomes. Inclusive teams or companies don't just feel better – they build better. As Inge Vergouwen, manager HR Service & Expertise at Royal IHC, stated during the seminar: 'The more diverse your workforce is, the better the results will be.' But change doesn't happen overnight. It takes time to shift long-standing patterns and mindsets within the sector.

## Recognising talent beyond the job description

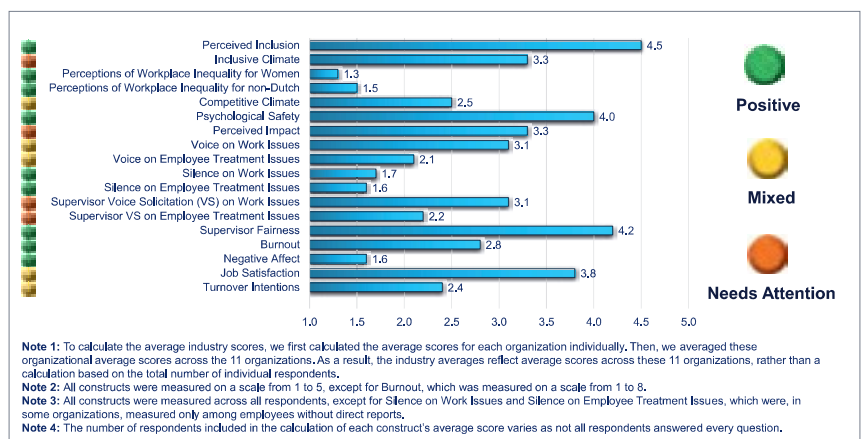
Of course there are many good examples of inclusion: 'In our company, we had Mario with us for a while – a very positive guy, full of enthusiasm. He did such a great job that we started assigning him to projects that were actually a bit too far away. To make that work, we picked him up from home and drove him from Rotterdam to Amersfoort. He saw that special treatment as a kind of promotion. Because of that, Mario started to see himself as an assistant project leader and began directing others. That was golden! People accepted his authority even more than ours. It was



Inclusion Survey constructs [2].



Industry-level results of the Inclusion Survey – Executive Summary I [2].



Industry-level results of the Inclusion Survey – Executive Summary II [2].

amazing to see. When you give people more responsibility, you really see them thrive. We also had a lot of laughs along the way' [1].

## Research on perception of inclusion

In 2024, the Dutch Maritime Network's Inclu-

sion Survey was performed among 2400 employees of eleven maritime companies. The results are given in the figures. Inclusivity was assessed by evaluating the extent to which individuals feel safe to voice their opinions, are encouraged to do so, and

whether their input leads to concrete actions. The results show that maritime professionals generally feel personally well included within their organisation. Yet they also indicate that the overall organisational culture in terms of inclusion has room for improvement. Employees experience limited involvement in decision-making, and the sense of influence on team or organisational processes remains low. Employees also speak out relatively little about the way colleagues are treated. Psychological safety is widely experienced, indicating that there is room to speak up, but the incentive to actually do so is sometimes lacking. The differences in experience between various groups are remarkable. Women, employees with a different gender identity, non-Dutch colleagues, younger and older employees, and people with disabilities systematically report fewer positive experiences. Managers are rated as fair, but they rarely actively seek input on work or personnel issues. This underscores the importance of leadership that actively encourages inclusion. The results thus provide valuable leads for organisations in the maritime sector that want to work toward a more inclusive work environment.

## How to foster greater inclusivity and diversity

During the seminar, Lisa Molenaar (AWVN and De Normaalste Zaak) demonstrated how to make job advertisements more inclusive. Too often, we are tempted to search for a “jack of all trades”, which inadvertently excludes a large pool of potential candidates. By focusing job advertisements on the essential core competencies only, we can significantly broaden the range of suitable applicants. This approach also helps to minimise bias in the candi-

date profile, resulting in a much more inclusive hiring process. Creating an inclusive and diverse workplace starts with intentional, thoughtful hiring practices. The following strategies can significantly contribute to attracting and selecting a broader range of talent, ensuring fairer opportunities for everyone:

1. **Improve job descriptions:** Inclusive language in job postings is crucial. Avoiding jargon, gendered wording, and overly specific requirements can help attract a wider and more diverse pool of candidates. Clear, neutral, and welcoming language makes more people feel that they belong – and that they’re welcome to apply.
2. **Use more objective selection criteria:** Subjectivity in candidate evaluation can introduce bias. By using standardised assessment methods and clearly defined criteria, organisations can reduce unconscious bias and ensure that all candidates are judged based on merit and potential, not background or personal characteristics.
3. **Structure your interviews:** Unstructured interviews can favour candidates who are more similar to the interviewer. Structured interviews – where each candidate is asked the same questions in the same order – help create a level playing field. They also make comparisons between candidates more consistent and fair.
4. **Focus on four to six core competencies:** Rather than trying to assess too many qualities at once, it’s more effective to focus on a small, clearly defined set of four to six competencies that are truly essential for the role. This sharpens the hiring process and prevents bias from creeping in through vague or

subjective “impressions”.

5. **Be explicit about your intentions:** Talk openly about your organisation’s commitment to inclusivity and diversity – both internally and in job postings. This signals to candidates from underrepresented backgrounds that they are valued and welcome. Transparency builds trust and shows that diversity is not just a checkbox, but a genuine priority. De Normaalste Zaak, a growing network of over 750 organisations that work together to build an inclusive labour market, has a practical toolbox and knowledge platform with good examples: <https://www.denormaalstezaak.nl/kennisplatform-inclusief-werkgeven/>. Also, VNO-NCW has a lot of information and good examples on the subject: <https://www.vno-ncw.nl/tag/inclusiviteit>.

## Practical follow-up sessions

The participants of the seminar clearly expressed a need to frequently meet in a setting with peers from all over the maritime sector. As a follow-up to the seminar, NML, in collaboration with De Normaalste Zaak, organises a series of online workshops to teach participants how to apply this strategy. The workshops are highly interactive and hands-on, enabling participants to immediately put their new skills into practice. Based on discussions during the seminar, the first workshop focused on more inclusive job advertisement and took place on 12 June. The second takes place on 1 July and revolves around candidate selection. Everyone deserves to feel happy and supported at work. When we create environments where people can be themselves and thrive, we unlock not only personal well-being, but also the full potential of our teams.

## REFERENCES

1. De Normaalste Zaak, <https://bit.ly/43qwBGg>
2. The Dutch Maritime Network Inclusion Survey 2024, <https://bit.ly/3Fpmt7A>

For more information on this subject or the online workshops, contact Chris Karman of NML, [chris@maritiemmasterplan.nl](mailto:chris@maritiemmasterplan.nl).



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