

The value of the branch network

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An open letter to the membership to highlight the important role of the branch network in the work of the Institute; to encourage greater participation; and to seek feedback on the future development of the branches.

A major study of the branch network and aims of the Institute in 1997 led to important resolutions by Council. These stated:

- Council reaffirms its commitment to the branches as essential to the development of the Institute as a leading international professional body for qualified mariners.
- The framework laid down in the Constitution Branch By-laws should continue to provide the guiding principles of operation for the next ten years.
- The branch administration booklet should be revised to provide guidance on best practice and advice for branch committees. The revision should be coordinated by the Finance and General Purposes Committee (FGPC) in consultation with the branches.
- Council should continue to receive branch reports and act as a focus for promoting branch activities.
- The FGPC should consider branch projects with significant resource implications.
- The Institute's technical committees should consider encouraging special interest groups involving branches, if appropriate.
- Cooperative ventures between branches should be encouraged.

● An Assistant Secretary should be appointed to understudy and take over from the Deputy Secretary when he retires.

Five years on, each of these resolutions has been implemented and continue to be progressed but this is an appropriate time, with further changes of personnel at headquarters, to review the role of the branch network now and over the next five years.

It is fair to say the resolutions set down what Council, its committees and the staff should do but, apart from encouraging cooperation between branches, little was set out concerning actual branch development or activities. This is not surprising given the autonomous status and voluntary management of branches. However, there is much useful guidance on branch activities in the Branch Administration Handbook, which was developed in consultation with the branches. Similarly, the Constitution Branch By-laws set out the democratic management required of the branches.

The branch network

In 1998 there were 35 branches – 16 in the UK and 19 overseas. Over the past three

years we have had a couple of closures due to falling membership in those branches which have been more than offset by the launch of new branches in many parts of the world so that there are now 40 – 14 in the UK and 26 overseas. It is likely that there will be further consolidation amongst the UK branches with some areas being served by a small group or sub-branch of active members rather than a full branch organisation. Similarly, there will be further expansion of the international network through the work of the Development Contacts, who are the focal point for the formation of new branches.

There is now a worldwide network of 29 of these development contacts with more being added each year and three of them – in Russia, the Netherlands and Southern California – have recently held exploratory meetings with members to progress the formation of a branch. The development contacts are volunteers who are committed to:

- Increasing membership
- Activating the interest of existing members and, where possible, ex-members.
- Establishing a branch if/when viable.

The success of this system can be seen

A selection of branch activities

Major NI Projects

Leadership Working Group - West of Scotland.

Future use of visual aids to navigation – public meetings organised by: West of England, US Gulf, Philippines, Belgium and Cyprus.

Seminars (at least annually)

- World Maritime Day – Pakistan.
- Mariner & Maritime Law series – North East England
- Safety and Environmental – British Columbia
- Bangladesh; India (West) and (South); Ireland; Norway; Ukraine; Western Australia.

Exhibition &/or Conference

Marine Asia – Sri Lanka

Maritime Excellence – London

Major charitable work

UAE

Regular technical programme

Many branches including most in the UK, SE Australia, New Zealand and many of those mentioned above.

in the diverse list of new branches launched in recent years including the Ukraine, India (North) and (South), Malta and Norway. Branches have also been reformed or re-launched in Iberia, Greece, South Wales, and Western Australia. This process of rejuvenation is one that is constantly with us as the branches need a constant stream of dedicated volunteers to run them. A combination of largely work related factors can result in the leading lights of a branch leaving the area or being unable to devote time and energy to the branch and this will soon result in a dormant state unless other members step forward to carry on the good work. Succession planning is as important here as in a company. Currently 4 branches could be assessed as being dormant but it is very satisfactory that 3 others are in the process of re-launching themselves.

The importance of this international network cannot be over-emphasised. It is a key reason for people joining the Institute and the lack of an active local branch is sometimes given as the reason for members resigning. The network is shown in much of the Institute's marketing literature and is a factor in the desire of many organisations to consult the Institute on a broad range of issues.

Work of the branches

The principal aim of the branches is 'to promote the activities and increase the membership of The Nautical Institute in the area'.

This aim implies a vibrant, proactive organisation of current professionals, and to a large extent that is what the existing branches are. But does the membership as a whole realise this? Attendance figures from the larger branches' programmes of events suggest an active membership of only 10 to 20 per cent at best. So it is worth restating the access to professional participation in branch activities – this is what a branch can give you:

- A local professional focus.
- Communication and fellowship with other nautical professionals (networking).
- Solving professional problems through seminars and workshops.
- A programme of technical and social meetings.
- Local and, in some cases, national representation on regulatory bodies or users' groups.
- Assistance with updating and professional development.
- Involvement with projects locally and internationally.

- Development of management and organisational skills.

The branches certainly provide a stronger Institute presence in local areas, an enhanced international status, and wider opportunities for recruitment, especially in the case of a new branch. For example, membership in the Ukraine more than doubled over a two year period as the branch was being launched. Branches help to provide essential feedback from the seafarers of that area as well as the shore based personnel, particularly through seminars/workshops and the reports of these events in *Seaways*. They are an invaluable network of contacts for advice, speakers and event planning, and they are encouraged to input to Council, although more could and should be made of this role internationally and Council will be considering this.

Some branches have devised innovative schemes to attract new members e.g. the Belgium Branch 'Adopt a student' scheme whereby existing members pay the subscription of final year cadets. An adaptation of this was devised by Captain Nick Cooper FNI to encourage the formation of an Egypt Branch. He is currently sailing with Egyptian officers and, with other members, sponsors half the first year subscription of new members. More volunteers to support these or set up similar schemes in new areas would be welcome.

Increasingly, branches are staging higher profile seminars and workshops, with local sponsorship to defray the costs, which are open to all maritime participants in the area. These are particularly valuable as they raise the Institute's profile, encourage recruitment and result in very worthwhile input to our overall work. In many cases, good publicity both nationally and in the maritime media results and the issue is debated more widely. The disadvantage of these infrequent events is that a high proportion of members may miss them if they are at sea, so it is important that they are balanced by a selection of events at other times of the year without over-burdening the branch committee. A model annual programme could be:

- Two technical meetings (including the AGM)
- One social event
- Two industry seminars with networking reception or dinner

However, each branch has to decide what is sustainable, regularly review the programme, and not be afraid to change it. In this, branch members have a key role but

recent response rates to branch review surveys have been abysmal. The committees want your input so please give it.

In planning future programmes branches may consider the following:

- Adopting a strategic project in the Institute's Five Year Plan and working on it.
- Instilling professional values through seminars.
- Volunteering to host a major Institute event such as the Command Seminar.
- Volunteering to host an Institute book launch.
- Coordinating input to the next Five Year Plan through the President's questionnaire.
- Raising issues of concern to Council.

Five main factors

In summary then, the value of branches to members is based on five main factors:

- The dynamic commitment of the branch committee and especially at least one leader, as well as a sharing of the workload and succession planning.
- The development of focused activities such as an annual conference, dinner or series of topical, technical meetings where members can participate with a sense of purpose and achievement.
- The provision of recognition through publication of reports of activities in *Seaways* and other media, the appreciation of Council, visits by the President and the support of HQ staff.
- Contact and communication with and between members working in different occupations.
- Contribution to continuous professional development.

To achieve this value and success branch committees often have to overcome many obstacles amongst which may be the geographical size of their area, changes in shipping activity, and the perceived lack of potential new members. However, the biggest hurdle is perhaps the pressure of work on members and the commitments of every day life. Most members want to 'belong' to a branch and there is an assumption that there will always be others willing to do the work to run it. There may indeed be but even so branch committees need the support of members attending the events to make their efforts really worthwhile.

If you find the current branch activities do not fully meet your needs, please first contact the local branch committee with your suggestions (see inside back cover for contact details). Council is always pleased to receive ideas from branches and will welcome comments on this open letter.