

Navigating success in a man's world

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CICT Commercial and Marketing Head Catriona Jayasundera – Pic by Lasantha Kumara

When Catriona Jayasundara first began work in the shipping industry in 2002 it was a highly male-dominated industry. In fact Catriona was the first woman to work in her capacity in the field of marketing and commerce at a container terminal operator at the Port of Colombo. Catriona recalls that those initial days were challenging. Nevertheless, she learnt to adapt and persisted, determined to make a difference. A marketer by profession, Catriona states that work in the shipping industry is something that found her. However since then there has been no turning back.

In 2014 Catriona joined as the Head of Commercial and Marketing at the then newly-begun container terminal company, Colombo International Container Terminal Ltd (CICT), making her the only woman holding a senior management position in a container terminal company in the Port of Colombo. CICT is a joint venture between the global conglomerate China Merchants Port Holdings Company Ltd. (CMPort) and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA). Last year Catriona's efforts were recognised by CICT's parent company CMPort, which awarded her the Golden Glory Medal, making Catriona the first overseas woman to win the competitive award which takes into consideration all global companies under CMPort. Catriona states the win was very humbling and encouraging as it indicated that not only at the local company level but at the global level as well, equal opportunity and gender equality is being recognised. Catriona sat down with the Daily FT recently to discuss the highly-competitive and diverse nature of being a marketer in the shipping

industry, the work she does with CICT, improving female participation in the industry, and the present trends and challenges the industry faces among others.

Following are excerpts from the interview:

By Asnah Anver

Q: By training you are a marketing professional and have worked in a number of industries from the hotel industry to the IT industry. What made you chose the shipping industry over other commercial industries?

A: I didn't choose shipping actually, it basically chose me. I was always clear that I wanted to be a marketing professional. Hence my focus was to work in as many industries as possible in order to have a diverse view and knowledge. I was working in IT for three years and was ready to learn something new, however I never had shipping in my sight. For me the port was a different world. A position was offered to me in the very first PPP (Public-Private Partnership) project in the maritime and port sector, and I took it as a learning experience and it turned into a passion. I have been in this this industry since 2002. Honestly I can't imagine leaving it.

Q: What do you like about working in the shipping industry?

A: I think a lot of things. I can't pinpoint and say one specific thing. First it was a challenge and that was what drove me to stay and later on I actually loved the industry: It's so diverse and there is something different every day. You're a part of this huge supply chain, it's a completely bigger picture, and you're just a little speck on it. So I think I really enjoy that.

Q: What is different about being a marketer in the shipping industry?

A: When you speak of the shipping industry, it covers a very wide spectrum of different services as part of the logistics and transport supply chain, and the port industry is just one link in this chain, and the industry was male dominated from top down. In fact back in 2002 I was the first female to work in the Port of Colombo in the specialised field of commercial and marketing.

Speaking of the Port specifically, it's a whole new world out there, but the basics are the

same. However the strategies and approach is extremely different, as the port is the link between the sea and land and thereby brings about the necessity to interact with the shipping lines as well as the cargo owners. We have to market to both in order to sustain this chain for one outcome. This is the one single most important difference in that we need to be able to meet the ever increasing demands or requirements of two different segments in the industry – the need of a cargo owner and then the owner of a shipping line. And when I say shipping lines, I deal with two types of shipping lines – the principal who is the owner of the ship and the local agents who represents. So all these different entities I have to deal with in order to get to that one box. It's very diverse and interesting.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about Colombo International Container Terminal Limited (CICT) and the work that you do as the Head of Commercial and Marketing at CICT?

A: CICT comes under the flagship of CMPort, which is currently the second largest port operator in the world. CICT as at now, is the first and only deep-water container terminal in the whole of South Asia that is capable of handling the largest ships afloat. The terminal is a 35-year BOT (Build, Operate and Transfer) PPP project with SLPA. Our terminal is a greenfield project which was fully completed in April 2014 and has since been achieving the impossible. In fact in 2015, our first full year of operation we achieved 1.5 million TEUs (Twenty-foot Equivalent Units). In 2016 we achieved two million TEUs. This is a remarkable achievement for such a young company.

However more importantly CICT is a very open-minded company that places great emphasis on human capital. I have only been with them since October 2014 so that's just under three years, and I am now the first female to hold a senior management position in this field in the Port of Colombo. That says a lot about the company. It's very positive to see that this liberal thinking comes all the way from our mother company. Last year I was the first overseas female to win the Golden Glory Medal from CMPort for my contribution to the company. So the open-minded thinking comes all the way from the top.

In terms of the work I do it's also very diverse. There is no one particular job that I do. It spans from PR to marketing to commercial, from attracting a shipping line to the Port of Colombo to the brand image of the company and its positioning here and globally.

But apart from that as an industry official, as a head of a commercial department or in a management position in the company, I also work in different associations in the industry. We work as a whole to better the industry in general. So the job entails so many different things. I like this job for that reason, that there are so many different aspects that have to be done. It's not monotonous.

Q: What are the most challenging and the most fulfilling aspects in your line of work?

A: The most challenging would be the competitive environment in which Port of Colombo is currently operating. That is the singular most challenging aspect of the job we do. Contrary to what many may think, our competition is not within the Port of Colombo but it is with other regional hub ports which are trying for the same transshipment cargo. Eighty per cent of our business is transshipment which means its connecting from another country to somewhere else. So we are just a transit point and there are options for transit. So it is a very volatile and vulnerable business. With the introduction of the Ultra Large Container Carriers (ULCC) and the recent consolidation of shipping lines, there is a consolidation of services. These services

will be calling only a limited number of ports and therefore this is a very challenging time for transshipment hub ports.

If I speak about fulfilment, there are many aspects. Professionally in terms of my job what specifically stands out would be the CSR work the company does. It's the part of my job I enjoy the most. It is extremely reassuring to see that CICT has this much focus on all factions of society that require support. They have a strategy focusing on the environment, education, health and social status. So it's very fulfilling to see how much money is invested back into society. I think that's a very fulfilling part of my job – I handle CSR as well here.

On another note personally it's very reassuring that when we go out to the international arena and secure business for CICT, it has an impact on the entire Port of Colombo. It's not only the growth of CICT but of the entire port that's projected. It's very humbling and fulfilling to know that we are a part of a much bigger entity and a much bigger cause that has such an impact on our country.

Q: You don't often see a lot of women holding senior positions in the commercial shipping industry. Is it particularly more challenging for women in the industry and if so do you see the situation improving?

A: Well yes you are correct, but that is rapidly changing now. I can't say that the work is more challenging. I think rather than the actual work it's the mindset that's really the challenge. That's what needs to be addressed. It's breaking this so-called glass ceiling. When I say mindset I don't refer to just the male mindset but I think as women also there is a change that's required. I think women also have to make a change in how they look at and approach the industry. We also have a responsibility there.

Shipping didn't change for me. I changed for shipping basically. I changed how I looked at it. It was not easy, I really struggled at the start. But I had some good counsel and I learnt a very hard lesson that they not going to change for me, that if I want to survive I have to change the way I look at things.

Actually I am a part of an international establishment called WISTA which is Women's International Shipping and Trading Association. It is a global establishment, a non-profit organisation as well, that is currently working very actively to address this mindset, to promote women to join the industry. We don't only manage the working establishments but we start from students. Every year we organise a career day and invite schools. I, in fact spoke of my experience. So we are changing mindsets from school children upwards so that shipping will be an option. I feel we have made great progress over the years. My new position in the company is proof that the situation is now changing and I believe it will be a major catalyst that will drive this change within the industry.

Q: What do you think shipping industry/companies can do to improve women's participation?

A: I think that's already in progress. Looking at many companies today there is a significant increase in the number of women entering the industry. I think it's only a matter of time before the mindset is completely changed and it will be an open market for all genders. What was lacking was the vacuum at the senior management level and now that the breakthrough has been made I am confident that the numbers can only grow. There is change, but like I said women have to also play their part in changing how they look at the market and their approach towards the male-dominated domain.

Q: How competitive is the market in Sri Lanka for container terminal operators such as CICT? Will the Colombo Port face any competition with the opening of the Hambantota Port?

A: Like I said before, this is a very dynamic industry and it is rapidly changing. The market is very competitive. However the real competition is not here but outside Sri Lanka with other regional ports, and that's where our sole focus should be. It's to manage the competition out there and retain the status of Sri Lanka as the preferred maritime hub in the region. Hambantota Port is currently focused on break bulk and ro-ro business and any further enhancement of capacities within Sri Lanka to attract different types of cargo can only benefit the country as a whole.

Q: How attractive and competitive is Sri Lanka as a country for shipping companies and vessel operators?

A: Well the Port of Colombo had a growth of 14% in 2014, 6% in 2015, 11% in 2016 and currently we are on 6% for 2017. I believe the figures speak for themselves on how attractive Colombo/Sri Lanka is. In an environment where a lot of ports are suffering, that is extremely positive. If you look at all the shipping lines that are now looking at us, and the alliances that are forming, they are all looking at Colombo. I think that is positive and shows that we are working in the right direction. However that doesn't mean we have a captive market and there is no work required. Eighty per cent of our business is in transshipment and hence is vulnerable to other regional ports. In order to sustain this upward trend continuous development and innovation is required. This is the main focus now as a terminal and a port.

Q: How is the market in Sri Lanka evolving and do you think Sri Lanka can establish itself as a maritime hub for shipping companies in the Indian Ocean?

A: Definitely. We have all the necessary resources. Geographically you can't ask for a better location as we are in the centre of the main East West Shipping route. There are multiple (three) port operators within the Port of Colombo which is unique for a transshipment hub. It's diverse in terms of options for the customer. In terms of cost the port has worked extensively to ensure we are competitive regionally. So yes definitely we have what it takes and we are already on the path, however there is still a lot that can and needs to be done. The relevant authorities are already addressing the requirements and I strongly believe the port is evolving in line with global changes to achieve the status of being a maritime hub. At the moment we are well placed and the plans are in place to improve. We have a bright future as a port if we just keep going in this upward trend.

- See more at: <http://www.ft.lk/article/621812/Navigating-success-in-a-man-s-world#sthash.rHou5Mq2.dpuf>