

Networks tackle the training challenge



Facing a widening skills gap, project forwarding networks are increasingly turning to collaborative training and mentorship initiatives to prepare the industry's future workforce. *Sophie Barnes reports.*

Recruitment and training have long been among the project logistics sector's most persistent challenges. Unlike many industries, there is no clear pathway into heavy lift and project forwarding; professionals often arrive from adjacent sectors, discover the industry by chance or follow a family connection into the business.

While companies have spent years discussing the need to attract younger talent, the issue remains as pressing as ever, particularly as experienced personnel retire and demand for specialised logistics services continues to grow.

There are signs of progress. Some of the industry's largest project forwarders have had success with the introduction of internship schemes, graduate programmes and structured mentorship initiatives aimed at developing the next generation

of professionals. Shipping lines have also increased investment in talent development, recognising the need to build a pipeline of skilled workers for an increasingly complex supply chain environment.

Yet project logistics remains a business that is learned largely through experience. The intricacies of project execution cannot be fully taught in a classroom alone; they require exposure to real-world operations and the transfer of knowledge from experienced practitioners.

For smaller and mid-sized forwarders this makes formal training programmes

difficult. Limited manpower, resources and time often leave little capacity for dedicated recruitment and development initiatives.

Project forwarder networks have long provided a platform for independent operators to collaborate and compete with multinational players – and, increasingly, their role is evolving beyond commercial cooperation. Several networks are now developing structured initiatives aimed at creating shared platforms for mentorship, education and industry exposure that individual companies may struggle to deliver alone.

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– Elisabeth Cosmatos, Cosmatos Group/THLG





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“The problem of recruitment is actual, it is not something that we talk about hypothetically,” said Elisabeth Cosmatos, president of The Heavy Lift Group (THLG) and ceo of Cosmatos Group.

THLG recently launched its next-generation initiative to take steps to address that issue. THLG NextGen will be formed of young professionals from the network's member companies and operate as a structural working party within the network with its own articles of association and executive committee (NGC). “It is the first step. It is not going to solve the problem of recruitment, but it gives us possible ways that we can confront it as an issue,” Cosmatos said. “It can also let younger people see from the inside how the industry operates.”

Family ties

The idea of THLG NextGen was born out of the familial nature of the project logistics business; many of the network's member companies are family owned, with the baton passed down between generations. “A lot of people in the group's kids are

either studying or working with them at junior levels,” Cosmatos explained. “So we thought, why don't we start with them, extend the invitation to our kids and experiment together with what works before we open the gate to more people.”

Currently, THLG NextGen already has eight members with ages ranging from 18-27 at various levels of experience. The goal is to have a structure with 8-12 members representing an age group of 17-30 from a variety of backgrounds – be it business, engineering or law. “The most important thing is to be committed to active participation,” Cosmatos said.

The NGC consists of a chair, vice chair, working group lead and programme manager. Emre Eldener of KITA Logistics, a long-time member of THLG, will act as a mentor to the programme.

Initially, THLG NextGen will focus on five pillars: education and skills development; mentorship and reverse mentorship; network engagement and visibility; innovation and future thinking; community values and culture. The initiative aims to create meaningful

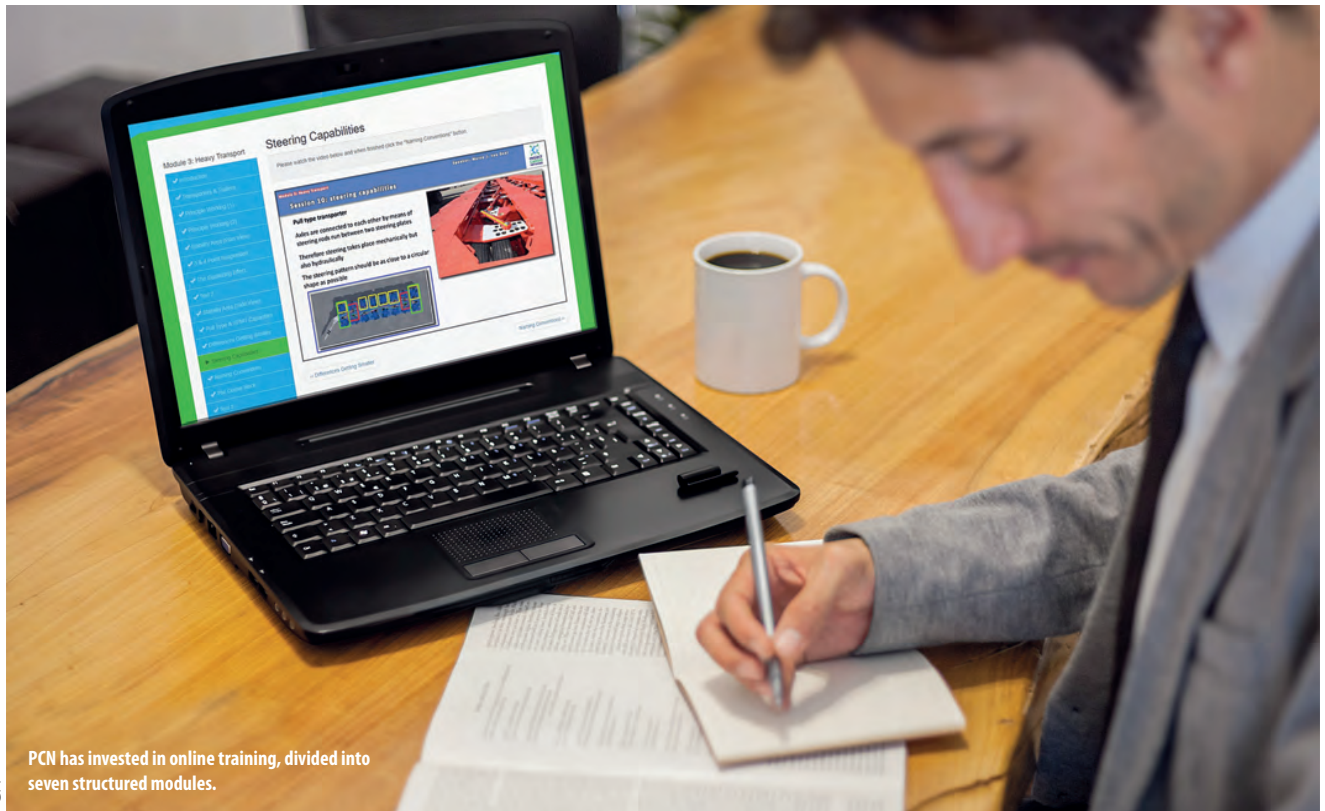
opportunities for emerging professionals to develop their skills through educational workshops, webinars and knowledge-sharing sessions. Members will learn from industry experts, exchange ideas and gain valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities shaping the sector.

Mentorship and collaboration

In addition, THLG NextGen will promote mentorship, collaboration and practical learning through lessons-learned discussions, operational best-practice exchanges, and port, terminal and office visits hosted by member organisations. Working closely with senior THLG members, the programme will encourage intergenerational dialogue.

Although, Cosmatos stressed the goals may evolve as the programme develops and the next generation takes the reigns. “The most important thing is not just to launch it but to keep it running, keep them interested and curious. That is the most difficult thing – to maintain it and see the long-term benefits,” she said.

This, Cosmatos believes, is imperative for the long-term sustainability of the network:



PCN has invested in online training, divided into seven structured modules.

PCN

“The purpose of this initiative is to attract, train and retain young talent and help develop our member companies. During its first year, we aim to enhance their skills, mindset and communication abilities to bring them closer to the profession – to create an environment where they can learn and further develop.

“It is important to see the longevity of THLG, so it is also important for us that the younger generation understands how the group works... Today’s NextGen members could become future members of THLG’s ExCom and, in turn, mentor the generations that follow.”

Cosmatos also stressed the importance of reverse mentorship – learning from the younger generation. “We are very excited to see what they can bring in terms of technology and AI for example. They have already expressed the eagerness to help THLG, bring in AI procedures to make things faster and easier.”

This is especially important for organisations like THLG, which operates as a non-profit and relies upon volunteers. “It takes up a lot of time, and if you can bring in things to automate processes or make it simpler, we want to go for it. It is looking very promising.”

Ultimately: “When it comes to recruitment, we can analyse the many different parts of where the younger generation can bring new ideas and perspectives but the most important

thing for us now is to not only launch the initiative but to keep it running and make it a success,” Cosmatos said.

While THLG’s Next-Gen initiative reflects one approach to developing younger talent within a project network structure, similar thinking is also emerging across other organisations in the sector.

Closing the knowledge gap

Across the project logistics sector, there is general understanding that recruitment and training must go hand in hand. Bringing new people into the industry is important, but so too is ensuring they have access to the knowledge, mentorship and practical experience needed to build long-term careers. Project networks are increasingly stepping into that role, leveraging their international membership bases to create

training and development opportunities.

Rachel Crawford, ceo of the Project Cargo Network (PCN), explained: “While recruitment remains a major challenge for many independent forwarders, we believe networks must tread carefully in this area. Attempting to provide recruitment services directly can create concerns around staff poaching, conflicts of interest and competition between members. In a close-knit global community built on trust and collaboration, this can quickly become problematic. For that reason, PCN deliberately avoids involvement in recruitment activities.

“Where networks can provide genuine value is through training, development and creating opportunities for emerging professionals to expand their knowledge and industry exposure. Many independent forwarders do not have the resources to run extensive in-house development programmes, making network-led initiatives particularly important.

“By investing in specialist training, encouraging knowledge-sharing through mentorship, and actively involving younger professionals in industry discussions, networks can play a vital role in supporting both their members and the long-term sustainability of the sector.”

PCN has several ongoing initiatives in this regard, including its investment in professional online training.

Historically, specialist project cargo

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– Rachel Crawford,
PCN



training has often been difficult to access, requiring personnel to travel to workshops, seminars or classroom-based sessions and creating both cost and time barriers. Working alongside industry expert Marco van Daal, the network developed a comprehensive online training programme designed specifically for heavy transport professionals.

Video lessons

The course is divided into seven structured modules and includes 71 concise, easy-to-follow video lessons covering essential subjects such as terminology, dimensions, forces, heavy transport, lifting, jacking, skidding and loadouts.

In addition, participants also gain access to five exclusive stability modules that demonstrate how the same engineering principles apply across transporters, cranes and barges – “an industry first that provides a unique perspective on project execution,” said Crawford.

She added: “The PCN Heavy Lift Training programme has been used and recommended by major organisations including DHL, Kuehne+Nagel, Panalpina, Bertling Logistics, Schenker, and Hellmann, and has already been completed by more than 1,000 participants across 95 countries.”

“One of its greatest strengths is flexibility. Participants can learn entirely at their own pace, starting and stopping whenever their schedule allows, making it particularly valuable for busy logistics professionals balancing project demands with personal development. They will also retain ongoing access to the course, allowing them to return and review specific modules whenever a relevant situation arises in their work.”

To further support professional development, PCN also recently launched a mentorship programme. “The initiative is designed to unlock one of the network’s greatest assets: the collective knowledge and experience of its global membership,” Crawford explained.

“Project cargo operations vary significantly from one region to another. Differences in infrastructure, regulations, port capabilities, transport routes and local constraints mean that every market presents unique challenges. Through PCN’s mentorship programme, participants gain valuable insight into how complex shipments are executed across different countries and industries.”

The programme pairs less-experienced personnel with seasoned project cargo professionals and gives them the rare opportunity to follow a live project from start to finish. Rather than learning through



PCN is organising dedicated sessions at its annual summits for delegates under the age of 30.

hypothetical scenarios, mentees gain first-hand exposure to the real decisions, challenges and solutions involved in delivering a heavy lift or complex project logistics operation.

Appetite for learning

According to Crawford, “interest in the initiative has been extremely strong, reflecting a clear appetite for practical learning and knowledge sharing across the project cargo community. The first mentorship pairings are expected to begin within the coming months”.

Alongside training and mentorship, PCN has also launched a new initiative aimed specifically at engaging younger professionals within the network – Future Project Leaders.

The programme will encourage younger representatives from member companies to share ideas, provide feedback and offer fresh perspectives directly to the PCN head office team. “The goal is not simply to attract younger people into the industry, but to actively involve them in shaping its future,” said Crawford.

To support this objective, PCN is also making its international events more accessible. From the 2026 annual summit in Xi’an, China, onwards, delegates

under the age of 30 attending alongside a senior colleague will receive a 35 percent discounted registration fee.

Dedicated sessions will be organised specifically for these participants, creating a forum for open discussion around industry challenges, opportunities, innovation and career development. Their ideas and recommendations will then be shared with the wider membership community.

Future-proofing the sector

“At PCN, these initiatives are all driven by a single objective: ensuring our network, and the wider project cargo industry, continues to grow, evolve and remain relevant for generations to come,” Crawford continued. She said that through training courses, mentoring opportunities, webinars, networking events and international meetings, networks can help bridge this gap while strengthening the industry as a whole.

“One of the greatest advantages a global network can offer is access to experience. Young professionals gain direct exposure to industry leaders from around the world, learn from real-life project case studies, and build international relationships that would be difficult to achieve within a single organisation,” Crawford concluded.