

**Managing a 'people business' in times of uncertainty:
Human resources in Ocean Transport & Trading's strategy
in the 1970s**

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Abstract

This paper will examine the role of human resources in the business strategy of Ocean Steam Ship Company (later Ocean Transport & Trading), one of the UK's leading shipping firms, over the 1970s, a time of rapid and disruptive change for the shipping industry and of considerable difficulties for the UK economy. As a result of uncertainty over the development of the shipping industry in general and Ocean's business in particular, managing staff numbers and career opportunities became key elements of the company's overall business strategy in these years. The paper examines the changing objectives of that strategy, the means by which these objectives were pursued and the external constraints under which this had to take place. It will argue that Ocean found itself privileging the requirements of running a 'people business' over other strategic concerns and that external constraints prevented the firm from pursuing theoretically more appropriate strategies such as increased use of outsourcing and extricating itself from its UK-based, human resource intensive business.