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The SIRC column

The modern approach to leisure and recreation aboard merchant ships: Do it yourself!

Little is done to make life at sea more attractive at a time when there is a growing need to retain trained and experienced officers and ratings, says Helen Sampson, researcher at the Seafarers' International Research Centre



IN recent months there has been mounting concern within the industry over the impending crisis in officer supply and the availability of trained and experienced ratings. A recent study for the ISF (see P1) indicates that demand for officers exceeds supply by 4 per cent (16,000) worldwide. However, some estimates suggest that the shortage could become even more serious, with a shortfall of up to 90,000 officers by the year 2010 (Numast Telegraph, May 2000).

Commentators correctly identify recruitment, and the provision of quality cadet training initiatives, as being among the core issues to be addressed by the industry if it is to avert a problem with potentially costly, and possibly dangerous, implications. However, retention rates are also a problem that the industry needs to address, and fast.

The modern shipping industry is highly globalised, highly competitive, and, for those who work within it, highly stressful. Regulation has brought much improvement in terms of the safety of ships and has offered some protection to those people who have to work aboard them. Regrettably, it has also added to the burden of paperwork and bureaucracy placed on the very people whom much of it is designed to protect. This has happened in the context of industry-wide crewing reductions and the widespread loss of specific posts, such as radio, administrative, and catering officers. Masters, chief engineers, and chief officers are perhaps most affected by these changes. Inevitably, some choose to leave the industry prematurely rather than cope with the mountains of paperwork they find themselves dealing with in addition to the responsibilities associated with managing a ship. One master I sailed with earlier this year planned to retire at the end of his contract. At 42 he was a talented, responsible and considerate captain with a wealth of experience and excellent overall management skills. He was precisely the type of person that the industry cannot afford to lose, and yet it had little to offer him by way of an incentive to stay. Of course, the stresses of the modern shipping industry do not

impact on senior officers alone. There is an inevitable "trickle down" effect and while seafarers are among the world's most resilient and uncomplaining workers, stress breeds stress, and every member of the ship's team can suffer when working in a pressurised environment.

What then can shipping companies do to address the problem of officer, and more generally, seafarer retention? An obvious "quick fix" is to increase wages on the assumption that "the market will provide" but this is an expensive as well as a short-sighted approach. Increasing wages may "force" people to stay at sea, as they have no hope of earning equivalent salaries ashore, but it does nothing to address the levels of tension, stress, and attendant fatigue, which they suffer while working. The industry should, perhaps, be aiming at a solution which is rather better than one which produces entrapped, dissatisfied, and exhausted, officers and ratings. A second "obvious" solution is to return to crewing levels which allow seafarers to enjoy adequate periods of rest as well as offering them assistance with aspects of the job in which they have less expertise (IT, catering etc). This is an attractive option but it seems unlikely that owners and managers will take it, despite its clear benefits. Perhaps the only remaining avenue which they might usefully explore is the improvement of living and working conditions aboard their vessels. A joke told by some seafarers relates to a group of naval architects who joined a ship they had designed with the intention of remaining aboard for a specified period of time. After just a few days however they begged to be set ashore because they were so distressed by the vibration of the ship and its impact on their ability to work and sleep! As a non-seafarer, working for short periods of time aboard merchant ships, I have often wondered how long owners would survive if they were forced to live and work in the conditions they impose on their workforce.

ILO 147 and the provisions of C68 and C92 are woefully inadequate in defending the quality of life for seafarers aboard modern vessels. They

relate to food and catering standards as well as to space, temperature, ventilation, and sanitation in living accommodation. However, they impose minimum standards which few of us would choose to live in for a week, never mind for the greater part of our working lives. This is not merely a question of humanitarianism. The links between living and working environments and stress have been cogently argued and are generally accepted. Similarly, the importance of recreation (which is not covered by industry conventions) in reducing stress has also been established. Yet this is an area which continues to receive little attention by ship operators, if not designers.

Being on a ship has been likened to being in jail (Lane 1998), yet the provision of leisure and recreation facilities, time, and space is better in many UK prisons than it is aboard the international merchant fleet. On many ships the message owners put across with regard to the provision of recreation facilities for seafarers, is quite simply "do it yourself". Left with little alternative, many seafarers do. Some create drum kits from paint tins; they make board games (such as 'horse racing'); they use paint dregs and scraps of wood to paint in their cabins; they utilise traditional seafaring skills in undertaking knot work, and engage in an astonishing range of creative activities.

Not everyone is able to do this, however, and there are also seafarers who simply retire to their cabins alone and at risk of developing a whole host of stress-related conditions. It is in these circumstances, and in the context of seafarers' isolation from families, heavy workloads, manning reductions, fast-turnarounds, limited shore-leave and fatigue, that owners expect not only to recruit junior officers, cadets and ratings, but to retain them for long enough to allow them to develop into the senior officers and experienced ratings of the future. Before they wring their hands and despair of the current and impending shortages perhaps they should consider what sort of life they are offering seafarers and how long they themselves would be prepared to live it.