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Personalities, Policies, and the Training of Officer Cadets

Gould, E.

Abstract

This paper outlines a study into UK Merchant Navy Officer cadetship which used questionnaire and interview data gathered from deck and engineering cadets in 2004 and 2005. The study took place in the context of a declining UK shipping fleet and seafaring workforce, and the absence of research into the views of cadets themselves. Its initial purpose was to understand cadets' experiences of training at sea; these varied with each unique combination of voyage, ship, officers and crew. As the study progressed the impact of the Tonnage Tax policy on their experience was observed. The paper highlights key findings from the study including the ambivalence which characterised cadetship; it considers cadets' views on the personal characteristics and attitudes which they felt aided adaptation to life at sea: and, policy related external factors that made that adaptation more difficult.

Introduction

This paper outlines research on the experience of UK Merchant Navy Officer Cadets; their views on how they came to take up training; their experiences of life at sea and the ship as a training environment; and their hopes and fears for a future at sea. In presenting this work I outline the origins and conduct of the study and highlight the key findings. For this audience, who may be directly involved in the selection and training of officer cadets, or who have an acute interest in securing highly competent and well motivated Officers, I have focussed on the extent to which 'successful' cadetship can be attributed to the disposition, the character of the individual cadet, and the extent to which external factors that are beyond the control of the individual cadet may lead to cadet 'attrition'. The key message from this paper is that effort is best directed not at finding 'the perfect cadet', but on addressing external factors that lead to attrition.

The Origins of the Study

When this study began in late 2001, the concerns of both Government and the Industry over the decline of the UK merchant shipping industry in terms of the ownership and registration of shipping tonnage, and of the shipping workforce, were already well documented (Ledger

and Roe, 1992; DETR, 1998; Brownrigg et al, 2001). Concern over the British seafarer workforce could be classified as: a decline in numbers of active seafarers (DETR, 1998); the increasing age of those seafarers (NUMAST, 2004); a decline in the numbers of Junior Officers recruited into the service; and, reductions in the numbers of Officer cadets training in the UK; in 1975 this number was 2,315, reaching a low in 1987 of 162, although recovering in the 1990s to between 400 and 500 (NUMAST, 2004).

Looking specifically at this last issue, the numbers of Officer cadets training in the UK, it became clear that there was no current research on the views of cadets themselves as to how they saw their cadetships and their futures as Merchant Navy Officers. Hill's excellent study commissioned by the National Maritime Board into the factors affecting joining, serving and leaving the Merchant Navy had involved trainees, but was already thirty years old (Hill, 1972); gathering the views of contemporary cadets on their training and prospects therefore became the starting point for this study.

The Conduct of the Study

Access to cadets themselves was through three companies, approached on the advice of Tony Lane at that time the Director of SIRC, and anonymised in the research as Ace Marine, Star Shipping and Ocean XL. Preserving the confidentiality of the companies and of the cadets who took part in the study was extremely important: a number of cadets interviewed, particularly those who were critical of their training experiences, expressed concern that their views could be traced back to them, and they needed considerable reassurance that this could not happen. Equally, cadets were keen that the issues they raised were highlighted to the wider shipping industry, and this Symposium paper is one way of fulfilling their wishes.

The co-operation from the companies was more than could have been hoped for, and through them questionnaires were sent out to all the cadets both deck and engineering who were in training with the three companies concerned; this totalled 400. 120 questionnaires were returned and from those, 36 cadet interviews were conducted. The interviews were carried out in three colleges identified in the research only as A, B, and C, and again sincere thanks are due to the administrative and academic staff who organised rooms and contacted cadets on my behalf. Without their help the research would not have been feasible.

The questionnaire and the interviews generated a wealth of data on how Officer cadets found themselves on their training programmes; their views on shipboard life; and how they saw their futures at sea. In the interviews, each one lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, most cadets spoke articulately and in detail about their experiences; this openness was to a degree unexpected, particularly as the majority of cadets involved in the study were young men who are not characterised as the most forthcoming of interviewees.

Key Findings of the Study

Calling and Tradition

The two recurrent explanations offered by cadets of what drew them to a career at sea were firstly, their positive experiences of the sea as a natural environment – sea-based leisure activities such as surfing or yachting, or simply growing up by the sea; and secondly, having a tradition of the sea and of seafaring in the family. The dominance of these two themes will come as no surprise to this audience and is consistent with Hill's study already mentioned (Hill, 1972), and in surveys carried out by Nautilus - UK since this study began (NUMAST, 2004). What is perhaps more surprising is that family tradition remains a strong determinant when information on a career at sea is so much more widely available than was once the case.

The Attraction of Difference

The study found that for most cadets entry into training was a positive process in which they saw the Merchant Navy as having specific attractions for them; this finding was in marked contrast to the studies of the 1970s (Hill, 1972; Hopwood, 1973). The opportunity to travel and see the world was the career attraction selected most frequently in the questionnaire responses by both deck and engineering cadets, together with the attraction of good pay. For the young people involved in this study, a seafaring career offered the promise of adventure, the attraction of something exciting and different, but within a traditional and well recognised occupation. Rather in the way cadets applied their enjoyment of sea-related sports to seafaring, so they associated the adventure found in leisure travelling with seafaring. Although it was cadets' expectation that they would experience the excitement of leisure travel as seafarers, it became clear as they talked about their experiences of planned training

at sea, that this was not always the case, partly a result of changes in the practices of seafaring. As Sampson and Wu (2003) noted, a seafarer today may in his working life see less of the world not only than his nineteenth century counterpart, but also his counterpart of the 1960s and 1970s, where longer periods of shore leave allowed seafarers to see and experience different countries and cultures.

The Attraction of Money

Although the prospect of a good salary was a career attraction, when pay was discussed in the interview conversations it was primarily in relation to the uncertainties of securing employment post-certification, and also in connection with what cadets described as ‘the money-trap’. The fact that deck cadets in particular did not see their training as giving them transferable skills did not add to the confidence of cadets in their overall job prospects. The concerns expressed by cadets in relation to: securing a job once they had ‘got their ticket’; to skills transferability; and to the money trap, were suggestive of uncertainty and mixed emotions best described as ambivalence; ambivalence is returned to as a key aspect of the cadet experience.

The Extremes: David and Robert

Cadets talked about their experiences with the full gamut of emotions including humour, excitement, sadness and, anger. It might have been expected that the cadets willing to participate in the study might have strong views about cadetship, either positive or negative; however the study revealed all shades of cadet experience from the rewarding to the deeply distressing. For illustrative purposes I describe a cadet at each extreme of the cadet experience.

The study showed that there were cadets who were enticed by the life at sea, whose overall experience of training was rewarding and who looked forward with enthusiasm and excitement to a future at sea: David (pseudonym) is an example of a cadet whose enthusiasm for a career at sea was infectious – as he said, “*It’s got all the benefits for me!*”. David saw before him a career of difference in which he could pursue a love of the sea, and an enjoyment of the ocean environment. He saw it as giving him access to an occupation with a longstanding and distinctive tradition and to also continue his own family tradition of

seafaring. David's planned training at sea had given him the opportunity of shore leave in other countries, and he had enjoyed the experience of a multiethnic workplace. He was in his own words '*pretty chuffed*' about the levels of responsibility he had already been given, and valued the promise of responsible and worthwhile work. In the interviews with David he felt that life at sea offered the potential for good pay and career progression.

There were others however who were so disenchanted that they left training altogether, with the consequent feelings of failure and disappointment, and there were cadets whose accounts of planned training at sea were disturbing by any standards. Robert (pseudonym) was a cadet who displayed such profound disillusion that he abandoned training altogether. Once at sea he found the pressures of the physical confinement and the restricted diet, the total character of shipboard life in which working and non-working life became inextricably interlinked, and, the distance from family and friends, all to be oppressive. He found these features to be magnified by what he perceived as hostile and unsupportive attitudes from those involved in his training at sea, and initiation processes which he interpreted as ones of unnecessary humiliation.

Ambivalence

Joseph Conrad the novelist, most famed for his short story 'Heart of Darkness' and himself a Master Mariner wrote:

"...there is nothing more enticing, disenchanting, and enslaving than the life at sea".

(Conrad, 1900/1974:14)

This notion of the paradoxical nature of seafaring, at once enticing and disenchanting was found to be a key element of the cadet experience. Even David, the most positive of cadets, displayed ambivalence in his thoughts about the future: would he relish a seafaring life in years to come when he had a family and had perhaps become desensitized to the excitement of the ocean? Even Robert, whose experience of shipboard life, was so negative that he decided to leave training, expressed regret about his decision: his final comment on leaving training was: "*I always hoped that I'd do a job that I'll have all my heart in . . .*"; for him, this was not to be seafaring, and there was ambivalence in his regret that seafaring would never be for him the meaningful occupation that he had looked for.

All the cadets in this study expressed ambivalence in varying degrees to shipboard life and to a future at sea; ambivalence was revealed through the mixed emotions, the tensions and the uncertainties they experienced as individuals. The study suggested that the cadet experience of transition into adulthood and into working life would seem to be more extreme than that of their peers in other forms of higher education; this increased challenge was seen as a consequence of the inescapable nature of the separation from home; of the limited nature of communications whilst away at sea; of the lack of peer contact; and, of the unique and committing nature of day to day life at sea.

Managing Cadetship

Much of the study focused on the ways in which cadets learned to manage the challenges of cadetship and the findings revealed a range of approaches that were undoubtedly shaped by their individual disposition, their personality characteristics. However, there were external factors that also played their part in the ambivalence expressed by cadets. For those involved with the selection and training of Officer cadets this finding is important as it suggests that no matter how much an individual cadet may be suited to life at sea, there are external factors that can lead to attrition. Whilst some of the external factors are integral to the very nature of seafaring and have to be accommodated by the individual, some are within the control of companies themselves. In the remainder of this paper, I will focus on ‘personalities and policies’ as the title of the paper suggests, and consider what cadets saw as the characteristics that suited an individual to life at sea, and how they saw the negative external factors that had a bearing on the cadet experience, and which were within company control.

Looking for Mr (or Miss) Perfect: The Ideal Officer Cadet

Entering the world of work is for most young people an experience that takes them from the familiar to the unfamiliar (Evans and McCloskey, 2001); this is particularly pronounced where the job is not visible or easily accessed by those outside the occupation, as is the case with seafaring. Cadets soon found that life at sea was altogether different from anything they had previously experienced, as the deck cadet in the following interview extract discovered:

Interviewee:

“Mainly they just don’t tell you what you’re getting yourself in to . . . and then when you go to sea . . . you’ve never been to sea before, you don’t know what it’s like, you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into, what people are going to be like. All the boys from my area . . . they’ve all been about boats and worked on boats before. But then going away on a ship, it’s different. It’s just a different way of life. Sometimes it’s a big shock . . . it was so, so, so different... “Oh my God, what’s happened?” It’s quite challenging when you first start . . .”

Stephen- Deck Cadet

Assembling prior information about the job can only prepare an individual to a limited extent: one cadet commented that although he began his training with expectations based on information acquired from his family he never, by his own admission, “*really thought it through*”, and even if he had, it was only when he “*stepped on that ship*” that the implications of being at sea became meaningful for him:

Interviewee:

“I imagined – I don’t know really because I never really, to be honest with you, never really thought it through...I never thought about how I would feel about going away for 4 to 5 months at a time. It never entered my head until I stepped on that ship... I never thought anything really through, to be honest with you. I think that’s why it was so difficult at the start.”

Stuart - Deck Cadet

All the cadets interviewed in this study showed insight into the complexity of shipboard relationships, the variety of ways in which this complex web of relationships showed itself, and how it could be handled. For some, adaptation to life at sea appeared to be effortless as the following interview extracts suggest:

Interviewee:

“I mean I’m a very relaxed person anyway [LAUGHS], so I just kinda slide in and have a few jokes, sit down, have a chat, have a beer, you know? It was good...you’ve gotta get on with other people and so, it was alright. You’ve gotta work with these people, ‘cos there’s such a small number of people... that’s just how I am. It just it goes straight over the top of my head to be honest [LAUGHS]. Nothing really fazes me... ‘cos when you’re on a ship, living in a confined space, you’re eating with the same people every day, working, well every day, working with them every day, socialising with them, you know? You’ve gotta work kind of at a short-term relationship...”

David - Deck Cadet

Interviewee:

“You’ve definitely gotta be able to just take everything. It’s gotta be water off a duck’s back. I mean, you share it with the same people for five and a half months, you know? You’re living with your family for five and a half months and can you honestly say you haven’t had an argument for five and a half months? . . . even with your mates or anything like that. [On ship] you can’t just turn around and say, “I’m not talking to you now” because it’s a professional thing as well.”

Josh - Deck Cadet

One seventeen year-old engineering cadet, describing how he conducted himself aboard ship, cheerfully dismissed my suggestion that his attitude displayed considerable maturity:

Interviewee:

“I think you’ve gotta be able to work out that if something goes wrong, there’s no point in you getting all wound up about it, you’ve just gotta get on with it and like put your head down and do it and then when it’s over, have a laugh about it. But like I don’t see any point in, if something doesn’t go the way you want, sort of kicking and screaming and throwing a hissy fit about something. I don’t think there’s any need for that, especially when you’ve gotta sort of work in close confines with the person, every day seeing ‘em.”

(Interviewer: “That’s a lot for a seventeen year old to kind of adjust to, do you think?”)

Interviewee:

“Nah, it’s alright, it’s normal. You just get on with it, it’s not, it’s nothing too strenuous [LAUGHS]. I dunno, if you don’t like it, quit. If you don’t think you’re cut out for it, quit [LAUGHS].”

Angus- Engineer Cadet, and interviewer

For other cadets, adaptation appeared to require more effortful adjustment. One female deck cadet explained the effort required in containing her natural exuberance. Singing and sporting a pink polo shirt were clearly not accepted behaviour by the Captain of her first training vessel:

Interviewee:

“Within forty eight hours he’d (the Captain) told me off for “joviality”, just cos I’d been smiling and going [ACTION], “Good morning,” or something, and he was just like, “There’s nothing for you to be happy about, what are you happy about?”. He just went mental at me. He’d heard me singing on deck, he went mental at me. So then he told me I was the worst form of sea life. He told me that I was female therefore I had more to

prove. I was wearing track suit bottoms and trainers and a, sort of, polo shirt, which is generally the norm for what you'd wear on a supply vessel. The problem was the polo shirt was pink and he didn't like it. So all these things before we'd left Aberdeen. So we'd just, we'd let go of the ropes and I'd gone down to my cabin and phoned my Mum in floods of tears, "Mum, this is gonna be a nightmare," And my Mum was just like, "No, you've got to be strong, get over it." And I did. After that it was a challenge. I took it as a challenge to keep him happy, "Yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir"."

Charlotte - Deck Cadet

For this cadet, the traditional expectations of the Captain had to be managed as part of her initiation into life at sea and she found that she had to contain her natural high spirits.

However there were others for whom the accommodation to shipboard life was clearly very difficult:

Interviewee:

"...you're stuck with people that, you know, you don't necessarily get on well with and, like you're, you're like a caged, a caged rat, you know, stuck on a steel tub going from one horrible port to another [LAUGHS]. And it's just, it really is not life, it, really, it's just . . ."

Sam - Deck Cadet

This sense of confinement and oppression for some cadets became overwhelming: 'Robert' referred to earlier, talked of his desperation in the following way:

Interviewee:

"Have you seen *Master and Commander*? I'd recommend you to watch it. It's, it's a recent film which has come out and I saw it and actually I have complete parallels with one of the guys who, actually, he committed suicide, 'cos he jumps overboard with a cannonball - and its set in a different time period but I actually, I could actually see parallels with his mindset but if, I dunno, if you're stronger or weaker if you actually have the, the nerve to, to go from that height? But and I, I felt that, nothing, for me personally, I, I don't have that inclination, but I imagine that for someone who gets so upset it'd be quite, quite easy to just jump off the back of the ship. Generally I would, I would imagine there are cases of it because there are certain environments that you can't, can't escape, really, there's no, you know, you are, you're there for that period and, to endure it. And for me, I mean I, I feel, I, I'm fairly tough to, to accept it and my feeling was, OK, endure it, you've only got - I mean I had the days marked off, for however many I had to go and I'd cross them off and look forward to that, every day [LAUGHS]. But the one thing for me was mainly reading and just trying to do, trying to do the job as best as I could, really."

Robert - Deck Cadet

Despite the way in which ‘Robert’ distances himself from the character in the film who commits suicide, and emphasises the fact that he himself is ‘*fairly tough*’ and can accept and endure his sea trip, I understood him to be saying as directly as he could, that he had at times felt suicidal.

There is an implication in many of these comments above that innate personality characteristics determine the ease with which cadets adapt to the intensity of shipboard life; quite simply, that some individuals are suited to it, and some are not. One cadet who resigned from training during the first year, in unhappy circumstances, raised directly the question of whether personality is the key determinant to accepting shipboard life very directly:

Interviewee:

“That’s, that’s a big, a big question that, maybe my, my personality wasn’t suited to the job, sort of thing.”

Robert - Deck Cadet

Cadets had their own views on what they saw as a successful approach to negotiating shipboard relations and the demands of being both a trainee and a seafarer: keeping out of the way; biting your tongue; not making waves; and, trying to keep the peace, were all phrases used by cadets in the interviews.

Interviewee:

“Yeah, kind of, you know, you just accept it and get on with it. There’s not much really, that you can really do about it, you just accept it. You’re basically the lowest. You should work your way up. Accept it, accept what you get, you know. You’re gonna get trodden on, just accept it and move on. There’s not really much you can do about it.”

Stuart - Deck Cadet

Interviewee:

“I mean it’s just part and parcel of the job. I mean if there’s anything about you that can be laughed at or made fun of, it’s done. But, but you don’t get away with anything. If you do something stupid, then it’s passed round the whole ship and they’re laughing at you... It’s all done in good fun, good humour . . . erm, and with regards to anything and everything . . . everything’s just up for ridicule.”

Ian - Deck Cadet

Accepting the tough initiation into the traditional occupational culture of seafaring was seen by some cadets as evidence of maturity, of successfully completing a rite of passage, and of their ability to adapt to being part of the wider social group: As Hill in his study reported,

acceptance of one's position on board, and commitment to the occupational culture was seen by the seafarer: "... *as though he has passed through an initiation ceremony and has successfully crossed the threshold into manhood.*" (Hill, 1972:58).

Interestingly, the questionnaire data showed a different approach with the cadets who felt that '*keeping one's head down*' was the way to get the best out of life at sea outnumbered twofold by those who felt that it best to be assertive. Of those who felt assertiveness to be the best tactic, the majority (70%) considered themselves to be assertive rather than under-confident. 'Standing up for yourself' was a recurrent phrase:

Interviewee:

"You've got to be quite strong mentally, 'cos otherwise, you're away from home and that, and you have to be able to stand on your own two feet ... you've got to be able to put your opinion across without offending ... you've got to be very assertive 'cos otherwise you just get walked all over . . . 'cos if you give an inch, they'll take a mile and walk all over you and before you know it, they'll be dumping all sorts of work and stuff on you. You've got, you've got to stand up for yourself. Well that's how I get by anyway and I think people have got more respect for you if you stand up for yourself, 'cos you know where you stand with people."

Brett - Deck Cadet

Planned training at sea provided the opportunity for cadets to learn to negotiate the complex web of shipboard relationships not only as newcomers to seafaring but also as future officers. Much of the effort is placed on 'self-management' in which cadets, often as the only trainee on board, have to find their own ways of 'getting by', and inevitably the natural disposition and personal resources of the cadets themselves played a significant part in this.

However attributing successful cadetship solely to individual attitudes such as '*nothing fazes me*' or '*its water off a duck's back*', to characteristics such as assertiveness, to a personal calling or of a strong family tradition, could lead to the conclusion that failure to complete training is the responsibility of the individual, a consequence of an 'unsuitable personality'. To take this view would be to underestimate the external factors that could lead a cadet who was well suited to a career at sea to abandon training. These factors related to environments that were not conducive to learning; the research showed that there were cadets who experienced what they saw as unsupportive and unsuitable training placements at sea; these were seen as being related to the training element of the Tonnage Tax, the Minimum Training

Obligation (MTO). The MTO was the object of direct criticism, with cadets suggesting that companies had no real intention of employing them once qualified, seeking only to benefit financially from the MTO.

Given that ships, as with most workplaces, do not have training as their prime purpose, it is unsurprising that cadets encountered very variable levels of support and interest in their learning needs from qualified seafarers; attitudes ranged from the enthusiastic and genuinely helpful through the indifferent to the openly hostile. There was evidence that some seafarers, particularly those less qualified, resented cadets as a threat to their own jobs; this resentment, stemming no doubt from an unpredictable job market, was seen in accounts given by a number of cadets. Cadets also described environments where alcohol fuelled tensions between those on board; some found this particularly disturbing and difficult to handle.

There is a temptation to attribute the variation in support, as with the response to cadetship, simply to personality differences - undoubtedly there will be individuals who relish their teaching role more than others. However, there are underlying factors which have little to do with individual predilections. MNTB Guidance (2006) emphasises the importance of officers and crew having a proper understanding of the nature of cadet training and the roles which they are expected to fulfil. This has implications for their own training and continuing professional development in order to support cadets with up to date advice and guidance. This research did not involve officers but their perspective on the support given to them to deliver their training responsibilities would have complemented the data from this study. In the interview extract below a deck cadet indicates the lack of involvement/interest in the completion of his Portfolio:

Interviewee:

“The Captain on the first ship did say at the start, “Right, I want you to know, you’re to complete the Portfolio.” In the requirements it says that he should really be looking at every couple of weeks or something but he only signed it right at the end, when we’d finished, you know, when we were signing off. And that was it, so I mean to be quite honest, if it wasn’t for the fact that we knew that we had to, you know, get the section one completed and we actually went ahead and did it, I don’t think, you know, we’d have gotten any of it done, really. You know? There was certainly no push to, you know, to get it finished which again I think was due to the lack of understanding of, you know, what was required.”

Richard - Deck Cadet

Related to the understanding needed by shipboard officers to support the training needs of cadets were issues of language and communication: For those officers with limited proficiency in the English language, the training of English speaking cadets could be seen as an added burden in already pressured jobs, a possible consequence of companies' enthusiasm for taking on cadets through the Tonnage Tax scheme. The Merchant Navy Training Board (MNTB) offers a weighted list of the factors that need to be taken into account in assessing the suitability of ships for onboard training. Weighted factors attempt to introduce a degree of objectivity into the process of deciding what is a suitable ship for on board training: one factor relates to the working language of the ship (MNTB, 2006:17); the more the use of English is limited as the working language of the ship, suggest the MNTB, the closer the scrutiny of the vessel concerned should be as a suitable training environment. In some cases the lack of understanding of their training needs was attributed by cadets directly to language difficulties; the comment below is taken from a account of sea time that was generally disturbing:

Interviewee:

"I did all my work, which was for the NVQ section on Officer of the Watch but erm because of the language barrier I, I couldn't understand a word they were saying."

Sam - Deck Cadet

In the interview extract below the cadet refers to language difficulties in which the '*very limited knowledge of English*' which the cadet ascribed to the Chief Officer was seen as potentially compromising his training:

Interviewee:

"We have this Portfolio that needed completed and some of the things, we literally didn't have a clue what it was asking us. And the biggest problem, as well, was, certainly on the first ship, he was an older Russian Chief Officer, who had very limited knowledge of English and we showed him the Portfolio and he really did not understand what exactly was written. And in some cases, you know, he was signing the, the Portfolio on what we had told him and it would really nasty or, you know er, trying to get ahead. We could of said it was anything, you know? It coulda been 'clean your cabin,' or something like that, when it was meant to be 'anchoring', or something. But you know, they, they really didn't have any idea what the English was for it, you know."

Richard - Deck Cadet

Sampson and Zhao (2003) observed a fear amongst seafarers that a lack of fluency in English may give the impression to their superiors that they are less than competent in other aspects of their job. Their observation takes on a different complexion for UK cadets for whom fluency in English is not the issue, but rather the lack of fluency in the senior officers who ultimately have power over the successful completion of their Portfolio. For the cadets who found themselves on ships where very little English was spoken there is little doubt that this impaired the quality of their learning experience, and may have contributed to their abandonment of training and/or their lack of confidence in their own competence. The comments of the cadet reported below expand on the language issue and also raise, in his own words, the need for 'equilibrium' between the responsibilities of cadets to get on with the work, and the responsibilities of the supporting organisations to ensure that placements are suitable; as a cadet representative of NUMAST, this cadet had a particular interest in the extent of trade union support for cadets:

Interviewee:

"I'll pick up on things I hear of from other cadets and I, I'll take it back to just sort of NUMAST and then take it back to the class and we have a discussion."

(Interviewer: "And what, what, what sort of things would that be, around that pay issue?")

Interviewee:

"Yeah about the pay issue, about the standard of ships and stuff like that. Some of the cadets go on really bad standard ships and some of them, one of my mates, went on a ship where they were all black African. There was no white British people at all. Not a racist thing. It was just the fact that that none of them spoke English and even the Captain was a black African and he's a, a white British cadet on this ship and [LAUGHS] and he had to get [LAUGHS], he came back after Phase Two at sea and he had no Portfolio finished, cos they didn't understand the Portfolio scheme and you couldn't get any Portfolio finished, cos they couldn't read the English."

I kind of felt that that was one of the big issues that we took up with them - that it's a bit ridiculous this, having to be a necessity to fill in your Portfolio, but then the company's sending you on a ship where you can't get anything done. So you have to sort of have a, an equilibrium between the company being sensible and sending you on a, a, on a normal ship and you being sensible and getting on with your work. You can't be getting on with your work if they [LAUGHS], if the ship doesn't know what it's supposed to be doing. So just, it's just really weird things that people I don't think have ever really taken the time to think about. Just kind of say, "Well, there's a ship, send a cadet on it." and not really thinking so much of it."

Dan - Deck Cadet and interviewer

During the successive phases of planned training at sea, cadets are expected to *'achieve and develop professional competence over time'* and to demonstrate this through the completion of the Training Portfolio. The study found that whilst cadets emphasised the importance of the Portfolio and the need to complete it as documentary evidence of their learning, there was a stronger focus from those interviewed, on the actuality of being able to perform the task. Cadets recognised that competent seamanship was not synonymous with simply getting the tasks in the Portfolio 'ticked off'. There was concern expressed by some cadets that when tested as responsible officers, their skills would be shown to be deficient; they were very aware that the consequences of poor seamanship cannot be concealed. Cadets' concerns over their competence may have been as much about their confidence as it was about a working knowledge of the technical tasks; however confidence is a necessary component of competence, and for some cadets the training process did not appear to have given them the confidence required.

But will there be a job at the end of this?

The focus in this paper has been on how the training environment of the ship can impact on attrition in a way that is beyond the control of the individual. However, the research also revealed the effects of another external factor- seafaring as a global workforce- that restricted job opportunities for cadets as Junior Officers and which should not go unmentioned in this paper.

Anxiety about securing employment post-qualification was clearly articulated by cadets who felt that they had been let down on two counts: firstly, that they had been led to believe that there was a good job market for qualified UK Officers – and they no longer saw this as being the case; secondly, they believed that the Minimum Training Obligation (MTO) component of the Tonnage Tax had increased the numbers of cadets funded by companies who had no intention of keeping them on as qualified officers, and this was a source of some resentment. *'You've not got a definite job, you've not got a definite future'*, said one final year cadet who was about to qualify as a deck officer. Historically, life in the Merchant Navy would have never offered certainty of employment (Hope, 2001), but it was clear from interviews with cadets that most had expected a 'definite future' when they started their cadet training but

many had since come to fear that they might not find a job – and not one at a salary they felt worthwhile.

Criticisms of the Tonnage Tax from the cadets in this study related to employment prospects and the belief that cadets were taken on with no real intention by companies of offering them a job after qualifying. The comment below is from a cadet who resigned from training:

Interviewee:

“The Tonnage Tax as well, I mean, the Government created training opportunities, like they usually do, but no real jobs. I mean there’s no, no necessity that they’ve got to give us jobs at the end of this. I mean if they had some sort of clause that would force them to.”

Sam - Deck Cadet

A fellow cadet had continued his cadetship despite experience of difficult placements at sea but was also concerned about poor employment prospects which he attributed to the Tonnage Tax:

Interviewee:

“This is the big problem, this Tonnage Tax, it’s creating a lot of Third Officers with tickets but no experience, you know? Certainly I don’t know of any one British Officer at the minute that they employ, you know? ... it just seems that they are grabbing the benefits of Tonnage Tax and then throwing everybody out, and that I think that really should be something to be addressed.”

Neil – Deck Cadet

There were a number of cadets in this study who displayed cynicism towards the MTO component of the Tonnage Tax, suggesting that cadets had suffered under the initiative whilst companies had benefited:

Interviewee:

“They’ll tell me at the end of the day whether my company wants to keep me on, or whether they can offer me work, or whether they can just let me go. It’s quite uncertain. It’s the same with a lot of the boys in the class. They’re employed by companies that are now foreign crewed, they’re the only Brits on the ship and at the end of the day the companies they work for won’t be taking on Brit officers at the end of the day. They get Tonnage Tax relief for having cadets, and they just want that, and then once their cadetships finish, that Tonnage Tax relief goes and away they go.”

John - Deck Cadet

The training element of the Tonnage Tax is not without its problems, and concerns that it has not achieved what was intended have been recognised (Gekara, 2008). The anxieties expressed by the cadets in this study over their employment prospects would seem to have had substance, and to have added to the external challenges faced during their training.

In Conclusion

For those involved in the training of cadets, there is an important message from this research: No matter how resilient the individual, how well they learn to adapt to shipboard life and the demands of what I describe in the study as a 'total occupation', the workplace can fail even the most enthusiastic of cadets. A poor training environment can mean ineffective learning with consequences not just for the individual but for the industry as a whole. Lack of employment opportunities post-qualification adds a further challenge for aspiring young Officers.

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