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THE SIRC COLUMN



Helen Sampson, director of the Seafarers' International Research Centre, finds out what seafarers think of computer-based training

IT is not often that I get invited aboard a cruise ship (sadly!) but recently that's where I had the pleasure of spending a very pleasant evening overlooking Hong Kong Island, listening to a band, and sipping a cold drink. I wasn't on holiday, however, I was at the closing of a seminar hosted by the Nautical Institute (Hong Kong). The seminar was characterised by serious and thoughtful discussion and, as almost inevitably happens on such occasions, the thorny question of who should pay for seafarer training was raised.

While an answer was not even attempted at the seminar itself, it is self-evidently the case that it should not be seafarers who pick up the tab for training. The reason for this is pragmatic as well as being rooted in a sense of fairness. If seafarers are required to take

time out of their leave periods, and to pay significant sums, for their own training (which they may not even see as necessary), then an incentive to circumvent the system inevitably becomes built into it. This makes vessels and seafarers vulnerable, as mandatory training has largely been introduced in an effort to raise standards of safety in shipping and ultimately to preserve life. For this reason, regulators, trainers, ship operators, and seafarers themselves, should all find themselves in agreement that seafarers are not the right group to "foot the bill" for training. Many responsible shipowners would point out that in fact they already invest considerable amounts in training, and in recent times a significant amount of this investment has been channelled into the use of on-board computer-based training (CBT). CBT is regarded by many operators as a cost-effective method for training on board their vessels. However, the delivery of such training has, for the most part, been undertaken in the absence of consultation with seafarers, particularly ratings. This leads one to wonder what they think

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of this new phenomenon. We already know that many seafarers feel overwhelmed with administration and paperwork on board, and we wondered how they felt about yet another demand on their time. So, we decided to ask them

In 2004-5 we undertook an international project on "Seafarer perceptions of CBT on board" with the collaboration of maritime college lecturers who worked alongside SIRC researchers. The results were remarkable and they were overwhelmingly positive.

While the most preferred form of training was instructor-led, as we'd anticipated, CBT was given a resounding thumbs-up by many seafarers. They felt it was interesting, useful for their jobs, educational, user friendly, and even fun! (see diagram). This was despite the fact that many seafarers had experienced problems when using CBT aboard. Most frequently problems were related to time, inadequate support from senior

officers, and resources such as equipment and documentation.

Seafarers were willing to invest considerable amounts of time in CBT on board. On average they reported that they were willing to spend nine hours per week of their working time, and 6.4 hours per week of their free time, on CBT.

In terms of working time, there was no significant difference between officers and non-officers and the average number of hours they were willing to spend on CBT. However, there was a significant difference between cadets and all other ranks: cadets were willing to spend an average of 12.4 hours per week studying with the aid of a computer which would constitute a considerable effort.

While seafarers overwhelmingly felt comfortable with computers, over one third of our participants felt that inadequate personal computer skills had hampered their ability to utilise CBT in the past. This suggests that for CBT to be

effectively used aboard ships, companies need to invest more in developing seafarers' IT skills. There were also indications that companies need to do more in terms of ensuring that time is made available on board for CBT and that senior officers provide proper support to crew undertaking CBT. Access to computers, guides and manuals is also something that requires attention at company level if this, apparently popular, form of training is to be deployed to maximum advantage.

Most importantly perhaps, companies and seafarers themselves need to be aware that no matter how much enthusiasm there is for CBT on board, it is no substitute for leisure or for the provision of recreational facilities. Many of our respondents noted that CBT could be stressful and tiring. It must, therefore, be utilised judiciously on board and seafarers must be encouraged to maintain adequate periods of rest and recreation. This is important for seafarer health

and has implications for fatigue management.

There is a danger that some of the better operators in the industry are already prioritising seafarer training, and key performance indicators, over welfare issues. There is insufficient variety in the provision for recreational activity that is offered on board many vessels. Ships are being designed with less accommodation space and with fewer facilities as standard. Swimming pools, for example, are becoming less and less common. It seems that some of the shipping industry's top

companies recognise the benefits of providing good social and welfare facilities to their shore-staff while failing to do so for sea-staff. Other companies provide even less than this, and some operators overlook welfare/training and all personnel needs entirely. In today's environment, when seafarers have fewer and fewer opportunities to get ashore, such neglect is not just inhumane, it is dangerous. All the CBT in the world cannot prevent accidents happening when seafarers are stressed and fatigued: a fact that all CBT users and providers might usefully bear in mind.

