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**Recruitment and retention of seafarers
– what calls to and keeps individuals in a career at sea?**

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Abstract: Many times, ships are seen as dangerous places where risks are everywhere and daily activities are performed under constant pressure. From this point of view, there are not many people interested in developing a career in this environment. From another point of view, a career at sea is seen as a continuous trip between different places around the world or as a constant “adventure”. The reality is somewhere between these views; there are risks and there is a little “adventure” but, most important, there are responsibilities and knowledge in all activities.

Achieving the necessary level of responsibility and knowledge is one of the principal concerns of shipping companies, and this has a direct impact on company personnel management. Many aspects included in the responsibilities and knowledge are part of seafarers' training and familiarization with the ship. To have both, it is necessary that shipping companies establish a firm policy regarding recruitment and retention of seafarers. The basis of this policy must be guided by considerations about what attracts people to a career at sea and what stimulates them to remain in this field with the same company. The training level can also be achieved after recruitment through company involvement in a seafarer's continuing update of knowledge and skills however, a satisfactory level of familiarization can only be achieved through a long period of practice onboard the same ship.

Starting from these considerations, in this paper we intend to present the results of a study completed with the participation of local shipping companies, seafarers, and future seafarers (actually students) who were questioned about their positions regarding recruitment and career development principles. The study was based on questionnaires and free interviews with all participants. The questionnaire items and interview questions were focused on considerations of each participant about what is important in the recruitment process and what has to be offered, or is expected to be offered in future, to retain seafarers.

We included students in this study because we consider that recruitment from school will possibly become an important step for future retention in these companies as a fealty program can be started from cadet sea practice. Results show that students appreciate companies where these types of programs are available.

The final results of the study allowed us to have an understanding of what is important for seafarers when they choose to develop a career at sea and how the companies can retain them for “multi-year contracts”, putting together seafarer’s expectations and companies requirements.

Keywords: shipping, seafarers, training, recruitment, retention, career

1. Introduction

The idea to work at sea is not new. This idea first appeared from the beginning of the sea “adventure”, when humans started to use seas and oceans for trade and social development. Today, work on board ships requires a specific level of training and compliance with a large variety of knowledge. In the past, the most important ability was the courage for, and the knowledge of, facing the risks presented by sea journeys. Actually, that risk still exists, but technology used for navigation and ship building methods make them less dangerous for human life. Also, technology minimizes human involvement in the usual onboard activities, reducing both physical and mental efforts. To reach these objectives, it has been necessary to implement the human-machine interaction concept.

A number of particular courses have been introduced in order to effect a harmonious human-machine interaction. These courses have the intention of creating a safety environment onboard of every ship.

With all of these advances in technological enhanced and personnel training today, we observe a shortage of qualified personnel in the field. In many cases, this shortage has been generated by the departure of seafarers for other onshore activities or by the economical crisis which just has passed. If this situation continues in the future, there will be a real problem to assure the necessary personnel for all active ships.

For this reason, the shipping companies need to start to retain seafarers in the company and onboard of their ships and, at the same time, stimulate the recruitment of new personnel with which to cover the empty positions. This process will not be an easy one as time is required to get a competent seafarer. On the other side, this personnel problem comes when the requirements for having a competent seafarer, including a longer time required for training, are higher than before.

Studying the shipping market in the field of personnel management, it has been observed that recruitment and retention of seafarers is a generalized problem with many companies having difficulties in this matter. Previously, shipping companies had developed a number of strategies in order to recruit more competent seafarers and to retain them in the company for a long period of time. These strategies included fidelity programs, bonuses for the period spent onshore, different methods to help seafarers to complete their training and many others.

The seafarer situation is not only a problem for shipping companies. Many other actors in the shipping sector are affected by the shortage of seafarers, including maritime administrations, regional training centers and universities. Therefore, the problem of seafarer recruitment and retention has to be addressed by most of the entities involved in the maritime field.

Being a maritime university, we are interested in contributing to this process by helping the maritime industry from our position. One of the most important contributions will be to

determine what future seafarers' aspirations are, what their expectations from this job are and what we can do to make them more attached to the idea of a sea career. This point of view comes from the idea that universities are not only professional training centers, but are also career advisors.

A group of teachers from Constanta Maritime University conducted a study into the recruitment and retention of seafarers by shipping companies in order to determine the future University position in these matters. The results of the present study will help us to adopt an appropriate position regarding the development of a career at sea.

2. Recruitment of seafarers – what calls an individual to a career at sea?

Recruitment is the process through which a company tries to have their own personnel to meet the legal requirements and work needs. Through this process the company intends, as far as possible, to cover its personnel needs with competent people who want to stay for a while in the company, not just for a short period of time. In this context, during recruitment, shipping companies will be interested in knowing the intentions of their future employees, what they expect and how long they are likely to stay with the company. Answers to these questions will represent the basis of the company personnel policy in the future.

Personnel recruitment in the maritime sector has to comply with international and national requirements regarding the compulsory training levels associated with every position intended to be occupied by a seafarer. Also, for some ships, special training requirements can be stipulated that are in direct connection with the ship's operational characteristics.

Before any consideration of personnel recruitment, it is important to remember the international and multicultural characteristics of the maritime industry. Accordingly, during the recruitment process, officials of shipping companies have to know which nationalities will be onboard their ships and to try to generate a friendly environment between crew members. In most cases, owners try, as much as possible, to have a homogeneous crew onboard a ship. This means they have to bring together people with close cultural characteristics. Sometimes it is difficult to achieve this condition because the crew structure is dictated by different conditions such as ship characteristics, flag of the ship, owner's needs, and, most important, pay levels.

Multiculturalism is considered as an important factor in decisions about the development of a career at sea, especially to those seafarers who are on their first employment contracts. According to different studies made around the world, almost a quarter of younger officers who have given up a sea career have taken this decision after a bad experience as part of a multicultural crew.

Other aspects that have to be taken into consideration at recruitment are related to pay levels according to rank, working conditions and how the ship owner considers them, ship trading waters especially if these waters include piracy or other dangers and the company policies regarding retention of seafarers and programs developed for this reason.

Salaries are part of the attractiveness of a career at sea. In many parts of the world, including Eastern Europe, onboard payment represents an important objective in the decision to take a job at sea. The attractiveness of the salary is doubled by the possibility of seeing the world as part of your job. The importance of these two considerations in the opportunity to develop a career at sea is affected by the part of the world from which the seafarer comes. Making reference to these matters in 2009, the former President of the IMO, Efthimios E. Mitropoulos, stated that "a recent survey of seagoing personnel, revealed that pay was not the most popular reason for going to sea. The most quoted reason was that seafarers actually wanted a career at sea; then,

proving that, even in the age of air travel, romance is still alive, was “a desire to see the world”. Only after these, came the financial considerations.” [1]

On the same problem regarding seafarers’ attraction to a career at sea, a report on Mapping Career Paths in Maritime Industries [2] concluded that location of home, family influence, good career prospects, long-term interest in the sea and travel as main attractions for seafarers hailing from European Union countries. In addition, the OECD project [3] report on availability and training of seafarers career at sea covering European Union countries concluded that pay and conditions, job satisfaction, independence and attractive prospects were the main reasons for attraction to a career in this field.

Another aspect which completes the calling to a career at sea is represented by the work conditions onboard ships. Seafarers’ interest in working conditions is driven by the particulars of all activities onboard ships. They will be interested in the work schedule, whether there is overtime required, what kind of extra duties are required, if any, and in many other aspects which are connected with employment contract activities. From the company point of view, it is important to answer all addressed questions and to convince the seafarer that onboard working conditions are at international levels according to international requirements expressed by IMO and ILO. Also, seafarers can have existing interest about the protection offered by the company for their employees including protective equipment and insurance coverage. Many seafarers are interested in a company’s insurance; what is covered and how they are protected in case of any incidents onboard.

In recent years an increased interest among seafarers about waters where the ship navigates has been observed. These concerns come as a result of an increased number of piracy incidents which have involved a large number of seafarers from different nationalities. Therefore, during recruitment discussions, it is necessary to explain to seafarers about the ship trading areas. If the ship trades inside of these known piracy areas, the measures that are taken onboard to prevent and combat piracy attacks will be explained and, if there was any incident of this kind, how the company treated that situation. On the other hand, piracy risk must be treated as part of seafaring.

Some of the considerations presented above are part of the study conducted with different shipping companies from Romania, which has tried to see how they approach and treat the recruitment process. Companies involved in this study are crewing companies who are a ship owner’s interface. However, the approach methods and requirements used are those expressed by the owners.

An important part of the study regarding the recruitment process has been dedicated to shipping companies’ programs for cadets. The cadet problem has become delicate in view of the latest context of shipping markets, when owners had been forced to reduce their onboard personnel and to suspend any cadet training programs. From our point of view, cadets represent the future seafarers and all companies need to consider this aspect in respect of the good tradition of continuity. This aspect has to come as a result of the seafarers’ aging process which is observed in many of the world fleets. To prevent the problems generated by the aging process, owners have to start to renew their crews; possibly through a new consideration of cadet programs. An advantage of the cadet programs is the possibility to stimulate cadets to remain inside the company for a while after completing the cadet practice period. A stimulus for cadet recruitment could come from training institutions, such as universities, through agreements between them, crewing companies and owners that offer guarantees for the training level of the cadets. In this way, Constanta Maritime University has developed agreements with a number of local shipping companies, through which some of our students have covered their practical training.

3. Retention of seafarers – what keeps a person in a career at sea?

In addition to recruitment, retention of seafarers is another important aspect for all shipping companies including ship owners, ship managers and crewing companies. All these companies want advantages from retention of seafarers with the company for as long a time as possible. However, in order to realize this long time retention with the company, it is necessary to know and to manage correctly those seafarers' considerations which make them seek a 'long term contract'.

Studying the most common seafarer's expectations, the following aspects have been noted as important: company branding, a happy and healthy environment onboard, a safe and secure working environment, decent working and living conditions, quality of life onboard ship, health protection for seafarers, medical care, fair terms of employment, seafarer family support by the company, working on high tech and usable ships and systems, opportunities for career development, good career prospects and the possibility to have a position with the company until retirement.

Starting from these considerations, we were interested to know the attitudes of Romanian shipping companies and seafarers towards these aspects, how the companies are able to satisfy these expectations and the ways used to accomplish this.

The importance of knowing this information have arisen from the general perceptions on the part of seafarers about some companies such as bad employer, badly run ships, offering poor working and living conditions, poor pay conditions, no interest in career development or no prospects for a career.

Analysis of the data obtained from seafarers' interviews has shown that only a small part of them have a negative opinion about the last shipping companies where they worked. Most of these negative opinions resulted from the poor working conditions onboard ships, payment levels that showed a difference between the contract amount and the paid amount, and by bad relations with seafarers of other nationalities.

An important aspect of retention is represented by the generation of a career path for seafarers, a fact which allowed a more easily controlled evolution of seafarer careers. A career path is an important element within bigger shipping companies, where advancing in rank is possible after examination of a seafarer's career evolution and verification of his fidelity and respect for the company.

Also, when the decision to remain onboard the same company's ships is taken, the seafarer takes into consideration many other aspects such as company policies regarding personnel training, support for improved training, support for their families, sustaining of seafarers' family members who intend to follow in their parents career. Seafarers need to feel that a company takes care of their problems and assures them a safe and healthy environment onboard ship.

The most important question when studying retention of seafarers in the maritime system is "what keeps them in a career at sea?" During the interviews with seafarers having a number of years of experience onboard ships, they declared that their decision to remain in the same company has been influenced mostly by the working conditions, good communication onboard and with company officials and company involvement in their retention. Seafarers also consider that a company requirement for a higher standard of training is a useful position in this matter.

At the same time, shipping companies should start to develop and implement programs for retention of seafarers which provide the opportunity for good career development. These programs are important, especially in situations where it is intended to build a firm fleet in which it is necessary to cover the personnel requirements for all managed vessels from the beginning.

In this way, shipping companies offer bonuses to seafarers for the period spent onshore and stimulate them to remain loyal to the company. Sometimes this is the best option for seafarer loyalty because they consider this to be like a 12 month contract. In this system, both the company and the seafarer have advantages where the company is sure about personnel coverage and seafarers are sure of their positions with the company. An advanced system of personnel rotation that is supposed to rotate the same seafarers on the same ship inside of 3 or 4 months contract requires 3 or 4 crews for each ship.

Another important aspect in the retention of seafarers is represented by the insurance and retirement programs offered by the company. In many countries, seafaring is treated as a part-time job without a formal employment contract or not under national social services. Seafarers will be more interested in remaining with a company that has covered the two essential costs of insurance and retirement. Seafarers who were questioned declared that companies that cover these costs are more highly rated than those without these benefits. In any case, seafarers' interest in these subjects appears after time spent at sea when they realize their importance; possibly after a medical problem or when they start to think about retirement. Among Romanian seafarers these aspects are seen differently by the officers and seamen, the former being more interested in insurance programs and the latter in the retirement programs.

With all of these, the retention of seafarers has become a difficult task for shipping companies and the situation has been emphasized by the recent economical crisis. Due to a reduction of activity, many companies lost some of their seafarers and are now forced to come up with more attractive offers to cover their personnel needs. At the same time, companies that were able to manage the economic crisis now have the advantage of recruitment and retention of seafarers from other companies. Our study indicated that many seafarers appreciated the companies that took care of them during the last three difficult years and accepted less favorable payment conditions in exchange for a stable workplace and the possibility for continuity with the same company; possibly on the same ship. According to some opinions expressed by the shipping companies' staff personnel, the actual crisis made the labor market in the maritime industry more stable. Therefore, seafarers are less receptive to changing companies for a minimum salary increase. In the future, other considerations will be important to seafarers when they decide to remain with a particular shipping company, than considerations of the past or present.

4. Maritime universities role in the student's career development

It is better to begin recruitment of seafarers from the earlier stages of training. Recruiting of future seafarers from their training period creates opportunities for development of a career in a shipping company.

Recruitment during school is beneficial both for students and shipping companies. Students have the possibility to decide if a career at sea is what they want to do in the future; companies can recruit their future deck and engine officers while, at the same time, having the opportunity to model them according to the company needs.

From a career point of view, maritime universities have to be seen as career advisers and developers with an important role in helping students to make the right decision on their future development. From the first to the last study year, students need to be advised about what a career at sea means and implies, what are the advantages and satisfaction levels and, in addition, what are the risks.

The universities role in development of a future career at sea is underlined at the moment when graduates give up their sea career as a result of wrong information and communication during their training period. As part of the study about what calls and keeps them in a career at sea, students have included many aspects. In order to have a clear picture of what calls people to maritime studies and their expectations of a future seafarer career, we initiated interviews where we tried to touch most of the important aspects from this point of view. The discussions were therefore with students from first year or close to graduation.

The questions addressed with the first year students focused on what they took into consideration when they decided to become a maritime student and what their expectations from a future career at sea were. Thus, when they were asked “What they have been taken into account when deciding to choose maritime training for a future career at sea?”, the most usual answers were those represented by the financial and traveling opportunities. In any case, many of the interviewed students said that attraction to a career at sea came from their family tradition with one of the parents or brothers being seafarers. During discussions, an optimistic attitude about the future development of a career in the field with a period of five to ten years as a minimum time spent at sea was observed.

Comparing these answers with those received from students in final years, a change in the considerations about the expected period for onboard activity was observed. Reasons for this change have come from different levels of dissatisfaction over time which have been pointed out very clearly by the students.

Thus, in the last year of study students are more interested in cadet practice which produced a major dissatisfaction because of shipping companies lacking interest in cadets. Taking into consideration that cadet practice is compulsory for future certification as deck or engine officer, the students’ disappointment becomes understandable.

Problems generated by the absence of cadet positions onboard ships and the impossibility to satisfy the certification requirements for graduation, led some of the students to find a job in other sectors; many of these without any connection to the maritime field. Analyzing this situation it can be said that, for some students, initial expectations are lost at the end of their study period because more than half of the students who gave up at a career at sea after graduation have not returned to continue their option for a career at sea.

On the other side, the students who found a cadet position with a shipping company which had implemented a cadet program declared their intention to remain with the same company after graduation and certification if the company expressed the intention to keep them in a junior officer position and give them the possibility for career development on the company’s ships.

Starting from these considerations and accounting for universities positions in the shipping market, we consider that the maritime training system needs to show an active involvement in their students’ career development and to help them to success in this way. Universities do not have only the role of transmitting information and knowledge to the students but are also responsible for the development of their career path. For this reason, they need to support the successful compliance with all national and international requirements for certification as deck or engine officer. In our opinion, the creation of cooperative programs between universities and shipping companies can offer the possibility of fixing some of the problems related specifically to recruitment of students and junior officers and, in the second stage, their retention in the maritime industry.

5. Conclusions

Seafarers are, and will be, an important element of the maritime industry. With all the technological development, the human element will remain the main decisional factor onboard ships. From this perspective, the processes of recruitment and retention of seafarers will always be points of interest for shipping companies.

Recruitment is the first step for retention of a seafarer and the possibility to develop a career as part of a shipping company. For this reason during recruitment, it is most important for the shipping company to know the seafarer's expectations and future plans and for the seafarer to know what the company is looking for and what perspectives that will give to him. When all these aspects are completely covered, the recruitment process will be the basis of a "long term contract" between the shipping company and the seafarer.

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