Shipping Companies Policy to Improve the Seafarer's Competency

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Abstract

The present paper wants to present how it is possible to build strong relationship between shipping companies and seafarers and through the companies to have competent seafarers on board their vessel.

There is an identified and global need to improve the image of the shipping industry and the attractiveness of the seafaring profession, if competent people are attracted into it. Suggestion for improvements includes better rewards, a different or changed shipboard environment, improved working and living conditions, better communications between ship and shore and seafarers and their families. The decision takers should listen more to the seafarer and get closer to the contemporary life at sea, to understand their difficulties better. More attention might be paid to supporting families, scholarships for seafarer's children, better medical insurance for their families, better identified career path, or at the very least, more information about the link between seafaring and the maritime infrastructure. The recruitment must be done according to international regulations, but it is important to take care of a seafarer' nationality and cultural personality. Regular courses are necessary to keep the competency level of seafarers up to date.

Companies need to have specialized departments for recruitment regarding area of working on board, as deck or engine, with good professional people, able to decide the right level of seafarers' competency and, if necessary to recommend the proper training to reach this level.

I. Introduction

From the beginning of navigation activities there exist two participants, which must be in strong relationship: the owner, shipping company and the seafarers. One without the other can't comply their activities and aspirations.

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For these reasons both of them have to be able to offer satisfaction through compe-
tence and high level of skills. The competences and skills are reached through necessary
level of acknowledge, as education and training.

Inside the company people able to coordinate the activities, good managers and
personally well known people realize these. Is difficult to use for recruitment of sea-
men persons who never live on sea or didn't have contact with this activity. To be able
to ask, first you must be a good connoisseur of activity, live inside and have had a good
reputation in activity.

On the other side, as seafarer, the first requirement is to prove to have the proper
training and skills for this activity.

Many countries have specialized schools for teaching navigation and engineering
for marine activity. In the past, the seamen were accepted only if they wanted to par-
ticipate in activities on board vessels, without any special training, in the present time,
in accordance with the Conventions and Regulations active in domain, these must be
first trained and after accepted onboard.

The STCW Convention present the minimum standards required, but many shipping
companies have their own levels of training and offer this training to their employees.

This relation, company-employees, is able to be a good one, if, the companies pass
over their own necessities and cover some of the seamen necessities, as, a good life on
board, safety and security in working process, a good life ashore, care of their family
through social programs, possibility to advance inside the company in case of a good
activity and many others.

2. IMPROVEMENT OF SHIPPING COMPANIES' POLICY

A number of threads appeared to emerge from both the formal contributions and
interventions, which support the concern, felt about the growing shortage of quality
recruits for both ship and shore, and the potential which this problem has to grow to
serious proportions. The lack of reward throughout the industry, its lack of positive
images and the fact that marine transport is "taken for granted" are handicaps which
need to be addressed.

There is an identified and global need to improve the image of the industry and the at-
tractiveness of the seafaring profession, if good people are to be attracted into it. Suggestions
for improvement include better rewards (more money), a different or changed shipboard
environment or updated organisation, improved working and living conditions, better
communications between ship and shore and seafarer and family. It is suggested that deci-
sion takers should listen more to the seafarer and get closer to the contemporary life at sea,
to better understand their difficulties. More attention might be paid to supporting families,
such as the financing of scholarships for the children of seafarers. It is suggested that there

should be a more formal, better identified career path (or at the very least, more information) about the link between seafaring and the maritime infrastructure. If the skills base of European countries is to be enhanced or even preserved a fresh look perhaps needs to be taken at incentives to employ European seafarers, and to encourage their recruitment and retention. The blame cultur and the increasing desire to criminalise those who make mistakes is a serious problem that puts good managers off the industry and makes the attraction of good seafarers into the profession very difficult. It is a disincentive to the industry as a whole, not a positive encouragement to addressing the problems of human error.

An open culture within the company, where seafarers can report and discuss accidents and incidents and near misses would be an improvement to one in which seafarers are afraid to reveal such matters.

It is recognised that "under-qualified crews just won't work in the demanding and sophisticated ships of the present and future". There is thus concern about whether sights have been set too low with the STCW 95 requirements, which is manifesting itself, in general unease over the IMO "White List". There is great concern that chaos will result from individual administrations and even companies putting their own interpretations on the acceptability from abroad. Nevertheless, the White List is seen by many as a useful instrument which indicates a certain minimum standard. There is uncertainty about how much it is the responsibility of the company to train and develop trained labour sources with some regarding this as a public responsibility, others that of the employer. Training with simulators was seen as offering more potential than that of more theoretically based training

3. SEAFARER'S SAFETY CULTURE THROUGH COMPETENCE

The STCW Committee recognized the need to promote technical knowledge, skills and professionalism of seafarers. Resolutions draws attention to the role of the revised Convention in the improvement of seafarer competence but also made recommendations on the selection of personnel exhibiting the highest standards of professionalism; encouragement for the training of junior officers and the adoption of measures to encourage pride of service and professionalism in the personnel that shipping companies employ. Some of these ideas perhaps sound a little old-fashioned these days but to meet the aim of the safety culture, it is in the professionalism of seafarers that it must take root.

That culture is more than merely avoiding accidents or even reducing the number of accidents, although these are likely to be the most apparent measures of success. In terms of shipboard operations, the competence to do the right thing at the right time in response to both normal and emergency situations is part of the training required to meet the STCW Convention standards. The quality and effectiveness of that training will play a significant part in determining the attitude and performance - the profession-

alism - the seafarer will subsequently demonstrate in his, or her, work. And the attitude adopted will, in turn, be shaped to a large degree by the "culture" of the company.

It is relatively unusual for new types of accidents to occur on board and many of those that continue to occur are due to unsafe acts by seafarers. These errors, or more often violations of good practice or established rules, can be readily avoided. Those who make them are often well aware of the errors of their ways. They may have taken short-cuts they should not have taken. Most will have received training aimed at preventing them but, through a culture that is tolerant to the "calculated risk", they still occur. The challenge for trainers and training, and managers ashore and afloat, is how to minimize these unsafe acts, how to instill the skills, and importantly the attitudes, necessary to ensure safety objectives are met. The aim should be to inspire seafarers towards firm and effective self-regulation and to encourage their personal ownership of established best practice. Internationally recognized safety principles and the safeguards of best industry practice have to become an integral part of an individual's own standards.

The competence-based approach at the heart of the STCW Convention seeks to iden-tify those skills that are keys to safe and efficient shipboard operations. The Convention does not, and could not, identify all of the myriad of competences that are required in every situation on every type or size of ship. It concentrates on the core competences and establishes the specification of the minimum international standard for those competenc-es. The training requirements in the STCW Convention almost certainly therefore require amplification to meet the demands of many sectors of the shipping industry. Nevertheless, the revised STCW Convention forms a sound foundation for safe ship operation. Many of the accidents and incidents that continue to occur could arguably have been prevented had seafarers met the minimum standards of competence and owners and managers ful-filled their obligations in the STCW Convention and Code. The STCW Code, recognizes the importance of establishing detailed mandatory standards of competence and other mandatory provisions necessary to ensure that all seafarers are properly educated and trained, adequately experienced, skilled and competent to perform their duties.

4. SEAFARER'S TRAINING PROCESS

At first sight the familiarization training for those new to the sea is very basic and, perhaps to many seafarers rather obvious, covering as it does such issues as safety in-formation, emergency signals and what to do in the event of certain incidents. Unfortu-nately however, before the introduction of this mandatory international requirement, the safety of the new seafarer may not have been a priority and, in too many cases, simple instruction in basic safety matters was ignored. Yet, if we are to instill the safety culture in all who go to sea, what could be more appropriate than receiving familiarization in safety before being assigned work on a sea-going ship?

Company responsibilities for familiarization training are not limited to those unfamiliar with life at sea. For those who are newly joined and taking up their duties as master, officer or crew, companies have a responsibility to familiarize them with the ship's arrangement, equipment, procedures and characteristics relevant to both routine and emergency duties. For those seafarers new to a particular company's ship, this introduction will establish at the outset the "culture" of the company. Where appropriate importance is given to ensuring sufficient time is made available, requirements are carefully explained and safety issues are given priority, the seafarer will doubtlessly adopt the same methodical and safety-oriented approach to his duties.

Faced with the opposite scenario: a poor, rushed ineffective familiarization with his new ship, the average seafarer is likely to adopt the same approach to his duties, possibly with dangerous and expensive results. There is therefore a clear benefit to be gained from investing time and effort to develop a culture of safety within a company; starting with the first impressions gained during familiarization training.

A safety culture cannot be engendered within an organization by order or decree but must be inherent in the way a company operates and a seafarer responds to the demands of his job. The professional response needed from the seafarer can however be developed and encouraged through appropriate training.

The STCW Convention contains criteria for evaluating competence. These criteria strongly support the adoption of a professional approach to the functions undertaken on board through recognition of, and demonstration of the application of, established principles and procedures. The application of these principles and procedures should ensure the maintenance of international standards and the development of a safety culture. If the company environment supports rather than resists these norms, then the culture of the short-cut or "near enough is good enough" approach will be effectively nullified. For the higher levels of training the approach goes further. The criteria established for evaluating competence are strongly safety culture-oriented as they are proactive and in many cases require the seafarer to demonstrate his ability to promptly and fully identify potential non-compliance.

Those officers who can really make a difference to the culture on board are those in the highest management positions. Indeed, one of the competences required for certification is to organize and manage the crew. In order to meet the criteria for evaluating competence, a potential management level officer (master, chief mate, chief or second engineer) must ensure that the crew are allocated duties and informed of expected standards of work and behavior in a manner appropriate to the individuals concerned. Setting expected standards and acceptable behavior are at the heart of developing and maintaining a safety culture on board.

The manner in which the message is conveyed is also important in these days of multi-cultural and multi-lingual crews. Harsh words and treatment may bring about

acceptable standards and behavior in the short term but, without the right approach, a proactive and self-regulating safety culture is unlikely to thrive.

The same holds true for those who are involved in the management and operation of the ship. If the activities of those who work in the shipping company ashore are not guided by the same safety principles they are unlikely to thrive in isolation on board.

Responsibility for establishing the operational culture on board lies with the company and is a clear objective of the ISM Code. The difficulty for the seafarer, particularly the master at times, is maintaining the safety first approach in the face of pressures outside of the ship and company. Pressures from port authorities, pilots, stevedores, agents and others with an investment in the ship and its cargo but not necessarily an interest in the safety of the crew. Clear and unequivocal guidance and support from the company, as required by both STCW and the ISM Code, are vital to maintain the safety culture on board in the face of these pressures.

The way forward is, on the face of it at least, clear. Seafarers need to be adequately rested before assuming their responsibilities if they are to do so effectively and efficiently.

Regrettable is that the safety culture is not yet sufficiently strong or widespread for those involved to see the benefits of adopting working practices that prevent fatigue without having them established internationally.

The essence of a safety culture is taking the safe approach rather than necessarily the quickest, easiest or cheapest. When faced with a task to be done or an objective to be met the seafarer must make decisions on the information available using sound principles and procedures to guide him, or her. The principles to be observed for watch-keeping on the bridge, in the engine room, at sea and in port are not new but provide the foundation for safe watchkeeping. The overriding objective of these principles is safety in maintaining a watch on board. The issues to be considered are clear and the safe approach made explicit. The watchkeeper adopting fully the principles in STCW will have embraced the principles necessary for the development of a safety culture.

Once developed and instilled in a seafarer, the safety culture has to be maintained.

The STCW requirements and responsibilities on companies, coupled with the introduction of the safety management systems required by the ISM Code, should ensure that the working environment on board is a safe one. The ISM Code objectives of continuous improvement in safety management skills should establish the climate for an on-going commitment to safety. In this climate the well-trained and professional seafarer can properly adopt the safety culture so necessary to the successful completion of any maritime venture.

5. COMPANIES INVOLVED IN SEAFARER'S FAMILY LIFE

In many countries families are very important for seafarers, in spite of the short time spent with the family. According to the present policy of working at sea, usually the time spent at home is shorter than period at sea, like 4 to 6 months on board with 2 to 3 months ashore. During time of on board activity, the family keeps contact with the seafarer through company. This fact must conduct to a pleasant relation between family members and company personnel responsible for this.

The company have obligation to take care of the seafarer's family in order to obtain a good response from this in his activity on board. In case of worries about the home family, the activity of seaman onboard will be seriously affected.

Many officers and crewmembers work at this moment inside of foreign or international shipping companies and the contact with the families is done via the company agent in the country of origin.

Almost all companies have a department for personnel management or personnel relations, department in charge with the social relations of the company. But, the agency in the seafarer's native country doesn't have one. This part of activity is covered by the personnel manager or by the one of the agency employees. As usual the agency has only one manager, who is the owner of the agency, the other person always covers this responsibility. This person can be one without social relations skills and for this reason can result communication problems, problems that affect the seafarer and ship owner company in the end.

At this moment in Romania over 80% of seafarer's are under contract with an international shipping company. The good payment level and work conditions are the first elements in their decision. Anyway this option has the inconvenience of non-payment of social and medical insurance to the state administration. In many cases the seafarers' wives are housewives and neither of them have the insurance covered. Solution is the private medical insurance and private allowance.

A good solution will be for the company to undertake the responsibility of covering these insurances and in this way to fidelities his employees. From the company point of view, the seafarers are insured by company insurance, ship insurance and P&I insurance. These insurances are available only on duty period not and on time spent at home.

The contribution to the retirement found also must be supported by the company, even if for the period of activity inside the company, on board their own ship.

Usually the seafarer's children are attracted by a career on the parents steps, that is a career at sea. Many of these follow a medium or high form of training, in maritime lyceum and universities according to the parents' rank. The attraction is generated by the stories about the life at sea and the adventure aspects of this.

Company can interfere in this problem through a scholarship accorded to this young future seafarer, in this way stimulating their efforts for a high level of training and, in the end to have a good professional person onboard.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The level of competences for seafarers can be reached in many ways. The minimum level of these are stated in present Conventions in force, but for a good operation of ships need to pass over these, to reach the high standards of training, to have seafarers familiarized with the latest technology used in navigation and for the ship engine.

The first step can be done during their school training, using the technology as simulators and the presentation of the present and future state of maritime industry. Ships evolved and implicit must evolve the people who work on it. Maybe, for the moment there is a period of stagnation in interest for this industry, but the future can be very attractive for the people interested to perform a career in the area.

After the training standard is reached, the shipping company must do the next step, in order to wake up the interest of the seafarers to stay in this industry. In this way, companies have to make few changes of their policies and conceptions and to start a new age of the owner-employee relation. Implication of company in the private life of the seafarers will be made with precautions, preparing for these activity persons with a good skill in social and personal relations.

The persons on board the ships are very affected by the events produced at home and to avoid these, the company can develop a program to sustain the seafarers' families, this including the insurance covering, interest about family problems and scholarship for the seafarers' children interested to follow this career.

7. REFERENCES

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