

Being a seafarer

Tanker Operator interviewed a group of serving seafarers in Delhi and found that 77 per cent think being a seafarer is enjoyable; 57 per cent are happy to be seafarers; 75 per cent said they would like a shore job given the choice

Tanker Operator interviewed a group of serving seafarers at a training center in Delhi to find out how much they enjoy their time at sea.

There were in all, 35 respondents, comprising 20 engineers and 15 deck officers. The respondents were the mariners enrolled in the STCW courses or preparing for the MMD examinations.

The best ways shipping companies could make the life of seafarers more interesting, they said was to let seafarers take their families with them onboard and provide a broader range of career growth opportunities

Being a seafarer

Out of 35 respondents 20 indicated that they liked being a seafarer including 8, who responded that they liked this profession very much.

5 respondents mentioned that they were indifferent to the nature of profession and took shipping as just another profession and a means to earn for a decent living. 2 persons indicated that they did not like being a seafarer.

In terms of determining the career choice, 18 respondents (51%) mentioned that they took to a life at sea because they considered it a good career choice. 11 respondents (31%) mentioned that they had always wanted to be seafarers. Some of these respondents also mentioned that they looked up to someone in their family or social circle as role models that acted as sources of inspiration and motivation for motivating them for a career at sea.

There was a general consensus that work is enjoyable on board. Around 27 of the respondents (77%) indicated a score of 3 or above (on a 5 point scale, where 1 signified strong disagreement and 5 signified strong agreement for enjoyable work). The main reasons given for the work being enjoyable were the varied job responsibilities, the challenging job profile, and travel.

Negatives

Some of the respondents (less than 15%) mentioned that work conditions are not that enjoyable because of hierarchical and formal work conditions.

They mentioned that rigidity / lack of flexibility shown by the senior officers onboard created an unfriendly work atmosphere. The other reasons mentioned by them were stringent STCW 95 regulations, which have increased the workload of the sailing staff with reduction in work force.

But some respondents also cited that with new regulations coming up and shorter port stay of ships, the career of the seafarer does not offer the same incentives as earlier.

27 of the respondents (77%) cited working in shifts and erratic work hours coupled with missing social and family life as the major reasons for increasing stress and burnouts onboard a ship.

However, some of that this problem is considerably reduced with more number of UMS class ships or on the ships where liberal family-carrying rules are allowed. Some of the other reasons for stress onboard were less human interactions while working onboard, an uncertain work environment and huge regulatory requirements to fulfill.

Going ashore

When it came to the shore job alternatives 75% of the respondents (27 in number) mentioned that if given an option they would prefer to settle out for a shore-based job.

Some of the respondents in the 26-30 age group mentioned that they are prioritising to clear their Chief/Masters ticket as early as possible hoping that would pave way for better / more shore job options.

Some reasons attributed for going ashore were being cut-off from the social world - family and friends. Also the job structure, though challenging, tends to be monotonous at times. Some felt there were better career options in shore-based industries in terms of job profile, work requirements and remuneration.

They would prefer access to food of their preference and enjoy the freedom to walk along the streets and have days off.

85 per cent of seafarers said they would like to work for a shipping company or agency ashore.

12 of the respondents (35%) mentioned that they were actively looking for options for a career change. They had plans of pursuing studies in ship management, MBA, working for the IT industry as some of the career options.

Most of these 12 respondents were in the officer ranks of 4th/3rd engineer and 3rd / 2nd officers.

A further 15 of the other respondents mentioned that if they were given an option to settle for a shore job, they would take it. But till now they have not thought seriously about it.

Around 60% of the people said that career path was not very well defined. There was a general opinion that after working for some years on the higher ranks, job responsibilities reach a plateau - a saturation level.

Some of the seafarers attributed working on contractual bases, hired by ship management companies, which place them on vessels of different ship-owners (each having a unique corporate culture) every time, as a primary reason for the above.

Owned or managed

When asked how recognized they feel by their employers, there was a wide range of responses.

The responses were different due to the respondents working for ownership/ management companies.

The respondents working under ship-ownership companies said that they perceived their career path as well-defined.

Small aspects, such as scheduled workdays / holidays in a ship-ownership company give them a better opportunity to plan / prioritise their time and inculcate the feeling of belongingness. Moreover, respondents felt that they are better recognised / identified this way with the one organisation they work for.

The respondents in the ownership companies said that company often took care of them on a personal level too.

At the operational level in ship-management companies, lower ranks did not relate to the bond with the organisation very strongly, while at higher levels like that of Chief Officer, Master, 2nd Engineer and Chief Engineer the level of recognition was high because of the company actively monitoring and communicating with them on an individual basis.

Recommending seafaring

When it came to recommending being a seafarer to someone else, 25 of the respondents (70%) said that they would.

Reasons cited include using the seagoing experience as a platform for pursuing other better career options later.

They said that the job as a seafarer provides an excellent opportunity to earn quick money. Also the Experiences acquired onboard help a person to evolve into a responsible and enduring person. Working with people of different nationalities lead a seafarer to be much more adaptive person. There are a wide range of opportunities to travel to different places.