

Changing Attractions of Seafaring Life

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► Introduction:

Whenever we have encounters with different concepts of seafaring life and especially its difficulties; the first question is why did you choose this job?

There are lots of anomalies & variations in contrast with the ordinary ways of life.

That is why this question is asked repeatedly.

There may be three forms of reply to this question:

- ✓ The first is "I had no idea & after a while I realized that this is a good or else a bad one".
- ✓ The second reply is "I knew about it & there were some presumed attractions to choose this profession".
- ✓ The last type of an answer is that "I had not much of a choice & I entered this career out of necessity".

There will surely be slightly deviating conceptions to this issue which would reflect when you scrutinize types of professions in the maritime industry. Some people might have never encountered the "Isolation" problems as gravely as an ocean going seaman, like those in the fishing industry whose maximum lengths of voyages may not exceed a few days or a week. On the other hand the non-limited voyage seafarers may not really feel the non-scheduled troubles of a maritime rescue team for instance. The large ships usually run on definite schedules & doing things on day to day & urgency basis should not be a routine.

What we must bear in mind is that the cultural back-ground & deprivation dominance in a society plays an important role in the choice & persistence as a seafarer. We would focus on the human element issues in order to be able to analyse the so-called attractions & associated changes in the maritime industry.

In the very old days the seamen were mostly the secluded sect of the society & apart from the captain & a few officers who were from a bourgeois back-ground and somehow were either the owner of the ship or held shares in it; the rest of the crew were chosen from the un-chosen sector of the society & had to have qualities as that of slaves! To be strong & staunch & having no or little family ties to keep them ashore. Surely this is not the case nowadays.

The choice of this profession due to a family tradition has always been there but in the past this was mainly for officers who had very luxurious lifestyle & was not very common amongst the ratings & sailors. In the modern world you hardly see this for both the officers & the ratings in the developed countries. In the less developed countries, despite the fact that complaining about the difficulties of seafaring life, is a very common behaviour but you can find a lot of senior officers & engineers who have their sons in the same profession. The reason must mainly be the financial

motivation & quite a large jobless population. So must be the case with the junior positions in those societies.

In the old times; the notorious masters had to "Shanghai" the poor vagabonds to earn crew members on board (i.e. They would send old sailors to find young & strong bodies; let them drink a lot to loose consciousness & then carry them on board; next morning intoxicated chap would find himself in the middle of the sea & had either to die or work to live & earn his food!) but nowadays they conduct various exams & need so many certificates to be allowed on board. It would at times be considered as a privilege rather than a tormented exile.

Some of the most quoted attractions for many categories of seafarers working in the industry are explained here:

► **Financial rewards:**

During a reputable university research; when some mariners & their families were asked about the benefits of a seafaring career both seafarers and their partners most commonly mentioned 'money' as an attraction of the work. Seafarers confirmed that their salaries were noticeably larger than those they could expect to earn ashore. It was also recognised that the differentials between seagoing and shore-side earnings were increased due to the tax benefits extended to seafarers.

Financial security associated with the job and the assurance of regular income was also an attraction to some seafarers. The security in a concept that can be similar to having a large sum received at once. As in some companies the families can be given some partial allotment after the agreement with the seafarer. In some other companies the wages are remitted in an account that after the termination of the contract the worker can get the whole aggregate. For many people this acts as a reward. It is like a big loan that once received can solve many troubles with a significant advantage that it is not really a loan & you do not have to pay it back!

In some countries having regular remittance in a bank account can be used as an added advantage too. It may help you in credit augmentation or preferences to get various types of loans, etc.

The importance of the money and the regular salary was so prominent that many seafarers cited it as the only really quotable advantage of working at sea.

The question is what if this category of attractions is not there at all or in a very mild version!?

With the financial crisis epidemic nearly everywhere in the globe; there will be a lot of shortcomings reported. Invariably the matter of having a larger amount of wages is there for nearly all the time. Even in the times of financial deprivation, the seafarers' wages are higher than their fellow colleagues ashore. The problem is how high? If the difference is not appreciable; there will be very little motivation remaining.

The higher wages can exceptionally be other way around, in some countries for instance, the earnings of a chief engineer on the shore job and especially managerial ranks is higher than the wages at sea.

The routine payment can be questionable too; there are many companies that have delayed or non-routine payment strategies. The tax exemption is also a very important issue. It can amount to about 40 to 60% of the income, but mind you; this is not the case with all seafarers. There are governments that deduct taxes under so many articles & exceptions from the seafarers. The very common type is the currency exchange taxes. Many countries with currency or financial problems exercise various taxes upon seafarers.

Noting the above-mentioned points; we should think twice to be firmly positive to count on "Money" as a real trust & thrust! for seafaring life.

On the other hand the dependence on the particular salary level could act as a trap to many seafarers and make it difficult for them to consider alternative (and less lucrative) shore-side employment due to their existing financial commitments. This dependence on the financial rewards of seafaring is mentioned by several seafarers.

The benefits of a seafaring salary are also mentioned by seafarer's families; however they mentioned this less often than seafarers and were more likely to cite other advantages of the lifestyle. Seafarers' wives talked about financial benefits in terms of having a 'nice house' or car and also in relation to the fact that they felt they did not have to 'worry about the money' at least!

Seafarers' wives also recognised the 'financial trap' where becoming accustomed to a salary at a particular level could act as a 'tie' to keep the seafarer working at sea. If the problem of not very high wages is there; this issue will change entirely.

From that certain point of view a very fine drawback is getting used and adapted to the certain income level. This is a real problem with both less experienced mariners as well as old ones. The younger generation gets accustomed to a certain lifestyle that if ever the voluminous income is stopped, the life will be in turmoil. They buy very expensive clothes, cars & luxury items that do not really match their lifestyle. The collection of wages & getting a sudden large sum of money makes them carelessly senseless to the forward rainy days.

For older officers & crew the matter is a bit different. Their spouses get too dependent on the income rather than the mariners. The children & wives get used to spindrifts in education and upholstery that once the old man is going to retire; the pressure is so intolerable that the poor aging seafarer can seemingly never stop going to sea as the expectations are very high & the retirement income can not really cope with the expenditures. Many old hands at sea have this problem & end up having heart attacks & various strokes while still sailing in their 60s & even 70s.

Last observation in this area may be the fact that if we must evaluate the workmanship conditions with financial rewards in a direct relationship?

This means if the values of the lost or deprived freedoms or burdened pressures should be evaluated with money or not?

In a sense, the answer is yes. Compare this matter to the overtime allowance. When you work instead of being free at home with your family & enjoying life; then you

should be rewarded accordingly. If you do this on Saturday evening or on a Sunday or the New Year's Eve, the reward shall have to be multiplied. Nearly everyone agrees with this.

We must remind ourselves if the compensation for the seafaring life is proportional or not. It is not difficult to find people that would not work on a Sunday afternoon even if you pay them triple. There seems to be a limit for this. Some shipping company managers explain that; as the nature of the job is shift-work & there is no Sunday or holidays; then once you accept the contract you are selling those luxuries to the payment you are supposed to receive.

The contradictions arise when the pays are not as good as they should be or like many companies; there are no overtime calculations for the officers. The attractions in these cases may be losing strength & or validity then.

► **Effects on Couples' Relationships:**

Whilst various researches have pointed to the detrimental consequences of intermittent partner absence on couple relationships, many of those who were interviewed for a research study saw that such working patterns could have beneficial effects on their relationships. The positive effects were more likely to be mentioned by women than their partners, perhaps due to the fact that women might be more used to reflecting upon, and talking about their relationships.

Many seafarers and their wives express their feelings about the intense pleasure and happiness they experienced when the seafarer returned home and some used the term 'repeated honeymoons!' to describe their relationship during reunion.

Periodic absences of one partner were observed to stop the relationship 'getting into a rut' and encourage couples to appreciate each other and their time together.

Some couples explain that they had fewer rows when they were together than their shore-based friends & colleagues did with their partners.

Where seafarers had been in previous, unhappy relationships, the lengthy separations required by seafaring work patterns were seen as making difficult marriages more tolerable. However, this could be disadvantageous as it prolonged relationships.

The fact that this type of relationship is peculiar remains the same. In some cultures a husband who is not there most of the time is not a good one. Many traditional families do not like to marry or choose such a person as a partner. Although being at times far from your family can be helpful; this will not work if repeated oftentimes, especially if you miss special occasions like celebrations; demise of a relative, etc.

For a healthy relationship; some social workers advise to take short trips alone & be free from some responsibilities but if this freedom or distance hurts the relationship; it is not really taken as an attraction. Likewise what was explained about the hardship & the financial compensation; it can be related here as well that sometimes no money can buy attending your daughter's first prom or being by your wife at her childbirth.

► **Longer leave periods:**

A significant attraction of seafaring is the work-to-leave ratio. Although working conditions vary, officers in senior ranks can be employed on contracts as favourable as equal work to leave periods and those in junior positions reported work to leave ratios which were even more favourable. Seafarers enjoy these long leave periods, free from the constraints and demands of work and couples are positive about the benefits of the time together & effects on their relationships.

Both seafarers and their families often make comparisons to traditional shore-side hours of 'nine-to-five' and pointed to the increased quality time with their families that seafaring work patterns allowed.

The attraction of the long leave periods are quite common but still if the seamen are from poorer countries & can not really afford such long leaves; the consequences may be devastating. In some very original seafaring societies especially those providing the ratings' portion of the industry; it is not so difficult to find seafarers that work for contracts over one year period & very soon after getting off a ship & receiving the leave wages; they sign on the next vessel just to earn more.

This can be due to many reasons of having no job security to get a job next time or lower wages that can not really allow enjoyment of longer leaves.

The fact that if the pays are good enough to sign off after shorter contracts & have reasonable leave periods; is one dependent on many factors like the economical situation ashore & the financial status of families as well as the shipping companies. There are also occasions that seafarers can not mentally cope with the long leave periods. They may not be really wanted at home. They would feel expendable & bored. There are also occasions that existence of seafarers at home is a disturbance to the harmony & discipline which has been established in their absence, so a long leave will be having detrimental effects. Long leaves are good but not always!

► **MLC as a benefit:**

The introduction of MLC & its implementation and entry into force in the near future (20.August.2013) may be hopefully used to advantage here.

Amongst all the known industries alike; seafaring life due to its special nature has been looked into differently & having such requirements as in MLC can be recalled upon as attractions. It is surely too soon to comment firmly on the issue but one can compare & visualize that having more stringent labour & working conditions defined may in future make this profession a favourable field of activities. Least assumption is that we have got regulations for many things that others have left at the mercy of owners, shareholders or general labour support syndicate requirements.

► **Other attractions:**

Some seafarers' wives express positive remarks about the opportunities and freedom that they can enjoy during their husband's absence. Women can take advantage of this time to pursue their own interests, hobbies and friendships and conceptualised their time alone in a positive way to regain single life pleasures despite being married!

For seafarers, other benefits related to the nature of the work, in particular the relative flexibility and autonomy that they did not feel would find in shore based employment.

The prominent difference may be that the sequence of working at sea & life ashore with things you do in any of the status can take longer to be routine & retains adventurous freshness for more prolonged periods. Life, while working in an office can be more institutionalizing than that at sea, although the human nature will definitely end up to the said gesture sooner or later.

Additionally, despite increasing rapid turn around times and speedy loading and discharge, the opportunity to travel continued to be a benefit of the job appreciated by some seafarers, at least the younger ones who want to join to see the world.

After all said a priori; let us come back to the fact that the life at sea is a difficult & troublesome lifestyle. People are all slaves to habits & although primarily rigid for changes; they would accept various life systems; amongst which is the peculiar seafaring life & its consequences.

On the other hand we need people to man the ships around the world and the running of ships in a safe, smooth & efficient manner requires many considerations. We can not take a restricted sample to put all assumptions into.

Money; intermittent relationships; longer leaves or having the opportunity to travel around the world can all be considered as attractions of seafaring life; although the reality can be different if you are living in a society that the usual international standards are not abided by & the seafarer may be looked at as money sack or silly outcaste who works longer hours and is paid less than adequate, then treated as an unwelcomed misanthrope.

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