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WHY SELFIE MATTERS IN THE MARITIME INDUSTRY?

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Introduction

Let me begin with a story. Four months ago a cousin of mine embarked on his first trip on-board as a full-pledged seafarer. He was 22 years old, an OS who had many plans for his future in the industry. He wanted to be an officer by the time he was 25 and hopefully, a captain by his late 30s, a first in our small hometown, south of Manila. Smile on his lips, sunshine in his hair, he posted his first selfie on his ship, on the bridge of a mammoth container ship, with the caption “The beginning of the best years of my life!”. And that selfie was followed by many more in different parts of the ship and ashore. Everything seemed fine. He looked to be enjoying the best times of his life. Well, not until I noticed four months on to his contract, his selfies became infrequent and then totally disappeared. In a rare chat on Facebook which happened only because his ship had some problems and had to stay in port for three days and thus he was able to use the facilities of a nearby seafarer centre, he told me that his ship’s internet connection had broken down some months ago and though the company was able to restore the email service which was essential to the workings of the ship, the restoration of full internet service seemed not to be the company’s high priority. Thus, his lack of selfie. And he said, because of this, his stay on-board had become an ordeal. The feeling of isolation was now weighing heavily on him. Days were long and moments dull. So I asked him, will he still want to continue working as a seafarer? He said he is not sure. The pay is good, he said, but days and weeks of no contact with anyone and not knowing what’s happening in the world were driving him nuts. In a way, I thought, as we ended our conversation, the frequency of selfie was the barometer of his satisfaction on life on-board. Call his case nuts, and what have you, his generation is the future of the maritime industry. And as the classic saying in sociology goes which I will tweak a bit, “personal troubles have the potential to become a maritime issue.” We need therefore a sociological imagination to view selfie or the lack thereof as important in our battle to win the hearts and minds of our seafarers nowadays.

The need to make the industry continuously competitive and attractive

The maritime industry is considered to be the most globalised of all industries and as such also the most precarious (Sampson 2013a, 2013b; Sampson and Schroeder 2006). Being globalised poses many opportunities and at the same time challenges. The maritime industry has to face a cocktail of headwinds, apologies for mixing metaphors, some going on for years, while others are fairly new, brought in by the transformations in the global economy in general and by new maritime regulations. Some of these include the introduction of new maritime environmental regulations, climate change, oversupply of vessels (some types), piracy and cyber attacks, and a wave of consolidation and alliances (Sanos 2014). But what I think is always present, and as such an enduring concern in the maritime industry is that which involves its human element (Arsenieetal. 2014, Baylon and Santos 2011, Brickman 2014, Cahoon and Haugstetter undated, Nguyen et al. 2014). Again, there are many but I will focus on just one.

As my time is limited, I will not be able to talk about as comprehensively as possible but my task today is to paint in broad strokes some areas of concern that the maritime industry has to address in cooperation with other parties of interest to make seafaring continuously competitive and attractive to our young people and at the same time retaining our current crop of well trained and committed seafarers. There are many but I will focus on just three: crew welfare and accommodation, further education for maritime professionals and ship-shore interaction.

Crew welfare and accommodation

While providing a most competitive salary and benefit packages will always be a plus factor in making seafaring attractive to our young people and retaining those who are currently employed, the industry should also continuously look at improving its offerings, in a way, upping the ante, primarily in the area of accommodation and recreation. A number of studies have shown us that those who opted to leave the sea for shore-based work oftentimes cite their not so palatable experience on-board as a trigger to seek other work and that includes poor accommodation and recreational facilities on-board. As such, provisions for good accommodation and recreation should be seen as key to the performance, recruitment and retention of seafarers in the industry (Ellis et al. 2012). The industry has made considerable strides in this regard, in terms of providing safe and comfortable accommodation and quality recreational facilities for seafarers on-board. However, much could still be done.

In 2012, our Centre did a study on accommodation and welfare on contemporary cargo ships. We are in the process of updating our findings in the light of the coming into effectivity of MLC in 2013, but for now, I will draw upon the findings of our 2012 study. The full findings are available to download on our website but I would like to draw your attention to some of our findings which the industry could benefit from. We distributed questionnaires to some 1,533

seafarers in China, the Philippines and the UK and we asked them about their accommodation and recreation facilities on-board. When it comes to the size of the cabin, 30% said that they were either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied. Seniors officers were also more dissatisfied than ratings while junior officers were more dissatisfied than senior officers. In terms of standard of furnishings, some 36% described them as neither good nor poor and 18% indicated poor and very poor. In terms of recreational facilities, the most commonly provided were DVD libraries (78%), books (71%), music systems (65%), computer terminals (53%), karaoke machines (52%) and games (50%). Quite interestingly, only 26% had internet access/wifi. Fast and reliable internet connection has always been the concern of seafarers, this I found it when I sailed with two ships in 2014 and 2015 for fieldwork, a reefer container and a tanker. My first ship was old, 25 years old and did not have internet connection. The email was controlled by the captain. Whenever we would visit a port, there was mad rush for the nearest seafarer centre to avail of internet services. It was also the first time in my life that I was not able to update my Facebook status for twelve days! I thought I would go mad. When finally I was able to do so, it felt so relieved! People had been sending me messages because they were used to seeing me updating my Facebook status everyday. When there was nothing for 12 days, they became very concerned as if the only barometer of my existence is my Facebook status updates. In a way, what my shipboard experience tells me is that internet connection is a necessity for most if not all seafarers. Internet connection is even more imperative for the Generation Y, those who were born between 1978 and 1994. They are indeed very different from the Baby Boomers and Generation Y, the current crop of seafarers manning our ships. The Generation Y is the most techno savvy and wired of all generations and yes, selfie-conscious. As Cahoon and Haugstetter explain,

Generation Y has been described as being well educated, creative thinkers, ambitious, impatient, arrogant, disengaged, technologically adept, disrespectful, having an international perspective, and demanding a greater work/life balance than previous generations. They tend to have high and some would say unrealistic expectations of possible employment options and do not believe they need to “do their time” before becoming managers and executives. Such characteristics would not normally be tolerated by business, but this has changed with valuable labour being at a premium as many countries come to terms with the effects of lower birth rates. (undated, p.6)

And as the war for talent rages on, the industry cannot rest on its laurels and must do all it can to make seafaring continuously attractive to them. The industry is competing with other industries which are also on the look out for workers of good talent and commitment. I was here in India last year and I was impressed by the vast swathes of land devoted to BPOs, high tech and multi-

national companies in Gurgaon or should I say Gurugram. They are a potential competitor as more and more young people are attracted by competitive salary and good training that these companies offer. There could come a time and I think it is happening now that the industry would not only attract seafarers solely on the basis of competitive salary. Within reason, the industry should always reinvent itself and be ahead of the game. Nowadays we can't always say come be a seafarer and see the world! We know that this has become difficult nowadays with ships' stay in ports becoming shorter and shorter and more companies now are providing opportunities for travel as a form of incentive for productive workers. Thus, going back to virtual connectivity, though Generation Y know that they will not have the same intensity and fluidity of connectivity on-board compared to when they are ashore, they still expect respectable access to the internet. And we could do more in this regard as internet access is becoming cheaper as more and more technology providers are selling their services in the market. Thus, in a way, if we see more selfies of seafarers on their Facebook accounts, it could be a good sign, our barometer on top of many others that the industry is producing many 'happy ships'.

Transition to maritime work ashore

Our ultimate goal really is to be the employment and employer of choice for our young people, both men and women. And once we get them and they become seafarers, we want to retain them. Retaining them makes economic sense as we all know. It takes years and a lot of resources to train seafarers and losing anyone to work ashore is always lamentable. We want them to stick to us until their retirement age. However, there are reasons, both personal and structural, that compel some of them to leave the sea for shore work. When some of them decide to do so, we should not lose them entirely. We must keep them because their knowledge and expertise acquired from years at sea is incalculable. They should be encouraged to work in shipping and maritime-related businesses. And they should know that there are opportunities for them in areas where their talent and experience could be put to good use. This now I think is a challenge and an opportunity for many of us here especially maritime schools and universities. I think this is now being addressed by many schools here in India by providing advance training and postgraduate education to those who would like to work ashore with focus on logistics, port operations, management, human resource, teaching and research. And this is where the industry and maritime educational institutions can work together to formulate courses, trainings and other means by which those who would like to continue working in the maritime industry after their productive years at sea can utilise their talent. In relation to this, I would like to call your attention to doing research on the maritime industry.

In my numerous visits to a number of maritime education institutions in a number of countries, doing research on the industry, particularly focusing on the human element, is something which is not given much attention by many institutions. I think seafarers who might opt to do teaching

must also be encouraged to do research and though it is now being done in India, with AMET leading the way, more could be done in terms of making it known to those who left the sea that they could contribute further to the industry by making a career in the academe. I remember being on my first ship and when I explained to the seafarers that I was there to do research they thought I was an investigative reporter of some media outfit. They could not understand that I work in the university and my bread and butter is studying them. The captain told me that it was his first time to meet someone like me getting on-board, sailing with them and observing what they were doing on-board. What I am saying is that this particular aspect of the maritime industry – maritime research - is so under explored when in fact in any industry research plays a very important role and with former seafarers equipped with the right training in research methods and theoretical tools, they can contribute a lot to the industry. In addition to this, and in connection with our study that I will be talking about shortly, we found out that a good proportion of seafarers that we interviewed thought that many of their office staff did not properly understand their work on-board which brings me to the question, if the shore is absorbing many of the seafarers to work for them, this should not be a concern and if it is a concern, then, one of the reasons could be that many of our seafarers who would have wanted to work in maritime companies simply could not because they lacked the requisite advanced training needed in these companies. Thus, more could be done in this aspect, that is employing more seafarers to work with land-based companies which could help in improving the interaction between seafarers and shore-based personnel.

Ship-shore interaction

For the past three years, we have been working on a study that looks into the social interaction between seafarers and shore-side personnel like immigration, customs, pilots, superintendent, office staff, amongst many. The aim of the study is to identify problems if there are and recommend solutions to address concerns related to ship-shore interaction. We will be presenting the full findings of this study in a symposium to be held in Cardiff on June 29-30 and everyone is invited to this event. The scope of the study is staggering as this involves some 390 semi-structured interviews and 2500 accomplished questions, conducted and collected in five countries over three years and eight sea voyages by five researchers with a combined 244 days at sea. One of the interesting findings in the study is the lack of understanding which seafarers perceived as existing between office staff and sea-staff.

“Our interviewees provided a variety of examples of the ways in which their situation was often misunderstood resulting in additional work, blame, extra reporting, and/or stress. The lack of understanding of the working environment on board vessels could lead to a range of behaviours that have the potential to hinder safe and efficient operations on board. In the course of vignette-

based interviews we uncovered an array of examples provided by seafarers of the ways in which poor understandings, lack of trust, and lines of responsibility combined to produce problems. One example was provided by an officer who recounted a situation where the captain had been prevented by ill-informed office staff from changing course in bad weather. Once the member of staff had checked up on the captain's report by consulting another vessel they informed him that it was now alright for him to change course as he had requested. However, by this time the vessel had already encountered the related severe weather. The experience had clearly led to resentment and frustration. Where captains stuck to their guns in relation to safety matters, and in the face of the exertion of considerable pressure from ashore, seafarers often felt that it was regarded as a 'black mark' against them by the office. Seafarers who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they had experienced being prevented by shore staff from taking an action which they felt was in the best interests of the crew (29% of respondents stated this) and/or of the vessel (18% of respondents). In the face of such data, many senior personnel in companies would argue that captains should always prioritise safety and that it is incumbent upon them to argue their case with shore-side managers. They might suggest that the company safety management system would provide support in this. However, previous work done at SIRC has indicated that even in companies where safety is prioritised at the highest levels of management, and where a concerted effort is made to communicate the importance of safety across the company, there is nevertheless a drive from middle management ashore to meet targets (often linked to managers' own performance indicators). This pressure is frequently passed on to seafarers who, as previously mentioned, frequently feel vulnerable in their positions" (for full details of the study, see Sampson et al 2016).

In a way, seafarers nowadays have felt to have become automatons, not being able to decide on their own and relegated to only receiving instructions from shore personnel. They rather feel that their years and years of experience at sea and numerous trainings are becoming more and more irrelevant as they face the increasing prospect of being told what to do by accountants and MBAs who do not understand what life on-board really is. As Clayton reports:

In the old days, the shipowning company entrusted the ship to the captain and supported his decisions without interference. This understanding which has been the basis of seafaring for centuries, has been turned on its head. Today, although captains remain able to make decisions affecting the voyage by law, they are influenced heavily by head office and its culture which is coloured by revenue and expense. Should a captain decide to not sail his ship because of weather issues, inevitably head office will call him and question his decision. Having decisions underpinned by 20 years of sea time questioned by accountants, with limited practical sea knowledge, is pressure that should never be brought to bear." 2016, p. 7)

This is just a snapshot of our findings but what this shows is the struggle that seafarers, especially senior officers, have to endure and come to terms with given the power dynamics and changing contours of expert system that contemporary maritime companies employ. In this regard, a constant dialogue between seafarers and the management must be made to ensure that there is a free flow of ideas going on, more like a capillary of sort, a circuit. This way our seafarers will feel valued and their maritime capital, as it were, given importance in decision making relating to ship and crew welfare.

Conclusion

Many years ago, our centre, SIRC, had recommended the following to make seafaring an ever competitive industry: 1. Shorter trips (preferably no longer than four months) 2. Paid leave of a comparable length to sea time 3. continuous employment, rather than employment by voyage 4. Training time to be added to leave period 5. Opportunities for partners (and children where possible) to sail 6. Improved access to cheaper communication 7. Increased contact between seafarers' partners and their employers 8. opportunities for seafarers' families to make contact with each other while crew at sea. These are very specific recommendations which some companies might have already taken on-board to reduce the strain of a seafaring life while others might have thought them to be too costly and therefore binned for the time being. From then on, developments have happened fast and furious: the low price of crude oil in the global market, the coming into effect in 2013 of the MLC, in 2015 of SECAs and in 2016, the Ballast Water Management Convention. On the technological front, most ships are now carrying ECDIS on-board and more technological breakthroughs are on the way which will contribute further to the challenges that seafarers face in terms of learning, maintaining and upgrading complex information for use on-board. This then demands that the industry employ even better trained and highly competent seafarers who in turn are more complex than their predecessors, and who have different needs which many, many years ago were not conceivable to many of us here. On top of that, these are the people who have many opportunities ashore than their predecessors. Having said so, the industry is thriving regardless of the headwinds and will continue to thrive provided that it is both open to change and critical of its own failings like for instance not being able to provide a sustained technological back-up to the selfie posts of my seafarer-cousin whom I mentioned in the beginning of this paper. Because we have to remember that private troubles could have the potential to become public issues or should I say a seafarer's selfie or the lack of it is a symptom of a maritime issue that we should never fail to engage with.

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