Helen Sampson sees alienation and loneliness as growing threats to seafarers. But the remedies tend to interrupt the flow of profits.

Dr Helen Sampson, the Seafarers International Research Centre’s director, was conducting a study on a dry ship when she decided to throw a Coca-Cola party to loosen the crew’s tongues. It proved much more revealing than she expected. “I think it’s quite a lonely furrow to plough,” she tells Fairplay, describing modern crewing.

She was surprised when one crew member told her he had not stepped into the area of the ship that was the party venue before. Other members had never even spoken to each other.

She believes that modern seafaring can be a very isolating kind of existence, when crew members just do their shift and return to their cabins, eating on their own. That is particularly so for officers on watch, she tells Fairplay.

By contrast, the first ship Sampson sailed on, also to conduct research, was an old reefer that nevertheless had a cinema, a swimming pool, a library, a gym and a sauna.

“It was really fantastic,” she recalls, with many opportunities for fellowship. “Where do you see that now?”

Sampson thinks that some companies are regressing on welfare provision. There was a time, she notes, when a small number of companies were designing ships to make the community of workers on board operate as well as possible, catering for their mental health and general welfare.

The onboard IT factor
That impulse seems now to have vanished. “A lot of seafarers on new ships tell us conditions have deteriorated. And some of the new ships I have seen have noticeably smaller cabins, smaller windows and fewer facilities than ships built prior to 1990,” she declares.

The isolation endemic to today’s huge, heavily automated vessels makes access to communication a key issue to the maritime industry, Sampson continues. “When you talk to ex-seafarers about why they have left the sea, it is almost invariably because they want to be with their families,” she notes.

“Anything that companies can do to make it more possible for people to have a family life and do the job that the company wants the person to do seems to me like a good investment,” she says.

Thus, providing crew members with e-mail access can improve their health and make a huge difference to their lives, Sampson finds.

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have been reported as being excluded from e-mail access for this reason).

For some companies, there is also an issue with family access to its e-mail conduit.

Moreover, companies that once had progressive personnel policies have now reintroduced criteria for who is, and who is not, entitled to free repatriation on compassionate grounds, Sampson discloses.

For some, the isolated lifestyle, tighter rules and deteriorating conditions can prove to be too much; there are regular reports of suicides at sea.

Sampson says the numbers are very difficult to measure, but she has noticed reports of suicides at sea.

As it turned out, all the feedback was positive. Sampson says delegates seemed genuinely interested in the question of women as a viable future labour source.

The sector has improved its health and safety record in developed countries, she notes, but then to use “a cheap solution in developing countries, as a way of saving costs, is a health hazard”.

### Factors that increase stress

Shorter turnaround time for crews, smaller numbers on board, increased paperwork, new rules such as ISPS, deteriorating accommodation – all these add to the dangers, she warns.

If an operator fails to increase crew numbers but piles on more paperwork and increases workloads for safety management, then problems build.

“I think that in terms of developing safety culture and wanting a safer profession, the regulations are going the right way,” Sampson concedes.

“But unless you have running parallel with regulations some sort of control over workloads and crewing levels, the solution can turn out to be a problem for those at the sharp end,” she predicts.

Employers today sometimes crew down to minimum safe manning levels, she notes: “It’s dangerous that you have registers in competition with each other competing on the basis of ‘submit your crewing plans to us and we’re most unlikely to challenge them’.”

She believes this niggardly attitude is causing the industry’s aversion to rules to improve health and safety.

### Women could ease the squeeze

IT WAS like entering the lion’s den,” laughs Sampson, describing the experience of co-presenting a paper at a manning and training conference in Riga earlier this year.

“I have never attended a conference where delegates have started to pre-empt a topic that is coming up for discussion,” she tells Fairplay, “but they were talking about women seafarers before we even got up and said a word.”

As it turned out, all the feedback was positive. Sampson says delegates seemed genuinely interested in the question of women as a viable future labour source.

She wonders whether companies are looking seriously at women as a solution to officer shortages, but is pleased that they are at least prepared to think about it.

The problem, according to Sampson, is that women are today such a visible minority at sea that just one bad experience can ultimately lead to employers deciding to exclude them all.

She points out that the companies that employ women in high numbers have very positive things to say. “The women themselves that I’ve actually interviewed were just phenomenal people,” she relates.

“They were doing really well, they were really achieving, and it makes sense, doesn’t it, that if you are going to do a job where the odds are really against you, that what you get is some really determined, hard-working women.”

She believes that if employers worry about labour shortages but prevent themselves from accessing a source simply because of sex, they are at a disadvantage.