Seafarers’ quest for better auditing regimes

Seafarers’ desire to protect the environment is being undermined by a multiplicity of unharmonised audits and inspections which they view as ineffectual. Says Mohab Abou Elkawam of the Seafarers International Research Centre

Seafarers are facing rough seas in trying to comply adequately with international, regional, and local marine environmental regulations in an era of growing environmental concerns. In this quest, they are faced with a rising tide of auditing and inspections which they feel are meant to comply with the ISM code on the audit culture that is currently dominating the shipping sector in general, and the tanker sector in particular. In the study, I talked to seafarers to establish their attitudes towards current environmental practices and discussed with them ways of reducing pollution and encouraging shipping to be more environmentally friendly. To my surprise, seafarers valued the environmental auditing and monitoring regimes in the shipping sector. However, they regarded audit quality and strategic approaches to monitoring as key to trusting the whole regulatory system dealing with marine environmental issues. Most of those who took part talked explicitly about their will to change the current situation and agreed that transparent and regular audit processes contribute to environmental practices at both national and corporate level. But it became clear that for seafarers to regard audits as credible it was necessary for their goals and purpose to be made clear. This did not seem to be the case. In other words, many seafarers perceived the intended purpose of the audit and/or inspection regimes as cosmetic practices which potentially deepen the distrust of the whole audit system. As a result of negative experiences, senior officers on board tankers seem to have dismissed the audit process, treating it as another bureaucratic procedure which entails more paper work for them. Some seafarers reported that in some parts of the world the audit process was done as “window dressing”, involving an auditor boarding and recording a number of deficiencies or non-conformities without an actual inspection. Then, when returned to those employers with a fictitious report that the deficiencies had been rectified. Such occasional fraudulent practices threaten the legitimacy of the whole scheme, and reasons of various deception strategies employed by some of them. Alternatively, they felt that auditing was seen by some employers as a necessary component of the audit programmes. The ad hoc nature of such audits and inspections often witness at sea and result in the underestimation of the whole audit scheme.

Some seafarers reported that different shipping companies and ship operators as cosmetic practices which potentially deepen the distrust of the whole audit system. The ad hoc nature of such audits and inspections, especially in relation to the environment and monitoring, if conducted effectively. They felt that auditing entities adopted a “window dressing” approach, involving an auditor boarding and recording a number of deficiencies or non-conformities without an actual inspection. The common practice was returning to those employers with a fictitious report that the deficiencies had been rectified. Such occasional fraudulent practices threaten the legitimacy of the audit programme, and consequently in the legal framework and monitoring system. The ad hoc nature of such audits and inspections often witness at sea and result in the underestimation of the whole audit scheme.

Despite this, the level of support for an audit regime as a necessary component of environmental practice remains high among all the seafarers interviewed for this research. This is, I believe, because of the part of seafarers to protect the marine environment from dumping practices that they frequent witness at sea and in port. This desire provides hope that co-operation can still achieve the regulation of ocean dumping and environmental pollution via more effective audits across the sector.