

THE SIRC COLUMN



Neil Ellis, of the Seafarers' International Research Centre, reports on a study of safety concerns in the maritime industry

Working at sea is a dangerous occupation. Statistics suggest that rates of fatalities for seafarers are high compared to other industries such as rail or road transport. In the light of these rates of accidents, the industry has reacted with the development of safety procedures, such as the International Safety Management (ISM) code. This aims to ensure safety at sea, prevent human injury or loss of life, and avoid damage to the marine environment. However, despite such attempts to improve safety many concerns about safety still prevail.

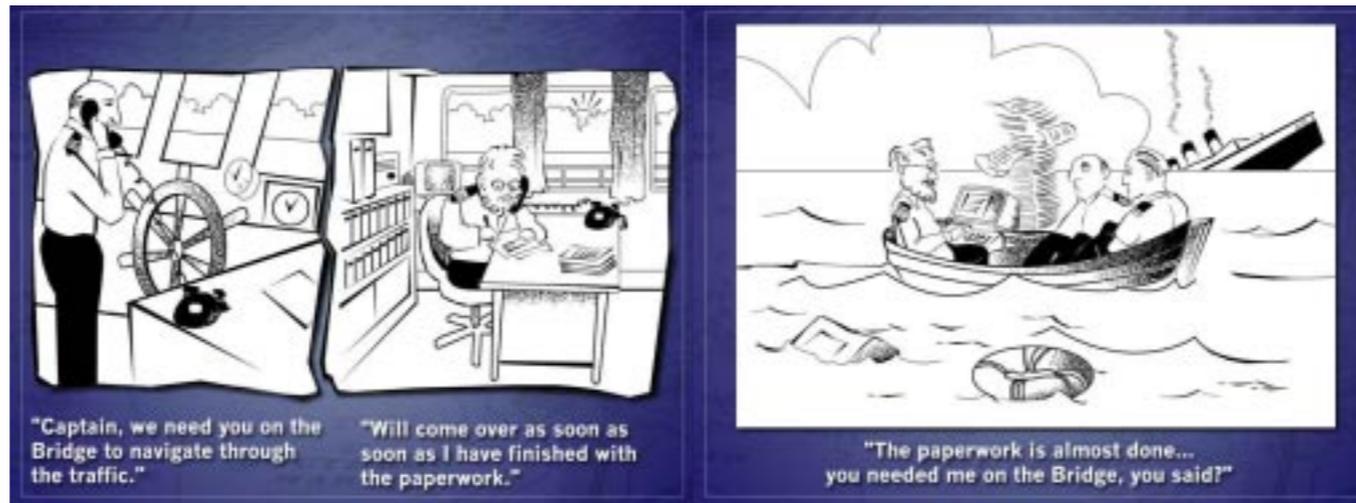
In this article I outline preliminary findings of a current study being conducted by the Lloyd's Register Research Unit (LRRU) within the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), which examines the safety concerns of those in the maritime industry. These were identified using focus groups conducted with managers of shipping companies, engineers, deck officers, ratings, and cadets, and interviews with a captain and a chief engineer. This aimed to identify the main areas of concern in relation to safety, which were used as the basis of a larger questionnaire survey.

A concern held by many seafarers

Key concerns about safety at sea

was that of high workloads, relating to a number of factors. Many saw the implication of new legislation, such as the ISM code as adding extra paperwork on top of already existing procedures. This additional paperwork was seen as unnecessary, a burden or simply a paper exercise. As one chief officer said: "You used to be able to do the same job a few years ago without having to fill all the paper work out, and you had a good idea of the hazards involved". In fact, a number of seafarers even went as far as to suggest that it actually stopped them from doing their "proper" job, which has obvious implications for safety. Indeed, many seafarers reported that they spent extra time in addition to their working hours in order to complete the paperwork, a fact recognised by seafarers and managers alike.

Another concern was the increased number of roles and tasks seafarers were required to take on. This was seen to relate to legislation, such as the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) code, which requires seafarers to take on roles and tasks. The upshot of this is that seafarers are taken away from their other duties; for example, in port a vessel must have a gangway watch. This not only takes the seafarer away from their other duties, but may also increase the workload for



Cartoon by Susmita and Syamantak Bhattacharya

other crew onboard. Trying to deal with this increased workload, some seafarers reported completing paperwork for jobs like routine tasks without having actually undertaken the associated task. Although this may occur only rarely there is concern that such practices may become commonplace.

Unsurprisingly, many seafarers also expressed concern about long working hours, often in excess of what they could legally record. In order to comply with working hours legislation many reported falsifying

or "fudging" working hour documentation. Although the immediate outcome of this is likely to be fatigue, a more worrying long term concern is that companies are not being made aware of these long hours, and therefore are not addressing them, and thus the practice continues.

Many felt that there were not enough crew onboard to cope with the workload. This was often thought to relate to new legislation such as ISPS, which was seen to take seafarers away from their daily tasks. The implications of such lack of crew

were particularly emphasised when seafarers talked about emergency situations or drills, as they indicated that crew levels may be so low as to compromise an effective onboard safety response. As one chief officer noted: "It has got to the point where there are some emergency scenarios that we work on while at sea, where we basically don't have enough people to cover."

Safety concerns were not only limited to practical considerations such as crew sizes and workloads, but also in terms of attitudes to safety. A

number reported not following safety procedures. This view was more common among older seafarers. They took the attitude: why should we wear safety equipment, we've never worn it before? Others exhibited a fatalistic attitude to safety, seeing seafaring simply as a dangerous job. Such attitudes may not only lead to dangerous behaviour onboard, but they also hinder the development of effective safety cultures across the industry and within companies.

Concerns about practical barriers to safety were also raised. The global nature of seafaring means that vessels are frequently crewed by multinational crews, and concerns about effective communication were raised. It was suggested that, in daily tasks, instructions may not be understood, or they may have to be translated by other crew. Although this may not be much of a problem in routine daily tasks, it may be important in emergency situations when tasks need to be conducted quickly and correctly.

Although this article presents the preliminary findings of a larger scale study, three areas do emerge which can be seen to have important implications for health and safety, namely:

1. Practices and regulation. Practices such as long working hours,

onboard tasks and the implementation of new regulations were seen to hinder the development of safe working practices, often culminating in fatigue. The industry as a whole needs to think about how it crews, and the work practices it employs so that they are more efficient, putting manageable workloads on the seafarer.

2. The inherent features of the modern shipping industry. Crewing policies nowadays favour multinational crewing patterns, and this is a feature of the modern day shipping industry which is here to stay. More attention needs to be paid during recruitment to insure that staff are sufficiently trained and have the skills to communicate effectively, and are not just chosen simply on cost.

3. Individual and group attitudes. Many seafarers did not see safety procedures as necessary or had a fatalistic attitude to safety. Therefore if companies, and the industry as a whole, wish to develop effective safety policies, they need to take steps to address these attitudes as at present they are a barrier to the development of an effective safety culture.

A key part of the next stage of the study being conducted by the Lloyd's Register Research Unit is a large scale questionnaire survey examining perceptions of safety of those working across the industry. If you receive a questionnaire, please complete and return it, as this is your chance to voice your concerns about safety, and to improve health and safety across the whole industry.