

THE SIRC COLUMN

How to take some of the stress out of the job



It is a problem for seafarers, says Neil Ellis of the Seafarers'

International Research Centre, but there are ways that both companies and individual seafarers can reduce the impact of stress

Stress is one of the most common reasons for work-related ill health and lost work time, with estimates suggesting that 50 per cent of work absenteeism is due to stress. In fact, it is thought that stress costs the EU, for example, 20 billion euros a year.

The types of things which have been shown to cause stress in the general work environment include: working under time pressures; having too much work to do; long and unsocial hours; badly designed shift systems; lack of participation in the decision-making process; job insecurities; poor relations with co-workers;

poor communications; and conflicting demands of work and home life.

When we look at the maritime industry these are the sort of factors which are experienced on a daily basis. Crews frequently have to work under time pressure as turn-around times in port get shorter and shorter. Seafarers work long and unsocial hours and often have to perform additional duties outside their shift periods. Shift patterns like six hours on, six hours off may also make it difficult for seafarers to get adequate rest and to find time to relax and unwind. Likewise the transition from sea watches to port duties can disrupt seafarers' capacity to rest.

The hierarchical nature of shipboard life may also mean that, on some ships, ratings and junior officers feel excluded from the decision-making process. For example, it is not uncommon for seafarers to be given specific tasks or jobs to do and instruction on how to do these tasks, but to be hardly ever asked what they think are the most appropriate methods of accomplishing them. This same rank system may also lead to poor

relationships and interactions with co-workers, as officers and ratings often have separate mess rooms and little opportunity to interact other than during work periods.

The changing nature of the industry has also led to crews being sourced worldwide as companies try to stay competitive. A negative consequence of this, especially in relation to stress, is that crews are often employed on short-term contracts with little job security. Tours of duty are also long, sometimes up to 12 months, during which seafarers are away from their families.

While many individuals can deal with one or two of these stressors, a combination may be less easy to cope with. However, it is just this sort of combination of factors which is frequently seen onboard ship.

The actual impact of stress may take a number of forms. Individuals may become irritable, lose concentration, be unable to relax, have difficulty thinking and making logical decisions, enjoy their work less and be less committed to it. There also may be physical manifestations such as poor sleep and an increase



STRESS relief: some companies provide better communications between seafarers and their families with subsidised phone cards and access to email, while hobbies and activities other than work can be beneficial for individual seafarers. (Photos: J Attenborough and B Law)

in minor, and in some cases, major illnesses. However, the impact of stress can also be more far reaching, and may affect the long-term effective and safe running of the vessel. For example, stress can lead to increased levels of illness onboard, increased staff turnover, poor performance and productivity, unsafe working practices,

dissatisfaction with work and increased accident rates.

So what can be done about stress? At a company level some organisations have approached the problems of high workloads by providing extra staff during busy coastal periods. For example, some innovative companies have begun to supply extra staff to take over onboard



paperwork during these periods. Companies may also provide longer term contracts, and in some cases better promotional opportunities as, in the long run, this means they maintain more motivated and dedicated crew who feel secure and valued. Better provision for communications between the seafarers and their family life is also sometimes made, such

as subsidised phone cards and access to email facilities, so that a better balance can be maintained between home and work life. Although these measures might be seen by some companies as costly, many organisations recognise that if crews are motivated and happy, they tend to work more efficiently, have less time off due to illness, and remain at sea and loyal to their employers.

Other things that can be done include the more efficient scheduling of shift patterns by senior officers in order to provide more opportunities for rest and relaxation. Greater emphasis can be placed on encouraging more social interaction onboard, such as curry nights or karaoke competitions. These may sound trivial, but they bring people together and they can help to dissipate stress. Encouraging discussion on how best to perform tasks may also be beneficial, giving seafarers more control over their work, making them feel valued and potentially highlighting quicker and more effective ways of doing things.

Seafarers can do things for themselves as well. For example,

there are techniques which may help to reduce the impact of stress upon them. Exercise (even simply walking round the deck) can reduce stress, as can meditation, stretching or relaxation techniques. Hobbies, or doing something other than work, can act as an escape from the everyday difficulties of work. Simply chatting to other colleagues and socialising may help to reduce worries and stress and provide a release from monotony and boredom.

Within the maritime industry there is an increasing interest in stress, and research has begun to look at how stress reduction and prevention techniques can be adapted from other industries. At the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), as part of the Leonardo da Vinci Stress Prevention Activities Project, I have just completed a guide which looks at the effects of stress in the maritime industry, and techniques for addressing this which incorporate both sea staff and managers. If you wish to find out more about this please go to the following web site <http://www.pepen.gr/spa/index.htm> or contact me at EllisN@cf.ac.uk