

Why should seafarers care about what researchers do?

Neil Ellis of the Seafarers International Research Centre shines some light on the role of maritime researchers and explains why their work is important to seafarers

I recently returned from a week-long seminar in London which presented an overview of many aspects of the shipping industry. A message that was repeatedly emphasised was that the general public has little concept of what happens at sea or in the marine industry, with the experiences of many confined to ferry channel crossings, or seeing disasters on the news. This lack of understanding of a seafaring career and its “mystification” parallels my own experience of being a researcher in the industry.

Frequently, the people with whom I engage have little or no idea of what researchers in the maritime industry do! Therefore I decided that in this article I would briefly explain the activities of researchers in the maritime industry and why your help with our

research is so important.

Researchers in the maritime sector come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are from academic institutes which conduct research within the industry. These researchers, such as those at the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), may have been seafarers themselves before qualifying as researchers and beginning a new research-based career. Alternatively, they may come from a traditional academic background and have developed an interest and expertise in the maritime sector.

There is no limit to what such researchers may take an interest in. However, those at SIRC, where I work, are interested in a very broad range of topics, from health and safety at sea, to the effects of legislation across the industry. They also employ a wide range of techniques to conduct their research, including interviews, postal questionnaires and on-board observation, as well as less interactive approaches such as reviewing documents on

maritime polices and academic publications. In order to better illustrate what researchers do and how they go about it, I will briefly outline a number of research projects that have been, and are currently being, conducted at SIRC.

The Fatigue at Sea Research project conducted by the Centre for Occupational and Health Psychology (COHP) at Cardiff University, in conjunction with SIRC, looked at the critical issue of seafarer fatigue. The research examined fatigue using a number of methods. Researchers sailed with vessels and tested crew responses to repeated computer tasks before and after shifts, as well as recording work and sleep patterns. Fatigue was also measured using physiological indicators through the collection of saliva samples and the associated measurement of cortisol, which is an established indicator for stress. Questionnaires were also distributed by seafaring unions asking about a wide range of issues concerning fatigue, such as working patterns and leave periods.

SIRC researchers are interested in a broad range of topics: here Neil Ellis carries out some research at a Coast Guard station.



Research relating to the industry doesn't always come from within the industry, or involve the collection of new information, and this is the case with the Stress Prevention Activities (SPA) project which is funded by the European Commission's "Leonardo" programme. This project used existing stress prevention techniques for a range of employment sectors such as small business and vocational educational training institutes, which SIRC adapted for use in the maritime industry.

A recently completed study considered risk management in relation to the exposure

of seafarers to hazardous chemicals at sea. The study was conducted by Professor David Walters, and it used a mixture of research methods to look at seafarers' exposure to hazardous chemicals on cargo ships, and the effectiveness of risk management in relation to the transport of hazardous materials by sea. Literature from academic and scientific sources on issues of chemical risk management in other industries was reviewed in order to draw parallels with the maritime industry as well as to make recommendations for safe practices. This was also supported by interviews with

people in both the maritime industry and the chemical industry.

Finally, the project that I am currently working on very much depends upon input from fleet personnel managers. It is the Lloyd's Register Educational Trust-funded Training and Technology Project and is part of a series of studies being undertaken at the Lloyd's Register Educational Trust Research Unit. This project is concerned with the training provided for seafarers when new technologies and equipment are introduced on vessels. A number of different research methods have been used within this project, including interviews with seafarers about how new technologies are introduced on board, training received, and access to training.

When a team of us recently travelled to Glasgow to conduct interviews with seafarers, one potential participant became quite animated and suggested that our research would lead to recommendations that would force him to undertake further training in

his leave time. His concerns were very understandable as in his company, as with many others, the burden of much training falls upon seafarers who may not only be expected to train in their vacations, but also to pay for it themselves. Nevertheless, the seafarer's concerns took us by surprise. We were in the very early stages of the research and had yet to form a view of what the findings were likely to be. We did not know whether seafarers would tell us that they received adequate training when new equipment was placed on ships, or whether they would tell us that such training was inadequate.

Sadly, because the concerned seafarer did not want to participate in an interview and have his views recorded as part of the study, his opinions cannot be reported in our findings unless they happen to be echoed by a formal research participant. In our reporting of findings we have to confine ourselves to the analysis of the transcripts of interviews with participants, or alternatively questionnaire

data if that is the form the research takes. This must be done in a systematic fashion and we cannot make use of anecdotes or casual conversations when coming to conclusions or making recommendations. It is one of the things that sets research apart from journalism.

This is why we would encourage all seafarers to formally take part in research studies that take place in this sector, no matter who conducts them. It is only by actually taking part that your voices can be heard, and we think that you have some very valuable contributions to make to the range of debates in which maritime sector members engage. So if the opportunity arises, please have your say!

For more information on any of the projects discussed in this article visit SIRC's website at: www.sirc.cf.ac.uk

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