

IMPROVING THE SELECTION AND RETENTION OF SEAGOING PERSONNEL

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To write about selection at a time when the maritime business is facing a shortage of seagoing personnel may look contradictory to many. The main problem today seems to be how to attract people to a seagoing career rather than to preventing or discouraging them.

I should point out that the scope of this paper is limited to the perspective of individual shipowners. The problems of the seeming lack of attractiveness of the whole maritime business obviously calls for international and joint strategies which ought to be dealt with by a joint and international body.

I will, however, demonstrate that there is no contradiction between careful selection of seagoing personnel and increasing the attractiveness of maritime industry. I will also demonstrate that strategies for organizational improvement will have the same outcome and also help to retain people.

Before talking of selection and retention, we must try to identify what we mean by "Attractiveness" in the working life, i.e. the qualities that make a particular type of work attractive.

I have attempted to make a list of things which in my experience are important qualities. Their order of importance is of course individual and they are therefore listed without any implied rank.

Fair social and economic benefits

Status

Work within a field of importance

Good working conditions

Safety

Variety in work
Responsibility
Influence
Participation
Enjoyment
Wide authority
Appreciation
Room for own initiatives
Fair ratio between work and spare time
Good managers and good management
Possibility to play a part in something bigger than oneself
Involvement
High expectations of one's performance
Belonging in a social context
Clear professional identity
Pride
Personal and professional development
Motivation
Being kept informed
Respect
Convenience
Excitement

The reason for some of the above items being written in italics will become clear later.

For the sake of clarity I have also made a list of qualities that probably reduce the attractiveness of a job, a sort of "reversed" list with a few items added.

Unfair social and economic benefits
Poor status
Feeling unimportant and replaceable
Risky work
Dangerous environment
Overload
Poor working conditions
No expectations of one's performance
Boredom
Repetitiveness
Poor management or poor managers
No influence
No appreciation
No enjoyment

No social context
No responsibilities
No identity
No or limited information
Disrespect
No authority
Detailed instructions
No convenience
No motivation
No own initiatives allowed or expected

This latter list is of course qualities that make work "Unattractive".

HOW TO BECOME ATTRACTIVE

1. Selecting Personnel Carefully

This has to do with breaking up old habits and traditions and learning by looking at other industries. Today it is common in other industries to be very careful when hiring personnel both on the managerial and on the subordinate level. For this the personnel staff are specially trained in interview techniques. They also possess the proper assessment methods and traditions. Moreover, competent applicants nowadays usually expect to be carefully evaluated before being hired. This gives them a sense of how serious the employer is and the importance of the recruitment, which is vital for their own evaluation of the position.

In the maritime business we should be equally careful when hiring or promoting personnel. Today we have specially designed assessment methods for the maritime industry, and interviewing techniques which can be taught and learned. With the proper methodology, combined with skills in assessment, there will be fewer mistakes and, as in other industries, a shipowner can also find personnel with a potential beyond the position in question, i.e. people whom it might be profitable to invest in.

Any shipping company that acquires a reputation for being something special will be attractive to applicants. Any applicant or employee who is good enough to have the possibility to choose a company will do so, and shipping companies will compete with each other to hire the best. When salaries and benefits are equal, the best professionals will apply for positions in a company they can be *proud* of and which gives them *opportunities*.

A thorough selection procedure before employment or promotion conveys a message to applicants as well as to those inside the shipowner's own organization: "In our company

we don't accept just anyone". This implies that only quality personnel will be employed or promoted.

It is a common misconception that by being careful in recruitment and selection there is a risk of not getting any applicants at all. Experience in other fields as well as in the maritime business shows that it is the other way around. High-profile shipping companies often receives spontaneous applications and receives more and better quality response from advertisements than others. A company or a line of education to which admission is difficult tends to get the most applications. A university that is *prestigious*, i.e. known for quality and difficult admission, is never without students.

Ambitious people try to gain admission to schools, companies and institutions where they are *hand-picked* and can feel *pride*. These are organizations whom they know would *not pick just anyone* and which therefore give them some extra *prestige*.

It is also beneficial for people within the organization to know that their workmates are carefully assessed and therefore skilful and good individuals. The result is that employees get more *confidence* in each other.

Moreover, knowing that subordinates are selected and found good often makes a supervisor very keen on *training* properly because failure may be interpreted as the supervisor's failure, not the result of some deficiency on the subordinate's part. It is thus no longer so easy to blame others and dismiss them as incompetent.

At Marine Profile we have developed an assessment method called Masterline Marine and, as its name suggests, it is especially developed for use within the maritime industry. We have also designed an assessment system for maritime academies which is scheduled for implementation soon.

By using psychological selection procedures for applicants to our academies, we expect to get superior quality officers and engineers in the future, to be able to raise the level of teaching and also to attract more applicants. The latter is because both the academies and the training will probably be looked upon as more *prestigious* than before.

2. Retaining personnel

In order to retain skilful personnel, a shipowner should create a working climate which is profitable for *professional growth*. A shipowner could launch programmes aiming at implementing teamwork and *good management* onboard as well as ashore, not forgetting the crucial interface between land and shipboard organizations. The task should be to implement and maintain a good company culture and good cooperation between the land and shipboard organizations. In fact, they should be looked upon as a single entity.

I can find no other organization more suitable for teamwork than a ship. The work is at times hazardous, people live at their working place, they have their spare time together, those involved have a common task, the working group is geographically isolated, all members are in a potentially hostile environment and have to be able to lean on each other, often several have the same work and similar training, everybody plays an important role in order to fulfil the common task and people receive further training and gain new experience by learning from others.

A crew with teamwork implies that *everybody counts*, that everyone plays his part and belongs to a *social entity*. It also implies *well informed* team members *and distribution of responsibilities and trust* by the master out to every subgroup or individual.

The manner of work onboard is, however, a mirror of how the entire organization is managed. If teamwork is lacking in the shore organization, teamwork can never be expected to grow onboard. The way managers ashore are running the organization will be evident in all its parts. If, for example, top management is authoritarian, their authoritarian style will be manifest throughout the organization. People will tend to give each other only limited responsibilities and lots of orders, even onboard the ships.

When there are limited responsibilities there is also limited information and then people will be in need of orders. Without information no one can be expected to take initiative; it is too risky and even "initiative-prone" individuals feel they can't because of lack of information. When people cease to take initiative, the management notices that and feels that they also have to give orders concerning details. This vicious circle makes everyone work too hard and in too fragmented and detailed a way. The management may after a while be burdened by all the responsibility and suffer severely from a lack of confidence in their subordinates, ashore as well as onboard.

To create good teamwork, both onboard and ashore, management must create a single entity out of a geographically spread organization. The shipowner should start the change process by using a business concept or a vision, i.e. he should realistically express what kind of player he wants to be and how he wants to play. This should not be expressed in economic or general terms but in such a specific way that everyone, irrespective of position, can identify with the *common objective* and feel *motivated* and *proud* to be *involved*.

Once the vision is formulated, the shipowner needs a strategy to reach the desired goal. He also has to formulate this and assure himself of everyone's *commitment* and *participation* by constant two-way *communication*. By doing this, he is *setting the standards* for the company and the standards for everyone involved. With a well formulated vision, the shipowner gives himself the tools to *evaluate the performance*, to assess and to react when necessary. Without a proper vision, there is a risk that the company will drift because circumstances may be in charge and not the management.

We have been working as consultants along these lines with other industries since 1982 and have recently started a similar development process with shipowners.

We have found that a well formulated vision creates a base for teamwork throughout the organization by letting well *informed* people *participate* to materialize the vision. They thus *become a part of something that is bigger than themselves*, something that is more *exciting* and *challenging* than their individual tasks because it places their efforts in a larger context with a potential to place them at the front of their business.

Masterline Marine

A final word about the assessment system Masterline Marine. It is an assessment method which can be learned and utilized by the shipowner's or manning company's own personnel officers. In connection with the training in Masterline Marine, they also receive training in interview techniques. The instructor is a professional management consultant and psychologist.

It is worth mentioning that the three major high-speed ferry operators in Sweden, Stena, TT-line and SweFerry, all use extensive interviews and psychological testing before allowing anyone to work onboard their new ferries. All officers, engineers and pursers are carefully assessed by us as regards their personal characteristics and attitudes and all crew members, catering personnel included, are assessed by the shipowners' own personnel officers using Masterline Marine.

Besides the question of safety consciousness and stress tolerance, the above mentioned shipowners also place emphasis on suitable personal character traits. In addition to safety, they want their personnel to cooperate in a new and modern way and to form teams. This is not only considered a matter of high safety standards and bridge management, it also marks the launching of a new business concept where the personnel and their attitudes and *motivation* are central, adding to the respective company's competitive strength.

Masterline Marine gives the shipowner information about an individual's overall capacity and personal style. Masterline Marine also sheds light upon the individual's capacity for *involvement*, *motivation*, *influence* as well as attitudes towards his work and *social* and intellectual capabilities.

Masterline Marine takes about an hour to do and consists of three forms, with a set of instructions, as well as computer software. Masterline Marine is culturally independent and used both in Asia and Europe. A Chinese version is in the process of translation.

I believe you now can see the connection, or make your own comparison, between the majority of the "attractiveness" items in italics and the outcomes of my suggestions in the text.