ISWAN

Social Interaction Matters (SIM)

Project Report Phase One, for the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN)

Photo by: Peter Cornelissen

Executive Summary

The Social Interaction Matters (SIM) Project was initiated with the primary objective of encouraging social interaction on board. This was achieved by conducting research that examined the relevant drivers and barriers to the promotion of social interaction and specific activities which seafarers around the world identified as helping engage people. The project recognises the importance of crew coming together during their leisure time and the contribution improved mental and physical well-being makes to efficiency and safety.

Seafarers are key workers, recognised as such since the COVID-19 pandemic. This has resulted in dramatically extended voyages and has focused attention on the importance of social interaction and seafarers' well-being.

The SIM Project has identified or confirmed the following:

Social interaction can improve the mental and physical health and well-being of seafarers and demonstrated clear benefits for:

- developing trust and better working relations with other crew members (family away from home).

- developing team cohesion and improved resilience that can increase motivation and productivity at sea.

- improved safety practice.

- combatting isolation and providing a release from the daily work environment.

The research also identified areas that can negatively impact opportunities for bringing people together socially on board, including:

- fatigue, lack of time and increased workloads.

- shorter port calls and less shore leave.

- the effectiveness of the leadership and management skills on board and ashore.

The SIM project, sponsored by the Maritime Coastguard Agency and the Red Ensign Group, is a three-phased project, with this research element making up Phase One. Research was conducted between March and September 2020. The research collected information from a review of literature, a widely distributed email survey targeting all maritime stakeholders and ten semi-structured interviews, also with experienced maritime stakeholders.

The research additionally identified areas of controversy including whether alcohol restrictions and Wi-Fi on board helped or hindered social interaction. The data conclusively showed the benefits of encouraging social interaction to take place on board and highlighted the need for sensitivity paid to the various nationalities that might be sailing on the vessel. Different cultures have been seen to influence the preference of certain activities and how the interactions take place. Generational as well as gender differences were also noted to influence the perception of the drivers and barriers of social interaction. Additionally, Wi-Fi was seen as essential to social interaction by many current seafarers, but less so from non-seafarers working on shore.

Future considerations for the industry need to have seafarers' well-being at the forefront of decision-making concerning ship operations, ship design, and crewing. Leaders and managers should be current and sensitive to a changing industry, continuous crew development and efficient vessel operations. The shipping industry, like others, must be able to adapt to external influences, whether this is guided by technology, a pandemic, or other factors. A flexible and sustainable management approach, and one which puts people first, is therefore essential.

Key research findings

- Regular social interaction on board benefits physical and mental health, happiness and motivation, helps build relationships, teams and trust, improves work safety, and reduces isolation and stress (pp.15-18).

- Good leadership, supporting an inclusive and unifying on board culture, is necessary to encourage crew to interact comfortably together (pp.8, 27-28, 30, 37, 49-51).

- Increasingly heavy workloads and fatigue were the biggest barriers to social interaction on board (p.24).

- Physical activities were more engaged with on board than online activities. The opposite is true with activities undertaken in port (p.20).

- Respondents between 29 – 40 years old were most likely to think that social interaction had increased greatly on board over the span of their careers. Figures for this decline considerably for people 41 years old and above (pp.22-23).

- Wi-Fi was viewed as both a driver and barrier of social interaction (pp. 41-43). It was more likely to be considered a barrier by non-seafarers and those with over 20 years+ experience within the industry (p.26).

- The top activities for generating social interaction were barbeques (Food) (p.31), table tennis (Sports) (p.32)' quizzes, games and cards (Entertainment) (p.33) and using WhatsApp groups (Social media) (p.34).

- A balance needs to be struck between achieving efficient shipping operations and the social needs of the crew that facilitate this. Many industry stakeholders are collectively responsible and must work together to ensure the best crew welfare.

- Further research is recommended into the impact of gender and diversity on social interaction on board. Focused investigation is also suggested into the specific role leadership can play in maintaining a healthy work and life balance for all crew on board.

- The research confirms that **SOCIAL INTERACTION MATTERS.**

Section 5: Conclusions

The SIM study supports the current literature and confirms that social interaction is valuable and has a positive impact on mental and physical health, general well-being and promotes on board safety. During the current pandemic, with restrictions on leaving a vessel and many extended contracts, the environment that seafarers live and work in, has more relevance over this than ever. This environment is influenced by the senior officers, in particular, the Master who must establish a supportive, comfortable, and safe environment where all the crew can work and relax together. Support from the shore office is also vital for this role. However, social gatherings can also happen informally on board amongst any of the crew if there is support from senior officers for this.

Providing seafarers with recreational distractions to help them connect with one another allows them to take a mental break away from their work. On a personal level this is vital but the benefits of enabling crew to socialise regularly together are far reaching and the impacts of crew cohesion and unity need to be widely recognised by shipping companies. As the research shows, people work better together when they have had opportunity to build up relationships with each other, establishing trust and familiarity. These bonds have positive implications for the safety culture on board.

Many of the barriers of social interaction noted in the research were seen to impact on each other. For example, smaller crew sizes and increased workloads can lead to fatigue and isolation with seafarers simply not having enough energy to mix socially during their down time. Although measures can be put in place to facilitate recreational gatherings on board, it is these fundamental issues that need to be addressed for a long-term impact to take effect.

Ultimately shipping companies and owners are best placed to ensure that their vessels are designed and equipped to adequately provide a balance for crew to work, rest and socialise on board together. Senior officers may need to be trained in the necessary skills to support an inclusive on board culture for all of the crew and ensure they are valued equally and are encouraged to interact socially. Crew well-being is of the utmost importance, and as this research has highlighted, social interaction plays a significant part in maintaining this. Leadership that employs 'soft skills' and supports democracy on board is an important component of this.

Other stakeholders, including governments, can also play a vital role through the provision of funding for port-based welfare and the inclusive implementation of the MLC and other conventions. Ports should make every effort to ensure seafarers can leave the ship where possible and facilitate welfare visitors on board. As the research indicates, these can have a very positive impact on seafarers who have been away from home for a long time.

Crew differences including nationality, gender, and age, should be considered in the planning of social activities as these factors can influence recreational preferences, for example, the use of social media to interact with others. Further research is recommended in these areas, particularly concerning gender, diversity, and the impacts of leadership on board. It is therefore important for ship management to consider what engages and brings people together and adapt suitable activities to their own company requirements. The research provides numerous examples of such activities and these can be adapted to accommodate most vessel types, voyage patterns, nationalities, and time constraints. Ensuring that crew engage socially, even for small amounts of time every day, is vital and should be a priority on every voyage however long. Ultimately, social interaction matters.

Next steps

6.1: Phase Two

Building on these research findings, ISWAN will work with a variety of interested shipping companies to trial a range of social interaction initiatives at sea. This will help to pinpoint a specific range of interactions and drivers that work best in different scenarios and on board various vessel types, with the aim of strengthening crew cohesion on board.

Each company will dedicate at least one vessel to the trial. Considering crew makeup (such as nationality, age, and interests), the companies will select one free or low-cost initiative to trial on board every few weeks for a minimum of three months to a maximum of six. The initiatives are divided into four categories originating from the findings of Phase One: entertainment, sports, food, and social media.

6.2: Phase Three

During Phase three of the SIM Project, ISWAN will use the data and feedback from the company trials to develop guidance for shipping companies in the form of a toolkit, which will be shared publicly. The toolkit will document proven successes, recommendations, and ways to overcome challenges to social interaction on board, all with the end goal of happier, healthier, safer, and more engaged crews on board. Click here for further information about ISWAN's Social Interaction Matters (SIM) Project. **https://bit.ly/2WqpHxe**