

Social Interaction Matters (SIM)

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



Photo by: Peter Cornelissen

Dr Kate Pike, November 2020

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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.

Foreword

ISWAN is delighted to be able to share this important work which shines a light on the essential role of crew cohesion and social interaction on board. We know that connecting with others is a fundamental part of good mental wellbeing. We also know that it often isn't straightforward for seafarers who spend months away from their family and friends and must live, work and socialise in the same place; sometimes for their entire voyage.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the direction of the project's early stages but it has added even more weight to the great need for better relationships on board with seafarers stuck on their vessels for many months.

The findings in this report not only emphasise how seafarers value positive social interaction on board, they highlight other important areas for seafarers that we hope to investigate further in the future. The report also complements ISWAN's latest guidance for shipping companies 'Mentally Healthy Ship' which draws attention to the role of the employer in promoting socialisation on board.

I have been extremely encouraged by the overwhelming enthusiasm for this work from seafarers and shipping companies alike, particularly given this very difficult time for the industry during the pandemic. I would like to thank Dr Kate Pike for her insightful work on this report and also Trinity House, the Red Ensign Group and Maritime Coastguard Agency for making the project possible through their generous funding. I look forward to moving forward to the next phase of the project.



Roger Harris,
Executive Director
ISWAN

Seafarers. They are the lifeblood of the maritime industry. They spend months at sea working to keep the global economy moving. We know all too well that they face untold challenges while working on board which has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding how and why social interaction matters and improving things so it can happen more often, will help to lead to improvements in mental health.

We are increasingly aware that life onboard can take a toll on the health and wellbeing of seafarers, which in turn can have an impact on the health of the organisation through reduced productivity and more accidents. We know from a wealth of experience that wellbeing is a critical and an often overlooked part of safety. This report identifies practical ways for shipping companies to improve wellbeing by strengthening social interaction. It also echoes many of the recommendations made in the MCA's 'Wellbeing at Sea: A Guide for Organisations' and 'Wellbeing at Sea: A Pocket Guide for Seafarers'.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency and Red Ensign Group (REG) are very proud to have been able to sponsor this project with help of Trinity House and funding from UK Government. On behalf of the REG, I would like to sincerely say a big "Thank you" to ISWAN, Dr Kate Pike, and all those who have been involved with this project to date. We look forward to seeing the outcomes of the next phases.



Katy Ware,
Director of UK Maritime Services & Permanent
Representative of the UK to the IMO

"Social relationships and networks can also act as protective factors against the onset or recurrence of mental ill-health and enhance recovery from mental disorders. **Interaction with other people is an inevitable prerequisite for human development.**" – (World Health Organization, 2005)

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.**

Acknowledgements:

This project, examining the importance of social interaction on board and at sea, has been made possible by UK Government funding, administered through Trinity House and sponsored by The Maritime Coastguard Agency (MCA) and Red Ensign Group (REG).



The International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) is a membership organisation which works to promote and support the welfare of seafarers all over the world. ISWAN offers a free, 24-hour, multilingual helpline, SeafarerHelp, one of the direct welfare services they provide to seafarers. Other services include relief funds for seafarers and their family members in need, as well as a range of health information resources.

ISWAN works with companies, unions, governments, welfare organisations and ports for the implementation of the ILO Maritime Labour Convention, 2006. They support those who establish and provide welfare facilities and services in port and on ships.

ISWAN is funded by membership subscriptions, grants from foundations, sponsorship and earned income. The main funders include – the ITF Seafarers' Trust, The TK Foundation, Seafarers UK and Trafigura Foundation, for their continued support.



The MCA works to prevent the loss of life on the coast and at sea. They produce legislation and guidance on maritime matters and provide certification to seafarers. 2020 has brought a focus on the human element of the maritime industry with an initial review completed to enable an update of Leadership and Management courses. An emphasis on suicide prevention also led the MCA to have a strong interest in why social interaction matters and how seafarers and communities can be supported.



The Red Ensign Group continues to lead the way in seafarer welfare as the Isle of Man Ship Registry gets set to launch the first ever App designed by a ship registry to support them. Describing seafarers' mental health as "becoming more acute" and recognising increasing isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Red Ensign Group are keen to investigate what can be done to support the lengthening times spent at sea.

Our grateful thanks go to all those who contributed to the research by providing information for the surveys and interviews, and for the discussion during the Webinar. InterManager, particularly Captain Kuba Szymanski, have also supported the SIM project and widely extended the coverage of the survey through their network. Our thanks also go to the project's steering group members¹ and the ISWAN team for their support and media coverage of the project. Special thanks to Jason Zuidema for his insights into the adapting and valuable role of port welfare charities. Thank you also to Sarah Honebon for her kind help, support, and feedback throughout Phase One of this project.

1. The steering group for the SIM project includes: Andy Window – Chair ISWAN, Ian Blair – MCA, Hazel Lewis – MCA, Natalie Shaw – ICS, David Appleton – Nautilus International, Ilona Denisenko – IMHA and Jason Zuidema – ICMA & NAMMA.

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Section 1: Introduction

ISWAN, with support from the Maritime Coastguard Agency and Red Ensign Group, established the Social Interaction Matters (SIM) Project to help improve crew well-being and cohesiveness for seafarers worldwide. The key objectives of the SIM project are to better understand how social interaction can be promoted on board and to identify the main barriers and drivers to this. The SIM project is being run in three phases and this report documents the research findings of Phase One.

The SIM project was initiated before the COVID-19 pandemic started to impact people's lives across the globe. Seafarers have subsequently found themselves facing extended contracts, closed borders, quarantine, and isolation as a result of national infection reduction measures. Robert Waldinger of 'What makes life good?' stated:

"Loneliness kills. It's as powerful as smoking or alcoholism."

And it is vital that this is addressed (TED 2018). Under the current circumstances focus is needed on seafarers' welfare and the benefits of fostering healthy interactions on board now more than ever.

Positive human interaction helps to develop the healthy relationships which are vital for well-being and mental health (WHO 2005; ESRC 2013; NHS 2019). Reis and Gable (2003) state that:

"Social support, the belief that one is cared for, loved, esteemed and valued, has been recognized as one of the most (if not the most) influential determinants of well-being for people of all ages and cultures."

The World Health Organization (WHO) adopts a definition of Health as "physical, mental, and social well-being" which acknowledges the value of social relationships and networks in protecting mental health and promoting the healthy development of people, even to the point of extending life spans (Mineo 2017, Forgeard et al. 2011). Isolation and loneliness are common causes and consequences of mental health conditions and may be exaggerated by imposed quarantines due to the COVID-19 outbreak (UN, 2020).

The nature of working at sea means that seafarers are often away from their home, family and friends, for extended periods (ISWAN 2020; SIRC 2019), and the crew they work with become their 'family' away from home. The extent to which the

development of this 'family' is facilitated depends on crewing policies and contracts which determine how often crew board vessels they may not be familiar with, as well as working with crew they have never met before. The fluid nature of many crewing contracts means that crew have less time to get to know one another and the cycle is repeated after each voyage. In contrast, stable crewing, where crew return to the same vessel, or one of a similar type, for more than one voyage, allows stronger relationships to be developed on board, promoting a greater sense of familiarity, trust, and responsibility towards one another (Pike et al. 2019). Identifying the barriers and drivers to meaningful and sustained social interaction on board is vital for the well-being of the crew across all crewing policies and contracts. The SIM project examined these issues in detail.

Providing a working environment that supports good work relations is important and can provide job satisfaction, productivity, better morale and ultimately, quality of life. Social capital theory argues that

"individuals' relationship networks determine the extent to which individuals can gain access to information as well as receive social and emotional support within an organisation" (Kao et al 2014).

Resilience developed, particularly from social interaction, which is arguably reduced on vessels lacking social areas by design or management, enables deeper levels of trust to develop (Heffernan 2011). Simply, a social value and advantage to a job but as noted by Gregory and Shanahan (2017), in times of emergency the cohesion that has been developed from this personal insight into character, strengths and weakness could influence the overall recovery from a serious incident or accident. Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk (Edmondson 1999). It therefore follows that companies striving to provide the best working environments for their seafarers are often rewarded with increased productivity and high retention figures and can readily attract new recruits. Being the 'Employer of Choice' should be a goal (HSE nd).

The leadership and management from senior officers should be responsible for setting a good example and the on-board culture that instils a positive environment and supports the well-being of all the crew. Seafarers need an environment where they can relax and engage with each other in their free time. When senior officers lead by example, on shore and at sea, it can have a

positive effect on the rest of the crew, promoting a more relaxed and trusting environment. Despite the responsibility of higher ranks, these individuals must also be self-aware and look after their own physical and mental health. The pandemic has put more pressure on leaders on board, well above their usual responsibilities, and it is important that burnout does not occur so that they can continue to work well and safely whilst supporting the rest of the crew (Splash 247 2020).

Crews are often diverse and multinational and have much to add within the right working environment including productivity and creativity; therefore, ensuring crew cohesion is important to the smooth running of a vessel. Multinational crews add diversity and complexity when it comes to understanding different languages and cultural preferences. This should be considered when bringing crew together socially to ensure that the recreational activities that are available on board will suit the majority and maximise engagement (SIRC, 2019).

Time and thought can be invested by shipping companies into helping crews connect on board outside of their work. Helping the crew to relax together, rather than alone can be achieved through a range of activities that do not have to cost very much, if anything. Both physical and passive forms of recreation can engage people including activities such as sports events, social media, entertainment and cooking. Outside and inside activities can all play an important role in bringing people together on board (Eigenschenk et al. 2019) but will be dependent on the ship design (space available), and the weather, for example.

Shipping companies should assess the barriers to social interaction that seafarers often face, such as increased workloads and long working hours, which can lead to fatigue and isolation (ITF 2020). These barriers can impact on seafarers' well-being, safety, and the level of engagement they are able and willing to invest outside of work (Barnett and Pekcan 2012; SIRC, 2020). Changes in access to amenities on board, such as the decline of bars, as well as operational and regulatory constraints that effect on shore leave for

example, will impact on recreation and should be included in this assessment.

Wi-Fi access and better social connections with family, friends and community have been widely shown to improve happiness mentally and physically, providing a sense of purpose and belonging and sustaining strong bonds (Nautilus nd). Any potential negative impacts are likely to be mitigated in ships with strong shipboard communities.

The current pandemic has highlighted challenges to well-being across the shipping industry, with many thousands of seafarers having extended contracts, due to new travel restrictions. These have caused crew change delays and

“Long hours of work, extension of contracts after extensions, stress, fatigue, trauma are the new normal for seafarers who continue to keep the lifelines of the world up and running. And in return they are treated with suspicion, contempt and get turned away from ports.” (Nautilus, 2020).

This situation has emphasised significant repercussions and a detrimental impact on seafarers' mental health, including in extreme cases, suicide particularly amongst the high-risk group of young men aged between 15 – 29 years (WHO nd.; Samaritians 2019; Seafarers UK 2020). However, the pandemic has also provided the opportunity to learn from good practice and successful responses that have come from dealing with COVID-19 at sea.

The shipping industry must constantly be aware and supportive of the well-being of its seafarers. Due to its complex nature, shipping will always need to adapt to global influences, the most recent of these being the COVID-19 pandemic (IMO 2020). Over time new technologies also present an uncertain future for seafarers, and shipping companies must do their utmost to protect one of their greatest assets. The well-being of seafarers is fundamental to the success of the industry, and their quality of life on board is crucial. Whatever the future holds, the well-being and social needs of seafarers will always be a key part of a sustainable future.

Section 2: Methods

The SIM Project, Phase One was conducted between March and August 2020. It was designed to consider the barriers and drivers of social interaction, and to gather suggestions of activities which have successfully brought crew together on board, alongside other factors which impact on this interaction. Data collected in Phase One followed a mixed method's approach comprised of a literature review, an email survey, and semi-structured interviews. The literature review identified key areas in which seafarers engage in activities on board and how these might be improved. From this, the survey questions were developed to measure strength of opinion and prioritisation of these topics and were subsequently explored in more detail with open questions within the semi-structured interviews. The project also hosted a webinar² to discuss the survey findings more widely with interested maritime stakeholders.

2.1: Surveys

A self-complete email survey collected data anonymously from maritime stakeholders and was made available for six weeks from April 15th to May 26th. The survey questions were piloted before the survey went live. The pilot included two non-native English speakers who were members of the ISWAN team and four people working in the maritime industry. Their responses helped to highlight areas of ambiguity and gauged ease of response to the survey. Minor revisions were then made to increase the survey's clarity and the overall usability. The survey was then widely distributed through ISWAN's networks, and many others including InterManager, Nautical Institute (NI), Nautilus International, Maritime Coastguard Agency (MCA) and the Red Ensign Group (REG). The survey was also extensively promoted on social media platforms to increase uptake.

2.2: Interviews

Following the surveys, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with industry stakeholders and were similarly representative of the survey respondents. Four out of the ten interviewees were female, seven were current seafarers and one was an ex-seafarer who was also a shipping manager. One worked for a P&I Club and another in a seafarers' mission. Five of the respondents were in the 29-40 year old age group and five of the interviewees had over 20 years' experience within the industry. All the interviews were conducted on the phone or via Skype and took an average of half an hour. The interview questions focused on drawing out detailed responses relating to the main themes that were raised by the survey. Open questions helped to obtain opinions that have been used as examples and quotes within this research report. Controversial areas raised by the survey, such as the impact of the decline of alcohol allowed on board and the use of Wi-Fi, were also explored.

2.3: Analysis

Data from the surveys was exported into Microsoft Excel from SurveyMonkey and sorted by question based on each response. The data were then coded and interrogated to provide the information presented in Section 3.0, Findings and Analysis. Information was then graphically produced to assist the analysis.

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and then themed and coded against the key focus areas, which included; nationality, alcohol, Wi-Fi, leadership and management, barriers, drivers, ship design, well-being, policy and COVID-19, among others. Relevant quotes were selected from the transcripts to support the key arguments made in the report and to highlight areas of social interaction on board.

2. www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBI4MVdKBHk

Section 3: Survey Findings and Analysis

This section presents the SIM survey findings and data analysis. The findings are supported by selected quotes from the interviews and surveys which help to highlight salient points from the research. Preliminary analysis is made in this section and further development of other discussion points are explained in the ‘Discussion’ Section, 4.0. The survey findings are based on a total of 911 maritime stakeholder responses, although not all the participants answered every question.

3.1: Demographics

Working category of respondents

The survey respondents varied widely across many different sectors of the shipping industry, but could broadly be categorised into seafarers, ship owner/ managers, P&I Clubs and other. The ‘Other’ category included respondents such as port chaplains, researchers, trade unions, surveyors, MET, shore-based managers and lawyers and more (Figure 1). The large response rate from seafarers 80%³ (N=731) helped to endorse the survey findings from a current perspective of living and working at sea.

Please select the relevant category.

Do you work as a –

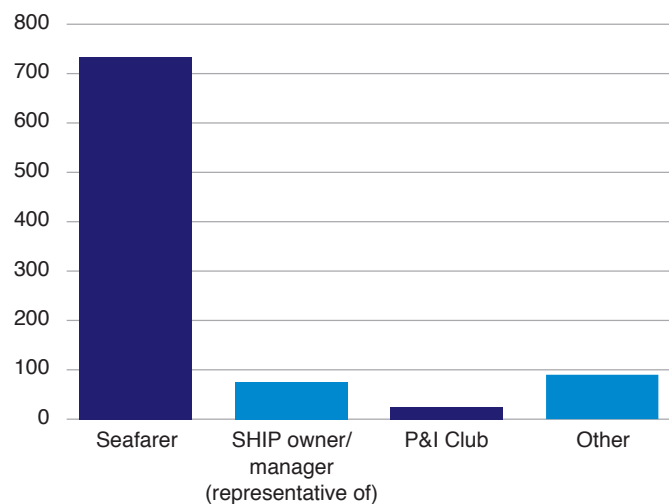


Figure 1: Work category of survey respondents

Age of respondents

Most respondents, 40% (N=366) were between 29 and 40 years old (Figure 2). However, there was a range of ages represented from 18 to over 63 years old.

What age group are you in?

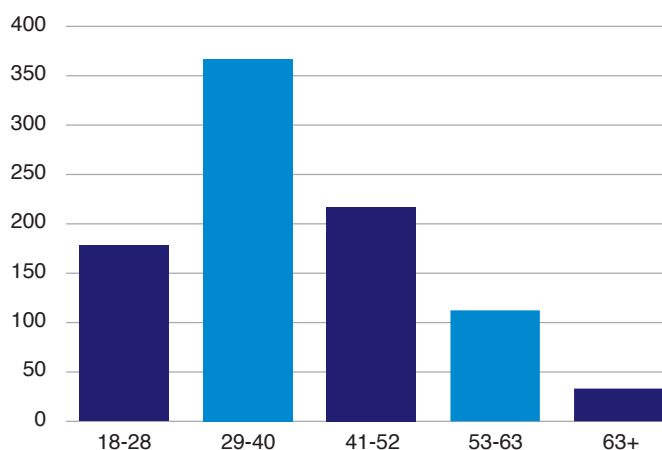


Figure 2: Age of survey respondents

Length of industry experience

Most survey respondents, 81% (N=736) had over 5 years or more experience working within the shipping industry. 32% (N=293) had 10-20 years' experience and 28% (N=256) had 20 or more years' experience within the industry (Figure 3). This suggests that most of the survey respondents had long service and years of experience within the industry to draw their opinions from. This was particularly helpful where questions related to changes over time.

How many years have you been working in the shipping industry?

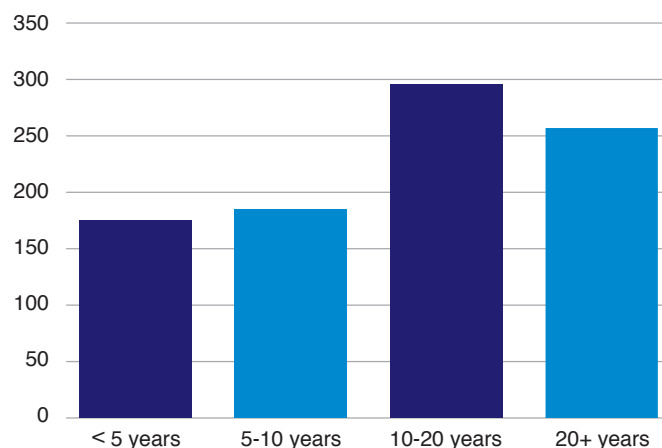


Figure 3: Length of industry experience

3. Where findings are presented in percentages, these have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Participant's gender

Most survey respondents were male, 90% (N=822) and the representation of female respondents was 9% (N=85), which is higher than the industry average, where approximately 2% of women make up the global seafaring workforce (IMO, 2019a). 1% (N=4) preferred not to say.

Nationality

Respondents of 61 different nationalities answered the survey, demonstrating the wide multinational nature of the shipping industry (Figure 4). Most respondents 44% (N=402) were of Indian nationality. The 'Other' category included respondents from Thailand, Nigeria, Albania, Brazil, Belgium, Ghana and the Ukraine among others. Nationality engagement with the survey

has a strong bearing on the situation with the pandemic at the time. For example, the vast number of stranded seafarers in Manila may not have had easy access to the survey, and ISWAN's regional team would not have been able to intensively promote the survey while working to support these seafarers. Numbers of responses may also be indicative of fewer Filipino seafarers in general having access to communications during this time of peak pandemic. The high percentage of Indian respondents may reflect ISWAN's strong presence in India with both a team and three influential board members residing there. The larger numbers of Burmese respondents may be attributed to the considerable number of Burmese followers on ISWAN's SeafarerHelp Facebook page (over 12,000).

What is your nationality?

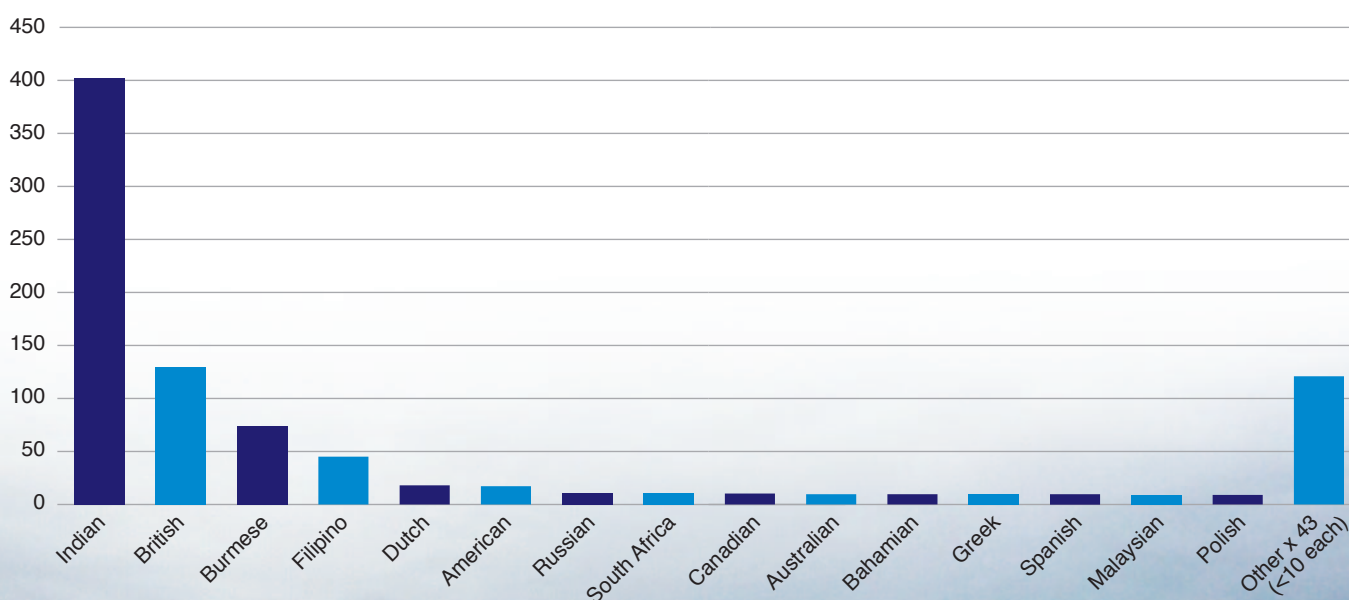


Figure 4: Nationality



Vessel type

Knowing the different vessel types survey respondents sailed on provided an indication of the different facilities and design elements of these vessels (see 'Vessel Design' in the Discussion Section 4.0). Of the 605 participants who answered this question, 51% (N=309) said they sailed on (in the case of ex-seafarers) or had last sailed on (current seafarers) a dry bulk carrier. The 'Other' category includes vessel types such as coastguard, dredger, cable layer and fishing vessel among others (Figure 5).

Please select which vessel type you are sailing on (or last sailed on if not currently at sea)

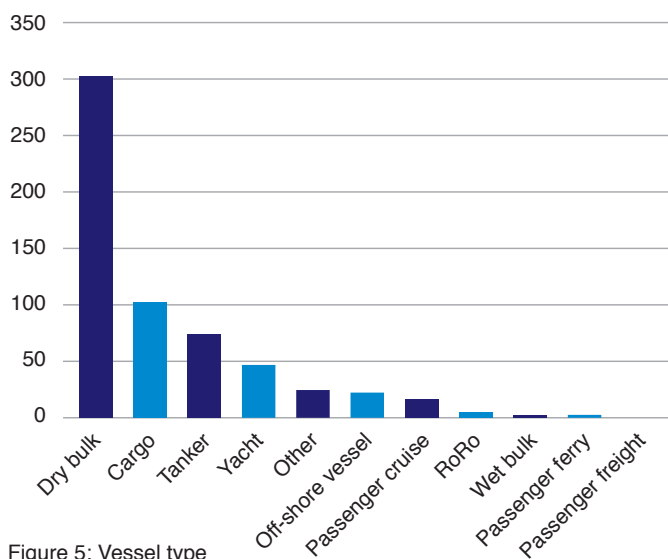


Figure 5: Vessel type

3.2: Social interaction

It was almost unanimously agreed that social interaction on board is important (Table 6). However, a different question is, to what extent are people actually able to socially interact with one another, and what are the barriers and drivers of that interaction? These questions are discussed in the following sections.

Do you think social interaction is important to crew members on board?

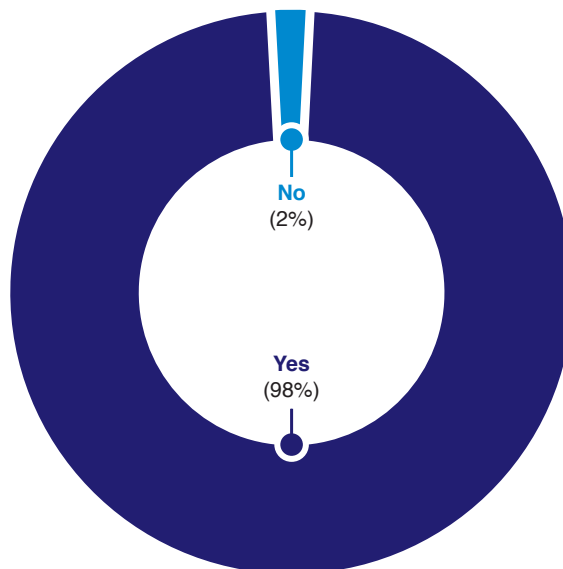


Figure 6: Importance of social interaction



3.3: What are the benefits of social interaction?

The interviewees were asked about the benefits of socially interacting on board whilst the survey participants were given the opportunity to comment on this following the direct question of whether they felt social interaction was important (Figure 6). Many benefits were identified, including the positive impacts on the well-being, mental health and safety of the crew and vessel. Quotes from the research are used to illustrate the main points below.

Happiness and motivation

Happiness, building motivation and keeping up the crew's morale were associated with social interaction on board. Keeping the crew happy was seen to lead to greater productivity.

"If you have happy employees, they will also go that extra mile for you. And when it's needed, and they need [to] work harder or work more, they will happily do, because they feel they are valued." – (Interview 3)

"[It is] Critical to maintain a high morale during long contracts..." – (Survey 381)

"Social Interaction improves teamwork and lowers the risk of mental health issues"
– (Survey 254)

It was also seen to maintain a better working environment where, by implication, crew could be more productive.

"Social interaction helps create a better working atmosphere." – (Survey 230)

"You have to be able to talk about work, home and nothing in particular. Having "downtime" is key for morale and sanity, without it, tensions rise and it creates an uncomfortable environment" – (Survey 768)

It is important that ships do not just become places of work and that equal attention is placed on supporting crew well-being. Unfortunately, priority is not always given to this.

"... but I have been on too many ships where the management are all about work, [...but] it is not only about work, it's also our life, our daily life, and our spare time." – (Interview 3)

Building relationships, teams and trust is vital to get to know crew better, both personally and professionally. Examples were given which illustrate that more understanding of each other encourages people to speak up if something goes wrong.

"... togetherness they get to know what's happening they could be Interdepartmental between the tech and the catering but when everybody gets together for a beer or two or watch a movie together they get to see the other side's perspective on things they get to learn that the other side has challenges..."
– (Interview 1)

"If I am comfortable with the people around me at a personal level, it is much easier to work [...], and to feel free to speak up if something is wrong." – (Interview 2)

If good relations are not built up between the crew, life could become unnecessarily stressful and could ultimately impact on the ability to pay attention to work and therefore, job performance.

"What I find is that we all have problems [and] personal issues when you can't actually talk to anyone about them. Then they tend to [play] on your mind more, especially because watchkeeping is quite quiet. Most of the time nothing is going on, so that affects my ability to focus on what I am doing" – (Interview 2)

"Having good social interaction of crews [and] each other can reduce stress, get better co-operation and team work." – (Survey 854)

Improved work safety

Building relationships and trust can have a positive impact on the safety on board and this theme was strongly apparent as the quotes below demonstrate.

"... and if you don't have social interaction maybe people just do their job, maybe not 100% because half of their mind is at home and it can cause accidents." – (Interview 8)

"... [if] you're encouraged to communicate, and with safety, communication is everything... So if you know that you've got a concern or a query or something you can just talk to somebody, it cuts out that chance of people to just bluff it through – like I don't want to ask about that or they might shout at me..." – (Interview 5)

“... it encourages the crew to learn about each other and therefore more empathy to be responsible for each other. In my opinion this leads to a better safety culture...” – (Survey 575)

“a harmonious relationship on board through social interactions may help prevent/minimize accidents or incidents.” – (Survey 872)

Noticing when things are going wrong

“I think it encourages everyone to look after each other as well because if it's your friend you are less likely to not bother...” – (Interview 5)

Signs of mental health issues and depression

“The benefit of social interaction would have been that the ship's staff can identify the early signs of depression. You get to know if a person is not talkative anymore or goes into a shell even the chief cook can come back and say [he] used to get a second helping now he's stopped coming down for dinner, that should give an indication that maybe someone needs to talk to him and sit down ask him about it and see if he is okay...” – (Interview 1)

“By social interaction we share our points and sometimes get good advice, which relieves or reduce our stress.” – (Survey 500)

“Social interaction play a very important role in one's mental health in a high stress environment. Also, in the overall health of the ship. This is shown by a simple conversation or a movie night with the crew [or] just at a game of cards.” – (Survey 788)

“... you have to be able to talk about work, home and nothing in particular. Having "downtime" is key for morale and sanity, without it tensions rise and it creates an uncomfortable environment.” – (Survey 771)

“It is important for the sanity and spiritual upliftment” – (Survey 472)

“This gives refreshment to crew members while they are not with their family.” – (Survey 764)

Combats isolation

“... when you are interacting with people around you, you avoid isolation, you also have less time to actually worry, and to think about everything that you are missing at home, and it makes time goes faster, and it makes you happier, which also means that you work harder, and you want to work”. – (Interview 3)

“Life at Sea can be very isolating and social interaction is vital to the health and well-being of the crew...” – (Interview 7)

Reduces stress

“Social interaction is something that is usually required because all of us are out at sea, we are away from our families and sometimes we just need to off-load our feelings and our stress just to talk to someone...” – (Interview 4)

“[if you] have some kind of party or get together so you feel less stressed ...” – (Interview 7)

Better communication

“We knew each other, we had a social relationship and a working relationship, and it just broke down that problem of people feeling embarrassed to go [and] talk to each other...” – (Survey 543)

Simply put, in relation to social interaction,

“I think getting to know people and building relationships with people it helps with everything ...” – (Survey 569)

Ultimately many believe that a

“Happy Crew, Happy Life, Safe Boat.” – (Survey 652)

“I always say a happy crew is a safe crew which leads to a safe ship ... It's very, very simple, if you can get your boys to be happy and work as a team your ship is safe.” – (Interview 9)

The research identified many benefits of social interaction which fundamentally contribute to well-being through strengthened relationships. Becoming more familiar with others allows warning signs to be noticed if things start to go wrong and provides opportunities for pre-emptive measures to be put in place if necessary. Additionally, the positives of social interaction can lead to improvements in working behaviours through increased motivation, the building of trust and better safety practice.

3.4: Preference for inside or outside activities

Survey respondents had a slight preference towards outside activities (54%, N=598) over inside activities (46%, N=315) (Figure 7). These activities can be weather dependent which is often determined by the vessel's route. They can also be determined by the space available for activities, which is sometimes linked to the vessel type.

Do you generally prefer inside or outside social activities?

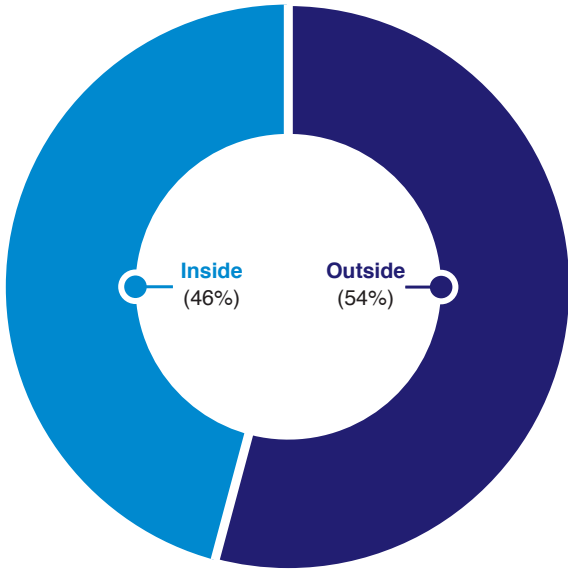


Figure 7: Preference for inside or outside activities

3.5: Enough organised activities and facilities on board?

Of the 598 respondents to this question, 69% (N=410) felt that there were enough organised activities on board and 31% (N=188) felt there were not (Figure 8). When asked whether there were enough facilities to help crews socialise together, 72% (N = 430) thought there were and 28% (N=167) felt there were not (Figure 8). Whilst these results are positive, it should be noted that the responses did not measure the levels of engagement with social interaction or the barriers that would make engagement difficult, such as fatigue and crew size.

Do you think there are enough?

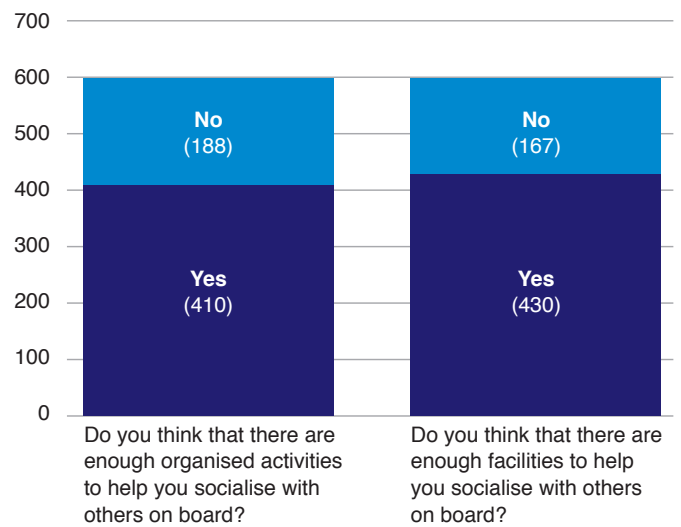


Figure 8: Organised activities and on board facilities



3.6: What recreational facilities do you have on board?

Survey participants were asked what recreational facilities they had on board (Figure 9) and were encouraged to provide multiple responses⁵ to the question. The survey data show the majority had access to a TV or cinema (N=515) and a gym (N=478). 'Indoor games' were also widely available (N=378). It is notable that chargeable Wi-Fi was more widely available (N=359) than free Wi-Fi (N=174). 'Communal space' was based on the vessel having enough space for the entire crew to gather.

Please select which vessel type you are sailing on (or last sailed on if not currently at sea)

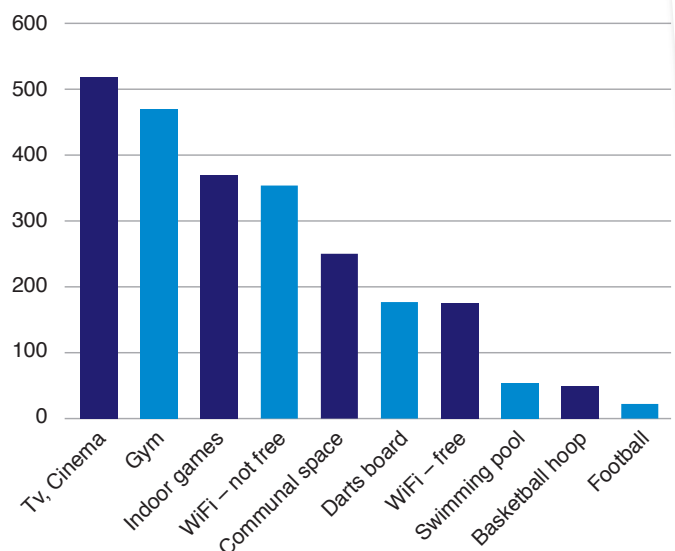


Figure 9: Recreational facilities available on board



4. www.Facebook.com/SeafarerHelp/

3.7: Recreational activities most undertaken on board

Survey participants were asked to rank their level of engagement with certain recreational activities on board (Figure 10). The results indicate higher levels of physical activities (particularly table tennis, basketball, darts and use of the gym) and lower levels of online activity. It is evident that food and drink remain the source of strong human interaction as well as a necessity. The lower levels of online activity indicated here suggest that there is less access to Wi-Fi at sea and may also indicate that crew access Wi-Fi less due to the chargeable rates often placed on its use on board.

Which recreational activities do you undertake most when on board?

Please rank the activities from 1-4 with 1 being the activity you undertake most and 4 being the activity you undertake least.

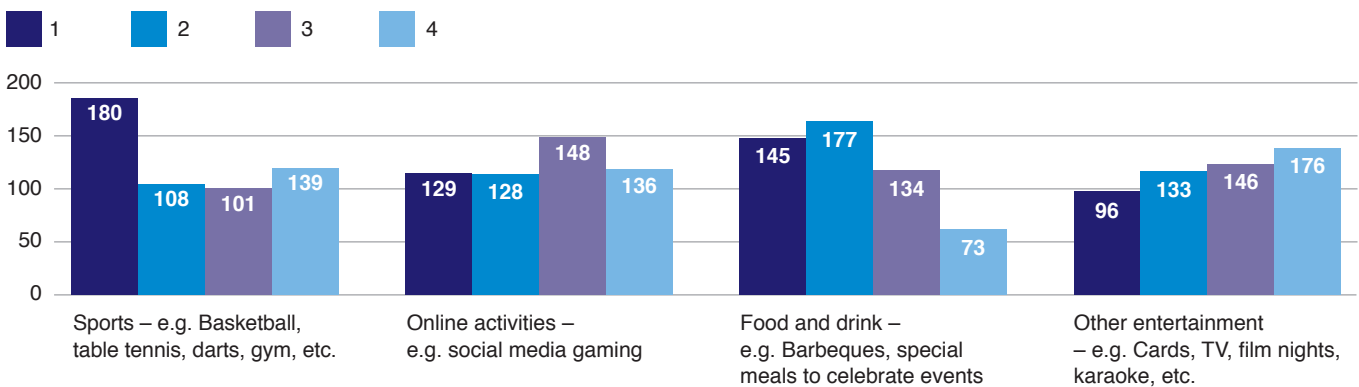


Figure 10: Recreation activities most undertaken on board

3.8: Recreational activities undertaken most in port

Survey participants were asked to rank their level of engagement with certain recreational activities undertaken in port (Figure 11). These results differ from the activities that are engaged with on board showing that physical sports are least engaged with (N=198) but that participation for online activities increases (N=217). This is likely to be a result of free Wi-Fi often being available where port facilities for seafarers exist. Engagement with food and drink activities are fairly consistent on board or in port.

Which recreational activities do you undertake most when in port?

Please rank the activities from 1-4 with 1 being the activity you undertake most and 4 being the activity you undertake least.

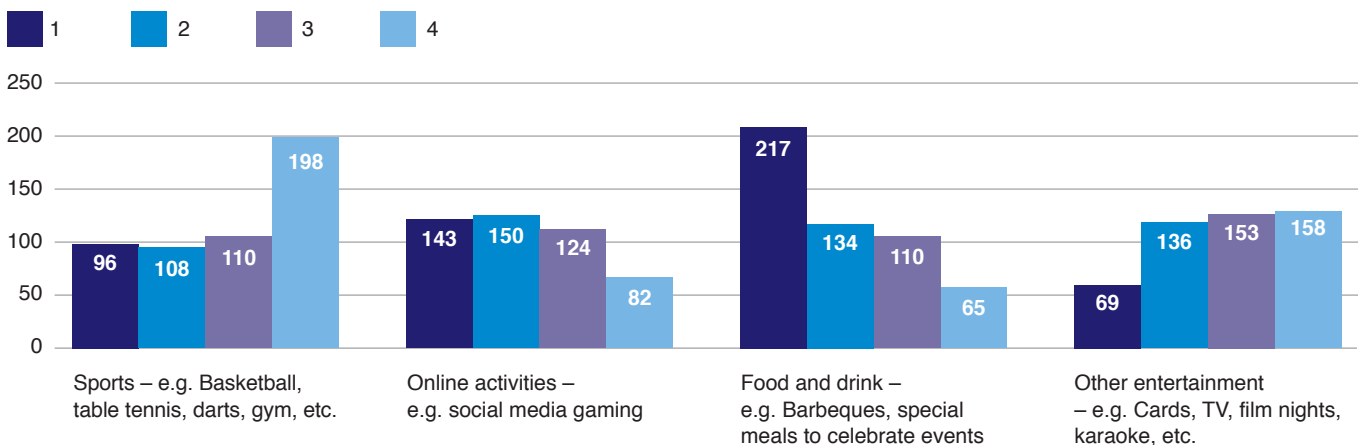


Figure 11: Recreation activities most undertaken in port.

3.9: Changes in social interaction on board and in port

From 721 responses, 48% felt that social interaction has improved on board but 38% thought that it had decreased, whereas 14% considered that nothing had changed (Figure 12). In port, the figures show that 42% consider there is an improvement in social interaction, however, 38% think that it has decreased, and 20% saying nothing has changed.

For those participants who considered that there had been a marked improvement in social interaction (and had selected ‘increased greatly’ on the scale (Figure 12)), the results were then split out by age group and sea service (Figures 13 and 14).

During your career, do you think social interaction has...

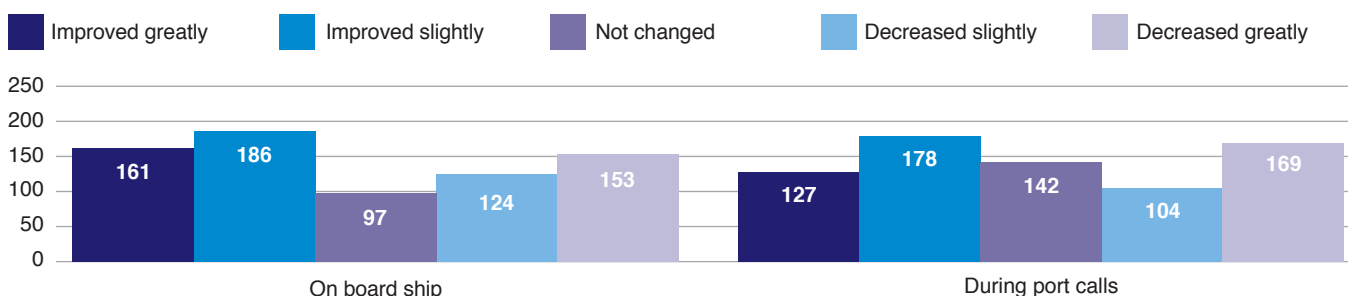


Figure 12: Changes in social interaction on board and in port

Those thinking that during their career, social interaction on board ships has... “increased greatly”

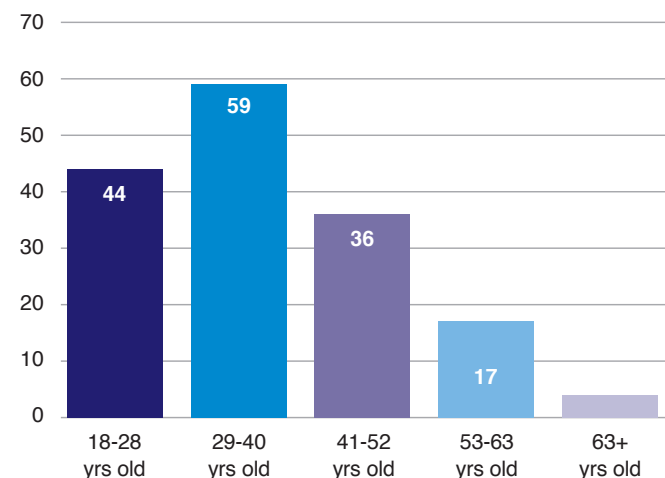


Figure 13: ‘Yes’ social interaction increased greatly on board – focus by Age

This produced an interesting result and generational split, with 29 – 40-year olds (N=59) most likely to think that social interaction has increased greatly. This result tails off considerably for older respondents, indicating a view of social interaction on board deteriorating over time. This would also likely coincide with the decline of alcohol and bars on board, as well as an increase in the use of technology and Wi-Fi (refer to Discussion Section 4.0 for more information on this).

A current reliance on technology for social interaction and entertainment, highlighted even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic, has seen what could be considered a social

withdrawal amongst older generations and a changing scene of social requirements to fully engage younger members in the industry.

“... it's gotten more quiet, more alcohol restrictions and crew getting older”
– (Survey respondent 611)

Interestingly, figures also showed that those who thought that social interaction had either greatly improved or greatly decreased were largely made up of non-seafarer respondents (Figure 14). 78% of those who suggested social interaction had greatly improved had no sea time. Figures also showed that 66% of respondents who considered that social interaction had greatly decreased, were also non-seafarers.

Changes in social interaction on board – by seafaring and non seafaring respondent

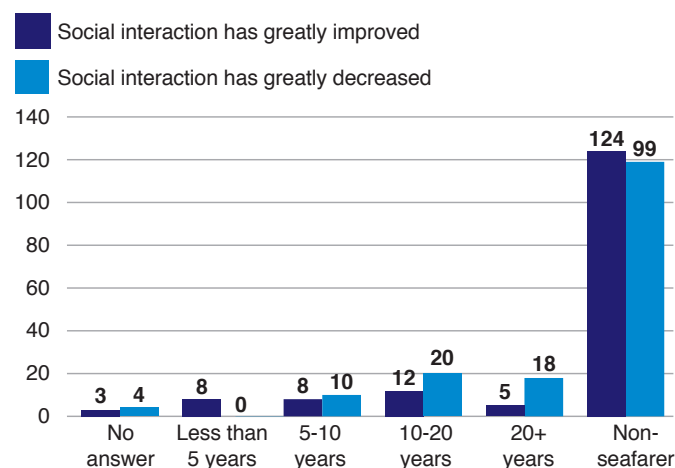


Figure 14: Changes in social interaction on board – seafaring and non-seafaring respondents

3.10: Barriers to social interaction

Encouraging social interaction at sea is not straightforward due to the complex nature of the industry, the different vessel types and multiple nationalities and individuals working on board. Many barriers to social interaction became apparent during the research and a multiple response question was put to participants asking them to prioritise what they thought were the main issues. In order, these were listed as increased workloads, cultural or language differences, fatigue, lack of time, and smaller crew sizes, among others (Figure 15).

What do you think are the barriers to socialising on board?

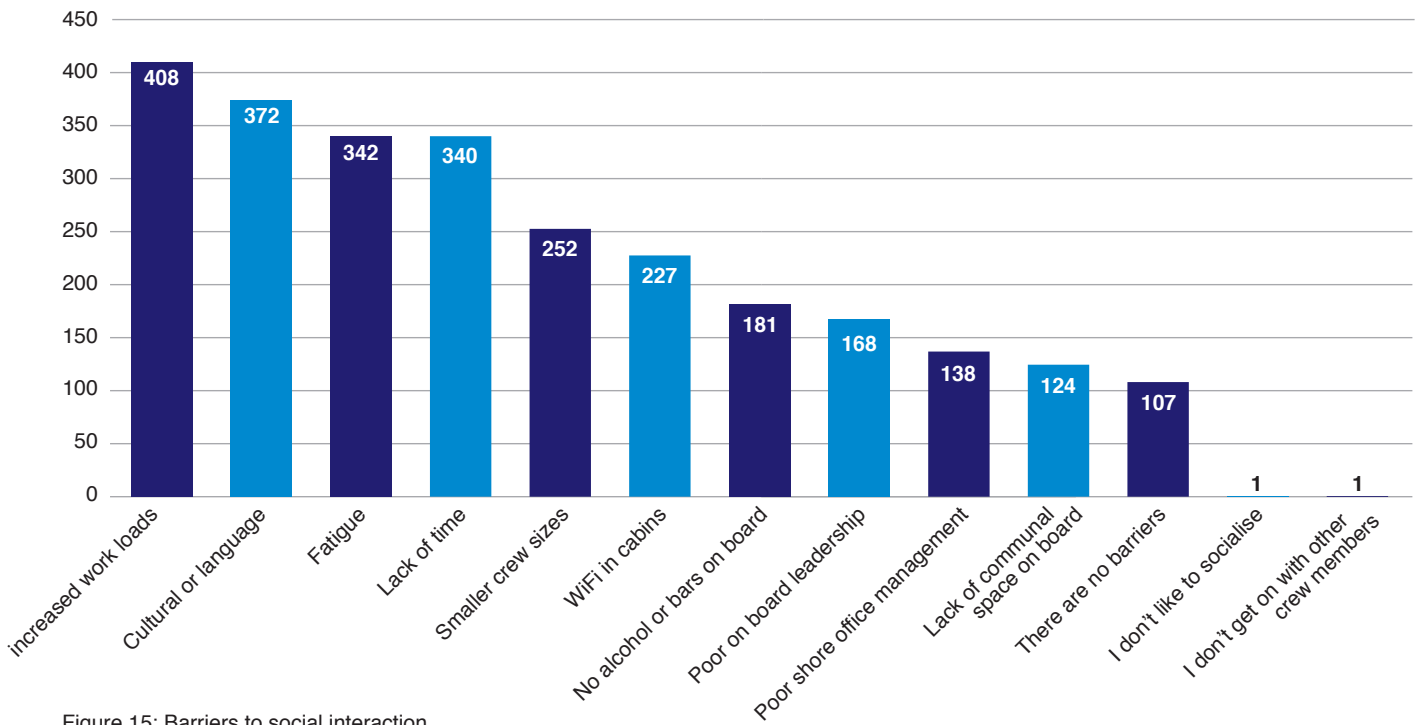


Figure 15: Barriers to social interaction

Increased workloads and fatigue

Fatigue, related to increased workloads and smaller crew sizes, was a common issue raised in the research and was noted to have a significant impact on the ability and inclination to socially interact on board. Numerous quotes illustrate this:

“... with the shipping industry the workload is too much [...] some top ranks just to make good numbers in the company, they just don't want to give parties or some organised get together. They just care about the work – but sometimes it's not good for the morale of the crew, because every time if the crew is having a good atmosphere there are less accidents in the work environment.” – (Interview 7)

“Shore leaves are minimized, work load on seafarers increased, regulations have become so tight, restrictions of shore leaves in some places, no transportation facilities very far towns/cities, crew size reduced, sometimes opportunities to go ashore missed due tiredness and wanting rather to take rest.” – (Survey 363)

“... now we are under so much pressure with so little time to sleep that the minute your work is done you eat, and you sleep... the pressure is too much [...] in the older days you had smaller ships, you had radio officers that did the paperwork you had so many people on board. Today you have so much more to do with less people and less time.” – (Interview 9)

“Small crew, 6 on, 6 off shift patterns make this difficult.” – (Survey respondent 66)

“... excessive workload, social media, lack of amenities on board.” – (Survey 787)

Language and cultural barriers

Good interaction and communication are important in combatting isolation on board and creating a good safety culture. However, language and cultural obstacles were high on the reasons cited as barriers to social interaction (N=372, Figure 15). This is discussed further in the 'Discussion' Section 4.0 under 'Nationality'.

"The biggest challenges are cultural... If you're not able to speak your native language it creates a difficulty to communicate more freely [...] if it's not your native language... and then when I'm alone on board I find myself more confined to my cabin because I already speak English or another language in working hours and then after work, I just withdraw myself a little bit. I've seen it happen with also with other cultures."
– (Interview 8)

"As each new Nationality are hired they mainly stay within their own groups, it takes years to get them to integrate, the whole safety culture thrown out the window every time, again taking years to bring back to normal safety standards."
– (Survey 58)

Fast port turnarounds

Cost efficiency is a priority for the shipping industry and emphasis is often placed on becoming as productive as possible. This, for the most part, means turnaround times in port are kept to a minimum leaving less free time for crew recreation.

"On shore it's the quick turn arounds now, quick turn arounds and the ever-increasing size of container ports and their distance from any commercial centre even if they're guiding it off the ship you can't get anyone on the port"
– (Interview 6)

"Short turnarounds, heavier /longer workloads leading to fatigue – too tired to be bothered going ashore" – (Survey 856)

"Port operations take precedence, to complete a turnaround as safely as possible, in as less time as possible, leads to no social life in ports" – (Survey 713)

"The main barriers I would say in the shipping industry is the workload and arrival departures late night [...] and then they arrive at the port so [work starts] so people don't get any time to do some kind of social gathering..." – (Interview 7)

Smaller crew sizes

Crew sizes have changed over time and have been attributed to increased workloads and feelings of fatigue.

"... the amount of stress has increased since I joined as a cadet. [There] used to be 25 to 26 people on board and now it has come down to 18/19, so the work load is quite much and that impacts the time that you rest, especially from a psychological point of view." – (Interview 4)

Other barriers to social interaction were seen as Wi-Fi in cabins (N=227), alcohol bans on many ships (N=181), poor leadership on board (N=168) and poor shore management (N=138). Throughout the survey and interviews, respondents displayed very mixed feelings about whether Wi-Fi and access to personal devices aided or prevented social interaction. For this reason, the data have been examined further to understand the influence that age and service at sea or on shore has on the views about Wi-Fi.



3.11: Is Wi-Fi a barrier to social interaction?

227 survey participants suggested that Wi-Fi is a barrier to social interaction. There was a clear difference of opinion about this depending on the duration served within the industry. If the duration was ten years or more, the likelihood of feeling social interaction had declined because of Wi-Fi on board increased (Figure 16). Younger people, with less knowledge of the industry did not appear to view this as an issue.

“Internet is a must need for seafarers on board as it connects them to the world as well as calms their mental health as a source of entertainment”
 – (Survey 786 – Indian seafarer, < 5 career at sea, and in 18 – 28 age bracket)

Interestingly, those working on shore were also more likely to view Wi-Fi as a barrier to social interaction at sea (45%, N=81) than seafarers themselves (20% N=146) (Figure 16). This may indicate a disconnect between shore and sea management and their understanding of the importance of Wi-Fi and connectivity for seafarers. It also signals a marked difference between the lived experience of seafarers and the perceptions of those not at sea. This mismatch is problematic in terms of leadership and management of the crew and may impact on other areas of vessel operations.

Wi-Fi is a barrier to social interaction...

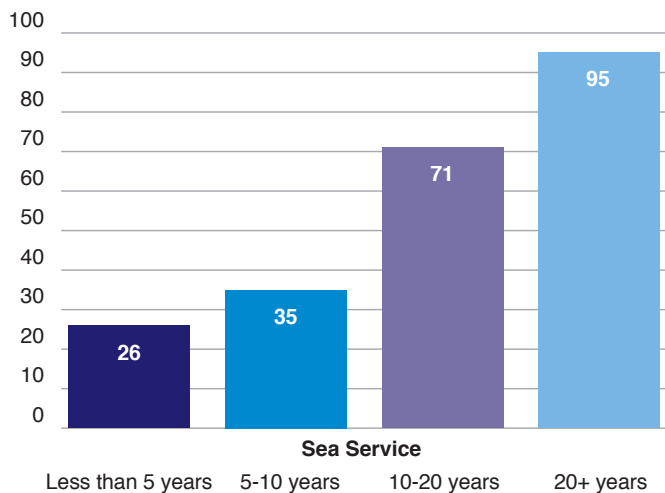
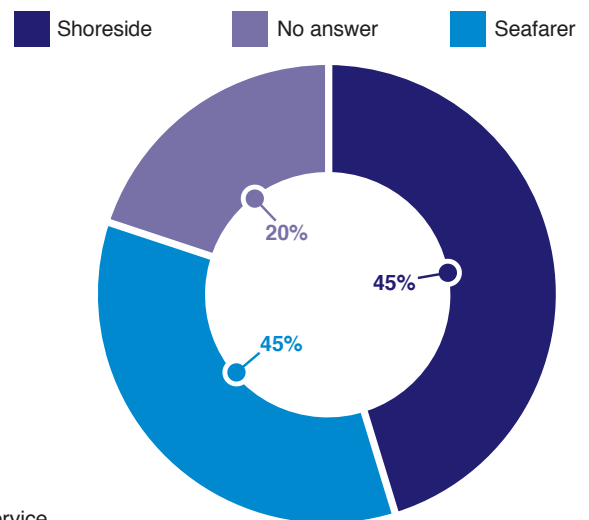


Figure 16: Wi-Fi as a barrier, relevance of sea/shore service and duration of service

Seafarer or Shoreside? Wi-Fi is a barrier



Significantly 49% of respondents over 40 years old consider Wi-Fi as a barrier to social interaction, whilst in contrast, only 12% of those aged 18-28 consider it an issue. This finding represents a generational difference in perspective. Older people (40+) often viewed technology as a burden and something that increased workloads and was apt to go wrong (Knowles and Hanson, 2018). Wi-Fi is discussed in more detail in the ‘Discussion’ Section 4.0.

Wi-Fi is a barrier – relevance of age

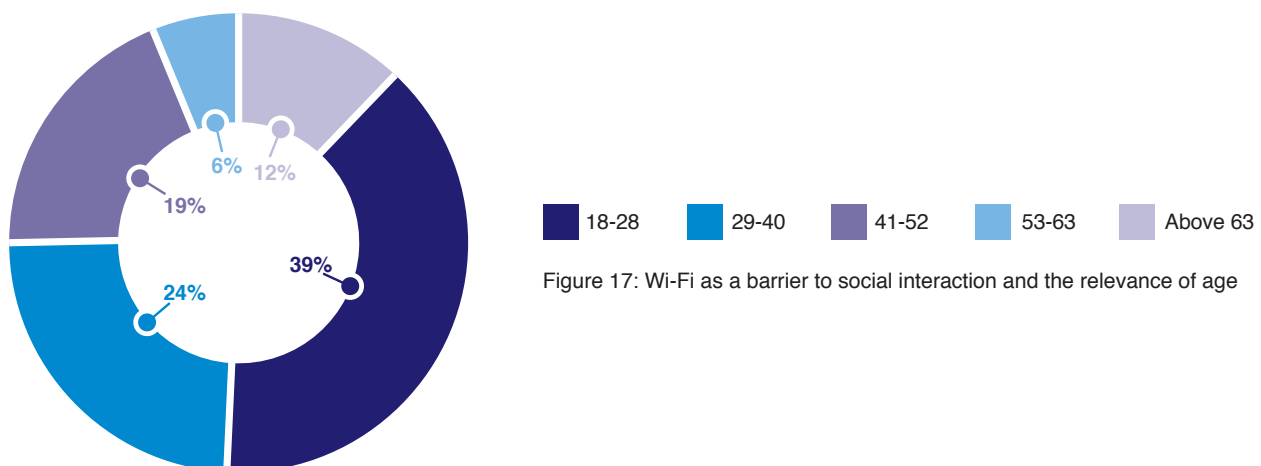


Figure 17: Wi-Fi as a barrier to social interaction and the relevance of age

3.12: What assists crew to socialise?

Survey participants were asked to select the drivers that helped them to socialise on board from a range of options (Figure 18). Strong leadership, which encouraged a supportive on board culture and social interaction, was given the highest priority (N=341). The hierarchical nature of the Merchant Navy means that the ship’s environment (on board culture) is strongly influenced by the behaviour and example set by the Captain and other senior officers. There are numerous examples of the positive difference an empathetic Captain can have on the crew, placing value on maintaining good standards of crew well-being and happiness, which also impacts the way the crew interact with each other.

“... crew management level officers they play a key role in maintaining social interaction...”
 – (Interview 7)

“... but it was all his leadership. As soon as he left we had a completely different [Master]... and the whole atmosphere died overnight. It went down the gangway.” – (Interview 5)

“... it has to come from the top down and the captain has to be there because otherwise there’s a kind of suspicion [...] whereas when he gets involved that disappears, it’s a piece of the leadership – fully, fully buying into it.”
 – (Interview 5)

Good leadership within a hierarchical organisation also provides junior officers with a positive role model and helps to pass on good practice to the next generation of seafarers.

Different nationalities can have different responses to authority which was noted in the following quote.

“... with certain cultures there is a higher power distance relationship [... But] some cultures are more free where you can openly ask questions, in other cultures the boss is the boss and he’s always right, and that kind of culture we need to change the mindset of the senior staff. Juniors are coming in and they learn from us, so I think that must be the starting point.” – (Interview 1)

Leadership comes with responsibility, and understanding this and the nuances of the crew and how they are likely to interact with each other (given their nationality, gender and age, for example) is important for smooth ship operations, both at work and during downtime.

Why do you think crew are more likely to socialise on board?

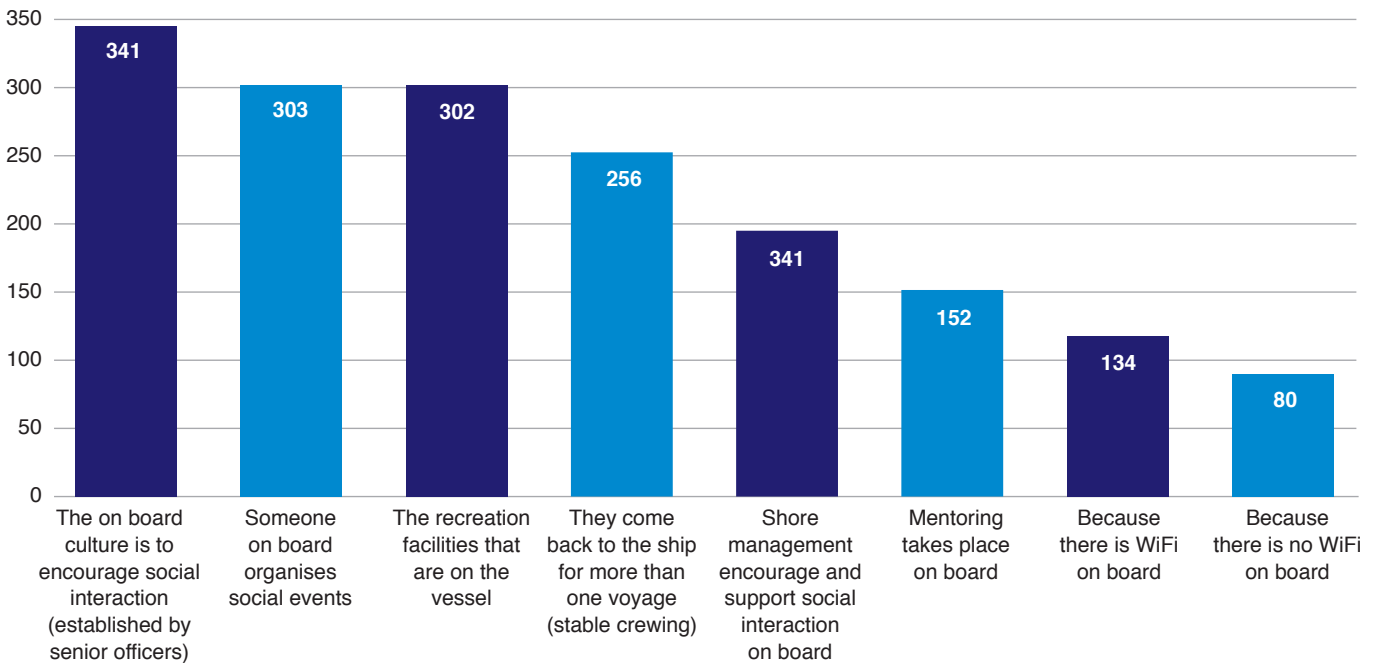


Figure 18: What instigates social activity?

The need for a dedicated individual to instigate social activities on board was rated highly by survey participants (N=303). This is understandable when recreation time is often viewed as limited on board. Having someone responsible for initiating social activities can make it easier for the crew to participate but it does not rule out informal get-togethers that can be organised more spontaneously amongst the crew. Of nearly equal importance was the actual facilities available on board which help social interactions take place (N=302). Stable crewing was also viewed highly (N=256) with some of the crew returning to the same vessel for more than one voyage, allowing relationships and trust to build over time and making social interaction easier and more likely. 192 survey participants thought that the shore management drove social interaction and 152 felt that social interaction was instigated through mentoring taking place on board.

“Social interaction can only increase if the new generation take an active interest in mentoring the crew, reduce the time spent in their cabins, mixing and socialising with one another.”
– (Survey 684)

Wi-Fi as a barrier and driver of social interaction is dealt with in the ‘Discussion’ Section, 4.0.

3.13: Who should instigate social interaction on board?

Interviewees were asked who they thought should be responsible for instigating social interaction on board. Like the survey responses, there was a strong sense that this should be a senior management job, particularly the Captains. However, this was not a role that could be relied upon as the following two quotes demonstrate.

“... it should lie with the Master and the head of the department; I have seen some people they do encourage but many don’t.” – (Interview 4)

“It’s from the top down, the officers should be much more responsible than they are I think, a lot of them they’re in their own bubbles and as long as the crew are fed correctly – and that isn’t always the case, but fed correctly and have decent accommodation and they do their work that they are paid for, I sometimes feel the officers wipe their hands of them.” – (Interview 6)

“Indoor or outdoor games, there should be organised activities, just to take break from regular workload and daily routine. People work without any holidays for whole contract especially officers and workloads are increasing day by day. Also, top management on board should think about it.” – (Survey 119)

One interviewee highlighted the difficulty that a Captain might encounter if they were instigating social interaction on board.

“Technically I’ll say the Captain, because everything is the Captain’s problem [but] when the captain forces a social activity, by default everyone doesn’t want to do it, because nobody likes being told what to do with their free time. So that tends to backfire.” – (Interview 2)

There were some who felt that the responsibility lay with the shore office.

“... I think that first of all it lies in the office. I think that’s where it starts,... we need the budget to buy things for ship, but also the office needs to encourage the management on board the vessel to encourage the crew to be social together.” – (Interview 3)

Others felt the responsibility lay with everyone on board.

“I would say the responsibility of making sure there is social interaction on board lies on the company as well as the people on board...”
– (Interview 7)

“I think [the crew] have to stop waiting for things to happen. I think that some people have the tendency to go to their own cabins and close the door and wait for someone to call them and ask if they want to see a movie or play a game. While I think that we have to be better and take the action ourselves.” – (Interview 3)

“It’s the people themselves who are responsible for that, and you can organise things, you can organise BBQs or you can organise like small celebrations or whatsoever but if people don’t want to participate you can’t force them to.”
– (Interview 8)

Although mixed opinions exist about who is the best person to organise social activities on board, the general consensus is that the management on shore and at sea should be supportive of these initiatives and facilitate the right environment for them to take place.

3.14: Social Activities

Many different social activities to bring crew together were suggested by the survey and interview respondents. These broadly fell under the categories of food, sports, entertainment, and social media and ranged from passive to physical. The proposed activities could be run over different time periods and for different lengths of time. Whether activities took place at all varied considerably from ship to ship and it was noted again that leadership on board impacted how the crew socially interacted.

“... right now it varies a lot from ship to ship if there are social activities on board or not.” – (Interview 3)

Social interactions initiatives involving food

Food provides our basic sustenance but can also provide a source of pleasure, and a focal point for gathering with crew. Food safety requirements and standards on board are set out by the MLC (2006)(ILO 2006). Socialising around food and drink is important in most cultures and the multinational crew on most merchant ships create diverse dietary habits which can be exploited in social situations as demonstrated by the research.

The following initiatives, suggested by the survey respondents, can bring crew together to share

food (Figure 19). Barbeques were a clear favourite (N=220), followed by parties (N=124) and celebrating special events with food (N=123). Some respondents (N=111) experienced regular food related events on board, for example Sunday cooking or monthly meal get-togethers. Culture or a themed night where crew came together to experience other crewmates’ national dishes were also popular (N=88). Position and rank switches were mentioned (N=19, where for example, senior officers relieve the chef and do the cooking for the rest of crew. Incentivised events (N=12), referred to special meals celebrating the success of something, for example, following a successful cargo delivery. Alcohol (N=11) is not high on the list of food and drink activities, most likely because many ships are now dry. However, alcohol was frequently mentioned in the comments section and is therefore discussed in more detail in the ‘Discussion’ Section 4.0.

“Captain used to take over the galley every Sunday and cook for the entire crew – it was the highlight of the social week.” – (Survey 831)

Many variations on activities related to food can be used for social purposes to suit different cultures and tastes. As eating is such a regular necessity it provides many opportunities for bringing people together.

List examples of any social interaction initiatives involving food that you have seen help bring crew together.

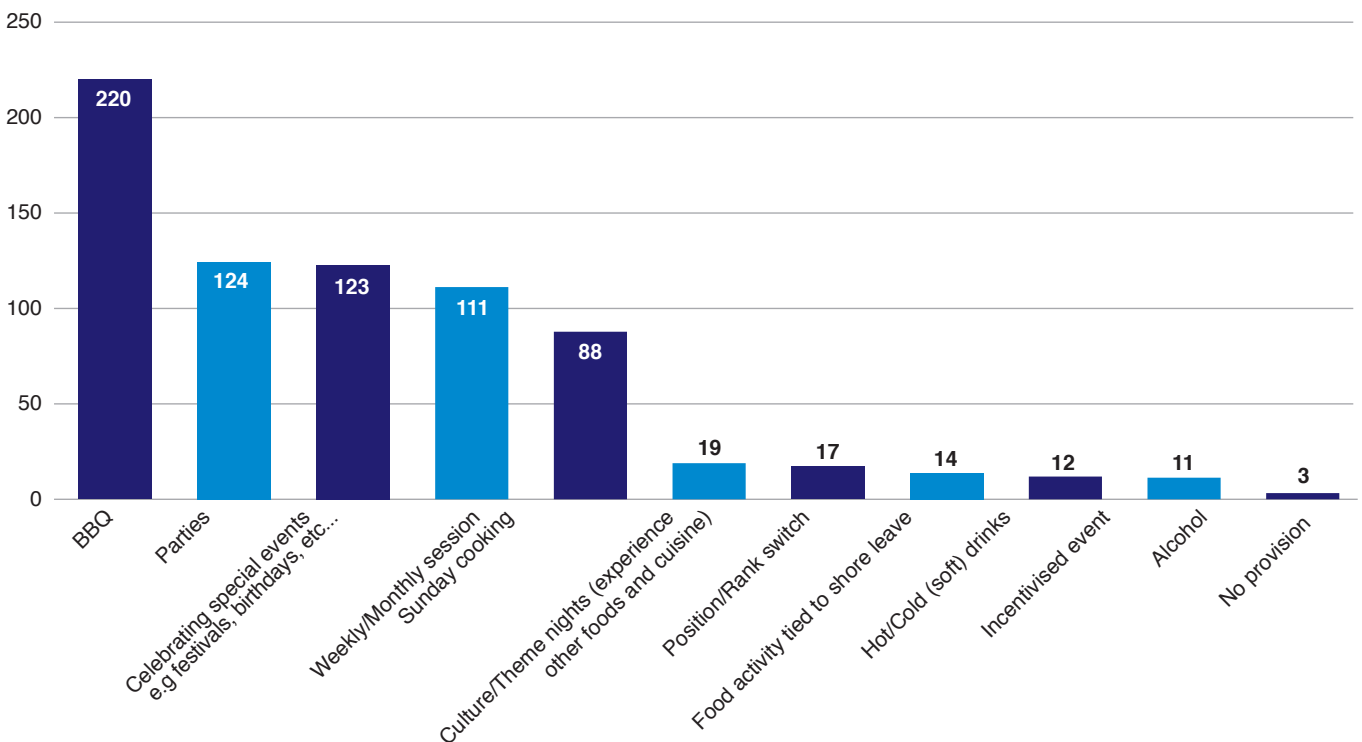


Figure 19: Social interaction initiatives involving food

Social interaction initiatives involving sport

Sport is historically good at bringing different people and nationalities together and can provide healthy competition. For those that enjoy physical activity, sports can deliver a good mechanism to interact together on board, weather and space permitting. The most popular sporting activity mentioned on board was table tennis (N=230). Sports involving a competition can bring the whole crew together or could be run as interfleet competitions (N= 131). After that, a range of different activities were mentioned (Figure 20) including gym activities (N=78) basketball (N=70) darts (N=35) and swimming (N=17) for example. Larger games requiring more space such as cricket (N=66) and football (N=52) were sometimes played in empty cargo holds. Shore activities involving sports (N=18) refer to games such as football and bowling. 19 people said that there were no sports activities available at all on their vessel, which may have been indicative of a lack of space.

“... providing the facilities can be bicycles for the lads to go on shore. The Filipinos love going for a bike ride in town. Wi-Fi and that sort of thing, communications facilities and karaoke sets and different things for different nationalities,”
(Survey 345)

“We have been organizing table tennis tournaments on board and whenever we have [an] empty cargo hold. Then we are playing cricket or football” – (Interview 8)

Physical sport has additional advantages over passive exercise in that it helps to keep crew fit, both physically and mentally (Sport England nd.). As mentioned, sport often has an element of competition which provides advantages for engaging others on board and potentially across a fleet and even with the shore office.

List examples of any social interaction initiatives involving physical sport that you have seen help bring crew together

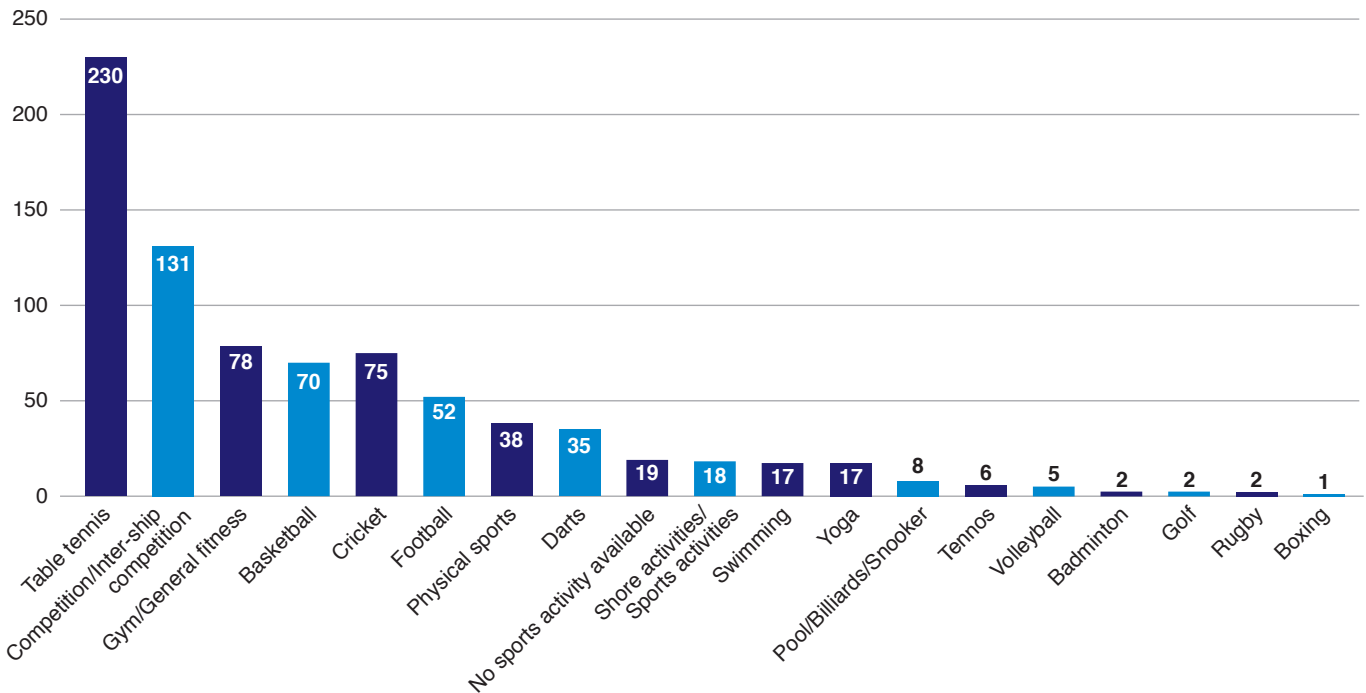


Figure 20: Social interaction initiatives involving sport

Social interaction initiatives involving entertainment

Entertainment covered a range of activities (Figure 21) with quizzes/games/cards being the most popular amongst the survey respondents (N=205) followed by TV/movies/DVDs (N=157). Watching sports on TV together was enjoyed (N=122) and karaoke and singing (N=110) were also popular, particularly noted amongst the Filipino respondents. Other activities mentioned included bingo/lotto (N=48) and shows/music/bands (N=31) among others. 20 people said that no entertainment activities were available on board their vessels.

“We’ve had fancy dress parades where people just made stuff out of what they have on the ship. We’ve had horse racing where you dress up like a horse... it’s kind of the slightly more crazy things tend to get more buy in you don’t need alcohol on board and people still have a really good time.” – (Interview 5)

“What I do on [the] ship is like in the evenings sometimes we play darts so sometimes I make it the engine vs deck or only men above 45 vs juniors and things like that. The prize would be a drink of coke or something like that, so facilities wise we could do with more space, but we try to make the most of it.” – (Interview 9)

Movie nights were popular, as indicated (Figure 21) and supported by the following quote.

“You know, a lot of people like watching movies. It’s a low-pressure way to relax around other people” – (Interview 2)

Some of the entertainment activities mentioned could be adapted to involve an element of competition and many would also be possible outside as well as inside.

List examples of any social interaction initiatives involving other entertainment that you have seen help bring crew together

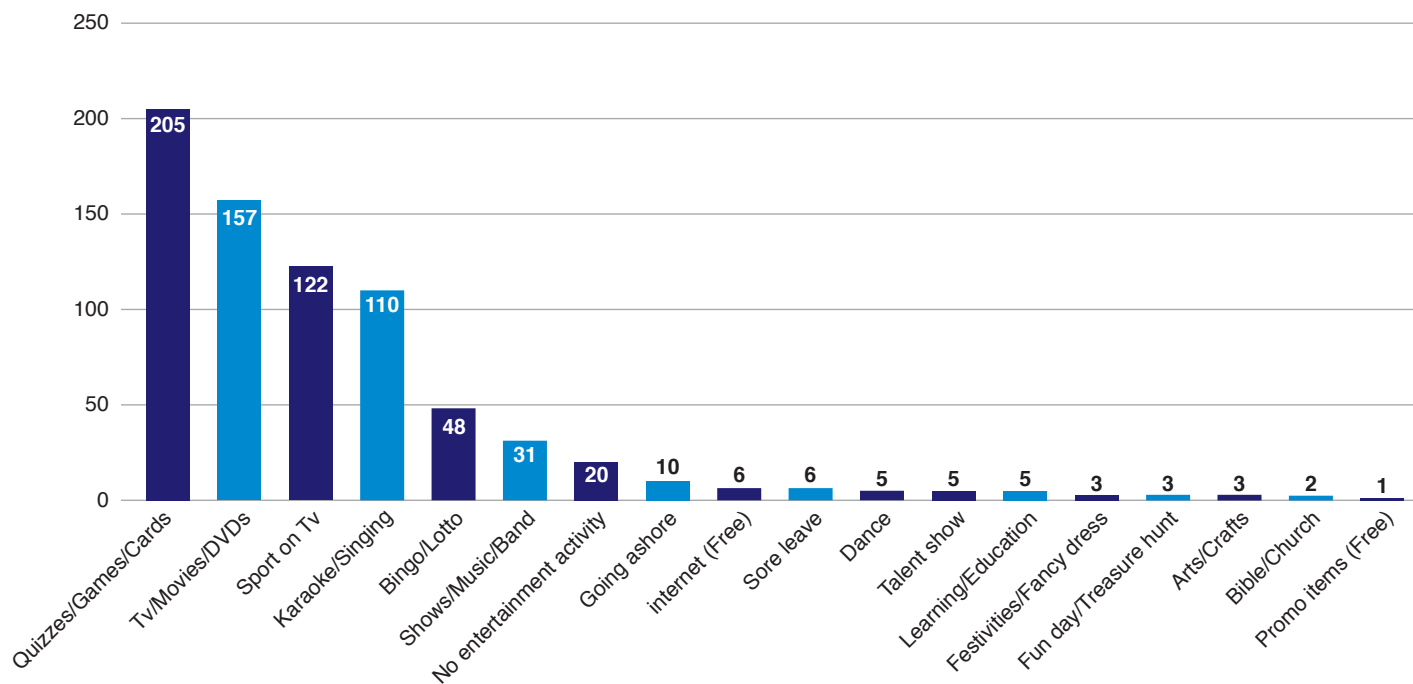


Figure 21: Social interaction initiatives involving entertainment

Social interaction initiatives involving social media

Social media in recent times has drastically changed the way that people interact with each other and participate in entertainment (Socialnomics 2017). Despite often patchy Wi-Fi facilities on board or having to pay for this service, seafarers clearly enjoy socialising using social media tools.

WhatsApp was the main method survey respondents said that they engaged together with social media (N=148). Many formed WhatsApp groups that they could share with their crewmates about daily life on board and events that might be taking place (Figure 22). The use of different social media platforms for social engagement was also popular (N=135) followed by gaming and the use of PS4 (Play Station) (N=91) if these facilities were available. Facebook was specifically mentioned 75 times and online games (N=65). 73 survey respondents said that they had no service or were unable to use social media because service was not free to them.

“In this case social media does tend to help, each one gets the same post or they get the same thing in Facebook or WhatsApp or something. They would talk about it, you know if someone’s seen a news clipping online then they would bring it to the mess hall, a new movie, a sports game a game of cricket, football or something. So [social media] does help, it does have its plus points for sure.”

– (Interview 9)

Despite the controversy surrounding the use of social media and Wi-Fi, activities reliant on these were clearly popular on board where available. Activities using social media can be highly adaptable and have the potential to engage people across the vessel and further afield and could certainly be used in a competitive way if desired.

Please provide any examples of activities online or using social media that you have seen help bring crew together eg. gaming or WhatsApp groups

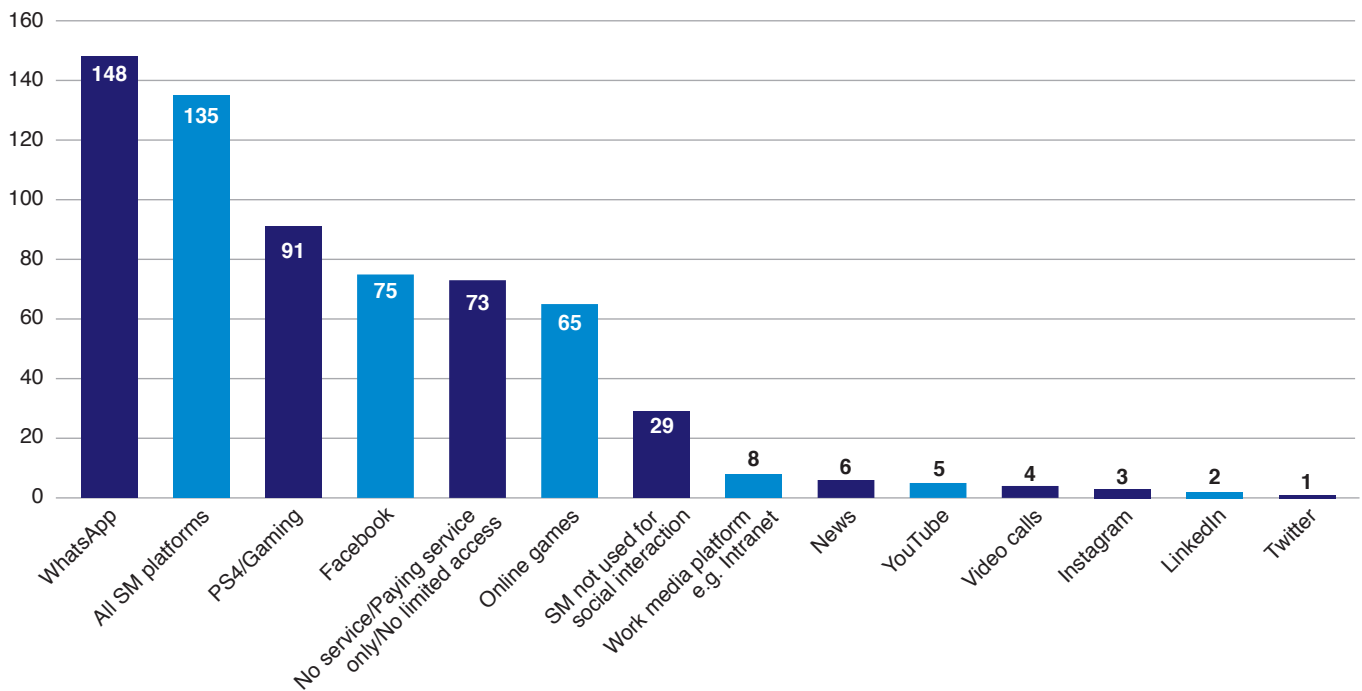


Figure 22: Social interaction initiatives involving social media

Competitions

There was evidence that competitions were popular incorporated into many forms of activities. Competitions can be uniting and provide an attractive focal point to gain people's interest and participation (Institute of competition sciences 2017). Competitions can also build momentum when made to last over time generating enthusiasm, a talking point and interaction.

"When you had a voyage of more than 15 days there used to be a bingo competition with ten numbers being read every day"

– (Interview 1)

"... try and promote sporting activities, basketball if they can, ping pong (table tennis) whatever they can do, competitions between different ships or each fleet, who can walk the most rounds or do steps... just do any physical activity or competition. In one way it's fun for the crew to do because they can compete with their friend's and other ships and it contributes to their physical well-being in the sense that it is healthy to do so. [...] There is a lot I think companies can do to improve social well-being."

– (Interview 10)

"On my last ship, we had a football tournament every month that the captain was actually planning. So, on Wednesdays he would put a note in the dining room where people could sign up, and everyone always signed up for it. And then Saturday after dinner we will all meet up, and we will meet some teams and will play together actually all night. It was really fantastic because people were talking about this, you know, weeks after, and we were looking forward for the next one. ... we did random teams, so none picked their team, and ... you get to talk with someone from the crew that you may be don't always talk with. And people all mixed in their ranks and all that." – (Interview 3)

Adapting activities to have an element of competition is something that could be easily achieved across all the categories of social engagement (cooking, sports, entertainment, and social media). It is a low-cost way of generating engagement on board and has the advantage of being flexible, where activities can be run as a one-off event or over a period of time.



Section 4: Discussion

This section takes a closer look at some of the key areas raised in the surveys and interviews.

4.1: Nationality

The shipping industry has driven globalisation and is also why the global seafaring community is culturally diverse and widely multi-national. The outsourcing of crew recruitment is commonplace and has led to mixed nationalities of crew being the norm.

Multi-national crews were broadly seen as an asset bringing different skills, viewpoints, and creativity to the crew on board. In relation to social interaction this can mean exposure to different national foods, different preferences in social activities and different interactions between individuals. When this works well, strong, and diverse teams that function together can be formed and help promote safety and other best practice on board. However, the survey noted that beyond fatigue, language and culture are among the top five reasons identified as a barrier to social interaction on board. If cohesion does not happen between different nationalities on board, cliques can form, minorities can be isolated and poor communication can cause safety issues.

“... I’ve found that having many cultures on board it’s a good thing actually. ... I’ve sailed [with] a staff of 6 different nationalities and there were 5 different nationalities on the bridge, Japanese, Filipinos, Ukrainian, English, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi and it was always a pleasure going into port and seeing the interaction between everybody over there, it was brilliant.” – (Interview 1)

“... in my opinion, it is only a benefit that you put a lot of different people together, I mean the diversity” – (Interview 3)

“I saw one captain once, he had a crew of 14 with 10 different nationalities and they all got on so well. They were like one big happy family”.
– (Interview 6, British, shore-based)

However, some issues relating to multinational crews exist that can impact on social interaction. For example, being the only one of your nationality on board can mean that you are marginalised and potentially isolated.

“... there have been a few situations where there have been minorities on board, so you may only have one of a different nationality, and that can create social isolation ...” – (Interview 3)

Sometimes cliques of the same nationality will form which is usually connected to sharing the same language and interests, but when this happens, social mingling between crew reduces as does the understanding and empathy with other crew outside of the ‘clique’.

“... sometimes is that small groups will form, you’ll have the Greeks in on corner, the English in one corner and that is absolutely not good. That is the worst thing you can ask for on board a ship”. – (Interview 9)

Multinational crews are complex, diverse and require strong leadership skills. These must demonstrate an understanding of the benefits of inclusivity and acknowledge the negatives associated with exclusion. The emphasis of leadership here needs to be around healthy interaction of all crew to develop the best teams and working environment on board.



Photo: Philip Ajuang

4.2: Gender

Women are a minority group on board merchant vessels, and this can be problematic when socialising with other crew members. Friendly behaviour can be misconstrued on both sides and sometimes the mark is clearly overstepped, leading to feelings of isolation and awkwardness (Pike et al. 2016).

“As a woman, my main barrier to social interaction is if I act in any way friendly to one or more to the other crew, it is an invitation for them or someone else to start harassing me. So, I feel like I have to stay away from all the social events, otherwise I will be blamed if/when I get harassed or assaulted”. – (Interview 2)

“I was the only female, so I felt segregated. I was also a cadet, so my opinion really didn’t make it that far. In my off time I spent most times in my cabin watching movies or on deck looking at the ocean”. – (Survey 446)

Being in a minority group can lead to feeling marginalised (Thompson, 2011; Germain et al. 2012) but if numbers of the group are increased there is a sense of safety and solidarity that is improved, for example:

“I’ve recently had some conversations with some women on the Ferries, but they seem to have less trouble with it, I think it is because they are more women.” – (Interview 2)

This is also likely to apply to other minority groups on board, such as ethnic minorities and those from the LGBTQ community. Diversity and inclusion are paramount on board to ensure a safe, happy and functional vessel and shipping companies should make every effort to ensure this is the case (Mission to Seafarers 2018; Human Rights at Sea 2015). Social interaction can provide the impetus needed to bring people together.

Women are known for generally having good social skills and a wider network of social connections outside of their family group. Kemp (2019) said:

“Women tend to open up to others, bringing the stuff that’s worrying them to the surface and feeling better for it, men don’t. Men internalise their anxieties.” (Kemp 2019). This is reinforced by the following interview quote:

“... I don’t know if it is just because women are better at it, but normally on the ships where I go, I think that I am better at gathering people than a guy would have been. I always arranged movies nights, or football tournaments, and I go down and knock on people’s doors or call them, and as my colleagues say, they don’t experience the same with male colleagues. I don’t know if we [women] are better at it, or if it is my personality that is more social.” – (Interview 3)

“I think that men find it easier talking about the difficult stuff with women.” – (Interview 3)

Social interaction can mean drawing people out of their comfort zones, but within the safety of being part of a group.

“I’ve found when there’s been a group of us, the girls have got together and there’s been a sort of bonding point. So there’s people that have gone to shop, I don’t do shopping but I’ve gone on shopping trips with people purely because they’re girls and start saying come on we’ve got to go on a shopping trip, you start falling into stereotypes but it’s actually really good because you speak to people you wouldn’t normally, that’s been good ...” – (Interview 5)

However, differences can be noticed, and behaviours adjusted when minorities form part of a social group as the quote below indicates.

“to some extent it may differ because you know when it is all men they enjoy, when there is a woman at the parties and the social gatherings ... I would not say that they don’t enjoy it when there’s women on board, if there’s a woman in the party they have to behave you know.” – (Interview 7)

Considering gender and diversity and promoting inclusion through a supportive company culture is vital to establishing a productive working and living environment on board.

6. **LGBTQ**: The first four letters of this standard abbreviation are fairly straightforward: “Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.” The Q can stand for “questioning” -- as in still exploring one’s sexuality.” (CNN, 2019).

4.3: Alcohol on board

Driven by safety concerns, alcohol and running a bar on board is no longer permitted, or highly restricted for the majority. This is a break with the historical, primarily Western drinking culture that existed on board many vessels and has created a marked change for some in socialising on board over the last few decades. This issue highlighted controversy from the survey and interview responses and the following quotes from interviews address some of the concerns raised.

Alcohol drives social interaction

“I’m very much in favour of having a bar on ships I strongly believe that the whole alcohol-free thing on board of ships has been really bad for seafarers in general. and that promotes socialising you can have a drink it doesn’t have to be strong liquor” – (Interview 10)

“On the bars I think the goodness that comes out of it far outweighs the bad.” – (Interview 5)

“When I first went to sea, we had bars on board, these were social places where crew regularly met. It is a good thing that alcohol is not consumed regularly at sea any more, but socialising has reduced as a consequence.”
– (Survey 428)

“[referring to alcohol] in the old days which was a good thing for me, you have people from so many different backgrounds, languages, and cultures on board. You do need something at times to break down the walls.” – (Interview 9)

“It has affected social interaction definitely, there used to be a bar or a store where even hard liquor was allowed, and people used to interact over alcohol.” – (Interview 4)

“... the bar is just redundant so there’s not the kind of influence to bring people together anymore. It seems to be more finish work and go to your cabin...” – (Interview 5)

“social interaction decreased greatly when management applied a zero-alcohol policy”
– (Survey participant 849)

As noted, the primary justification for alcohol restrictions on board is safety. However, it is worth noting that fatigue has a similar impact to the effects of drinking alcohol, in its ability to slow responses and cause people to make mistakes (Schmidt 2017; Neild 2017). Although the issue of excessive alcohol consumption on board has now largely been addressed, seafarers are still struggling with fatigue on a daily basis, despite provisions made within the STCW and MLC to help regulate excessive work hours (Marine Insight 2020; IMO 2019b).

Some of the research respondents were not explicitly against alcohol on board but felt that it should be controlled.

“But my company doesn’t mind beer, so beer is okay but also a company should [have] a strict control over it if they are issuing alcohol to the crew. There should be a strict guideline of how much to give or how much not to give... so if we have beer on board I think once a while people can get together and enjoy you know, but when there is a zero alcohol policy, I have seen a lot of [the] crew have complained that they can’t survive on board there is no enjoyment...”
– (Interview 7)

“I don’t think that the occasional beer [is a problem]... It relaxes them they can look forward to Saturday night have their karaoke and have a beer all together. I think that’s quite good [if] it doesn’t get out of hand. I don’t think an absolutely dry ship is completely necessary.”
– (Interview 6)

“[no alcohol] has definitely reduced the social interaction on board. And as we talk about it with my colleagues, we do not need to go back, we do not need to have free alcohol, we do not need to have bars, but the fact that for instance, Saturdays that is always the big night, so we have the three course meal and if we could just have a glass of wine or beer, I think it that would make a big change because people will maybe stay at the dinner a little bit longer than normal, and people would talk more together. So, it is not that I would say that we should go back, but I think that is wrong to take it away completely.”
– (Interview 3)

“Vessel is alcohol free – therefore a BBQ for example takes a long time and man hours to set up and generally due to no beer crew will eat and leave almost immediately, so it is a waste of resources” – (Survey participant 569)

“... so I feel that having soft liquor on board does promote socialising but I have to stress, soft, not hard liquor.” – (Interview 10)

Some research respondents referred to the health and safety issues that can be caused by allowing alcohol on board. Others raised issues associated with banning it entirely.

“Alcohol is not necessary, but the fact it has often been taken away has the impact of a loss in trust and general demoralisation; it’s the assumption that people can’t behave or control themselves” – (Survey 902)

“The bars, again, on a personal level, I am much happier not sailing with drunks.if I am not constantly scared of my colleagues, it probably improves my social interaction – (Interview 2)

“I was working on the gas tanker they had a zero drink policy on board, zero alcohol and their entire fleet I think it was one thousand ships without alcohol. If I might be completely honest, I have never seen more violations with alcohol in my entire life....” – (Interview 1)

“When they try to smuggle booze back on board that means we can’t control it, whereas at least if we are drip feeding it to them, then we have some sort of control over it.” – (Interview 2)

It is clear that alcohol has been directly responsible for accidents at sea, but it is also apparent that social interaction has changed, and possibly suffered, where it has been banned from ships entirely. The search for middle ground, which some shipping companies have found, may be a consideration for others.

4.4: Smoking

Smoking is another activity that, despite its health risks, can serve to bring people together on board. Smoking is often taken up to help users deal with stress and boredom among other reasons (ASH 2009; Delaney et al 2018) but it does allow them to take regular breaks from work and provides a social focal point where people who smoke, get together, regardless of their authority within an organisation. For example:

“I know chief officers who’ve said I can’t give up smoking because if they give up smoking then they won’t know what’s going on with the ship because the centre of all gossip is the smoking area and that’s the one place where there is no rank, there is no ceremony for anyone. The captain comes down for a cigarette and he’s mate for the time he’s not Sir. So, it is a real boundaryless area.” – (Interview 5)

“On our vessel, crew socialize during coffee times. That is the daily moment (2 per day) that everyone is in one place talking or smoking”. – (Survey respondent 82)

The health disadvantages of smoking are now widely known, but the social element that smoking provides is unique and can have real benefits in getting people together and talking informally across organisational hierarchies a few times a day. Replication of this safe, social space is something that would provide social benefit, particularly for seafarers.

4.5: Wi-Fi (on board connectivity)

Connectivity and internet access are a significant part of modern life, particularly for the generations that have grown up with it. The benefits and challenges of providing Wi-Fi on board provoked mixed reactions from the survey and interview responses, which are discussed in this section. One thing is certain, most seafarers like to have access to the internet at sea, primarily to be able to stay connected with their family and friends. One Captain summed it up like this.

“.. if the ship was to meet with an incident and the master has to abandon the ship, in the old days the announcement would be [through] a PA system, but now as soon as you drop the Wi-Fi signal everybody comes running on deck.”

– (Interview 1)

“I think that the company should invest much more in the Wi-Fi on board. I know that many people they think that if we had better Wi-Fi none will talk with each other. But I actually think that it will have the opposite effect, because at this moment at sea our Wi-Fi is usually very bad and unstable, so we spent a lot of time in our cabin trying to speak with those at home, ... where if our internet were just working and we could easily receive and send messages, or just talk all with our families for 10 minutes ... I think that we would spend less time on it and would be less frustrated. Because the frustration is definitely one of the biggest downsides there.”

– (Interview 3)

“Through the development of technology and the availability of internet on board, seafarers spend less time in messrooms and common rooms and more time in isolation in their own cabins. There, they have their own entertainment, can keep in up with the news and contact their loved ones from the privacy of their own space.”

– (Survey 526)

“More TVs and electronic devices in cabins, more time on social media and chatting with friends and families. New generations used to staying in bedrooms more.” – (Survey 888)

There was also an interesting observation that Wi-Fi can provide a ‘lifeline’ for contact with family, friends and the outside world. It can provide refuge for crew members not wanting to socialise on board for whatever reason.

“Also, for people who don’t feel safe or for some reason can’t socialize, it is really helpful to stay in contact with that support network at home, you know, that’s been a life saver.” – (Interview 1)

*“I have been interacting with my friends who have been staying on the full Wi-Fi ships and they are having a good life actually because they have been given 2 hours of talk time a day which is rarely being used, I mean how much can you talk? They are quite pleased actually whenever they want they can talk to their families that **creates a sense of positivity** so any time they can contact their family through video call, through Wi-Fi through WhatsApp whatever but that sense of **security is there.**”* – (Interview 4)

Wi-Fi can discourage social interaction

Others felt that Wi-Fi has been responsible for the decline of social interaction on board, for example:

“... much the crew used to sit together every evening and share their movies, their life stories over dinner and over drinks now with the internet people tend to stay more in the cabin during their off times and more so with the work pressure...”

– (Interview 4)

“for me it causes more problems than it’s worth, and it’s so slow it’s the other thing that’s why people get so frustrated because if one person video calls that’s it the rest of the ship can’t have Wi-Fi so yeah it needs to be a lot better before its actually useful to people.” – (Interview 5)

“... if you have too much of it people will go to their cabins and just watch Netflix and stuff .

– (Interview 9)

Wi-Fi restrictions on board

“I feel that internet is necessary on board the vessel so that the seafarers are informed and in touch with his family, but we should have a certain amount of control on it.” – (Interview 1)

“I have never been on a ship with fully functional Wi-Fi.” – (Interview 4)

“When they introduced Wi-Fi, it was on a voucher system, but the vouchers were free, and I think that was a really smart way of doing it, because it helps to keep some sort of control of it, it stopped people from downloading huge movies or whatever, but you still had access if you wanted it.” – (Interview 2)

“... when you are at home or [in an] office you can just click for a moment to see the news or you can do a small email privately if you want. On board there are not that many devices so you have to use your personal device to go to your cabin ... to get your social interaction and then you find out the downside that people in smoke breaks or coffee breaks toilet breaks just slip in to go to their cabin to check their email or there is something private to them like a news flash or something and it would be better for people to help themselves and say ok just after dinner I do a quick check but it’s very difficult, especially when there’s a time difference .”

– (Interview 8)

“I don’t think you should have access in your cabin to Wi-Fi. I think it should be a communal area so if you want to go and talk to your family its fine, you go to the common room or you go to the mess area and talk to them, then that way one of the things that comes out of it [is] if there is a problem at home and if the partner at home is complaining to the person on board, if that person is together with other crew members then it’s obvious that it’s a problem and they can immediately talk to each other and try and share what it is ...” – (Interview 10)

Free Wi-Fi on board

“Yes, I would say that it should be free because a lot of companies now days are giving free internet and some are still charging money and because they’re seafarers and they’re totally isolated they are at sea a lot of the times a lot of people are psychologically sick they think they have made their own choice by being at sea and sometimes internets not working and they are home sick and they cannot talk to their family.” – (Interview 7)

“..... most of the management companies, they are charging an extortionate amount so that poses a problem.” – (Interview 4)

Controversy surrounding the benefits and challenges of Wi-Fi will remain whilst generational differences exist. However, the experience of seafarers and the isolation from their families presents a compelling argument for its use on board. Although Wi-Fi and connectivity has coincided with a decline of social interaction on board, as noted by some of the quotes, it could perhaps be utilised better to engage people, such as interaction through social groups (e.g. WhatsApp) and gaming online together.

4.6: Ship and shore management relationship

The relationship between the management on the vessel and on shore is an important one and impacts on the daily operations of the vessel and the crew well-being. Good communication is essential between the ship and the shore and this should filter through to the crew to provide them with clarity and certainty regarding the expectations on board, as often as possible. This has seen to be especially important during the pandemic when uncertainty about end of contracts and leaving the vessel are high.

“My only advice is to the shore side, please be honest to the staff on board make sure that they are aware of the efforts your making because this goes a long way. If the crew on board the ship are aware of what’s happening, and he is aware of all the efforts being made by the company then he will appreciate that he won’t have any doubt in his mind.” – (Interview 1)

“Don’t see initiative from senior management. All we talk of is work. Like already said seafarer’s mental wellness is just for talks and least in the priority of anyone” – (Survey 128)

Small efforts made by the shore office to improve social interaction can increase motivation on board and make a difference to whether the crew are inclined to ‘go the extra mile’. An example during the COVID-19 pandemic is provided by this quote:

“one of the advantages is that the shore management has risen up to the challenge of making sure that the seafarers that have now been on board for longer than the stay of their contract are made to feel good about staying, by increasing the internet bandwidth or engaging in some kind of inter-ship game [and] increasing the amount of club allowance and so on.” – (Interview 1)

Support from the shore office for initiatives taken on board to engage crew is vital demonstrating concern for crew well-being and promotion of initiatives that encourage this.

4.7: Ship design

The environment that people live and work in can impact on all aspects of an individual’s well-being. The design of the ship contributes an important role in this regard, including the spaces in which the crew are able to interact together. As many vessels are built to achieve economies of scale, they are often built larger but with little regard for the accommodation quarters and spaces in which seafarers use recreationally to relax and enjoy their time off. This can impact on how they experience time on board (Turgo, 2020). Living and working in a constantly moving environment can present issues that should be considered in a ship’s design. As one interviewee sums up,

“I think that by ship design and by designing that foundation correctly, we can encourage people to be together.” – (Interview 1)

“[Referring to Communal space] Majority space is utilised for commercial use, sometimes gyms and TV rooms are converted to client offices and cabins specially in the offshore industry. This should be stopped, and more and more extra-curricular activities should be engaged on board.” – (Survey 619)

When the design is not well thought out, the impacts can be problematic. For example,

“Also in the cabin they are not very friendly when the ship is rolling to and fro...” – (Interview 1)

The hospitality industry pays great attention to areas such as lighting, temperature, ambient noise and furnishings to encourage the public to feel comfortable and to ultimately spend money. This aesthetic can have a powerful impact on people’s mood and behaviour. Similarly, if seafarers are living in an environment that does not consider their comforts and activities, both at work and in their recreation, then it can be assumed that they will not be operating at their best and maybe distracted by the general discomfort of the environment that they are in. For example,

“it is again about the budget and everything is cut down, and it doesn’t feel homely, even small things such as the shades of light. If you choose the kind of lighting that you see in hospitals and public places that are cold and white light, it doesn’t make you want to stay in that area, but if you put up warm lights, it feels more homely and more comfortable.” – (Interview 3)

“But definitely the furniture, ... need(s) to be comfortable, there is a big difference if you sit on a couch from China or on a couch from Europe. I am going to say that the comfiness is very different. I know that some companies work with it, but I think that is something we should focus more on.” – (Interview 3)

“I think a lot of the smaller ships the new designs will focus on cargo capacity and have very limited accommodation space available ...” – (Interview 10)

“They’ve forgotten about the crew [is] basically what’s come out of the design. All the Gucci stuff for the operational side but actually when you look at living, we haven’t got the space on there.” – (Interview 5)

Ensuring there is enough space for the crew to live and work in comfortably, whilst also making sure the vessel is fit for purpose, requires a careful balance of these essential needs. Consideration of the diversity of the crew, such as age and gender are also important and should be accounted for within the ship design allowing these factors to co-exist without conflict.

“... the person with the highest rank decides what’s going on more or less The younger people, usually lower in ranks, they want to play videogame or PlayStation and they are usually outranked by the older or higher ranks they just want to see a movie and don’t want any background noise. it’s interesting instead of one big space maybe you need several smaller ones.” – (Interview 8)

“... now they put it all together to make one big space one big happy family but everybody wants to do something else and they take it away there should be like 2 smaller rooms or maybe one bar with a moving wall something you can open and close just separate it so one part can watch the movie and the other side is talking or listening to the radio or music or whatever.” – (Interview 8)

Country specific design traits

The research showed that certain countries designed new ships to certain specifications which did not always allow enough space for the entire crew to get together. Comments were made about the minimal space in Japanese builds, whereas countries such as Norway and Holland were thought to allow more room for recreation.

“I’ve been in various companies, so some ships which are more of the Norwegian style build, they have ample space in them. You can place a treadmill at least 6 to 7 people no problem but the Japanese style ships they are a bit squashed, so maximum 4 people can exercise together.” – (Interview 4)

“... the Japanese built tankers they have very [little] space in the accommodation like this there’s hardly a hall or something to have a party but that can happen in the mess room.” – (Interview 7)

“Ships which are built by yard like the ones I’ve seen in China, no definitely not. But a few custom-built ships by very few companies especially the Dutch companies they do tend think about the crew and welfare a bit ...” – (Interview 4)

It is interesting that these design differences were noticeable by given country. This indicates that good practice in designing for crew well-being exists and could be adopted if companies are willing to do so.

4.8: Importance of port facilities and ship visits

Not all ports have dedicated facilities for seafarers, but where they exist, whatever the offering, the research shows that they were considered important to social interaction and for boosting morale generally, as the quote below indicates.

“Incredibly important [if] you’ve got a shop where you can go and get some quick comfort, just a bit of chocolate, ... something like that brings people together having the [Mission] however awful it is there’s something about it, it creates an atmosphere that you just don’t get anywhere else and also you are all there together you find that all the little tensions that were built up come out in the [Mission] and it generally comes out in a more friendly way than it otherwise would because everyone’s having a good time, everyone’s happy ...” – (Interview 5)

It should be noted that access to port facilities are currently extremely limited due to restrictions on seafarers leaving vessels during the pandemic. Port visits are now dependent on a country’s own regulations as well as that of the shipping company involved. Understandably, many are being cautious. The volunteer network that supports the multiple seafarer charities working in ports around the world has significantly decreased since the pandemic. Many volunteers were elderly retirees because due to the time they had available to help. Their age group meant that they were automatically in a high-risk category from the pandemic. This has led to the ministries, missions, and other charities having to deal with an increase of seafarers’ requirements against a backdrop of significantly reduced support.

The interview and survey results focused on the benefit of port facilities when they were accessible, and their increased value due to short port calls and because many ports are far away from city centres (Mission to Seafarers 2019).

“Port facilities are an important facility [and] have a huge impact on social impact ...”

– (Interview 7)

“usually it’s the Seamen’s Mission, which is really important, because without the Seamen’s Mission you can’t go on-shore because there is not transport usually.” – (Interview 2)

“More ports are becoming aware of the importance of providing social and welfare facilities for seafarers, but not enough and not quickly enough.” – (Survey 88)

“... the crew are having more problems going ashore and a lot of off-shore ports limit shore access to crew [also ...] the rotation at the port is a lot shorter ...” – (Interview 10)

Interacting socially away from the ship and making use of port facilities can have a healthy and positive impact on those using them.

“most people never go alone at shore, they normally go at shore with some people.”

– (Interview 3)

“Ports calls lessen my homesickness”

– (Survey 28)

Nationality dependent

“I think it depends on the nationality and the culture I know for other nationalities they really need it, I know charities like the mission for seafarers will use these port facilities to engage with the seafarers so yes I feel they are important.” – (Interview 10)

“Because I am on container, the terminals are normally a long way from the actual cities, so I know in the big ports when we have these port facilities, especially the Asian crew they use it a lot. And they always go out to download some movies, or to play some pool, or talk to some other people.... It is not because the Europeans do not use it, because we do. But it is just that there are more Asians out at sea today.”

– (Interview 3)

How seafarers’ charities are responding and adapting their port facilities

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many seafarers’ charities have had to adapt to seafarers not being able to come ashore and have revised their services accordingly. Some now provide a delivery of welfare boxes to seafarers at the gangway and shopping deliveries. As Jason Zuidema from NAMMA puts it, in these times, “Sharing a bit of junk food with your family and friends is a staple for mental health.” Other adapted services include ‘Ministry from a distance’ and support chats via text (Zuidema, 2020).

4.9: Regulatory areas

Shipping is a highly regulated industry, often as a result of reactive measures being put in place following accidents at sea, for example, SOLAS (post Titanic) and Civil Liability Convention (CLC), (post Torrey Canyon) and International Safety Management Code (ISM), (post Herald of Free Enterprise).

The International Ship and Port Security Code (ISPS) and the The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) are some of the regulatory requirements mentioned by the research respondents that have impacted on seafarers' well-being.

The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) (2006) focuses on health and safety and includes necessary hours of rest and accident prevention (Regulation 4.3). This legislation was the first of its kind and has set a benchmark that will be developed over time. However, certain shipping companies will apply the MLC more completely than others, meaning its value will vary (Pike et al 2019b). The research respondents had a mixed reaction to the MLC, although on balance it was viewed as positive, for example:

"... a lot of things have become better after the MLC especially the welfare on board because there is more focus on it, but in my opinion, it seems like a lot of companies, unfortunately, are still lacking on that point, they are only fulfilling the minimum requirement of the MLC."

– (Interview 1)

".... the MLC has helped with the standard of living increased and the recreation equipment have been made mandatory on board, so that's definitely a plus point" – (Interview 4)

"The MLC has put a positive impact on social interaction I can't see any negative aspect of it because since the MLC has come the welfare of the crew is brought to a much higher standard like a lot of companies are offering free internet like before without the MLC we didn't have any access to internet." – (Interview 7)

The ISPS Code was established to increase port and vessel security but has unfortunately generally led to greater restrictions in crew being able to leave the ship in port.

"[With reference to the ISPS code] in some ports you need to go through many security points, and it takes a lot of time to get out, and when you only have 4 hours off you don't want to spend half of that time trying to get out."

– (Interview 3)

"... unfortunately the ISPS code was intended to be in a good way it was started off as a security code which was to protect both the ship and the crewunfortunately there are always exceptions to the rule which utilise the rule for the purpose of denying shore for seafarers or for making some money" – (Interview 10)

"Most [ports] are very strict and regulated [the] United States is very famous for it and then also depending on terminals, when you're calling or sailing on tankers, getting on oil terminals, especially major oil terminals these are the most strict companies where, okay you can go ashore [allowed] by government but our installation doesn't allow anybody going ashore. Then it's not by the country but the terminal regulations, by the oil majors themselves when you go to smaller facilities then ISPS is just as strict but you have the possibility to go ashore or they have means to get a service boat or a private taxi company on the terminal which can drive you to the boat and back to the gate."

– (Interview 8)

4.10: COVID-19

Seafarers are used to being away from their family and friends for long periods of time. However, the impacts from COVID-19, mean contracts are often extended and restrictions are placed on leaving the ship during port calls have heightened these issues. This has had a detrimental impact on seafarers' mental health and even the safety of the vessel (IMO 2020). However, lessons can and should be learnt from the pandemic and from some of the absolute best behaviours that have come out of it to protect the well-being of seafarers. These issues and best practices arising from COVID-19 are discussed below.

Impacts on mental health

Interviewees were asked about the impacts of COVID-19 on the crew and what could be learnt. Many pointed to the significant consequences the pandemic has had on mental health on board and some traumatic situations that seafarers have been dealing with in isolation. The following quotes provide examples of these.

[on hearing about the death of his father during COVID at sea] "... I try to give him some positivity and that's how things are... He's a chief mate, if he falters the ship falters so he's just holding himself there." – (Interview 4)

“I think its brought home because there’s been a raise in suicides from what I’ve heard and I think people have started really thinking about each other ...” – (Interview 5)

“I saw a Filipino about to go on leave after almost a year on duty and straight before he was due to leave they changed it and made him stay on board, not for a long time but it devastated him – I saw it, he physically shrank he’d been so looking forward...” – (Interview 6)

“... for boys that have been held up on board for so long, close to 1 year, 8 months, 9 months they’re in a sorry state because not only are they tired, exhausted it is the feeling of what if something goes wrong at home. So that is playing on them much more than they’re health is for themselves” – (Interview 9)

“It is very tough and when you reach port people look at you like you’ve brought the plague in.” – (Interview 9)

“It’s really at breaking point, we don’t push at all we just do the bare minimum to keep the ship clean and safe because you can’t push someone who would rather jump overboard than do another 5 minutes of work.” – (Interview 9)

Importance of good Leadership

COVID-19 has presented additional challenges for the senior officers at sea. They must be able to deal with their own levels of stress as well as manage and help the rest of the crew with theirs, on top of running a safe and efficient ship. Burnout can be become all too common, particularly where contracts have been extended (Stapleton and Opiari, 2020).

“..... I think everything depends on the management on board the ship and how they handle the situation. ... in my 5 months on board we had an amazing crew, and our management handled the situation brilliantly, they were encouraging, and they were setting out games, and they were informing their crew. Every night the Captain would go down for dinner and he would just say a few words about how the situation, So, there was a constant flow of information, and people, they felt included. ... when you have a situation like this, it is the management’s job to keep their humour up and make some effort, I know it takes a lot from them.” – (Interview 3)

Importance of good communication

Uncertainty can be harmful. The following quotes provide examples of the value of good communication, even if an uncertain situation cannot be addressed directly.

“I think the uncertainty is what’s killing people, and just the inability to just go home.” – (Interview 5)

“... for the Asian guys that go off it’s very difficult for them [if] their country doesn’t allow them to return or its very difficult to return and nobody can give an answer okay when can I return. So, its never-ending form maybe tomorrow nobody knows exactly what the rules are anymore that makes it very complicated.” – (Interview 8)

“... if it is an inclusive and just culture then the ship is more informed about what’s happening even in the times of COVID-19 ...” – (Interview 1)

Looking after and noticing each other

Taking a genuine interest in people, will help them to feel valued and appreciated. Initiatives such as ISWAN’s Connecting Crew Campaign (ISWAN, 2020), Mentally Healthy Ships (Blackburn, 2020) and the MCA and InterManager’s Well-being Assessment Tool (2020) demonstrate a few of the many ways in which organisations are collaborating and prioritising crew welfare.

“That we have to talk with each other, and that we have to notice each other, I mean, notice the change in people’s mood, and keep in mind that is ok to ask if people are ok or if they want to talk because it is important to talk to people, ... So, I think just in the general human aspect, we have to show interest for each other, and there has to be space for all of us.” – (Interview 3)

“.... so I make it a point at least once or twice a day I go round during their work breaks bring them a hot tea or something, joke and then go back up to the bridge... These are the small things that help them to stretch it on a few more days each time. : I do, do it as part of my routine I do meet the boys every day at least twice but now I do it much more...” – (Interview 9)

As key workers, the pandemic has impacted seafarers more than most. However, the research shows how clear communication, support for the crew and concern for mental well-being can have a significant positive impact. These are the lessons which must be learnt for the benefits of seafarers’ welfare.

4.11: Funding of activities

A small, allocated welfare fund is usually made available by shipping companies to support recreational activities for the crew. Interview respondents were aware that this provision was not made available by all shipping companies. Variations also existed in the amount paid by the shipping company and how this was allocated.

“... in my company we are getting \$300 for the ship every month for welfare activities like when we have parties and get togethers [...] so we get \$300 a month and that plays a huge role when maintaining social interaction and social gatherings on board.” – (Interview 7)

The respondents mentioned an amount between US\$300 up to \$1000 were regularly available, and for some, this amount had been increased during COVID-19.

“.... it varies a lot, but in my company for instance, in relation to this pandemic, all ships receive a thousand dollars to their ship’s welfare fund. And there is money that you can use right away. So, for instance on my ship we bought guitars and new play station games, and some different things that the crew were asking for such as new basket balls, etc.” – (Interview 3)

“... in my company we are getting \$300 for the ship every month for welfare activities like when we have parties and get togethers. [...] so we get \$300 a month and that plays a huge role when maintaining social interaction and social gatherings on board.” – (Interview 7)

The allocation of the welfare funds was often dependent on the decisions made by the Master, and how this was administered relied on their leadership on board, electing to either empower the crew to make their own choices about how the funds are used, or making these decisions themselves.

“Some captains they care a lot about the welfare on board, so they will ask the crew, and say ok, we’ve got a thousand dollars and I want some advice from you guys, what do you want me to use them for? But other captains, they will just buy something that they think will work.” – (Interview 3)

The welfare fund, where available, represents an investment from shipping companies to help provide for seafarers’ well-being. Consideration of how this can best be spent, taking into account the ages and nationalities of the crew, will ensure maximum impact from the fund, however small. Turning this into a democratic process is likely to see the best return on the investment.



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.

Section 6: 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. Visit the ISWAN website for further information about ISWAN's Social Interaction Matters (SIM) Project: bit.ly/2WqpHxe



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