

“CASTAWAY” or ADAPTATION OF THE SEAFARER TO THE LIFE IN THE SOCIETY AS AN IMPORTANT MOTIVATION

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I was born in a small Eastern European country - Bulgaria. My country is situated on the Black Sea but has no old tradition in seafaring. It started 120 years ago when my country got its independence after 500 years yoke. To be a seaman was my childhood dream. I have followed this dream all my life. I completed the full 5 years course of the State Naval Academy for merchant marine. After 15 years of sea experience, I am at the top of my career working as a Master for an international shipping company. I have travelled all around the world, I have seen people of many nations. My dream has become true. However, when I look back I realize that all my efforts to find and prove myself as part of this world and the society were in vain. I feel more isolated and forgotten now after years of travelling and meeting so many people. I feel myself more like a castaway than a seaman. In one American movie named - “Castaway” the famous Tom Hanks is acting as a man who survives an airplane crash on a small Pacific island. The castaway was found and brought back to the world to which he belongs by seamen – his brothers in fortune. This movie is a good example of what happens when a person forgotten by society after years of isolation is trying to adapt to normal life again. The fate of seafarers nowadays is very similar to that of the “castaway” character of Tom Hanks.

Hundred years ago, seamen were bearers of progress and civilisation to the undiscovered world. However, there are not unexplored parts of the world today. Living standards rise everywhere in the world because people use in their household more and more cheap stuff manufactured by cheap labourers and delivered by the cheapest marine transport. Ninety percents of the world trade is carried out by sea but there is no understanding amongst people in society of the very important contribution that seafarers make to the world economy.

The age of proud seamanship is over.

What is the benefit of being a seaman at the beginning of the 21st century, in this human oriented world of globalization and progressive technologies? I will try to analyze the situation of seafarers in the modern world.

The shipping industry has invested a lot of money and potential in the training and education of seafarers for better performance, safety and survival at sea. There are so many training programmes, manuals, requirements of the International Maritime Organization, rules and legislation that modern seamen

are forced to navigate in the ocean of “paper bureaucracy”, twice bigger than the natural one. However, good seamanship, training and education are not enough to avoid the fearful storms in the so-called “paper ocean”. If you try to collect all the requirements that seafarers have to respond to in one book you will be surprised – the novel of the famous writer Jules Verne – “20 thousand leagues under the sea” (Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers) will be like a small note-book compared to that book.

Seafarers have to be well trained, in perfect health, physiological and mental condition in order to take proudly their place in the battle of survival at sea. They have no right to be indisposed while joining the next ship – otherwise they will miss their employment. All international passports, visas, seaman’s books, training certificates, qualifications have to be updated regularly – and no excuses.

The modern world of shipping needs perfect soldiers – two heads, four hands, four legs and immortal if possible.

Eighty percent of accidents at sea are caused by human error. However “Erare humanum est” (Seneca) - to make mistakes is part of the human nature. Many factors are taken into account while investigating reasons for accidents. Fatigue, stress, lack of experience is amongst them. Nevertheless, the period of adaptation, one very important factor for the ability of seafarers to perform properly their tasks is still underestimated by many.

If we compare the job of a train driver and a pilot flying an airplane to that of a seaman, we shall see that the pilot and the driver are working in severe environmental conditions and are under constant stress due to the nature of the high-speed machines they are controlling.

However, all stress they endure is just for a short period of maybe 2 to 12 hours. After the shift or the flight, they have rest in a normal living atmosphere in the society – hotels and houses, if inland together with their families, friends and relatives.

Unlike seafarers who are working and resting in the same aggressive environment – vibrations, pitching and rolling, stormy weather, moisture, heat, cold, toxic vapours, clock rotation for several months at sea far away from home. For one astronomical year, seafarers are spending with their families in their country a period of two or three times less than at sea. Somebody may say that the long interrupted rest between two employments is well enough to recover. However, after the 4th month, at sea some biological changes in the body cannot be recovered. Some psychological changes in the mind too.

Most of the shipowners and crew managers take care of seafarers only for the period of their contract of employment and just for the training courses concerning the preparation for work at sea. In fact, the motivation of seafarers is a subject of interest for ship-owners as long as seafarers are employed on board the particular ship.

There is another aspect of the seaman's life: adaptation to life in society. It is as important as the adaptation to life at sea. Moreover, it is an important part of the motivation of the seaman too. Why?

Let us calculate how long seafarers are at home for the period of 5 years (60 months). For example, let us take the average duration of a contract - 6 months, and the average period of leave - 4 months. Simple calculation: For the period of 5 years, the time spent on board is 40 months and the time spent at home is 20 months. The period of studying in order to obtain a license for an officer or engineer is 5 years too. The validity of the certificates, passports, and seaman's books is 5 years. During these 5 years, the International Maritime Organization has been changing, renovating, and amending many conventions, because of the extremely dynamic development of the marine industry. As a result, a new model of training courses and requirements are frequently implemented.

Seafarers need another month of training and certification while they are on vacation every year. That makes 5 months less for 5 years or 15 months at home for the average period of 5 years.

Every seaman according to his professional experience at sea needs a period of a week or two up to one month to adapt to the working and living conditions - multilingual crew and working environment. The adaptation of a new joining crewmember is facilitated by many written instructions, rules, regulations and drills in which he has to participate after boarding the ship.

Unfortunately, the period of adaptation of the seaman to normal life in the family and society after his return home could last longer than a month. Finally when the seaman is about to realize that he is back to normal life again he has to leave for another six months or more. There are no written instructions, rules, regulations and drills he has to study and participate in order to feel himself a normal member of his family and society after such a long absence. In fact, the seafarer is well prepared to respond to any extraordinary situation at sea but is not able to handle a simple domestic situation at home.

Owing to this lack of awareness and information in most cases, seafarers are spending their money unreasonably, investing in useless or unprofitable enterprises. As a result, seafarers are disappointed, moneyless and desperate at the end of their vacation. In addition, they are ready to go back to sea – unpleasant, but familiar and profitable, repeatedly turning in this closed, vicious circle. The shipping companies welcome this very situation, and they know how to capitalize it.

Another possibility for seafarers to be closer to society is during their stay at sea when the ship calls at port.

How long does a seaman spend ashore while the ship is in port?

Shipping companies are investing in more and more modern terminals around the world. The idea is to increase to maximum the speed of cargo handling operations and to facilitate multimodal transportation by developing more effective infrastructure. In order to respond to that requirement all terminals are situated far away from cities and close to international highways. The time for cargo processing is between 4 and 10 hours for most types of ships.

At its best, half of the ship's stays in port seafarers have for rest and the other half they are on duty. Seafarers need at least two hours to reach the nearest city or seaman's club (if there is any) in order to send a letter, an e-mail or to call home and go back. On contrary, they will prefer to take rest on board after sleepless nights in stormy weather instead of wasting time wondering how to find the "Promised Land". As a result, connection with home is broken for months. In addition, the situation is the same for long ocean passages and for short port calls.

The Christian missions for seamen like "Flying Angel" and "Stella Maris" and the Retired Seamen Associations are supporting the seamen's clubs in the countries of the British Commonwealth (i.e. Australia, New Zealand). I have noticed that Unbelievers, Muslims and Buddhists, do not visit those seaman's mission clubs very often. However, most of seafarers today are from Asia and ex-communist European countries.

There are not so many seamen from the highly developed countries nowadays. There will not be any retired seamen from those countries who will be able to support the mission for seamen in the future.

How many shipping companies are investing money in building seamen's clubs and for supporting missions for seamen around the world? How many shipping companies are organizing constant communications with home, free transportation, entertainment for their crews during their short stays in port?

How many shipping companies are making efforts to make their crews feel less isolated from society?

It is unacceptable that in this world of globalization where people are fighting against discrimination, for human rights and are trying to break the borders between nations and religions, more and more boundaries and restrictions are built for seamen. According to the Maritime legislation seamen are presumed guilty until the contrary is proved, while as per civil legislation criminals ashore are presumed innocent until proved guilty. In the European Convention on Human Rights, Section I, article (6), paragraph (2) is stated: "Everyone charged with a criminal offence shall be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law."

On the contrary in the Bulgarian Merchant Shipping Code (edition 2002), Chapter VI, article (170) paragraph (2) is stated the following:” It is assumed, until the contrary is proved, that the loss, shortage or damage to the cargo which have occurred after its receipt for carriage, have been culpably caused by the carrier.” In the United Nations Convention on the Carriage of Goods by Sea(“Hamburg Rules”), Part II, Article 5, Paragraph 2 is stated that: “The carrier is liable for loss..., unless the carrier proves that he,...took all measures...to avoid the occurrence and its consequences.”

Another example of discrimination towards seafarers is the implementation of the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code. I do not know either one case of substandard port terminal, which have been closed after 1st July 2004. But how many ships have been detained due to some procedural misunderstanding? The reason was not that the ships were not well prepared, but that the port facilities were not ready to face the challenge of a new reality.

That is what happened on board a ship under my command, four months after 1st July 2004 in an European community port. The duty officer reported that 15 men, five of them without any ID’s, badges or list with names are presenting themselves as a lashing gang insisting to board the ship after it was cleared by the authorities. Five men declared that they had forgotten their badges. I refused permission for boarding for those five men. As a result, all the lashing gang left the ship declaring that they will go on strike. There were no cargo operations for the next few hours. I was pressed by the Charterer’s agent and by the Port operational manager to allow those men to board the ship in order to avoid delay.

I was threatened that I will be responsible for any delay and this will be included in the Statement of facts. Despite all pressure, I refused the boarding of those men. Finally, they got their badges and were allowed to board the vessel. I do not like to imagine what would have happened if I had granted permission for boarding of these men without ID’s and at that very moment, the local Coast Guard had boarded my ship for a routine inspection. Who would have been accused for breaking the procedure? The answer is: the Master of the ship, which would have been declared as substandard and detained not for two, but for 10 or more hours. Moreover, there would have been no any consequences for the port terminal authorities or the stevedores.

Sometimes it is much easier for one container full of machine guns to pass the Security control in a port than for a seaman who wishes to reach the nearest telephone cabin. The seaman is not allowed to break the seal of a container if there is any doubt that the content is different from that declared and is harmful for the health and life. Nobody knows how many deadly weapons, chemicals and drugs have been transported by sea declared as toys, electronics or washing powder.

Every day hundreds of thousands of people are passing passport controls at airports around the world. There is no requirement for passengers to be checked for any vaccination. Unlike when the authorities come on board a ship, they do not allow seamen without a vaccination book to enter the country.

I do not know any registered case of demonstration of seamen for human rights down the streets in big cities in the world's recent history. Seamen are the most disciplined silent and honest workers in the world. They are more like soldiers in the army than like civilians. Nevertheless, what is the difference between mariners of the navy of a particular country and merchant seamen? Society respects military men, because of their service to protect. They are participating in special training programmes for adaptation for civil life after their age of retirement 15 to 20 years earlier than the age of retirement of merchant seamen. Moreover, society is paying not only respect but also the salaries of the naval men.

The modern world experiences a big movement of people from the less developed countries towards high-developed countries. This process is escalating as time goes on. Most seamen today are from those less developed and poor countries. Nevertheless, they usually are not motivated to emigrate, because the money they earn is enough to keep a normal standard of life in their countries. The seamen are investing their money in the economics of their countries. They pay their taxes without cheating. What kind of gratitude and encouragement do they receive for being good citizens? Today the government of my country is not making any effort to ensure that seafarers working under foreign flags are exercising their constitutional rights to vote in the elections while they are at sea. Political parties do not care for the votes of seafarers.

One ancient philosopher said centuries ago: "There are three kinds of people – dead, alive and those who sail at sea." Unfortunately, at the beginning of the 21st century this old sentence is still valid.

It is true that today the shipping industry experiences enormous need for seamen, especially officers. What solution does the industry offer? Dual certificated officers?! Dual certificated officers who will navigate by a wrench and screwdriver and will repair the fuel pump by a sextant.

Seafarers nowadays are employed mainly from the East European countries and Asia... Mr. Rod Short ExC, MNI- Executive Secretary of AMETIAP wrote in his article in Seaways magazine (April 2005): "...The shipping companies are trying to fill up the deficit by people with little choice who will accept low wages... As living standards rise, there is less inclination to seek employment at sea, as evidenced in China, where there is now difficulty in recruiting seafarers from the booming coastal regions and recruitment efforts are reaching far inland..."

If there is difficulty in recruiting seafarers from the biggest human population in the world today, where can workers who will accept lower wages be found?

The old vicious practice of ship management companies to change the crew from one nation with a cheaper one is no longer effective. This strategy is at a dead end.

What should be the motivation of seaman then? The money? Money he gains he invests in the same society, which is rejecting him, part of which he is trying to be.

The world remembers seafarers only when a scapegoat is needed to be sacrificed for a disaster, pollution or collision at sea. (“Safety at Sea International magazine” Jan 2002, the article by Phil Belcher –“Scapegoating the seafarer”).

If there will be a chance in the future for humans to be replaced by intelligent machines on board in order to avoid human error, first of all marine transport will not be so cheap any more and secondly: there will be nobody to be sacrificed as a scapegoat. Machines cannot bear the blame and plead guilty.

How to motivate a seaman to work longer at sea if he has already performed his main goals: to get a house, to buy a new car, to pay the education of his children, to start his own business? Eight to ten years are enough for a seaman to perform the above tasks. Ten years is the period to have a good career of a marine officer or a petty officer and to be a qualified and experienced professional. Nevertheless, after the 10th year most seamen quit working at sea long before the age of retirement. In addition, the reason to quit is not that their salaries are not enough. The reason is that they like to be normal citizens of the society to which they belong again.

Most ship management companies are using retrograde and ineffective methods to attract their employees. A couple of dollars more would not be enough motivation for a young man in this world of opportunities, globalization, booming information and communication technologies.

The seamen have not to be treated like seasonal workers anymore. The shipping companies have to offer the same long-term social privileges that are offered to the workers in the industrial sector ashore.

Programs for adaptation of seafarers to the social life have to be established. These programs could be similar to those implemented for adaptation of professional soldiers of the army after the age of retirement.

There is lack of marine specialists at the operational and middle management level in shipping companies. Most of those who are working ashore are very young with little or no sea experience. This is resulting in the so-called “commercial pressure” towards the ship’s management, which is the reason for many operational problems and even accidents. The one who will be regularly at both sides of the fence will be more useful and motivated for better performance and development. The rotation principle of work for senior marine officers in the offices ashore for a certain period and then on board will be very useful.

Increasing the salaries of the seafarers according to the rate of the living standards is very difficult, it is better to offer stocks or share of newly built ships. Anyone who is working on board his own property will be more motivated. Many methods for motivation of seafarers have already proved their effectiveness.

In conclusion, my analysis is based on my own experience, observations and many conversations with my colleagues of different nationalities. Nevertheless, I may say that I express one common opinion of the seafaring people around the world: we need a different approach and understanding on behalf of the world shipping industry and society. The human resources in seafaring are almost exhausted not because people willing to work at sea have finished, but because the methods for attracting and motivating seafarers are retrograde and ineffective. The seafarers have to take the place, which they deserve in society.