

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines skills retention in the British shipping industry. In doing so, the chapter explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on seafarers as individuals and the potential for serious repercussions of such impact for the UK seafaring industry as a whole. Our findings indicate a clear need for a co-ordinated effort from the key stakeholders, including national government and shipping companies, to work together to support the seafaring labour force. Providing sufficient support has the potential to mitigate the risk of increasing numbers of seafarers leaving the profession and reduced numbers choosing to join it, both of which would have serious repercussions for the industry and more widely.

INTRODUCTION

The five largest supply countries for seafarers are estimated to be China, the Philippines, Indonesia, the Russian Federation and Ukraine (ICS 2021). British seafarers – of which there were an estimated 22,440 in 2018 (DfT 2019) – comprise only a small proportion of the global seafaring labour force, which in 2021 stood at nearly 1.9 million (BIMCO 2021). Nevertheless, as an island nation, shipping is one of the most important industries for the UK economy (Maritime UK, 2019). The British shipping industry is acknowledged as a success story for the UK and the country relies on the £10bn that the industry contributes to the gross domestic product annually (Maritime UK, 2019).

This chapter explores the experiences of the British seafaring workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic. It does so by drawing on data from a research project which commenced in June 2020. Data were collected via an online questionnaire which was opened at two periods of time to enable both those at sea and at home to contribute. A total of three hundred and fifty-two responses were collected and whilst the overall number of seafarers who took part in the study was small, the respondents came from across the spectrum of ship types, ranks and departments. Their responses suggest that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are being felt across the industry. In addition to exploring seafarers' general experiences during the pandemic, in the study we captured various issues relating to skills retention including seafarers' intentions to exit the industry and likelihood of recommending employment in the industry to others.

By drawing on the data obtained from this study this chapter explores the reasons why seafarers may choose to exit the seafaring industry and in particular focuses on the ways in which these reasons may have become exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, the chapter also considers what support individual seafarers have received during the pandemic and what support they feel would have helped. It also makes recommendations for both shipping companies and policy makers on how skilled workers can be retained in an industry which is of vital importance to the UK.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to explore the broader human rights issues experienced during the pandemic – these issues are covered elsewhere (see, for example, Mukesh 2020). The purpose of this chapter is to explore an area which literature (see, for example Gekara 2009) indicates that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, was a source of concern and which the pandemic had affected.

The chapter begins by considering the nature of the seafaring workforce, in particular focusing on how the industry provides skilled and qualified workers. Following this we present findings related to the experiences of British seafarers during the pandemic and how these relate to skills retention. We then consider the support seafarers have received – and what they felt was lacking. Finally, we present the key conclusions from the research and suggest some possible ways forward.

THE SEAFARING INDUSTRY

Those who work at sea face difficult working conditions including adverse weather conditions, long working hours and prolonged separation from friends and families. It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that those who work at sea are found to have high levels of depression in comparison to other working populations (Lefkowitz and Slade 2019). Moreover, seafaring is widely recognised to be a relatively dangerous occupation with seafarers at increased risk of experiencing an occupational fatality (Roberts et al. 2014).

Whilst the issues faced by seafarers in terms of occupational health and safety have remained fairly consistent over the last few decades there have been various ways in which globalisation has transformed the seafaring industry – and in particular the seafarer labour market. Whilst historically there was a link between where a ship was owned, built, operated and crewed, with local seafarers recruited on a local hire basis, today this link no longer exists. For the vast majority of ships there is no longer a link between where the ship is owned, the nationality of the crew and the flag the ship flies. Instead of employing local seafarers, the workforce is now recruited from developing countries via third-party crewing agents. In doing so shipping companies utilise an approach to labour which is primarily focused on cost-minimisation (Lane 2002; Sampson 2013). They are able to do so due to the global standardisation of qualifications and skills among seafarers as established by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

One consequence of changes in recruiting practices has been the substantial rise in multi-nationally crewed vessels. Wu and Winchester (2005) define multi-nationally crewed vessels as those with seafarers of three or more nationalities working onboard. Whilst there are no accurate figures on ships which are multi-nationally crewed, a study found that 85% of vessels which called at ports in Finland had multi-national crews (Storgård et al. 2013). Research indicates that whilst seafarers perceived the presence of communication problems between multi-national crew, many seafarers indicate a preference for working as part of a multi-national crew (Sampson and Zhao 2003). Reasons for this preference included reduced potential for conflict and greater tolerance for others (Sampson and Zhao 2003).

Irrespective of the nationality of the crew onboard, the number of seafarers required for each ship is determined by safe manning requirements, which are dictated by the

vessel's flag state. All UK flagged vessels of 500 Gross Tonnes (GT) or more are required to hold a safe manning document which specifies not only the minimum number of workers required onboard but also the minimum qualification required for each of these workers. For example, a safe manning document for a ship greater than 3000 GT sailing worldwide would state that the ship is required to have at least one Master, one Chief Mate, one Chief Engineer, one Second Engineer, one Engine Officer of the Watch and two Officers of the Watch (Maritime and Coastguard Agency 2015). Each of these individuals must hold a Certificate of Competency (CoC) equivalent (or higher) to the position they are sailing in. The requirements for obtaining a CoC are determined by The International Convention on Standards of Training and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW).

A SKILLED WORKFORCE

The International Convention on Standards of Training and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW) established the standards required for seafarer training and certification at an international level. Prior to the convention individual governments set the standards, usually without reference to practices in other countries, and consequently substantial variations in standards across countries existed. Whilst the standards are – at least in theory (see Bloor et al. 2014 for discussion on variations in training standards) – the same across the globe, the means of reaching these standards vary somewhat from country to country and in this section we focus on how the UK trains seafarers.

Primarily, individuals enter the British seafaring labour force as an Officer Cadet. There are three main types of Cadet: Deck Cadets, whose primary duties include the navigating of the vessel, Engine Cadets, whose duties include the maintenance and operation of the vessel's machinery and Electro-technical Cadets, whose responsibilities include monitoring and maintaining the electrical equipment onboard. During the financial year 2018/19 there were 1670 Cadets in training (DfT 2019). These cadets undertake a professional qualification which is awarded by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and are supported by the 'Support for Maritime Training' (SMarT funding). The training of Cadets varies slightly between the various training establishments in the UK. However, the majority of Cadets partake in training schemes comprised of academic phases which take place in training establishments and seagoing phases where practical experience of working at sea is gained. It is therefore clear that there are several actors including government agencies, maritime training establishments and ship owners involved in the training of UK seafarers (Gekara 2009).

The training scheme typically lasts for around three years and on completion Cadets are awarded a Certificate of Competency which enables them to work as either an Officer of the Watch (OOW), an Engineer Officer of the Watch (EOOW) or an Electro-technical officer (ETO) depending on the pathway taken. Not all those who embark on the scheme remain until completion and research indicates that many of the withdrawals occur in the first fourteen months (Gekara 2009). Prior to the pandemic, Gekara (2009, p.218) argued that attrition was a "possible explanation of the failure to increase the absolute number of officers from the UK."

Qualified seafarers, both those who wish to progress up the occupational hierarchy and those who wish to continue working at the same level, are required to undertake various ancillary and safety renewal courses at shore-based training establishments to maintain their CoC. In order to progress up the onboard occupational hierarchy qualified officers are required to obtain further CoCs which are dependent on their occupational role onboard. For example, for Deck Officers the process for an Officer of the Watch to obtain a Chief Mate's CoC includes completing twelve months sea time whilst holding a OOW CoC, completing various ancillary and safety courses and passing various examinations (written and oral). To progress to a Master CoC, twenty-four months of watchkeeping sea time is required, along with completing various ancillary and safety courses and passing an oral examination.

To put this example into context, an individual entering the industry as a Cadet in 2021 could expect to be a qualified OOW in 2024. Assuming they work a rotation of equal sea time and leave, the earliest they would be in a position to commence the examinations to obtain the Chief Mate's CoC would be 2026. They could potentially obtain a Master's CoC in 2028. This timeframe, however, is the shortest possible and does not allow for eventualities such as exam dates (which are set by the UK Government) not coinciding with periods of leave, being unable to secure an OOW role on completion of the Cadetship and the time taken to complete the various ancillary and safety courses.

In addition to the time associated with obtaining each CoC, there is of course cost. In 2016 a study estimated the average cost of training one individual from new entry in the industry to holding a CoC to be £59,150 (Oxford Economics 2016). In the UK some of this cost is met from public money, with the balance coming from shipping companies. The public costs are administered by the Support for Maritime Training (SMarT) scheme. The stated aim of the scheme is to "facilitate an adequate supply of UK maritime expertise to meet the nation's economic and strategic requirements" (UK Chamber of Shipping 2012). Throughout history the importance of British seafarers has been demonstrated in numerous national emergencies and conflicts (Nautilus 2019b). British seafarers have been needed to maintain supply lines and British military operations and therefore domestic seafarers are considered an important necessity.

Nevertheless, it is clear that providing skilled and qualified British seafarers is a costly undertaking. It is also clear that any labour shortage of qualified officers would take time to address, with individuals undertaking a minimum of three years training before being awarded a CoC and able to work as an officer.

LABOUR FORCE SHORTAGE

At the time of writing a shortage of UK seafarers is predicted, and this shortage was predicted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2016, the UK Seafarers Projection Study, for example, suggested that by 2026 there would be a shortage of approximately 4000 UK deck and engine officers and 2000 UK ratings (Oxford Economics 2016). The reasons for a shortage are two-fold: a shortage of individuals entering the industry in relation to the number of trained seafarers exiting the industry.

One of the responses to the shortage of individuals entering the industry was an announced doubling of SMarT funding to £30 million in 2018. Despite this substantial increase in funding Cadet numbers have remained fairly stable over the last couple of years (DfT 2020; Nautilus 2019a). The increase in funding, however, indicated that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the UK government were concerned about potential skills shortages in the shipping industry. These concerns are likely to have been well founded with most seafarers intending, at some point in their seafaring career, to ‘swallow the anchor’ and move to shore-based occupations. One study, for example, indicated that approximately one third of new seafarers anticipated moving to a role ashore within fifteen years (Fitzmorris, 2018). Similarly, an earlier study indicated that seafarers aged around 30 years old are the most likely to opt to move to shore-based employment (Oxford Economics 2016).

In the following sections we consider the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted on seafarers moving to other occupations.

SEAFARERS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been far-reaching and it is likely many of the consequences will remain unseen for quite some time yet. In this chapter we are particularly interested in whether such consequences may include skills shortages in the UK shipping industry owing to both skilled workers exiting the industry and others choosing not to enter the industry. We therefore explore the themes which emerged from the analysis in relation to skills shortages, including individuals not entering the industry, workers exiting the industry and the slowing of career progression for those employed in the industry. In doing so the various ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on seafarers’ careers are highlighted.

NOT ENTERING THE INDUSTRY

Despite the UK’s reliance on the seafaring industry, many of the general population are unaware of the various roles undertaken by workers in the industry. In recent years various efforts have been made to increase public awareness of the industry and encourage individuals to consider a career at sea. Much of the efforts have focused on current workers in the industry acting as ambassadors (see, for example, Careers at Sea Ambassador 2021) and spreading knowledge, particularly among young people, about what their roles entail. Research from other industries (see, for example, Byron and Lane 2020) indicates that the use of such ambassadors can be positive in improving recruitment into a profession.

In addition to such formal ambassador schemes, informally people may choose to enter an industry based on the personal experiences of others in their community, such as family, friends, and neighbours (see, for example, Kim et al. 2010). Thus, whether (or not) workers would recommend their industry to others outside of the industry is of importance. Over one third of our respondents stated that as a result of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic they would not recommend the seafaring industry (figure 1).

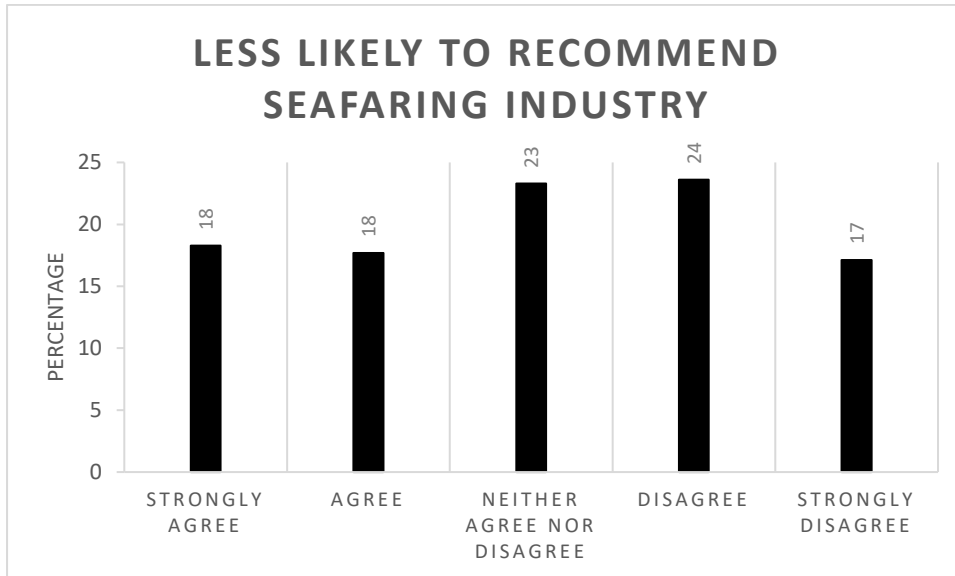


Figure 1 Response to the question: The COVID-19 pandemic means I am less likely to recommend the seafaring industry to others

In giving further details regarding his response one Captain of a bulk carrier stated:

I am now, more than ever, convinced that I should have stopped sailing and begun to work ashore years ago. I will definitely never advise anyone to join ships as a seafarer. Captain, bulk carrier.

The Captain had not joined a ship despite being scheduled to do so and was waiting at home without pay. In his response he stated that he had not received any support from his employer and had simply been instructed to wait. Given these experiences it is little wonder he felt he should have exited the industry and would not recommend it to others.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led several key stakeholders to raise concerns regarding a reduction in individuals choosing to enter the industry owing to negative press. For example, various news headline have spoken of stranded workers (BBC 2021), suicides onboard (NY Post 2020) and ships as ‘hotbeds’ for the virus (Guardian 2020). Arguably, it is the lack of an adequate response from the industry to these well-publicised issues that is the real problem, with our data indicating that some seafarers perceived that the pandemic had highlighted what they considered to be a lack of workers’ rights in the seafaring industry. One seafarer stated:

The lack of workers’ rights for seafarers has been brought to the forefront and I feel that this will dissuade people from choosing a career at sea. Officer, cruise ship.

Whilst it is yet to be seen how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact on whether or not individuals choose to enter the seafaring industry, the negative publicity and the lack of adequate response from the industry is clearly of concern.

EXITING THE INDUSTRY

As well as the possibility of individuals choosing not to enter the industry, stakeholders are concerned that trained seafarers might exit the industry either due to their own experiences during the pandemic or as a result of the experiences of their colleagues. Our findings such that concerns may be well-founded.

In the questionnaire respondents were asked whether or not as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic they intended to exit the seafaring industry and find employment in another industry. The responses to this question can be seen in figure 2 and show that 16% of respondents intended to exit the industry.

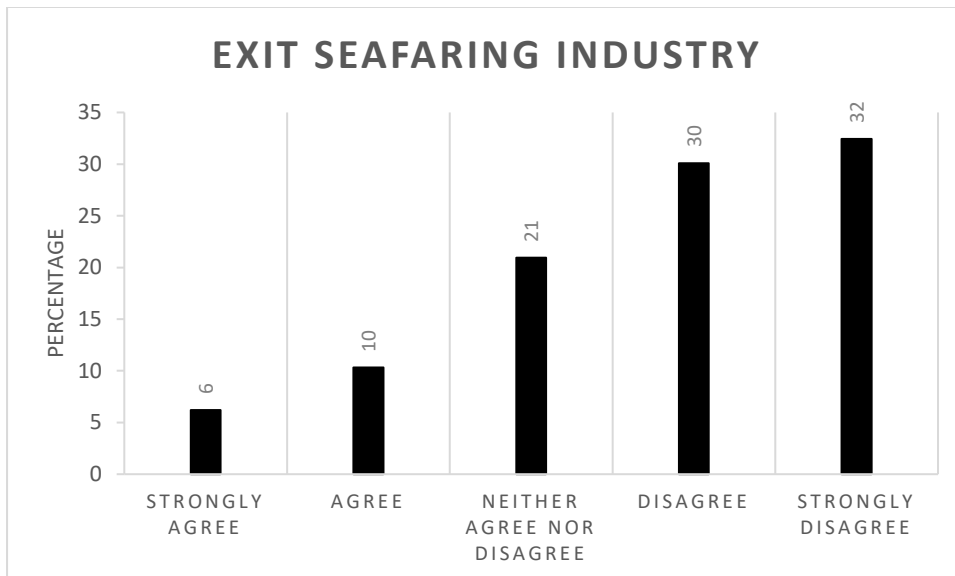


Figure 2 Response to the question: As a result of my experiences during the pandemic, I intend to exit the seafaring industry and find employment in another industry

There are several important reasons why the pandemic might have been a catalyst for individuals choosing to exit the seafaring industry. For many seafarers the duration of a tour of duty is of great importance when deciding whether to accept a job or not. For those with permanent employment shorter tours of duty tend to be preferred but during the pandemic many seafarers reported increases in the duration of their tour due to the altering of employment conditions. One officer working onboard an offshore support vessel explained the consequences of his company doubling the duration of his tour:

My company has used COVID-19 as an excuse to increase the length of our rotations from 4 weeks to 8 weeks not including quarantine days. This has really affected our mental health and strained our relationships with family at home. This abuse needs to stop. If it continues into the summer, I will be looking seriously at coming ashore far earlier into my career than I had intended. Officer, offshore support vessel.

Just over half of the respondents in our study reported that they had experienced delayed repatriation and consequently had not returned home on the date they expected. An officer working onboard a tanker explained how delayed repatriation

had impacted on their mental health and consequently caused them to question whether to continue in the industry:

The lack of an end in sight made me extremely hopeless and depressed. When I finally came home everything returned to relative normal, but I want to change career path. No business should be allowed to force you to work against your will. It is a form of slavery. Officer, tanker

The negative impact that the pandemic had on seafarers' mental health and well-being was apparent throughout the data. For some seafarers the toll of the pandemic was so great that they felt they could no longer continue in their chosen careers. A rating onboard a nuclear fuel carrier stated:

As someone who struggles with mental illness, it made me decide that I can no longer work in this industry as it is too harmful to my mental health, and there is a lack of support to people struggling with mental illness. Rating, nuclear fuel carrier.

Similarly, a Cadet said:

Covid heavily disrupted my cadetship and had a negative impact on my mental health to the point that I was unable to join my next ship. Unfortunately, it means the end of my cadetship and I believe the pandemic was a significant contributor to this outcome. Cadet

Some seafarers perceived that the pandemic had reduced job security, and this also impacted on their mental health and well-being, with several respondents suggesting that a lack of job security was pushing them to seek employment outside of the industry. For example, one officer who was previously employed onboard a cruise ship but had not had his employment contract renewed stated:

Due to no post contract follow up because the ship I was on had confirmed cases of C-19, I suffered from stress and has taken a month to feel my normal self, this has led to finding a new job back on land as trust with the company has now depleted. Officer, cruise ship.

In a similar vein, another officer employed in the cruise industry stated:

I have been investing in my education since this pause because I want to skill-up and give myself opportunities in a job with more security. I have loved working at sea, however, the pandemic has tipped the balance in favour of looking for other opportunities. Officer, cruise ship.

Worries regarding job security are unsurprising given that nearly half of the respondents in our study reported that redundancies in their company had already happened or were happening soon (figure 3).

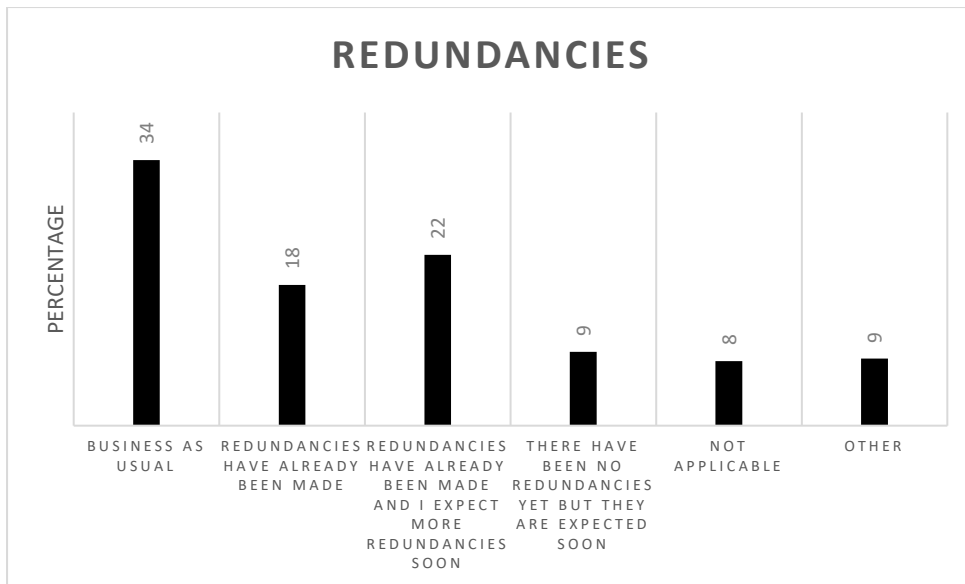


Figure 3 Response to question: Which of these statements best describes the actions of your employer during the pandemic with regards to recruitment and retention?

It is also worth noting that whilst some seafarers may have chosen to leave the industry others may have lost jobs or recently qualified as officers and were unable to find suitable employment and thus felt they had little choice but to find employment elsewhere. One newly qualified officer stated:

I am considering taking land work, just so I have an income - though this will kill my career before it starts! Newly qualified officer.

A further reason why some seafarers indicated their intentions to exit the industry is related to the 'Seafarers Earnings Deduction' (SED) tax scheme. The SED tax scheme is operated by the UK Government and whilst the scheme is somewhat complex to understand it is basically linked to the number of days British seafarers are outside the UK. Seafarers are able to claim one-hundred percent tax exemption of any foreign earnings as long as they have spent the appropriate amount of time outside of the UK (Nautilus 2021). The scheme makes seafaring a lucrative financial option for many British seafarers. The pandemic, however, has meant that the scheme has become inaccessible for some seafarers. There are several reasons for this including the fact that some seafarers have remained at home unable to join ships and others have been onboard ships, in particular cruise ships, which have anchored or drifted for extended periods of time in UK waters. The inability to access the scheme has resulted in an adverse financial impact for some of those who work at sea. For example, one rating employed on an offshore support vessel stated:

I am worried about losing out on my SED tax claim. Without this incentive it is not worth the sacrifice of my time to work at sea. I have been stuck on leave longer than I should have which has had an impact on my days out of the country as leisure travel has stopped. If I lose my tax as looks likely I will leave the sea ASAP. Rating, offshore support vessel

At the time of writing a UK trade union is lobbying the UK Government on the SED issue, however, concessions from the UK Treasury are yet to be secured and the issue remains of concern for substantial numbers of British seafarers.

SLOWING DOWN OF CAREER PROGRESSION

Whilst the COVID-pandemic has been the catalyst for some seafarers to exit the industry, it has also slowed down the career of some of those who chose to remain. The data indicate that there have been several reasons for this. Firstly, some of those who have been undertaking Cadetships have been unable to join ships and gain the necessary sea time. One Cadet, for example stated:

I missed out on my first phase at Sea so after Phase 5, I could possibly still need to do another 4 months or so before being able to sit my orals. Cadet.

Secondly, some qualified officers have also been unable to accrue the sea time required prior to undertaking the examinations needed to obtain a higher level CoC. This may be because they have been at home waiting to join a ship or because they have been made redundant or not had a temporary contract renewed.

The career progression of seafarers has also been hit by the restrictions placed on shore-based training establishments in the UK. Due to various restrictions including lockdowns and reductions in face-to-face teaching, some seafarers have faced difficulties in completing ancillary and safety courses – both those which are required for career progression and also to renew CoCs. The data indicate that Cadets in particular have been impacted by the various restrictions placed on shore-based training establishments. For example, one stated:

[The pandemic] has had a drastic impact of the quality of learning, especially in the most important year, I do not feel ready to sit SQA [Scottish Qualifications Authority] examinations. Cadet

The Cadet explained that lectures had been online and that they had found learning in this manner particularly difficult. Thus, whilst the initiative to allow training to continue online may have prevented the slowing of progress for some individuals, for some the use of online teaching methods were unhelpful.

Some qualified officers had also faced difficulties owing to training establishment restrictions. One officer onboard a tug stated:

[It's been] difficult to get short courses and renewals [are] only temporary for COCs. Officer, tug

In addition to the difficulties around accessing training at shore-based establishments, the comment made by the officer raises an important issue regarding CoC validity. Each CoC is valid for a set period of time and must be revalidated by applying to the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA). The application process requires the seafarer to send the originals of various documents and an application fee to the MCA, which will, if all of the conditions have been met, issue a renewed CoC. Early in the pandemic it became apparent that owing to the

substantial delays in repatriation the CoCs of some seafarers would expire whilst they were onboard, thereby making them ineligible to work. In response to this issue – and others which were direct consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic – the MCA provided UK seafarers with various dispensations including CoC extensions (MCA 2020).

Owing to the restrictions put in place due to the pandemic, the MCA postponed various examinations which seafarers are required to successfully undertake in order to obtain both initial level and higher level CoCs. Consequently, some Cadets who were at the last stage of their training were unable to undertake the exam they needed to obtain a CoC and so be eligible to commence work as an officer. Some officers were also unable to progress to higher level CoCs. For example, one officer working in the cruise industry told of their experiences:

I had also been at college before lockdown studying for my 2nd Engineers ticket [CoC], and had exams postponed until July. Officer, cruise ship

Furthermore, some seafarers reported that the changes in MCA working practices because of the pandemic resulted in delays to the receipt of certificates, as explained by one Captain working onboard a semi-submersible vessel:

The UK marine coastguard agency have not returned my certificates they are out of the office. Captain semi-submersible vessel

As an industry which requires its workers to have the original paper certificates in hand onboard, the inability to receive such certificates for extended periods of time is of concern as any delays may hinder the ability of seafarers to undertake paid work.

SUPPORT

Lastly, we turn to findings relating to the supports seafarers reported experiencing were in place and those that were not available but which seafarers felt would have helped them during the pandemic. Identifying what seafarers feel would be beneficial is important as it may enable the key stakeholders to take measures to ensure that skilled workers remain in the industry and that worries regarding mass skills shortages do not come to fruition.

There has been similar research into the experiences of workers in other key UK industries during the pandemic (Vindrola-Padros et al. 2020; Davies et al. 2020). Much of this research has focussed on those on the frontline of healthcare, for whom a range of government mechanisms offering support have been put in place. For example, the UK National Health Service offers employees a confidential staff support line, free access to wellbeing apps, bespoke health and well-being support for black, Asian and minority Ethnic colleagues and staff mental health and well-being hubs (NHS 2021).

Many of those who participated in our study perceived that the support provided to British seafarers by both the UK government and those who employ the seafaring labour force has been inadequate. When asked about the support they had received one officer working onboard a private yacht stated:

Very little - only an email circular regarding mental well-being and several reminders we were lucky to be in a job, when we challenged management ashore!! Officer, private yacht.

The data indicate that some shipping companies did implement support measures, including increased food budget, increased welfare budget (generally used to buy welfare items such as games consoles for use by those onboard) and support telephone lines. Some seafarers perceived that this support was of little, if any, use. One officer onboard a container ship, for example, explained the support they received:

[It was] useless remote psychological advice from a 3rd party Company.
Officer, container ship

With a lack of support from the UK Government and fairly hit and miss support from employers, some UK maritime charities introduced services intended to provide support to seafarers. The data indicate, however, that over half of respondents were unaware of the presence of these charities (figure 4).

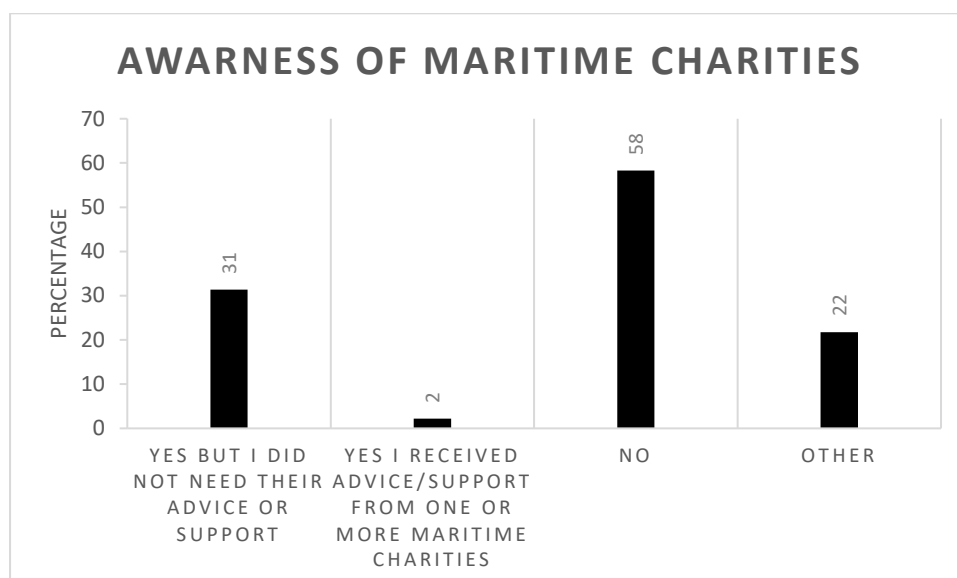


Figure 4 Response to question: Did you know that there were numerous maritime charities standing by to advise and help you and your dependants during the COVID-19 pandemic?

When asked what would have helped them during the pandemic, many seafarers stated the desire for more support not only from shipping companies but also from the UK Government, with some comparing their own experiences with those of colleagues of other nationalities. For example, one Captain working onboard a workboat stated:

[We need] government assistance in facilitating crew changes. The Dutch government have stepped into support [Dutch Company A] and [Dutch Company B] on this project but UK government refused to assist my employer who is a large workboat contractor from the UK. Captain, workboat

A further officer succinctly stated:

More support from Government and ship owners. Officer

With relatively high levels of redundancies in the industry it is unsurprising that many of the respondents stated that the support they really needed was reassurance over future employment. An officer on a cruise ship, for example, stated:

Reassurance of future employment and continued pay. Officer, cruise ship

It is of particular interest that the data indicate that seafarers perceive such reassurance over employment could be provided not only by employers but also by the UK Government. One Cadet training onboard a passenger ferry stated:

More government support on jobs for British seafarers. Cadet, passenger ferry

In a similar vein a rating on a standby vessel stated:

British seafarers should have more support and backing and chances of saving their jobs and been given financial help and rights. Rating, standby vessel

It was clear in the responses, however, that some seafarers felt that such support, particularly support provided by the UK Government, would be very unlikely to be forthcoming.

To be honest it's clear that the UK government and her policies are more concerned with shipping companies than seafarers. We know that we have been forgotten for years. Officer, offshore support vessel

These views are unsurprising as previous research indicates that seafarers perceive maritime regulations – and those bodies, such as the UK government who make such regulations – to be more concerned with supporting those who control the seafaring labour force, rather than the individual seafarers (see, for example, Couper 2012). Similarly, research indicates that seafarers perceive shipping companies to utilise them in the most cost-effective manner, regardless of any impact on their wellbeing (Devereux and Wadsworth 2021).

DISCUSSION

In 1988 the UK defence committee stated: "The availability of merchant shipping for defence purposes is governed by three key factors: the number of UK flagged ships; their accessibility when they are needed; and the availability of a pool of British seafarers to man them. There are grounds for concern on all three counts (Parliament 1998)." Both the Falklands War and the first Gulf conflict are two recent examples of how merchant seafarers can make a crucial contribution during a national emergency (Parliament 1998). Whilst this statement is now over 20 years old, the fact remains that as an island nation the UK requires ships which they can access when needed and a pool of seafarers which can crew them. Yet despite their

importance to the nation and despite the fact these workers have experienced some substantial difficulties during the pandemic – such as delayed repatriation – they have not received any support from the UK Government. Many have also received no meaningful support from their employers either. Instead of support, many British seafarers have experienced widespread indifference from the industry.

Our findings indicate a clear need for a co-ordinated effort from the key stakeholders, including national government and shipping companies, to work together to support the seafaring labour force. Such efforts need to be sufficiently flexible to meet the varying needs of different groups of seafarers and take into account what the seafarers themselves say would help. For example, those who have been made redundant or have not had employment contracts renewed would benefit from financial support. Those who have been at sea onboard vessels which – contrary to normal operations – have remained in UK waters need additional support accessing the SED scheme. Whilst this chapter does not purport to have all the answers, it clearly indicates that there is much could be done to better support the British seafaring labour force. In addition, it has shown that providing sufficient support has the potential to mitigate the risk of increasing numbers of seafarers leaving the profession and reduced numbers choosing to join it, both of which would have serious repercussions for the industry and more widely.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter adds to an emerging body of literature which focusses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various workforces. It has explored the impact of the pandemic on seafarers as individuals and the potential for serious repercussions of such impact for the UK seafaring industry on a whole.

Like all studies, this research was not without limitations. Firstly, a degree of self-selection is likely to have occurred owing to the research method utilised and consequently those seafarers who chose to participate may have done so owing to their own particular experiences. Secondly, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of seafarers employed at the ‘poorer end’ of the international seafaring industry as the participants are solely British seafarers, who tend to be employed at the ‘better end’ of the industry.

Nevertheless, the study has identified potential issues as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to skills retention in the seafaring industry. This is worthy of the attention of the industry’s stakeholders in itself. Moreover, the study has highlighted some of the ways in which the pandemic has thrown a range of pre-existing concerns held by seafarers into starker contrast and exacerbated the impact of the structure and organisation of their employment and work on seafarers’ wellbeing. This is far from unique to seafaring (see, for example, Walters 2021). So whilst our research has focused solely on the seafaring labour force, the experiences of seafarers and the broader impact of the pandemic, particularly the ways in which it has highlighted pre-existing concerns, issues and inequalities in relation to their work and employment, are likely to be mirrored among a range of workers who have played vital roles during the pandemic but remain ‘forgotten’.

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KEY WORDS AND DEFINITIONS

Certificate of Competency: Licence issued to seafarers in accordance with the International convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW)

Seafarers Earnings Deduction: Tax relief scheme for those who work on ships operated by the UK Government