



Seafarers Happiness Index

Quarter 3 / 2020



IN ASSOCIATION WITH



The
Seafarers
Happiness
Index

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Seafarers Happiness Index Quarter 3

The Seafarers Happiness Index (SHI), in association with the Shipowners' Club and Wallem Group, is a live barometer of the key issues facing those at sea today. Seafarers are asked 10 key questions, enabling them to share their views on how they feel about specific issues affecting their life and work on ship.

Once again, the answers and data generated were given against the backdrop of a global crew change crisis precipitated by COVID-19, and we heard from seafarers both at sea as well as those currently stuck ashore. There was more variation in the data for this Quarter, which appeared to mirror the emotional ups and downs of the pandemic. Hope and optimism early in the Quarter soon gave way to crushing disappointment. A large early uptick as it looked like crew changes would go ahead fell away but was enough to lead to a rise in the average happiness score.

We felt it was important to bring together the distinct issues and pressures that the pandemic has brought and give them the spotlight they deserve. As with Quarter 1 of this year, this report will therefore focus on some of the key areas where the effects of the pandemic are being felt, namely workload, social interaction and shore leave, and examine how the mood has shifted since the onset of COVID-19.

Executive Summary

The average Seafarers Happiness Index score showed overall happiness at 6.35/10, surprisingly up from 6.18 in Quarter 2. General happiness levels took a rather surprising upturn this time round which, whilst pleasing to see, appears to have been very much driven by the expectation of an easing in travel restrictions.

As such there was a marked difference between the beginning and end of the Quarter. In the early part, there were signs of increasing optimism as national borders appeared to be opening once more. Unfortunately, as the Quarter progressed, there was a sense that the second wave of COVID-19 was beginning to put paid to hopes of

getting home, or indeed back to work. This was marked by a fall in the happiness levels expressed.

Where there were more negative responses, seafarers reported feeling increasingly concerned and emotionally exhausted by the uncertainty surrounding their employment. "Life during COVID is hell" was a response that seemed to capture the general mood.

Towards the start of the pandemic, we heard from seafarers experiencing increasingly heavy workloads as they were forced to stay onboard for longer than their normal contracts. There was again a sense of frustration as trips have gone far over their contractual timeframes, and crews reported that their tolerance is being stretched as they continue working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week.

There has been much talk of the mental burden facing seafarers, but in the face of extended contracts we also heard from crews who work manually and of the physical exhaustion they are experiencing. It seems that time spent onboard is breaking both bodies and spirits.

The written responses indicated that seafarers are trying to find as much solace in their work as possible, using it as a means of blocking out their concerns over crew changes. There were repeated messages of frustration though, with many seafarers bemoaning the cutting of crew numbers. Such harsh realities mean that tensions are rising. Masters and officers are often accused of working crews without due consideration of the exceptional circumstances.

Where crews are seeing positives, it is in an increased sense of unity onboard as seafarers struggle through extended contracts together. Those who spoke positively



said that shared activities and mealtimes are vital to help maintain relationships. However, the latest results indicated that the burden of social distancing and constant use of personal protection equipment (PPE) is increasingly becoming a problem, with masks in particular heightening the sense of isolation.

As witnessed in the first half of the year, tensions onboard continue to rise and issues such as race, politics and bullying were again being reported. Sadly, the uncertainty about getting home only exacerbates these problems.

There can be no ignoring the issue of shore leave during a pandemic. Time and time again seafarers stated that due to the pandemic it is impossible to get time away from the vessel. For some, even where there is an opportunity to take shore leave, they would “rather sleep than go ashore”, and some were pleased to stay onboard as they felt vulnerable to infection in some of the nations visited.

Where seafarers spoke in terms of actual leave and their worries surrounding getting off ship, we heard that crew feel trapped, isolated, worried and just want to get back to their families. Where this is not possible, communication becomes all the more essential. Being connected is no longer simply important, it is absolutely vital. Crews are desperate to understand what is happening at home and

how their families are being affected by COVID-19. “There is still no sign of relief and repatriation” said one, in a comment which reflected the views of many.

The View from Ashore

Aside from those at sea, there were also a number of responses from seafarers who are facing financial ruin as they cannot join vessels. There were messages of desperation as seafarers are forced to contemplate career changes.

The respondents stuck at home alluded to their careers being jeopardised, with livelihoods devastated. We received a number of standalone comments from crew who are unable to get on ships, so their work has dried up. They see themselves as forgotten victims of the pandemic. Stuck at home, many say that financial ruin is increasingly likely unless they turn their backs on the sea. They feel utterly helpless with nowhere to turn.

Many of the seafarers who spoke on this issue were from the cruise sector, a part of the industry that the Index usually receives many responses from. Unfortunately, with the pandemic having decimated cruising, it seems many are simply wondering if they will ever work again.

This edition of the Seafarers Happiness Index focusses on the impact of COVID-19 and particularly those areas of seafarer life, such as workload, social interaction and shore leave, where the effects of the pandemic are being felt the most. To read more analysis of this Quarter’s results, visit happyatsea.org

Workload 6.04 ↑ from 5.60

Despite the rise in happiness levels, frustration and issues over crew changes and concerns over reduced manpower continued to characterise the responses in this Quarter. Tiredness, stress and fatigue are all being felt and reported. In contrast to previous reports, however, the written responses suggest that many seafarers have been trying to find as much solace in their work as possible, using it as a means of blocking out their concerns about crew changes. “I am getting my head down, getting things done, trying not to think about too many things I cannot control”, ran one of the messages, which perhaps best captured the mood. Work has become the one certainty in a very uncertain world, with responses such as “keeping myself busy is good for me”.

There were repeated messages of frustration though, with many seafarers bemoaning the cutting of crew numbers and the doing away with entire ranks within some fleets, particularly the role of Fourth Engineer. With workloads increasing, respondents questioned the supposed need for fewer people onboard as a result of technological advances. As crew numbers are cut, there are increased pressures from port calls, paperwork and inspections. There was a sense that minimum safe manning levels were never anticipated for seafarers working such long periods at sea.

Reducing manpower and increasing paperwork was felt by many to be an absolute recipe for disaster, especially as it impacts the quality of maintenance and watchkeeping. As one respondent commented, “my job feels overloaded, with tasks passed to me constantly. There is juggling of all that has to be done onboard”.

A number of seafarers spoke of frustration as time onboard has gone far over the expected timeframes. Tolerance is being stretched and working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week for such sustained periods is taking its toll. There were some responses from crew who perform manual tasks, who said that they felt utterly exhausted and as if their bodies, as well as their spirits, are almost broken.

The relentless pace of work has also left some seafarers feeling too fatigued to pursue any activities or exercise. With too few people to do too much work, there is little time to keep fit and healthy. As one commented, “Life is about work, not working out”.

However, another respondent claimed that “one of the huge positives of COVID” was that it has shown the “absolute nonsense that seafarers have to deal with in port”. The respondent said that the usual flood of personnel onto the vessels, requiring forms to be filled in or photocopied have now vanished: “These people can no longer come onboard, and the paperwork has absolutely disappeared, and guess what the ship safely loads and discharges every port. We no longer have the distractions so dare I say it cargo operations are a lot safer due to COVID”.

In contrast to previous reports, we are also beginning to see concerns about the longer-term impact of the pandemic, most notably the lack of training opportunities. According to seafarers, training is currently almost non-existent, and many see themselves as almost in a holding pattern. As may be expected, seafarers are not attending colleges, and many ticket renewals have been automatically rolled over. Whether this will have an impact on standards remains to be seen.

My job feels overloaded, with tasks passed to me constantly. There is juggling of all that has to be done onboard.

Interaction with crew 7.24 ↑ from 7.04

Following a recent downward trend in the data for social interaction onboard, it was pleasing to see a climb this time round. Although the reasons for this growing sense of positivity were not completely clear from the written responses, there were comments that revealed a growing sense of unity onboard as seafarers struggle through extended contracts together.

There was, however, a real sense of frustration in many of the narratives. Internal politics onboard are now coming to the fore and tensions appear to be rising. Masters and officers were accused of working crews without due consideration of the circumstances, and there were calls for the pressures of the job to be scaled back. “We are working as hard as ever for longer than ever”, ran one comment.

Onboard camaraderie can be sorely tested when seafarers feel under stress and, as we saw emerging in responses earlier in the pandemic, issues such as race, politics and bullying onboard are creating a poisonous atmosphere. Sadly, once again, nationality seemed to be the biggest catalyst in reports of bullying. “Life during COVID is hell” was one response, while another commented, “I was a glass half full guy and was a happy soul for the most part. That was until my relief was more than a month overdue”.

There were some interesting points raised regarding the perceived contrast between the views of shore management versus those at sea. One respondent spoke of being “fed up with being told by non-seafarers that interaction onboard is good for you”. He went on to bemoan the fact that “ex-seafarers from 20 years ago remember when they were all the same nationality and alcohol was readily available onboard. They remember the good times and cannot understand why people onboard just want to go back to their cabins and have time to themselves. I can go through a whole trip not having a proper conversation”.

Those who spoke positively said that shared activities, even something as basic as mealtimes, are vital to help maintain relationships. “The more we do together, the better for all”, said one respondent. There was a sense that mealtimes are the only opportunity for crew to see others onboard, and to have some opportunity to relax and even talk. As one commented, “At dinner I can meet my friends without a mask, so we can actually have a conversation”.

The issue of wearing masks and social distancing seems to be damaging social cohesion, something which was much more apparent in the written responses in this Quarter. Masks onboard are clearly a cause for concern. Whereas workers ashore can go home and interact without face coverings, onboard there is a sense that the constant wearing of masks is having a negative impact on conversation and engagement, and adding a sense of disconnection and isolation.

Social distancing is having a similar effect. A number of seafarers spoke of their frustration over staggered mealtimes which have been introduced to assist in social distancing. This is leading to them eating alone at tables and spending more time feeling isolated.

Similarly, when it comes to group activities such as basketball, many of these have been stopped due to demands for social distancing. This has been a cause of much irritation for many, and respondents spoke of life onboard being challenging enough without the positive aspects of life at sea being taken away.

I can go through a whole trip not having a proper conversation.

Shore leave 5.4 ↓ from 5.75

There can be no ignoring the problems of shore leave during a pandemic, and many seafarers also used this question to comment on the lack of opportunity to leave the vessel and return home. It is therefore unsurprising that the data, which has long been heading downwards, took another fall.

Time and time again seafarers stated that due to the pandemic it is impossible to get shore leave. Yet, at the same time, many were relieved to stay onboard as they felt vulnerable to infection in some of the countries where their vessel called. Even when there is an opportunity for shore leave, one respondent stated that they would “rather sleep than go ashore”.

Another respondent noted that the problem of shore leave has nothing to do with COVID and implored us not to see this as an issue that has been around for a long time. Indeed, time ashore is increasingly rare regardless of whether we are in the midst of a global pandemic.

One of the obvious impacts of not being allowed ashore is that access to, and use of, seafarers centres has fallen. Crew spoke of their frustration at not being allowed to get ashore to visit centres. Furthermore, seafarers who would normally use the opportunity of shore leave to buy themselves some “food and treats” are being denied, and the lack of variety is starting to weigh heavily upon them. “If there was Deliveroo at sea I would not have any wages left”, said one seafarer who dared to dream.

There was, however, much praise and gratitude to welfare volunteers who have continued to offer support and have been a welcome and visible presence throughout the pandemic. Where crews cannot visit centres, then the provisions and support have been taken to them, where appropriate.

As we witnessed in the previous two quarters, the pandemic has exposed the fact that seafarers are often more concerned with simply getting their contract completed and getting home, rather than anticipating any breaks from the ship. Where seafarers spoke in terms of home leave, there were a number of extremely heart-wrenching responses. Crew spoke of feeling trapped, isolated, worried and desperate to return home to their families.

The crew change crisis is not simply about the problems of getting leave, it seeps into everyday life onboard, and the crisis also means very little change for crew. Day after day a relentless routine of work cannot be broken as there is no means of accessing the facilities which can make life better, more pleasant and happier.

Crew would rather sleep than go ashore.

Conclusion

We were surprised to see average happiness levels rise this time round. The average SHI results showed the happiness of seafarers at 6.35/10, up from 6.18 in Quarter 2. It is important, however, to note the fluctuations in the data for this Quarter, which appear to be symptomatic of the emotional rollercoaster that is the pandemic.

The rise in Happiness levels was driven by a significant positive upturn in the early part of the Quarter, which then dropped away in the latter months. In July, seafarers spoke of indications that the worst of the pandemic had passed, and of increasing optimism as national borders appeared to be opening once more.

Unfortunately, as the Quarter continued, there was very much a sense that the second wave of COVID-19 was dashing the hopes of many to get home, or indeed back to work. As might be expected, this was marked by a drop in the happiness levels expressed.

This report focused on the key areas where the effects of the virus are being felt most keenly, namely workload, interaction onboard and shore leave. The previous Quarter's report raised concerns of an emerging mental health crisis in the seafarer community and this shows no signs of abating. We again heard from seafarers who are really struggling with having been at sea for so long. There were signs of mental and emotional burnout, but so too physical. Crews reported that their tolerance is being stretched as they continue working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. We heard from seafarers who are trying to find solace in the distraction of work and are using it as a means of blocking out the concerns about crew changes.

It is clear that sustained periods of working are taking a heavy toll. Extended contracts mean that many crews are having to sustain tough manual work, and such tasks are leaving them utterly exhausted.

Social distancing onboard was seen as making life even harder than usual. There were many seafarers who felt increasingly isolated, unable to mingle as they would usually. It is difficult seeing masks instead of the faces of colleagues, and there are signs this is having an impact and reducing a sense of engagement onboard.

Notwithstanding the problem of social distancing, there were some positives reported. Seafarers spoke of an increase in the sense of unity onboard. Crew felt a sense of togetherness as they share the experience of struggling through extended contracts. Those who spoke positively singled out shared activities and mealtimes as vital opportunities to see others onboard.

Shore leave during a pandemic is as difficult as one might expect, and as such there was a sense that many seafarers have simply given up on the concept. Indeed, many were also pleased to stay onboard, as they felt vulnerable to infection in some of the nations visited. There were palpable fears in the responses in Quarter 1 of visitors to vessels who could spread infection, and there was some sense of relief that the number of people coming onboard has fallen. This has also led to less paperwork needing to be completed, another issue which seafarers had previously expressed concerns about.

The crew change crisis is still very much a problem, and seafarers are incredibly sensitive to the issue of when they will be able to leave ship. In the previous two quarters, crews spoke of feeling physically exhausted, anxious and homesick, and these issues were still very much apparent. Crew feel increasingly trapped, isolated, worried and are desperate to get back to their families.

The Happiness Index responses also featured many messages about the importance of communication and connectivity. The ability for seafarers to talk with home is vital, and not just for them to share their news, but also to hear the reality of what is happening back at home. There are real fears surrounding safety and wellbeing of families and loved ones, and it is so important that seafarers feel properly informed.

Unusually for the Index, we heard from seafarers who are not actually at sea. Stuck at home and unable to join vessels, many voiced their frustrations and fears. Indeed, it was stressed that many are facing potential financial ruin as they cannot find employment at sea, whilst others feel no option but to contemplate career changes in the months ahead.

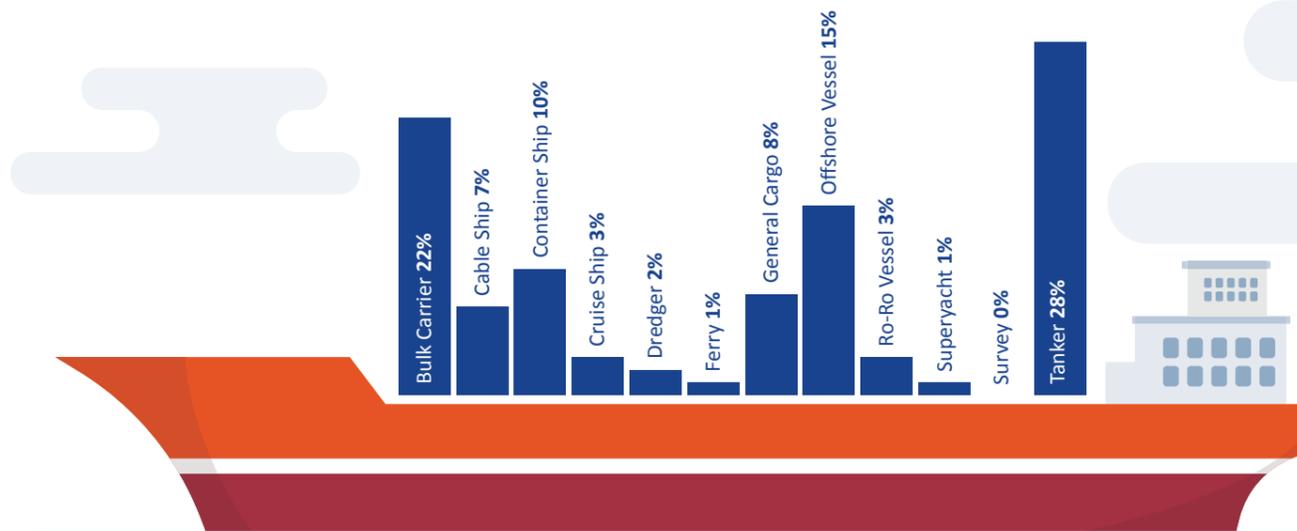
As ever, we must thank all those seafarers who took the time to share their thoughts with us. We are extremely grateful. They told us the things which really frustrate and concern them, the things that make a positive difference, and offered some opportunities for improvement.

We always need more data and to hear the stories of more seafarers, and for those who have already done so, to share again. So please visit www.happyatsea.org to find out more, and to complete the survey. We also want these reports to be spread as far and wide across shipping as possible, so please do share these findings. We would like to thank our 2020 sponsors, leading P&I insurer the Shipowners' Club and maritime solutions company Wallem Group, and we must also thank the companies which have approached us about setting up bespoke happiness surveys for their own fleets so they can benchmark their own performance against the wider population of seafarers.

I am getting my head down, getting things done, trying not to think about too many things I cannot control.

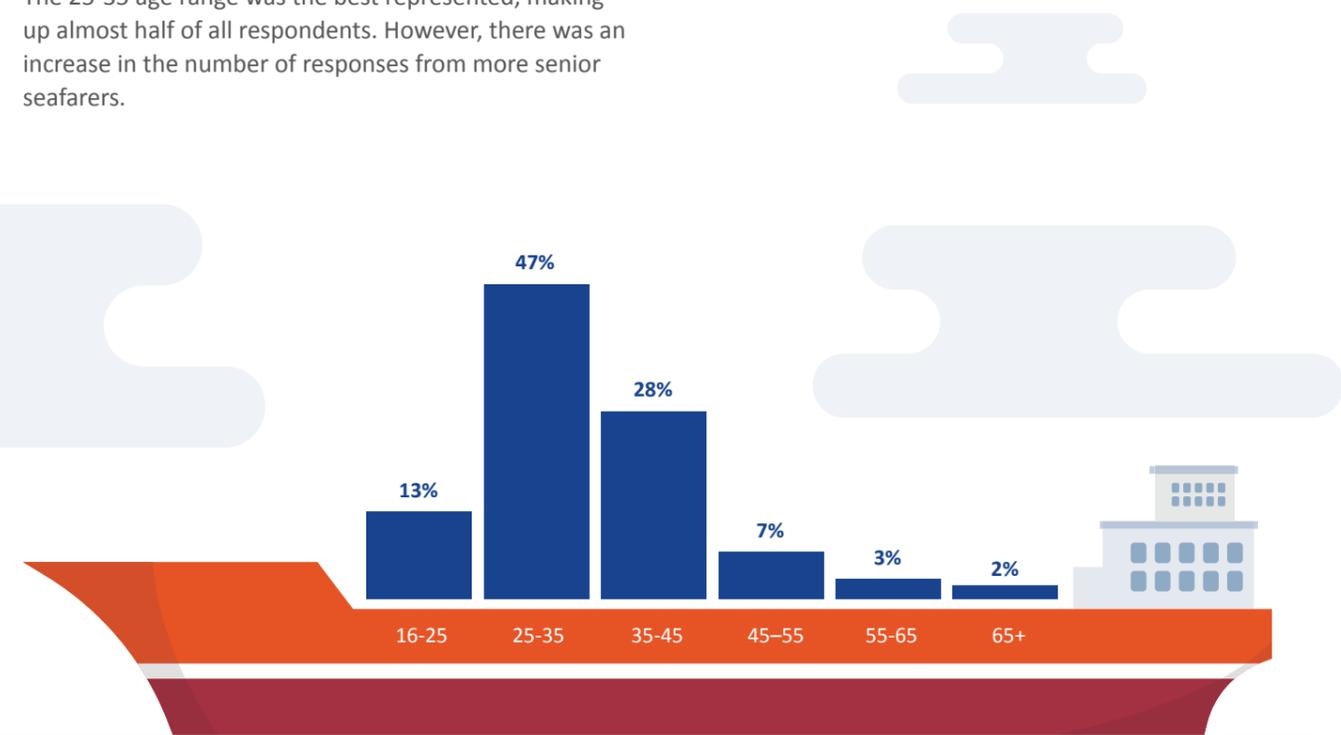
Ship Type

Once again, the highest number of respondents served on tankers, though bulk carriers came in a close second. We saw a steep drop in the number of responses from container ships and, as expected, cruise ship numbers were drastically diminished.



Age Range

The 25-35 age range was the best represented, making up almost half of all respondents. However, there was an increase in the number of responses from more senior seafarers.



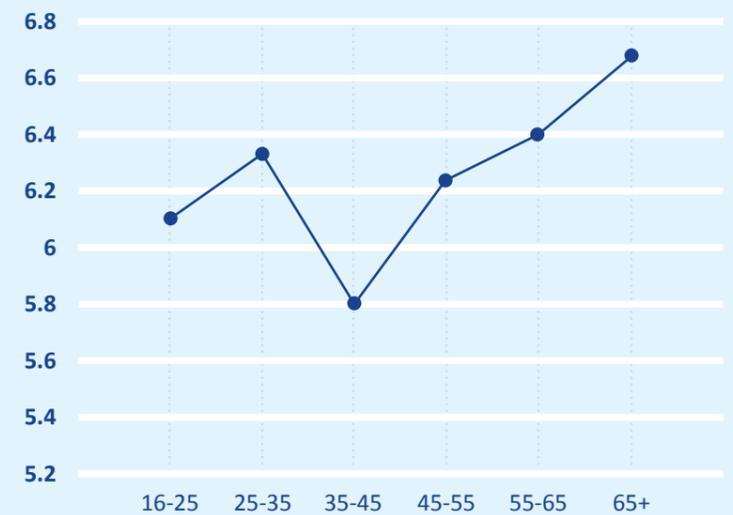
Ship types and happiness

The pattern of previous reports was not repeated this time round as cable ships and superyachts reported markedly higher levels of happiness than other vessel types. As might be expected, the responses from those still serving on cruise ships was startlingly and concerningly low. The figure of 4.8 was the lowest we have witnessed, and we hope that those who did respond are getting access to the assistance and support they need.



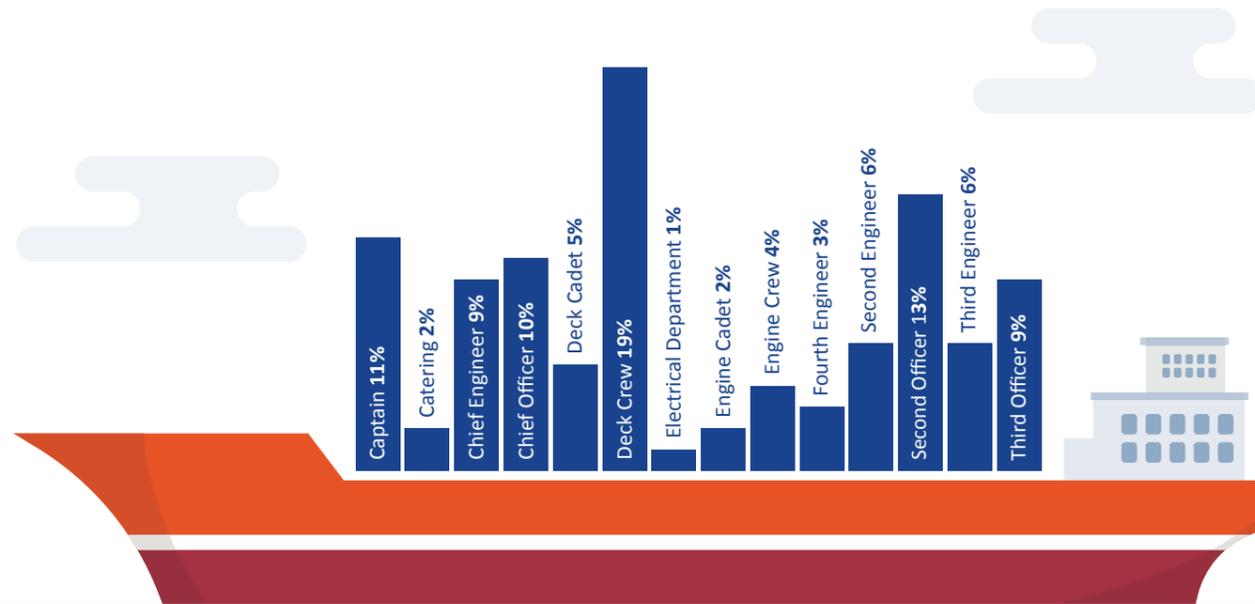
Ages and happiness

The younger age ranges were fairly consistent in their responses and ran close to average across the Index. Those at the senior end of the spectrum, reported enhanced happiness levels over their younger peers.



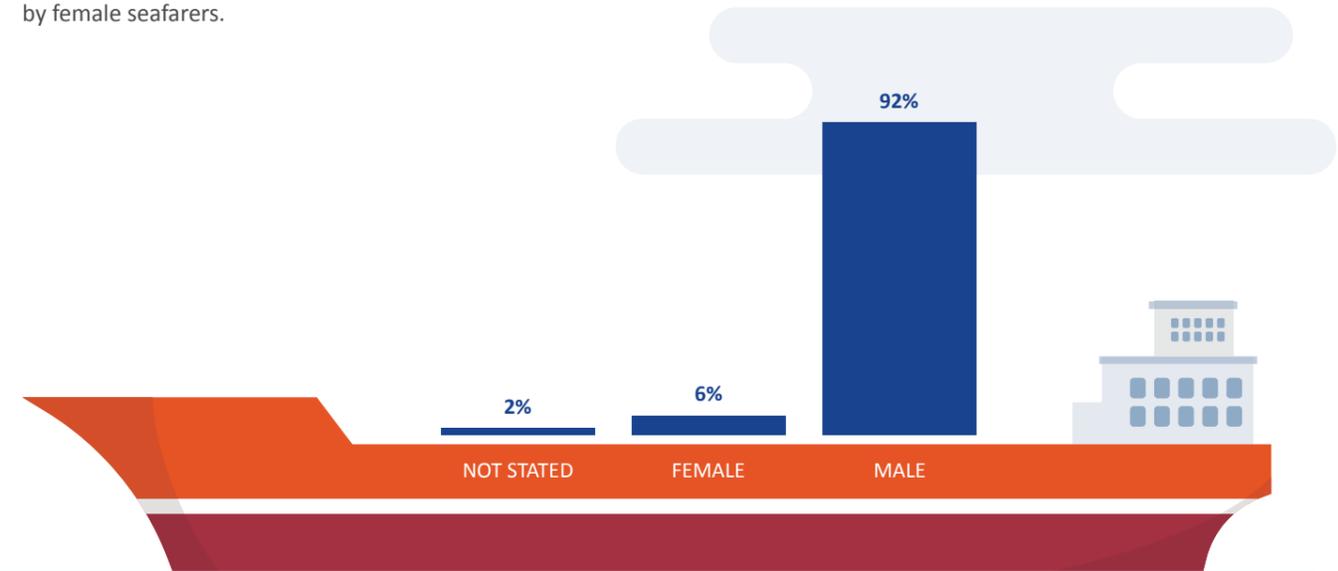
Rank

We received our usual wide spread of seafarers across all ranks and departments. Deck crews were the best represented once more.



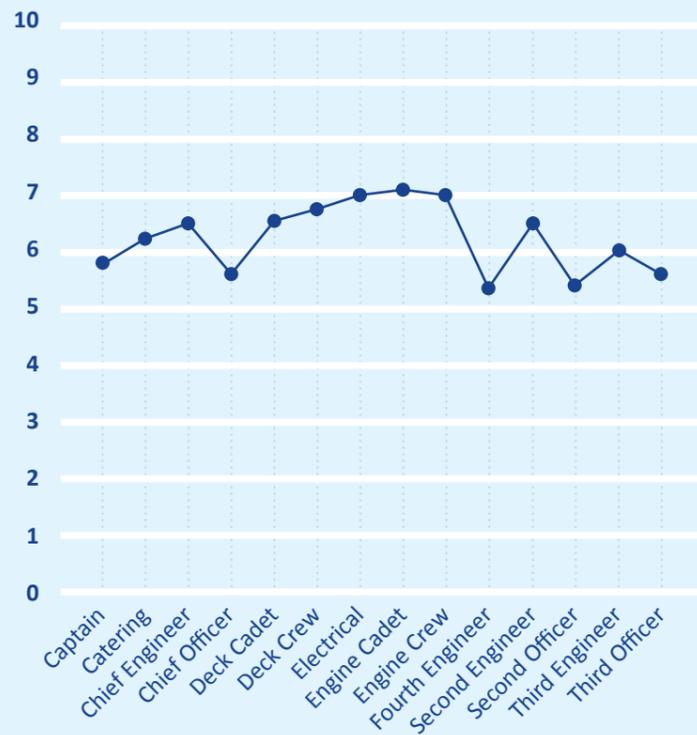
Gender Balance

Whilst the number of female seafarers completing the Seafarers Happiness Index is still low, we have now recorded increased levels across the past two reports. Whereas previously males represented over 96% of respondents, in both Q2 and Q3 the figure was down to 92%. This is positive, and hopefully we can now look to increase the insight given by female seafarers.



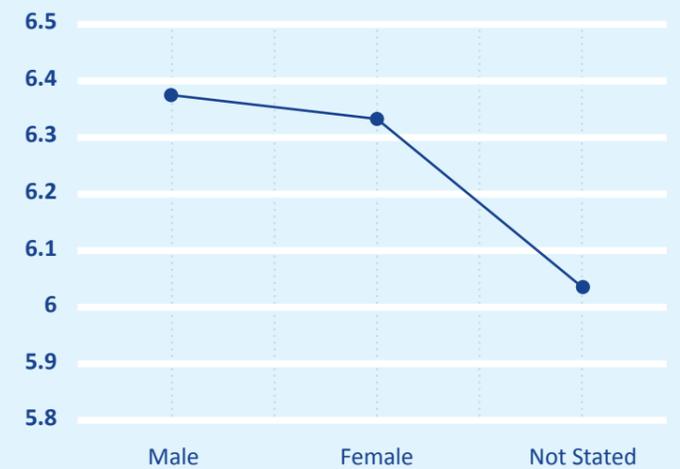
Ranks and happiness

A number of ranks saw a drop in happiness this time, with fourth engineers and second officers scoring the lowest levels. Officers tended to score lower, with a fairly consistent tracking across deck and engine crews, and cadet trainees.



Gender and happiness

Whilst there were more female respondents, they still report being less happy than their male counterparts. However their happiness levels were on the rise, with female seafarers recording an average of 6.33/10.

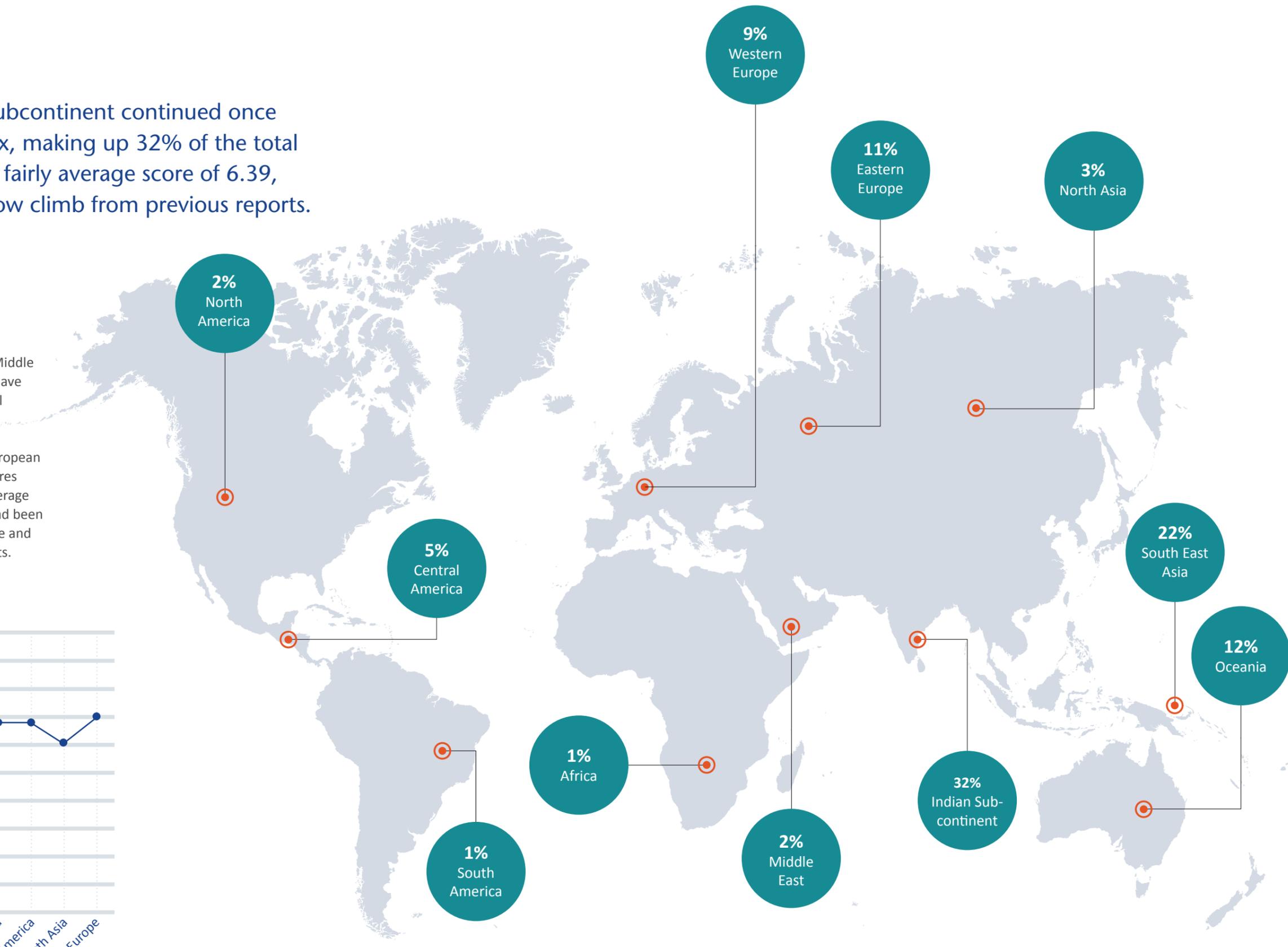
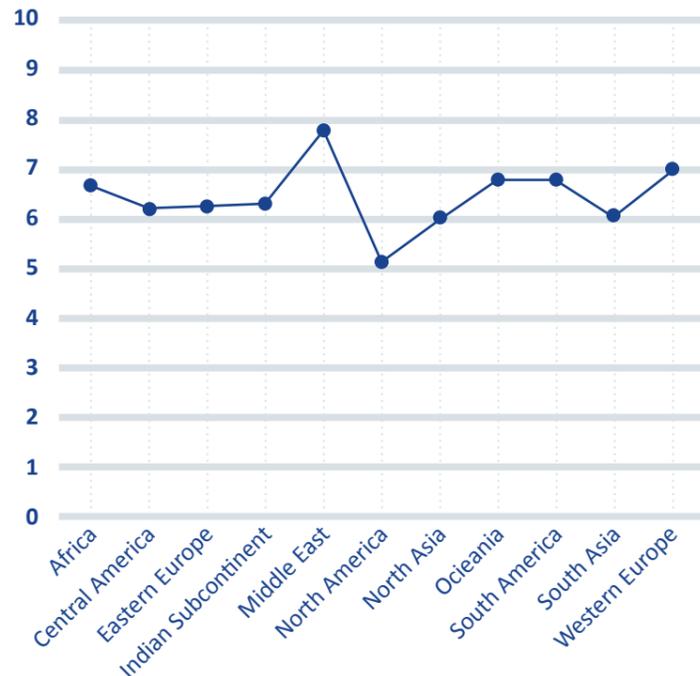


Where

Seafarers from the Indian Subcontinent continued once again to dominate the Index, making up 32% of the total respondents. They scored a fairly average score of 6.39, though again recorded a slow climb from previous reports.

The happiest seafarers by far were from the Middle East, recording one of the highest scores we have seen of 7.8, though they only made up a small number of respondents.

There were more responses from Western European crew this time round, and their happiness scores may have contributed in part to the rise in average happiness level. It appeared that a number had been brought into shorter sea trades around Europe and were less likely to be facing extended contracts.



On Board Mental Health Champions

The Mission to Seafarers is working to develop mental health resources to build resilience with crews on board.



Sometimes we face difficulties that make us feel...



Take back control

Think like a STAR

Stop: Take a moment to pause, collect your thoughts and try a 'calming' coping method.

Think: Consider what you are worried about. Try a 'regain control' coping method.

Apply: Use your coping methods, consider sharing them with a loved one or a trusted crew member.

Reach out: Contact The Mission to Seafarers, we're here to listen and support.

Calming

Breathe 4,7,8 Repeat

Focus on your breathing. Slowly inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 7, and exhale for 8. Repeat 4 times. Think about the cool air entering your nostrils and the sensation of your chest rising and falling.



Round Off

Slowly say the alphabet or count to 100 out loud.

Regain Control

Task Challenge

Do a task where you feel in control and receive a sense of achievement. This could be ticking off a To Do list, completing a word search or solving a math puzzle.



Mood Diary

Write four columns headed 'Day', 'Feel Up', 'Feel Down', 'I pledge'. At the end of the day write what made you feel good, what made you feel upset, and a pledge on how you will take back control.



WeCare downloadable resources to use on board and at home —



This information is designed for information purposes only. It is not intended to amount to medical, legal, or financial advice and should not be relied on or treated as a substitute for specific advice relevant to your circumstances. Nor should it be relied upon by you in making (or refraining from making) any specific decisions. If you have specific questions about your mental health or finances, you should consult a suitably qualified healthcare professional or financial adviser.



Would you like your crew to be On Board Mental Health Champions?

We understand the hardships crews face at sea. Balancing life onboard with commitments back home is challenging. That's why we've created WeCare, a wellbeing programme offering free courses on mental health awareness. Through our courses in social communication and financial wellbeing, we look at the root causes of poor mental health, explore practical methods to achieve wellbeing, and promote coping strategies to empower action.

To find out more about classroom and online courses, contact thomas.ohare@missiontoseafarers.org

www.missiontoseafarers.org

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