



Addressing the maritime recruitment crisis:

*Actions and
recommendations from
ISWAN's 2023 Seminar*

16 November 2023



*Hosted by the
Finnish Seamen's Service*



About ISWAN

The International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) is an international maritime charity which works to improve the lives of seafarers and their families with services, resources, strategies and advocacy. ISWAN supports seafarers and their families around the world with our free helpline services, educational resources, relief funds and humanitarian support. We also work to drive change within the maritime sector for better health and wellbeing amongst seafarers, using data from our helplines to identify areas of need and inform new projects and research.

In 2023, we assisted 6,740 seafarers and their families around the world through our helplines and delivered training to almost 6,000 seafarers, including pre-departure orientation and mental health awareness presentations. Over US\$180,000 was awarded to seafarers and their families in need by the relief funds administered by ISWAN.

Addressing the maritime recruitment crisis: Seafarer wellbeing in a changing world

ISWAN's 2023 seminar was held in Helsinki on 16 November 2023 and attended by delegates from across the maritime sector, including shipping companies, crewing agents, management companies, training institutions, unions, P&I clubs, yacht managers, ship service providers and welfare organisations. The seminar was hosted by the Finnish Seamen's Service (FSS), a long-standing ISWAN member, as part of FSS's 50th anniversary celebrations. The event took a solutions-focused approach to considering the increasingly acute recruitment and retention crisis that the maritime sector faces. A series of panels drawing on expertise from a range of maritime stakeholders considered fair working conditions, inclusive cultures and technology in addressing the recruitment crisis.

The seminar was framed in the context of the extremely rapid changes that the maritime sector is undergoing and the implications

that this has for seafarers and for the seafaring profession. Whilst the technical challenges of adapting to decarbonisation and automation receive substantial attention, comparatively little focus has been placed on the impact these rapid transformations are having on seafarers and their wellbeing. Taking as its starting point the technological revolution that maritime has already begun to negotiate, the seminar sought to cast light on how the sector can reimagine the vocation of seafaring in a digital age. What changes will be needed for maritime employers to successfully recruit and retain the highly skilled seafarers who will be needed to power the decarbonised, increasingly automated vessels of the future?

This paper aims to build on the solutions identified during the course of the day to provide a springboard for continued collaborative action amongst stakeholders to build a safer, more sustainable and more resilient maritime sector.



History of the Finnish Seamen's Service, hosts of ISWAN's 2023 seminar

Although the history of seamen's services in Finland extends over 150 years, the Finnish Seamen's Service (FSS) was founded in 1973, in conjunction with the drafting of the government's Seamen's Service Act. Since then, its remit and activities have evolved over time, informed by wider social, cultural, political and economic trends.

The 1970s saw the FSS focus on providing a range of social and cultural activities to support seafarers to participate more fully in society, including launching a Finnish radio station to broadcast to seafarers around the world. In the early 1980s, the FSS had to adapt to the significant impact that the global economic recession had on Finnish shipping. In tandem, it adapted its services to focus on providing more individualised support to seafarers, in line with broader societal understandings of

wellbeing. With the economic landscape for Finnish shipping strengthening in the early 1990s, the FSS once again refocused its mission to reflect the growing importance of occupational health and wellbeing in the workplace. FSS's activities evolved to include cultural services, adult education and support for seafarers to adapt to the increasing digitalisation of the workplace.

Today, the FSS offers a range of wellbeing and information services to seafarers within the Finnish merchant fleet, as well as recreational services to all foreign seafarers visiting Finnish ports. The FSS continues to work in partnership with stakeholders from across the Finnish maritime industry to strengthen the position of seafarers by ensuring fair working conditions that support seafarers' health and wellbeing.



Photo - Finnish Seamen's Service (FSS)

Amplifying the voices of seafarers

Perhaps the most important theme and action point from ISWAN's seminar is that the maritime sector must listen more closely to what seafarers tell us about the challenges of living and working at sea and, crucially, to turn what they tell us into practical actions.

Through our helplines, ISWAN hears daily about some of the underlying factors that are driving the recruitment and retention crisis. Seafarers talk to us about a wide range

of issues that impact their wellbeing, from experiences of different forms of abuse, to a lack of shore leave or the stress of long-term separation from family members. There are, however, comparatively few opportunities to hear directly from seafarers about their proposed solutions to the challenges that the maritime sector faces. For this reason, a panel of seafarers opened ISWAN's seminar and shared insights from their experiences at sea and the steps that they believe companies could take to retain skilled crew more effectively.

Panellists shared the different routes that they had taken into working in the maritime sector and the factors that encouraged them to continue working at sea. The seafarers were unanimous in emphasising the unique rewards of a career in maritime, but also stressed the vital importance of employers taking action to make working at sea an attractive and sustainable option for a wider group of prospective seafarers.

Panel host:

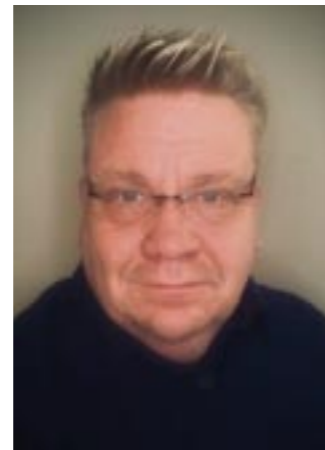
Jason Zuidema –
ISWAN Trustee; Executive Director,
NAMMA; General Secretary, ICMA



Suneeti Bala,
Former Chief
Engineer, Trustee,
International Women
Seafarer's Foundation
(IWSF)

'How did I join? It just happened. I wasn't aware of what I was getting into. Somehow this one special

college had entrance through an engineering exam and I landed up there. Until I went for a campus interview with my father, we didn't know there were no women, so it came as a shocker when people started seeing me and asking my father what I was doing there. Somehow my father was very supportive and proud. He said, "I know my daughter, and she can do it". And that's how, I kept his faith and trust and I did do it. The first day I got onboard, I fell in love with the ship and the sea. It was an amazing journey. Of course, a lot of troubles being the only woman there, but it also actually brought my passion towards problems and challenges.'



Mika Behm,
Shop Supervisor,
Eckerö –
M/S Finlandia

'I didn't know anything about what it was like to work onboard... But then earlier in my career I noticed that there are lots of things that you can

improve in your work, in a company and my ideas luckily were taken well and after a while we started to create a new management style, and I thought, "OK, I have something to give here". So I've been the lucky one to be able to develop me and my career further and maybe that's one reason why I have stayed so long. And I see that there is still more work to do and that keeps me going on.'



Tommy Björklund,
Seafarer, Neste;
Writer, FSS Magazine
Vapaavahti

'There is no very romantic reason. The only reason was money. That's because I worked in a restaurant and it was a nice job but

not such a good salary. And I had some friends who worked on ferries so I heard that the salary is much better there and I thought, "Ok, why not? I am young and I have plenty to do with that money!" Then I stayed there as I recognised that it was a nice environment to work; ok, it was a hard job in the ferry restaurant, but well paid. I liked that when I am at home, I am at home. That was one good reason. But after 17 years I wanted to do something else but still onboard ships. So I took a little more education and have been working deckside for about 17 years and still love it.'



Steve Oertel,
Captain,
MF Shipping Group

'We're sailing worldwide, we have a lot of cultures we're living with and influences we can take part in and we see also in the ports. I got to know a lot

of people and a completely different system of working, since the vessel is such a small, close system, we're a family working all together in companionship and tackling all the daily challenges we have. We're the only ones who can tackle it so if we have a problem we have to solve it ourselves until we're in the next port. Nobody else will do it for us. And exactly this challenge to tackle every day, you can do it together with your small amount of people, to make a big impact. You're transporting thousands of tonnes of cargo from A to B; people are depending on us to deliver these cargos... You can make a big impact for your vessel and for other people. And this link in between, to handle this for my crew, company, the people depending on me, drives me further.'



Key themes and action points from the ISWAN 2023 Seminar

Fair Work

The panel explored the role that working conditions have to play in the recruitment and retention crisis. Panellists discussed practical steps that the maritime sector can take to bridge the gap between current working conditions and seafarers' aspirations. They also considered what fair work means for seafarers of today and how companies can reinvent their offer to current and prospective crew.

Panel host:

Charles Boyle –
ISWAN Trustee; Director of Legal Services,
Nautilus International

Presenters and panellists:

Maria Carrera Arce –
Research Associate,
World Maritime University

Isabelle Rickmers –
Founder & CEO, TURTLE

Sadie Saunders –
Maritime Policy Adviser, International
Transport Workers' Federation (ITF)

Andrew Stephens –
Executive Director,
Sustainable Shipping Initiative (SSI)

Key themes and action points from the discussions were:

Seafarers need to be better informed about their rights. Currently, a lack of awareness means that infringements of rights are not reported as many seafarers do not understand their entitlements or know what to do if these rights are infringed.

There is a need for greater innovation in crewing. To achieve long-term sustainability, the maritime sector needs to:

- **Improve retention by developing new approaches to contract length and stability.** Many seafarers are no longer willing to work long contracts. The sector will need to adapt accordingly, including considering continuous employment agreements as well as shorter contract lengths.

'One of the problems is contract lengths are too long. We have six-week periods, it's not even long. But if you are 20 years old, and you have a new girlfriend and so on, maybe it's long.'

– Tommy Björklund

- **Revisit family carriage policies.** Flexibility as regards family carriage has reduced in recent years, whilst at the same time, many seafarers are less willing to endure long periods of separation from family members.

'Family has become more and more important. With internet, we can see that it's very important for people to get connected. [However,] the more family values have gone up, the more companies have reduced their policy of family carriage. So this is something, if they can see they will be able to carry their family, it can also motivate them.'

– Suneeti Bala

- **Develop safer and more transparent routes into employment.** This could include solutions such as secure digital platforms; greater vetting of shipping companies; international databases to log incidents of corruption; or mentorship programmes to support career progression and support seafarers to make more informed choices.

Committed action to address well-known problems. Whilst innovation is needed in some areas, elsewhere the maritime sector must find greater resolve and take concrete steps to tackle long-standing and much discussed issues such as a lack of shore leave and failure to adhere to work/rest limits.

Greater transparency and regulatory enforcement are required. Currently, a lack of enforcement is facilitating practices such as forced labour, withholding wages and charging illegal recruitment fees. The use of Flags of Convenience makes enforcement of international law more challenging.



Achieving parity between shore and sea.

All the entitlements, rights and support that are available to shore-based staff should also be available to seafarers. We should also ensure that we celebrate the successes and achievements of seafarers, as we do for shore-based staff.

The sector must address “technostress” and overwork.

The nature of work at sea is changing extremely quickly and not enough is being done to understand the impact on seafarers’ welfare. Bureaucracy and paperwork are increasing at a time when crew sizes are reducing, adding to stress, workloads and fatigue levels.

Salaries for seafarers are not keeping pace.

For many seafarers, salary levels are a key motivation for joining and remaining in the maritime sector. In recent years, the financial incentives to work at sea have been eroded and people can earn similar salaries at shore with a better life/work balance.

‘When I started my sailing career, I was earning eight to nine times more than my school mates who were not in this career. But in today’s time, the gap has slowly closed. So people now can chose careers with almost the same salary, but with a better life.’

– Suneeti Bala

All these factors mean that:

The maritime sector must be willing to invest more in seafarers. Maritime employers must begin preparing for the increased costs associated with improving seafarers’ working conditions and wellbeing in order to make the sector sustainable in the long term.

‘Since we have a big crisis, it’s not any more that the company is coming and saying, I need an A, B, give me a list and I’ll select one, whichever I want. It’s turning around. The seafarers can more likely choose where they want to go, because they can decide the conditions of working.’

– Captain Steve Oertel

The importance of shore leave

– Captain Steve Oertel

‘Sooner or later you get bored. You are mentally imprisoned, because you cannot go out, you will fall in the water. Anything you do, you are restricted. You cannot eat what you want because you have to take what the cook is offering. You cannot go where you want, because it is restricted by the sea. You cannot do what you want because maybe it is not possible on the ship. You cannot play soccer, tennis. Meeting friends, they are not there. Yes, you can talk to them, when you have time, connectivity, but you are restricted again. So anything you do, you are restricted. You have to live with it. But the question is, how can you live yourself with it. With shore leave, you can just go. Nobody is holding you back. You have a door, you can pass through the gate of the port and say, ok, behind that, it’s my opinion to choose what I want to do... Nowadays, we don’t stay long in ports. It doesn’t matter which vessel you go, if you stay longer than 24 hours, that’s luxury... Shore leave is one of the crucial points to take care of.’

Inclusive Culture

Taking steps to build a more diverse, equitable and inclusive culture is often seen as key to addressing the recruitment gap. The 'Inclusive Culture' panel explored how the maritime sector can address the barriers that prevent it from benefiting from a more diverse range of talents and backgrounds.

Panel host:

Karen Waltham –
ISWAN Trustee; HR Director/Independent
People Management Consultant

Presenters and panellists:

Dr. Caitlin Bentley –
Lecturer in AI Education,
King's College London

Susanne Justesen –
Project Director, Human Sustainability,
Global Maritime Forum

Daniel Smith –
Founder, NeurodiversAtSea.org

James Stockbridge –
Co-Founder & Trustee,
NeurodiversAtSea.org

Sofie Trier Jensen –
Marine Culture Project Manager, Maersk

Key themes and action points from the discussions were:

Building inclusive cultures requires long-term structural change. There needs to be sustained and holistic commitment to addressing all aspects of company culture: work culture, business culture, sea and shore culture. This is an ongoing process, rather than a time-limited goal.

'I still sometimes encounter that maritime business, especially senior level management, has the old mindset that the captain is god. To be honest, I don't feel myself as god, sitting upstairs. This is not what I feel being a leader is about. Being a leader is to take the people with you. To take them with them, you first have to speak to them, you need good cooperation and communication.'

– Captain Steve Oertel

Psychological safety is key. Being able to speak openly about ideas, concerns or mistakes without fear of retribution is vital to safe and inclusive cultures at sea. This involves rethinking leadership and management cultures, as well as placing greater emphasis on psychological safety in training institutes.

'You do not only need a connection to loved ones at home, you also need a connection and respectful environment onboard. So there we are back to the wellbeing of the individual person. I believe every seafarer who is onboard needs to have a balanced and fair environment that they feel confident in; they like to go

there. If they are going back home they need a motivation to say "yes, I want to go back, I want to go back on the same vessel, I want to meet the same people again". The key need is to develop this wellbeing of the person, of each individual person. In my perspective, this is the need that we can achieve with a lot of small approaches and measures. We're imprisoned on a few square metres for several months. You only want to come back if you had a good atmosphere, if you're not bullied, if the boss doesn't always give you scrubbing the deck.'

– Captain Steve Oertel



Training cannot be the only solution.

Diversity and inclusivity cannot be achieved only through developing guidelines and manuals that are then implemented through formal education and training. Training is often seen as a single event. However, real cultural change involves ongoing work to facilitate the kinds of conversations that can shape actions and behaviours, involving people in all roles in exploring how to build a safe and respectful environment for all.

Targets can be useful, but they have limits.

Targets must be achievable, realistic and underpinned by a genuine commitment to change and to identifying and addressing barriers to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. It's vital to identify what is important to measure, rather than only focusing on what can be measured easily. More nuanced focus on leading and lagging indicators may provide more meaningful insights.

'We know that the MLC talks about bullying and harassment. How effective can it be without a policy or a standard approach from a company. So whatever guidelines are given in the MLC needs also to be written in a language and a system with a measure, with a KPI maybe, so that things are implemented. It's lacking walking the talk, not only talking, talking.'

– Suneeti Bala

Systemic factors continue to limit gender equity.

Women seafarers continue to face structural inequities such as discriminatory employment practices and unequal access to on-the-job training. The infrastructure and design of vessels needs to take greater account of gender, for example as regards sanitary facilities.

Increased flexibility in relation to family life.

Seafaring needs to become more flexible and imaginative as regards contracts that are compatible with family life and raising children, for people of all genders.

Inclusive recruitment policies and improved on-the-job support. Seafaring could access a much broader range of talent by making recruitment processes more inclusive and providing improved on-the-job support and appropriate adjustments. For example, leadership cultures that provide safe and supportive environments for people who are neurodiverse could benefit from skill sets that are much needed in many seafaring roles.

'We noticed we are lacking professionals, so we opened up the recruitment system and asked "what do we actually need?". We need all the certificates that you need to work onboard, but then we narrowed the criteria and came in the end to, "Hire the attitude and train the competence". We got lots of applications and we also changed the interviews. We started to tell them about the work, what it's like to stay onboard, what kind of work, what facilities you have and what you do in your free time. After that,

it became like a discussion and the person who was applying got an idea about what the work is onboard. And it was a success. It was really nice to see how young people and also some older people too joined us. It's not only the recruitment process. When people come to work, how do you treat them? You have to stand behind the words you tell them in the interview about what kind of management you have. Everyone wants to be an individual and to be seen and heard.'

– Mika Behm

'People are quite scared when you tell them what kind of papers you have before you start to work. What I have noticed is that getting medical certificates nowadays is becoming more and more strict.'

– Mika Behm



Using new technologies to reimagine who can be a seafarer. Technological advances such as the development of maritime autonomous systems could enable the sector to move beyond restrictive definitions of what a seafarer looks like and become more open to historically marginalised groups.

All of these factors mean that:

The maritime sector must commit to going further than minimum regulatory standards. To build cultures of psychological safety, maritime employers must aspire to do more than simply meeting legislative requirements. The regulatory environment is behind the curve and, furthermore, a compliance culture can stifle the kind of learning and change that is needed to build safe and sustainable environments. Employers must be willing to make a deeper commitment to creating the kinds of company cultures that seafarers will want to join and to remain part of in the longer term.

'Having someone onboard who can coordinate social interaction can help because people feel good and they want to come back. As a captain, I have a lot of possibilities to realise this. On my ship, it's a cargo ship, we only have some space on deck, we put a basketball field there. People were very happy. We made a barbeque. And these are the small things to make community. We're not supposed to be lonely. On my vessel, we're nine people sailing around for minimum two months, if not six or eight months onboard, so we have to get to know each other. Small investments can help people to feel well.'

– Captain Steve Oertel

Capt. Oertel's vessel, managed by MF Shipping Group, participated in ISWAN's Social Interaction Matters (SIM) Project – find out more about this project [here](#)

'You need a good gym. If you have a poor gym, I have recognised that there is no-one, or maybe the biggest guy onboard is there. In this new boat, at first the gym was empty, but then we got the new gym equipment and it was perfect, best on the Baltic Sea!... And now I have realised that in the past two years there are plenty of people who didn't used to use the gym, but they do now. Maybe not every day, but a couple of times

a week. And if I think from the companies' point of view, I think our gym cost €30,000, which sounds a lot, but if there are people who exercise there and they get in better condition, they avoid accidents, they feel better, they have less sick leave. So that €30,000 is a very small amount for this kind of investment. If you have good facilities, people use them.'

– Captain Steve Oertel

Forging a path for Indian women at sea – Suneeti Bala

'I began my career as a Junior Engineer and climbed the ladder to become the first woman Chief Engineer from India. When I moved to my shore career, I became the first woman Marine Surveyor from India. Being part of the first generation of women from India, we thought that our struggle was normal, because we were the first ones. We had to make a path for the women who would come after us and things would improve with time. But it came as a shock for us that even after 10 years, the women who were entering maritime were facing exactly the same challenges that we faced. Ten years is a good length of time for industry to learn, but it wasn't the case. We formed a WhatsApp group and when we started talking it was an eye-opener for us and we

realised that things were going in a very different direction to what we expected. From there, we founded the International Women Seafarers' Foundation (IWSF). Since then, I can tell you that we have come a long way and that things have changed.

'Not much is known about what life is like onboard as a woman. And if it is not at all known to your colleagues onboard or your colleagues onshore, it becomes very difficult to cross those challenges and pass through your normal sea life or time onboard. The challenges that women face onboard need to be spoken about more so that people can contribute. If it's not known, it's not possible to solve it. Usually women end up solving their own problems or they talk to their peers, because they think that if they talk about these things, maybe they will be judged, which is so true, actually. I have faced this myself: every rank I have been,

every ship I have joined, the initial 15 days I am on everyone's radar. Everyone is talking about how I am performing and asking "is she good at work or not?" Still today it is the same scenario. A woman has to work twice as hard and prove maybe four times more than her counterpart just to make them understand that we are a rank, not a gender. Maybe people are not aware that they are treating women in that way.

'Outside of hospitality, women's participation in maritime is only 0.5%, so it's not a surprise that when a woman joins onboard, her colleagues don't have experience in how to interact with her. How much support do shore staff have in dealing with any scenario or any conflict onboard? I remember that when there was a conflict, people have a standard approach: just keep them apart. Separate the two parties or remove one party to another ship or back

home. But in this scenario when there is a woman and a man, in 90% of cases it is the woman who is removed from the ship, whether or not she has done something wrong. This creates the general perception that women onboard are trouble. Who is going to change this? Women, who are only 0.5% compared to others? No, so we need a really cooperative approach; we need to collaborate at all levels. We definitely need gender sensitisation training for all onboard seafarers and shore staff also need to understand how to handle different scenarios. I also don't know how many companies have a return to work policy after maternity leave for women seafarers. This is a challenge in a normal work culture but has anyone thought about what this means in seafaring? And if they have thought about it, has anyone implemented it? There is a lot to do, and I would be happy to help.'



Changing technologies – Impact on wellbeing

The maritime sector is undergoing technological transformation as a result of onboard connectivity, automation and the journey towards decarbonisation. The panel considered the challenges to seafarers' wellbeing of such a rapid pace of change, as well as the scope for technology to help to reinvent seafaring and restore its attractiveness in the digital age.

Panel host:

Sue Henney –
ISWAN Trustee; Head of Marketing,
IDWAL Marine

Panellists:

Chirag Bahri –
International Operations Manager, ISWAN

Dr. Christos Kontovas –
Reader in Sustainable Maritime
Transportation and Logistics,
Liverpool John Moores University

Catherine Logie –
Direct to Consumer
Services Director,
Ocean Technologies Group

Steve Oertel –
Captain, MF Shipping Group

Rob Parkin –
Business Development
Specialist, BazePort

'If you ask anyone, they will immediately say that they need connection with home. They have families, they have friends, so for sure, this is a base need people have onboard. They need to stay in contact with the people they love at home.'

– Captain Steve Oertel

Key themes and action points from the discussions were:

The technological revolution has arrived.

It's vital to take account of how rapidly life and work at sea is changing. There has been an explosion in what can be provided to ships in terms of internet access, online training, telemedicine, tighter relationships between ship and shore, new automated equipment, collecting live data about seafarers' welfare. Technology can be an extremely positive enabler, but it also brings a range of challenges that need to be managed.



Mitigating the dangers of “technostress”.

The proliferation of new technologies can add to stress levels and workload for many seafarers who often feel they lack the support and training to adopt them safely. Greater attention needs to be given to integrating new technologies effectively, understanding how seafarers can be supported to cope with the volume of data and information they are receiving and mitigating the risk of cognitive overload.

Harnessing onboard technology

creatively. There has been much debate about the pros and cons of internet access as regards crew cohesion and social interaction. The fact is, connectivity is here to stay and should be embraced. Used imaginatively, technology can be a facilitator and driver of social interaction, alongside other initiatives to give crew members accessible and inclusive opportunities to relax together.

Trusting seafarers to use technology

responsibly. Whilst taking a proactive approach to using technology to increase opportunities for social interaction, it is also important to trust seafarers to use technology responsibly and to their own advantage. Seafarers should have the same freedom as those ashore in terms of access to the internet.

Learning from other industries. Society more broadly is on a digital journey and there is much that maritime can learn from industries that were earlier adopters of wholesale digitalisation about how to embrace the benefits and mitigate the challenges of technology most effectively.

A new approach to training. Digitalisation has opened up a wealth of options as regards seafarer training. Training should not be a tick-box exercise; there is need for more adaptive learning with a personalised approach that takes account of what seafarers already know and what their true learning needs are. Seafarers themselves should be included in more meaningful ways in decision-making about what kind of training is needed and what would be effective. This includes understanding and adapting to the different learning needs of different groups of seafarers as regards technology, including, for example, young people and more experienced seafarers.

All of these factors mean that:

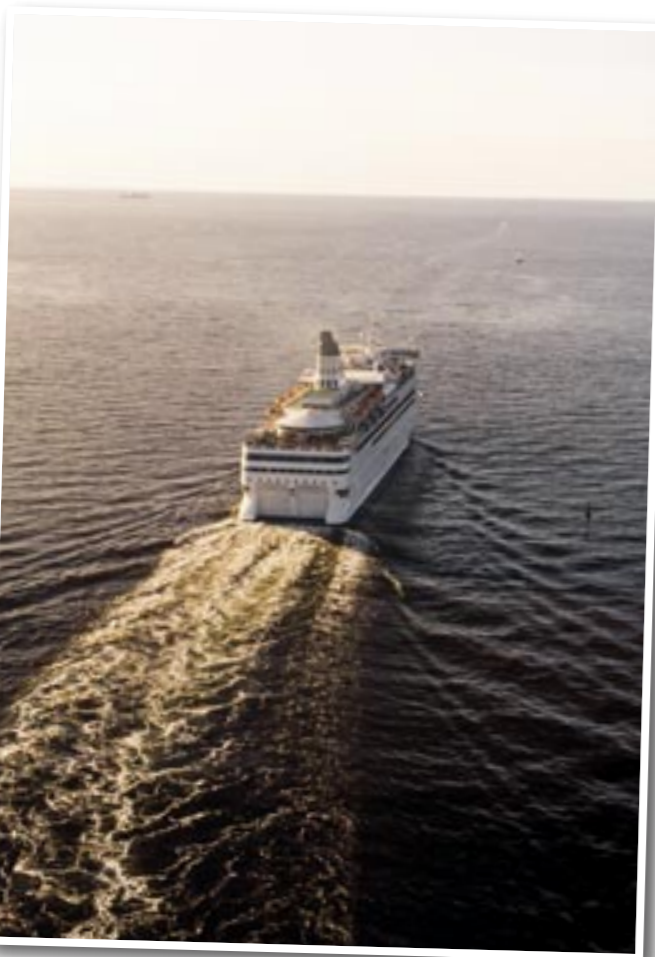
Technology must work for seafarers.

There needs to be more strategic and creative thinking about how rapid advances in connectivity can transform life and work at sea in ways that benefit seafarers and the safety of vessels, rather than presenting additional burdens.



The path ahead

With greater numbers of seafarers appearing to be reconsidering their careers at sea, concerns about how the sector will respond are well placed. Arguably, however, this moment of crisis also presents a real opportunity for the sector to reinvent its offer to current and prospective crew and to identify what it would take for modern, much more technically-sophisticated seafaring to recapture the vocational appeal that it held for earlier generations.



A number of overarching themes recurred through the seminar panels which can serve as guiding principles that the maritime sector can use to navigate the challenges that it faces:

Investing in seafarers is a commercial as well as ethical imperative. High levels of attrition and key skills gaps mean that investment is vital in business, as well as human, terms. The maritime sector will need to invest in terms of both time, effort and money to successfully reimagine seafaring for the digital age.

Terms and conditions matter. Addressing systemic issues within company culture is critically important. However, the maritime sector must also look more seriously at factors such as improving wages, reducing contract length, guaranteeing shore leave and making seafaring more compatible with family life.

Seafarers are not commodities. A great deal is already known about the issues that seafarers face. Too often commercial imperatives and regulatory pressures are prioritised over the wellbeing of seafarers. The maritime sector needs to get more serious about tackling well known issues such as overwork and a lack of shore leave.

The sector must listen more to seafarers. There needs to be greater commitment to taking a collaborative, cross-sector approach to turning what seafarers tell us about the challenges they face into practical action. The maritime sector cannot just pay lip service.

Work and life at sea is unique and there is still much to love about the profession. The panel of seafarers all expressed the pride they felt in their careers at sea and their sense of loyalty to the profession. However, this dedication and good will risks being eroded by a lack of thought and consideration for seafarers' wellbeing.

'The attitude I have today of, "I can do it!", comes from the sea. And the best thing which I tell everyone who wants to join this career is that the one thing that the sea tells us how to survive, }be it any hassle in life or a practical situation of emergency, when you have to really deal with it. Usually as a human being with fear, we have fight or flight, but the sea gives you the whole tendency to fight and to get out of. So this is something that kept me going and I still miss the fresh breeze, the sunrise, the sunset, the bright moon and the waves.'

– Suneeti Bala

'My point of view is that the image of working onboard is quite masculine and people don't generally know that there are lots of different tasks. When I go to talk in schools, many people are quite surprised about what kind of different jobs you can do on vessels.'

– Mika Behm

'I liked the adventure part of it. So people who are adventurous would like to have this career. And similarly there are other things which we learned through the sea. But I didn't know when I was joining. With awareness, maybe we can highlight what are the good things about this career. But at the same time, we should not overdo it. Because at times, people think that it's an amazing career and the hard reality is that it's also a very hard career. Not only staying apart from your family but if you talk about engine rooms, it's also really hard work. If people think it's all good, when they come and join ship and they see that no, what they thought was not true, they get disappointed and they leave and the retention rate goes down.'

– Suneeti Bala

'In India, awareness is lacking a lot. People don't know about this career. We have such a big coastline but only people around the coast know about it. If they don't know about it, they will not join. Talking about women, again the awareness. First of all, people do not know that there is a career there and that women can join. It's such a big lack that we all, not only India, but everywhere, need to improve.'

– Suneeti Bala

‘A lot of people don’t know what it means to go to sea. What are the possibilities? Is it only to be on deck or in the engine? No, there are more departments to work on. You never had anything to do with maritime? You’re welcome to try. Give it a try! Come onboard, have a look, how is it for yourself? Even for us, as seafarers sailing on different vessels, between a ferry, a passenger vessel or a tanker, there are worlds in between. We should make this public, to make people know about this is one of the key points, I believe.’

– Steve Oertel

It’s important not to generalise. The challenges facing seafarers working in different industries, of different ranks or from different demographic groups often vary. As well as tackling major structural issues, there is a need for more nuanced focus on addressing the specific obstacles faced by seafarers from different backgrounds and working in different circumstances. The solutions are not necessarily the same for all.

The maritime sector must be ready to compete for skills and human resources. Just as the sector will be vying with other sectors for resources such as sustainable fuels, it will find itself competing in unprecedented ways with other industries to attract the high-tech skill sets that will be needed to operate the vessels of the future.

The sector must rethink how it attracts seafarers. In order to attract and retain the skills that it needs, a new approach is needed to raise awareness of the range of careers that are available in the maritime sector. This will include finding new ways to inspire a more diverse range of young people with a vision of what a rewarding career in modern seafaring could look like.

But first...

Action is needed to make maritime careers genuinely safe, sustainable and inclusive. Before redoubling efforts to raise the profile of the varied career paths it offers, the maritime sector must take committed action to ensure that it can provide fair working conditions and psychologically safe environments for the seafarers that it seeks to attract.

Taking the action forward: Key ISWAN initiatives in 2024

ISWAN will continue to build on the action points raised during the 2023 seminar through a range of initiatives over the coming year, including:

Fair work

- The launch of a research report carried out in conjunction with Gujarat Maritime University focusing on measures to address fraudulent recruitment fees in India. We will then develop a plan to build on the report’s recommendations to tackle this issue.

Inclusive culture

- The delivery of a sector-wide, collaborative campaign which raises awareness of the challenges faced by women seafarers and educates about the importance of male allyship.
- Building on ISWAN’s 2023 [Personal safety precautions for job-seeking yacht crew](#) resource and associated awareness campaign, which is aiming to empower yacht crew to understand their rights and boundaries, job-hunt more safely, and to increase their access to specialised support.
- The launch of a new Family Outreach Programme (FOP) which will empower seafarers’ family members with tools and resources to support both themselves and their seafarer relative during periods of separation.

Changing technologies – Impact on wellbeing

- The launch of the findings of a survey on the impact of decarbonisation technologies and regulations on seafarers’ wellbeing. We will build on the report’s recommendations to develop good practice guidance about how maritime employers can better support seafarers’ through the transition to zero carbon.

And most crucially:

Amplifying the voices of seafarers

- We will continue to place providing a platform for seafarers’ voices at the heart of our work. We will use what seafarers tell us through our helplines to identify and draw attention to the key challenges that they are facing. We will also make seafarers’ central to our projects, communications and advocacy work.

Sponsors

With grateful thanks to the seminar presenters, panellists and panel hosts for sharing their expertise and insights so generously. Our thanks also to our seminar hosts, the Finnish Seamen's Service, and to all seminar attendees for their engagement and participation.

The seminar would not have been possible without our sponsors:

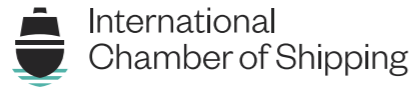
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