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***Focus group with maritime students***  
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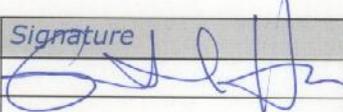


## DOCUMENT STATUS

### Authors

<i>Name</i>	<i>Organisation</i>
Eva Nordström	Swedish Maritime Administration

### Reviewing/Approval of report

<i>Name</i>	<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
Gertrud Hermansen	DaMSA		2010-11-08

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## 1 Introduction

A focus group is a method where a group of persons are asked about their feelings and attitudes towards certain products, services, ideas or concepts. It's a common tool for feedback in marketing and also serves as a method of research when it comes to values and thoughts.

In order to capture the image and level of attractiveness of shipping and maritime business as a career track, we invited students at Chalmers University of Technology to take part in a discussion and film production. The students all aimed for a career at sea and thus, discussions are very focused at onboard employment.

A general invitation was published online at the Facebook group "Futurecrew" and posters were put up at the school. Recruitment to the focus group was also done in cooperation with representative of the students' recruitment organization "Radar". About 20 people registered for participation, but most of them declined in the last minute, as the event accidentally collided with a student sports event.

Still, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April six (four women and two men) maritime students gathered to the focus group which was moderated by Eva Nordstrom from the Swedish Maritime Administration. A film team was in place, too. The original intent to carry out the discussion in English had to be changed, as participants considered the language change as a barrier to comfortably speak their mind. In order to minimize the final cutting of the film, moderation didn't take place during the discussion. Ahead of the actual filming, topics were introduced and specific questions were written on a whiteboard, to serve as guidelines.

The scope of the focus group was to cover four topics; 1) what makes an employer attractive to young potentials, 2) whether these students see a life time career within the maritime sector, 3) to explore how the students plan to combine a career at sea with family life and personal interest and finally, 4) participants were asked to read the outcome of the "Young seafarer's focus group 2009" arranged by INTERTANKO and ITF and comment on it.

A film clip with English subtitles has been produced on each topic and they are all published on the project website. Another series of films (6) presents each participant in the group as they make a short introduction and comment on something they find important. All these film clips can very well serve as promotion material and are of course free for use. The film clips will also be available on YouTube.

## 2 Discussions

This is a summary of what was said and the report is complementary to the film clips. Our intent is to sum up a general view.

### 2.1 *What makes an employer attractive?*

When putting a crew together, it's important to have the right person in the right place. People should not be considered as building blocks that are always exchangeable. A proper introduction, a description of the position onboard and moderate expectations are important.

When you spend six out of twelve months onboard, is there any reason why it shouldn't be as good as being home?

A shipping company can profile itself as an employer in order to stand out as attractive; by offering internet service, physical training onboard and good succession systems. It's the actual ship and the conditions onboard that matter, not so much the general company image. Big and well known is not automatically good. But if the new employee feels welcome, appreciated and has a saying about the work, it's considered attractive.

If you have a family at home, access to the internet and a webcam is a must. A company that understands the value of having the family members – and especially the children – onboard for a shorter trip is highly appreciated.

Besides communication possibilities, which are ranked very high by all participants, they also think it's important for the company HR staff to be familiar with the ship and the crew. The "family onboard" must function well as a team. And the team should be reflecting society with a multitude of gender and culture.

Sometimes there are conflicts between the older, experienced members of the crew and the young and inexperienced. There is a general concern that older officers don't have the possibilities to develop. How do they get new input and further education? Why are some of them so conservative and resistant to new findings?

The possibility of a leave ashore when calling at ports makes the work place more attractive. The crew must be able to feel this is ok by the company, but the onboard culture must also be permissive. But sometimes, in the end it's up to each individual to make such priorities. The shipping company Wallenius was mentioned as a role model, arranging study visits at the manufacturing plants for the crew onboard the calling ship.

The group thinks unanimously that it's important that they themselves serve as good role models and speak well of the maritime business. They suggest more information about maritime careers to young students and points out the importance of describing maritime careers ashore.

Are there any specific Swedish values when it comes to this topic? The group agrees that perhaps it would be the perception that we are superior to many others and that Swedish maritime education is world leading. "We tend to forget the international outlook and make comparisons."

## **2.2 Do you see a lifetime career within the maritime sector?**

For some people, working at sea is a lifetime choice, but recent statistics in Sweden show that the average time spent in onboard positions is decreasing. For young potentials it seems "the moment of truth" is once you become a parent. Is it possible to combine working at sea with a family life? Going ashore or working on a ferry seemed to be the immediate solution to most group members.

Future engine officer Sandra is the only parent in the group. She claims this is matter of personality, not the situation itself and says she has more time to be the kind of mother everyone wants to be during her long leaves. "I will have all the time in the world to engage in my children and their activities when I'm not working" she says. "I don't know if I can ever get used to missing home and it's always worst the first day, but I think that kids learn to cope with it."

What about other students with manager ambitions? Do they think they will work from nine to five and pick up their kids after school every day? Christoffer reminds us that there are sacrifices aligned to most advanced careers.

If you want to quit your career at sea and find employment ashore, it's not evident what kind of job opportunities you have as a deck officer. Go to sea and work ashore, it just doesn't make sense. It was not clear to anybody in the group where to turn for a career change.

The maritime business is very male dominated and one would think young women were hesitant about such careers. But the maritime academies see an increase in the number of female applicants. The young women in the group say they are pretty tired of the debate and do not want any special treatment. The right person is more important than the "right" sex and all it takes in order to decrease the gender imbalance in the future is "a little adjustment in the working conditions and a little adjustment in your personal attitude."

## **2.3 The life puzzle**

Are there any differences between men and women when it comes to combining work at sea with a relationship, family life and a rewarding social life? Do young potentials in Sweden stick out in comparison with other nationalities? It's striking how important parenthood is in the group.

- I think I will spend my whole working life onboard, says Joel. But then again, how do I know what it will feel like to have a baby?

He shares the story of a colleague whose wife had their baby while he was onboard, shaking his head at the fact he wasn't at her side when it happened.

- It's not only about family, says Michaela. It seems everything funny and important in your life always take place when you are at sea. You miss out on weddings, birthdays and holidays and then, when you're home for six weeks in the middle of the winter, there is nothing going on!

## 2.4 Comparison with IMO focus group

In April 2009, twenty young seafarers (17 men and 3 women) met in London and discussed current issues related to maritime sector (Young Seafarers' s Focus Group, 2009). The main issues of concern were listed by the group:

- **Job security and employment conditions**  
Nine months contracts are too long; ratio to time ashore important (8 weeks on/8 weeks off is OK). The currency fluctuation can cause difficulties for seafarers and it's better to be paid every month to enable mortgage loans etc. It's good when companies provide personal loans for employees. Companies should pay for repatriation to home port for ratings as well as officers.
- **ISPS**  
Seafarers are treated like terrorists or criminal suspects; all pain, no positives –all burden on the seafarer. There is a conflict between safety and security and not enough people to cover watches. Shore leave is denied many times –is it a right or privilege? Port State requirements are not practical or reasonable and there is no standard practice-sometimes you need passport, sometimes not. Some standards are not applied in terminals as on ship. Excessive cost of transit in ports/escorts and exacerbated issues of criminalization against some nationalities
- **Shore leave**  
It was noted that seafarers of certain nationalities experience denial of shore leave more often than others.
- **Criminalization**  
Seafarers fear of being blamed for environmental accidents and security regimes make seafarers feel like criminals.
- **Manning vs workload**  
Constant influx of new requirements alongside existing requirements, it's virtually impossible to relax and go ashore. There is a problem of fatigue and additional work should be proportionate to number of crew.
- **Piracy**  
Seafarers need more reassurance that companies will support seafarers and ensure releasing if taken hostage. Compensation? Danger money? Official military support on board? Rerouting to avoid pirate infested areas should be supported.
- **Living conditions & communication with home**  
Quality of life on board is adversely affected by poor standards of accommodation and recreational facilities. Single cabins are important. There is a problem with lack of adequate contact with family, seafarers need better access to internet (private life but also distance learning). Sometimes there are inadequate allowances for food.
- **Amount of paperwork on board**  
The ISM Code is too open for interpretation and there is no consistency between companies. Information is often duplicated and there is too much to deal with on board. Since there is not enough time and manpower, there is need for a secretary on board. Seafarers are responsible for themselves and their own work as well as paperwork & onboard training for others. There is also a sense that companies are covering their backs; a blame culture.
- **Training issues**  
Computer based training on-board is mandatory for promotion but there is not enough time to fit this in with duties. It would be better to do training ashore. Additional courses

required by charter party sometimes have to be paid for by individuals (company won't). Depending on company, sometimes the costs for licenses is passed on to seafarers. Many need training on seafarers' rights.

- **Image of the industry**

There is either a lack of knowledge amongst the public about the industry or old-fashioned, outdated idea of seafaring. Airline pilots are portrayed as heroes, seafarers like criminals.

The EfficienSea focus group was asked to study the IMO report and comment on it. In general, they agreed about the issues of concern but pointed out that working conditions vary a lot. For example, in Sweden a normal working period onboard is only four to six weeks. It seems the common understanding is that seafarers earn big money. In defense of high salaries, the group asked if there was a price to everything you miss while you are away.

Not having a lot of international experience, from a Swedish young potential or student's point of view, there are still some issues of concern:

- You need to know when you can be relieved from duty
- It's important to be able to go ashore in ports
- Security drills must be taken seriously
- A minimum crew onboard is not beneficial in the long run
- It should be part of the job to supervise cadets
- Management training is important, even after graduation
- Maritime programmes will benefit from courses in pedagogy
- Everyone can benefit from having cadets onboard, older crew members too