



Seafarers Happiness Index

Quarter 4 / 2019



The
Seafarers
Happiness
Index

IN ASSOCIATION WITH



SHIPOWNERS

SECURITY FOR SMALL & SPECIALIST VESSELS

Seafarers Happiness Index Quarter 4

There is much noise which surrounds and even masks how seafarers actually feel about the challenges facing them at sea. The Seafarers Happiness Index (SHI) from the Mission to Seafarers exists to provide an ongoing study into how people at sea feel about a range of key areas.

The platform is a vital tool in measuring how happy people are about the various elements of their working life, providing a picture of the real successes but also highlighting problems within seafaring, delivering opportunities to improve and develop.

The Index is made up of a standard set of ten questions and these cover key areas, such as mental and physical health, diet, rest, workload, connectivity, training, access to shore leave, as well as relationships at home and onboard. These are answered anonymously, and seafarers are encouraged to complete their answers during each trip.

By sharing their feelings on a scale out of ten, and by providing some written insight, the Index gives a voice to seafarers and addresses the fundamentals of why people are happy to go to sea, or not as the case may be.

General happiness levels have fallen this quarter almost universally across all questions, with only the issue of connectivity seeing a rise in the figures. Aside from the data, we once again received compelling and fascinating insights into life at sea. Seafarers did not hold back with their opinions and set out the things about seafaring which are good, bad and very ugly indeed.

Every quarter, seafarers provide their input and insight – so we would encourage people at some point during each trip to sea to just take a few minutes to share their thoughts. The Seafarers Happiness Index can be completed at www.happyatsea.org

So please, whether you are a seafarer or whether you work with seafarers – we need to hear the real-life tales onboard ships today. We urge you to complete the index on every trip to sea, that way we can build data and weave together the stories of what is truly being experienced during life at sea.

Executive Summary

Overall Seafarer Happiness has fallen almost across the board this Quarter – down to **6.13/10** from **6.59**. The one area of positivity was the perennial issue of connectivity and crews felt that they were seeing an improvement in the services being offered to them. This is positive news, and in other optimistic responses we heard of the pride seafarers feel in providing for their families, as well as the impact that training can make on career development and progression.

However, there were some rather worrying problems highlighted this time around.

It is saddening to report that based on the seafarer statements received, it seems that there is a growing problem of racism at sea. Not only was it an issue for a number of seafarers who anonymously shared their experiences with us, but the problem was compounded by the fact that not only had they been subjected to racism, they said they felt powerless in dealing with it.

There is a seeming lack of faith in the system to report those who bullied, abused or attacked them. This is in keeping with the issue of sexism we have heard about in earlier reports. Company procedures, it seems, may be failing those who are most vulnerable while supporting those who cause problems for those they work with.

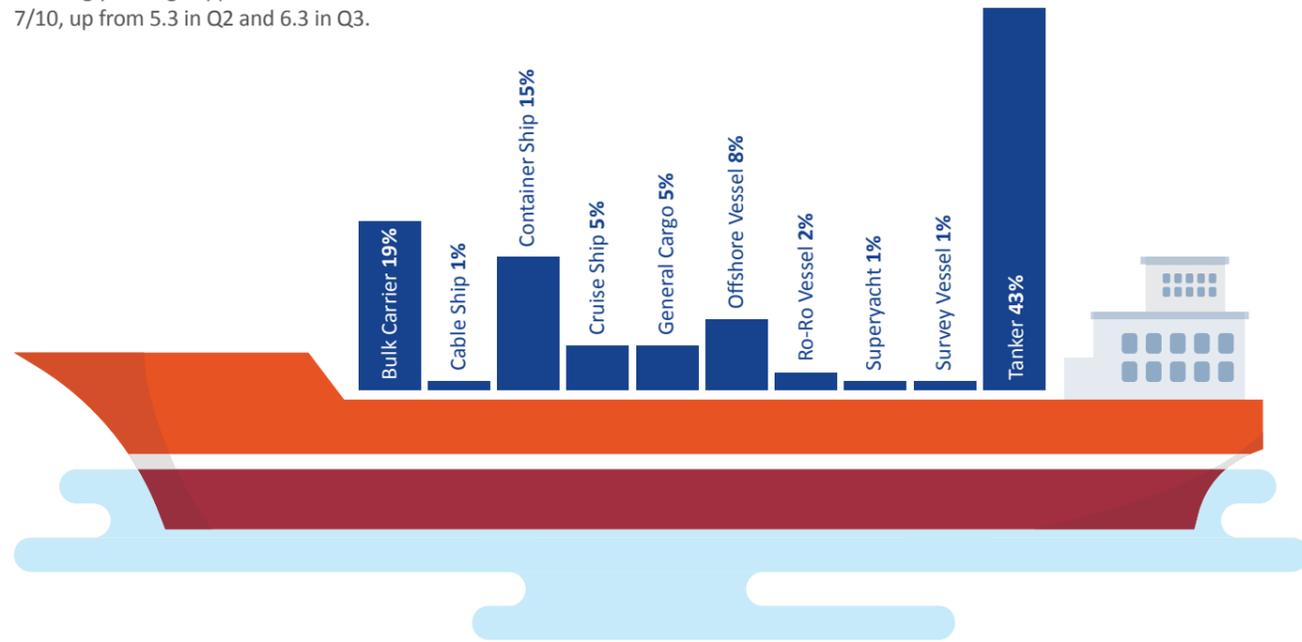
The number of seafarers sharing their thoughts has remained fairly steady. Across our website, enhanced survey function, social media channels, and by those visiting our seafarer centres globally, we received comments and input from just over 2000 seafarers. We thank them all for sharing, as this is extremely valuable. As ever, this report is our way of repaying that investment of time and effort, and we hope we can continue to make life better for seafarers, and to make their time at sea happier.

SHIP TYPE

The highest number of respondents served on tankers, though bulk carriers and container ships continued to provide a steady flow of responses too. We also heard from more specialised vessels, such as offshore, dredgers, superyachts and cruise ships.

Elsewhere dredger crews appear to be fairly happy at 7.57, and rather surprisingly those serving on offshore vessels have seen a rise too, up to 7.36. While we did not receive many responses from superyacht crews, those we did hear from were extremely satisfied with their lot with a rather remarkable average of 9.5/10 on their general happiness levels. We will monitor to see if this becomes a trend or is merely a happy blip.

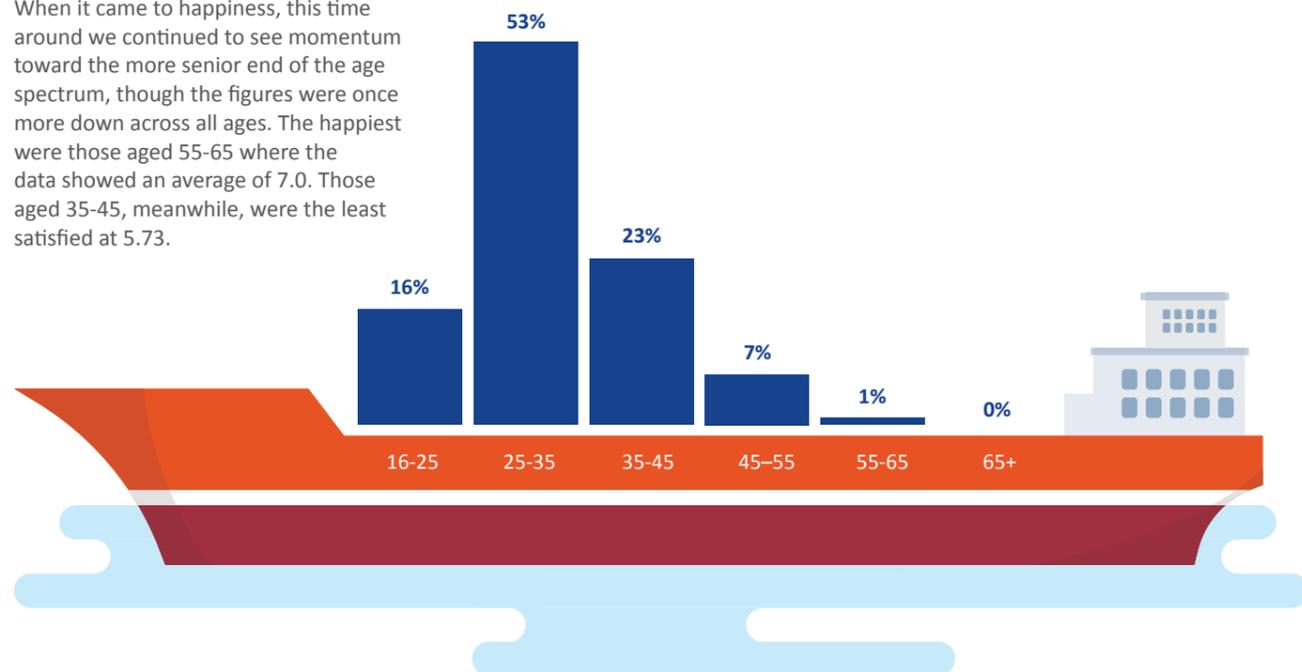
The most satisfied of the large-scale respondents were crews onboard container ships, on average they sat at 6.23/10, followed closely by tankers at 6.03, while bulk carriers experienced a drop down to 5.65. It was pleasing to see that cruise crews were seemingly feeling happier this time around. Their numbers rose to 7/10, up from 5.3 in Q2 and 6.3 in Q3.



AGE RANGE

Once more, the 25-35 age range were the best represented – they made up a large majority of the responses.

When it came to happiness, this time around we continued to see momentum toward the more senior end of the age spectrum, though the figures were once more down across all ages. The happiest were those aged 55-65 where the data showed an average of 7.0. Those aged 35-45, meanwhile, were the least satisfied at 5.73.

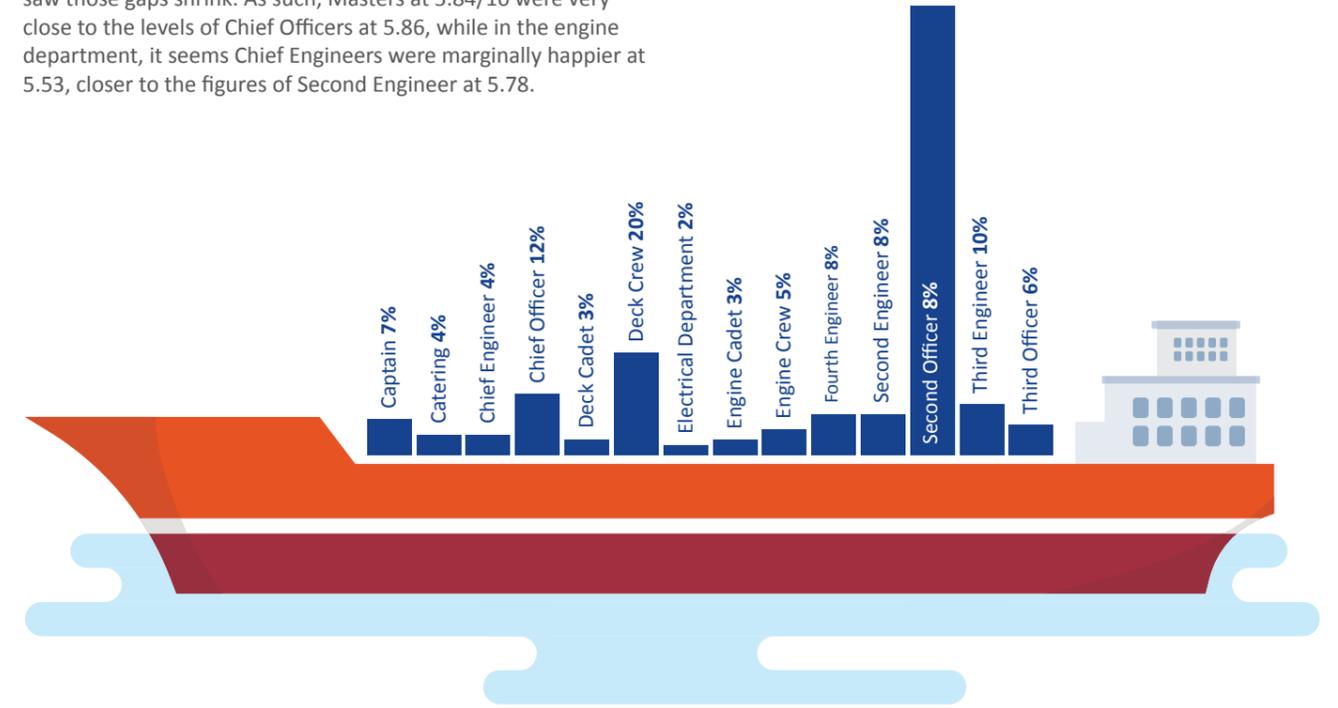


RANK

Once more, we saw a fairly even spread of seafarers across all ranks and departments. Again, that seems to be a reflection of our outreach through certain dedicated social media platforms and influencers.

We have grown used to Deck crew usually being a fairly satisfied lot, but as the respondent numbers have grown it seems the levels at 6.5/10 have fallen behind those of the Engine crew who reported a significant rise to 7.6.

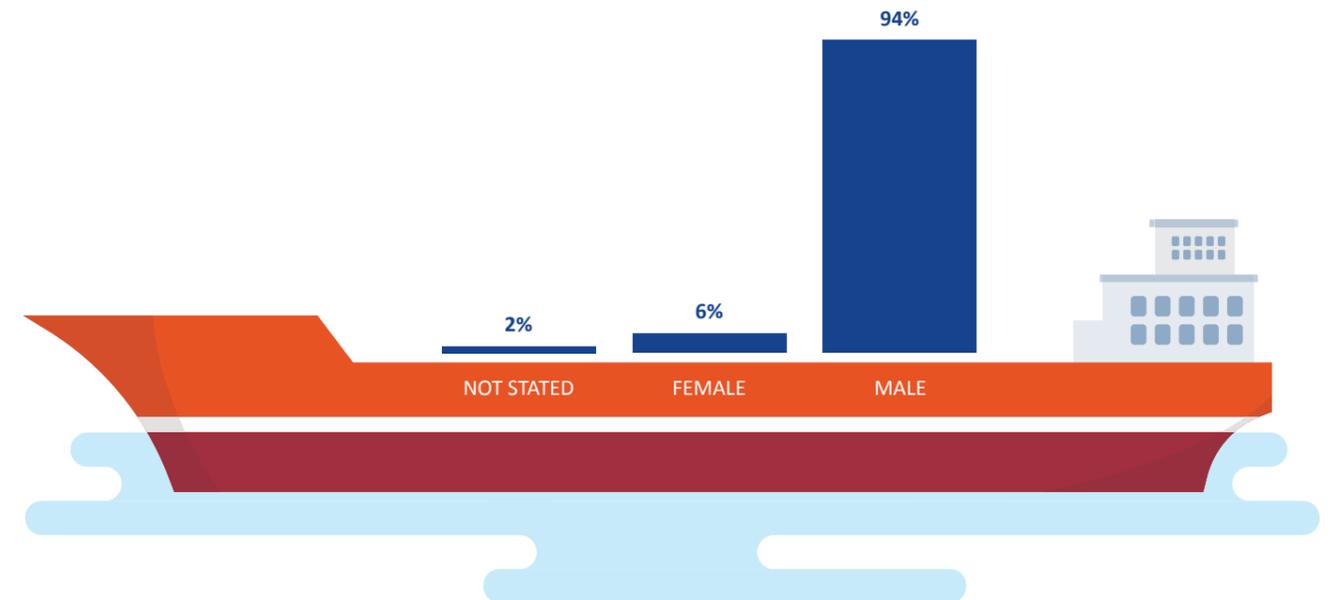
It had been the norm in past reports for senior staff to be far less happy than their immediate juniors, but this Quarter we saw those gaps shrink. As such, Masters at 5.84/10 were very close to the levels of Chief Officers at 5.86, while in the engine department, it seems Chief Engineers were marginally happier at 5.53, closer to the figures of Second Engineer at 5.78.



GENDER BALANCE

Sadly we have continued to struggle with the number of female seafarers completing the Seafarers Happiness Index. Once again the spread of genders in the responses was woeful. Over 96% of respondents were male, and it shows that we need to find ways of better engaging with female seafarers. Across past reports we have tended to see the female responses higher than their

male counterparts. Alas, this time round that trend faltered. Female seafarers reported their levels to be 5.85/10, while males were at 6.20. The seafarers who preferred not to disclose their gender were at 5.14, which again is far lower than we have seen previously.



How happy generally when at sea?

6.17 ↓ from 6.37

There was a small dip in overall happiness levels this quarter, which was perhaps to be expected as the lead up to the holiday season tends to take its toll emotionally for seafarers. The prospect of being away from home during key family times is something that was mentioned by respondents.

Those seafarers who were happiest spoke of the importance of their role as provider for their family, especially in giving their children a future and providing the best education and foundation they can. There is a sense of sacrifice in being away, but where that translates into positives at home, then seafarers are happy to do whatever they feel is best for their family.

This is where the issue of abandonment or non-payment of wages is so damaging to seafarers. The question of payments for illness or injury was also a concern. In a profession where so much focus is about sacrifice for family at home, where there are concerns or questions about getting paid, or of “what if something happens to me then who will take care of my kids and wife”, then seafarers get very concerned indeed.

It was troubling to note that a number of respondents said they had experienced racism at sea, and that this was impacting their job satisfaction and wellbeing. There were indications that this is a problem on the rise. This is clearly something which needs to be dealt with and eradicated.

The fact that life at sea changes was also stressed by respondents. Changes to the environment, whether that be port calls, busy shipping lanes, different cargoes or weather can have a significant impact on the quality of life onboard. Where there are shifts in the operating condition of the vessel, then the impact on crews does need to be better considered and managed.

How happy with your work load?

5.59 ↓ from 6.16

The issue of workload is one which has historically been a contentious one for seafarers, and this quarter saw a fall in the happiness level. Across past Seafarers Happiness Index reports, the problems of heavy workload, poor management, lack of resources, inadequate support and the demands of external agencies have all come to light. This time around was no different.

The requirement for crews, ships and companies to meet vetting standards was criticised repeatedly. One seafarer stated, “A lot of my workload is time consuming fulfilling the requirements of vetting and does not contribute to the vessels operation. It will never be looked at by anyone other than myself”. This was mirrored in many responses. While the checks to ensure standards and compliance are important, if they are making seafarers stressed then it seems the system is somehow compromised.

Administrative duties can even seemingly impact safety. A deck officer commented, “More pressure to carry out admin during bridge watchkeeping.” There is something very wrong with systems which are supposed to enhance safety but then place undue pressure and distract seafarers from their primary tasks.

It seems time for a rethink and revisit of how companies adhere to the demands of clients, and indeed of their own safety and quality management systems. The documents, checklists and requirements may well be completed or filled in, but there seems to be no parallel check of their impact on crew. One comment was that “shipping is tricking itself if it thinks being safe on paper makes it safer on the water”.

Continuous pressure about inspections and audits, in addition to the overload of checklists and paperwork, makes the job tough and harder than it needs to be. Technology was meant to be easing this burden, but there is little or no indication that this is the case.

How happy about the training you receive?

6.38 ↓ from 6.91

Maritime training is an area where there often seems to be very little middle ground. Seafarers who respond are usually either very pleased with the training and the opportunities they receive, or they are very dissatisfied.

This time round was no different. There were many respondents who were extremely pleased that their companies supported them and they felt in-house and external training was a hugely positive experience, giving them the skill and knowledge to improve and advance their careers.

Sadly, this was not a view or experience shared by all. One seafarer reported computer-based training (CBT) as a “waste of time”, and saw many courses as simply “a tickbox service for shipping companies”.

Those who experience good training also seem to be granted the opportunity to use it so the time, effort, perhaps even expense of training is then reflected positively as they are

able to gain promotions or new roles. For those who have a negative view, it seems that they invest the effort, but then the deliverables from that training translate into nothing more than wasted time and/or money.

Success when it comes to training seems to rest on a threefold approach, providing good quality, engaging and relevant courses, in a way which minimises the impact on a seafarers’ time, and which comes with some value at the end of the process.

Seafarers are very happy to learn, but they do not want it to be boring or feel irrelevant, to eat into their rest time at sea or their leave at home, and they want it to mean something. They want to feel better at their job, and able to climb the career ladder as a result.

How happy about interaction with other crew on board? 6.67 ↓ from 7.28

Despite the many challenges, problems and issues associated with being a seafarer today, there has always been one aspect of life at sea which has seemingly been positive – that of interaction between crew. This is in fact one of the only times that the happiness level for this question has seen a fall.

Seafarers have spoken at length of the positives of good relationships onboard, of the camaraderie, friendships and mentoring which come from being able to work within a cohesive, engaged social unit.

Where there are friendships, there is happiness. Where there is the space and time to engage, where there are shared activities and some enjoyment, then friendships will flourish. Take those opportunities away, then we see isolation, loneliness and the degradation of crew wellbeing.

As we have heard before, everything is good when the crew all feel a sense of shared endeavour and the ability to relax and have time for themselves collectively. Some likened the social aspects onboard to an engine – they said it takes maintenance and looking after to ensure all parts work well together. It was stated that if companies paid as much attention to the upkeep of relationships onboard as they do to planned maintenance of equipment, then the results would be far better.

The fact that this Quarter saw a drop in score for crew interaction was a cause for concern, and there were a number of negatives voiced by crew. The issue of racism was raised, not only the fact that it exists, which is troubling enough, but also that seafarers who suffer do not feel they have anywhere to formally complain or ask for assistance. Often, they do not feel able to raise the issue onboard, for fear of exacerbating the problem, while even complaining to the company is often not an attractive option. There were calls by some respondents for an independent complaint line or procedure, something which perhaps the industry should explore.

How happy about access to shore leave? 5.59 ↓ from 6.16

As anyone who has read previous Seafarers Happiness Index reports will be aware, the issue of shore leave and of getting time away from the vessel is one which has proven particularly problematic. This time around is no different, and the figures have taken a considerable fall.

Put very simply, seafarers are not happy with the barriers they face when trying to have much-needed and deserved time away from the vessel. From the demands of work in port, to costs and immigration hurdles, through to the fact that they often feel too fatigued to even face leaving the ship, the problems are many. Despite new rules that ports are meant to abide by, it seems to be no easier to get ashore.

The reasons for wanting to get away from the vessel were laid out by a number of respondents. As one put it, “Shore leave is always a stress buster”, but they added that it is so hard to get “good shore leave”, owing to terminal restrictions, additional surveys and inspections, as well as fears over alcohol policies – all have eroded the time-honoured practice.

While no-one would condone “enjoying” time ashore so much that a seafarer would be in breach of drug and alcohol policies, crew members need to be able to relax and recuperate.

Once again, the phrase used was that shore leave is “dead”. Perhaps we need to rethink an alternative. It is clear that seafarers do need a release from the pressures they face, and if that is not ashore, then what and how?

How happy about wages/salary? 6.09 ↓ from 6.57

There are a range of factors which make seafaring an attractive career option, but we cannot ignore the importance of money. A number of respondents highlighted the concerns they have over the wages they receive.

Whether stagnation, exchange fluctuations or rising costs and taxation at home, seafarers repeatedly stated that their wages seemed to be falling in real terms.

The issue of exchange rates was also raised in relation to the fees charged by some manning agents. Seafarers from nations which are required to submit remittances back home are often hit by dubious charges and confusing exchange rates, which impacts the money they are able to provide to their families.

As highlighted in the section on general happiness at sea, seafarers feel an immense sense of pride that they are able to provide for their families. They work tirelessly in very challenging conditions to ensure their families have all they need, from homes, to food and education. It is often the case that a seafarer’s focus is very often about home, and of what they are doing for their family.

Wages can therefore impact hugely on overall happiness and, unfortunately, the pressures on seafarers only intensify when they feel they are being undervalued or not rewarded.

For the seafarers who feel happy with their wages, they reported a sense that when they get paid, all the memories of “hardships” disappear, and they can focus on the good that their money brings back home. Meanwhile, when there are problems, they often revolve around an erosion of wage levels.

How happy about the food on board? 6.23 ↓ from 6.77

This question saw a fall in satisfaction level, as crew talked of a range of issues which affected the quality of the catering and the standards of the food they receive onboard.

The most repeated issue related to the budget allocated for crew. Different figures were quoted, but the least satisfied said that their vessels were only budgeting around US\$7 per day. It seems obvious, but bears repeating, that where the spend is low the quality of the food served to crew is reduced.

There is also often the problem of nationals of one country trying to provide for nationals of another and a number of respondents felt that their meals were inappropriate. This appears to be a matter of training. It would be unfair to expect any cook to be proficient in foreign foods without ensuring they have been trained and given the chance to prepare. Ingredients are also important, as well as the understanding of what to do with them.

Seafarers also spoke of a starch and meat heavy diet. They claimed that they often felt lethargic after meals, and that the quality of the food did not usually match what they would eat or prepare back at home.

How happy about your ability to keep fit and healthy on board? 6.41 ↓ from 6.84

By far the happiest respondents were those who were encouraged and allowed to take part in physical activities or sports onboard. Those who were playing basketball regularly, or even table tennis, reported far higher happiness levels than those who did not have access or time to exercise.

The use of fitness equipment and playing sports is an important part of any wellbeing regime and has the added benefit of boosting social aspects of life onboard too. A gym or sports area is a great place for crew to spend some time, to either engage in activities which allow them to focus on non-ship related matters, or to have time with crewmates and a chance to talk.

Seafarers recognise the benefits of exercise, and there is little doubt that most want the opportunity to keep fit. Some respondents were frustrated that the wider industry spent time stressing the importance of exercise rather than ensuring that companies actually provide the means to partake in it.

Time, space, encouragement and ability to keep fit and healthy are vital to making life better at sea. This comes across loud and clear in the Happiness Index responses. Crew are unequivocal about the benefits and importance of sports and exercise equipment, and of having the time to use it.

How happy with welfare facilities when you are ashore? 5.28 ↓ from 6.05

Satisfaction with welfare facilities ashore saw a significant drop this quarter. However, a closer look at the responses shows that seafarers are not necessarily unhappy with the services, but rather the data reflects the frustration at not being able to get physically ashore. Unfortunately, limited shore leave strongly impacts on the views and attitudes of seafarers when it comes to welfare facilities.

Where and when seafarers do get to centres or facilities, the vast majority are highly complimentary about the people they meet, the services on offer and the provisions for them. Time and again, seafarers praised the staff and volunteers who greeted them all over the world.

The problems come where there is dissatisfaction with access. Whether there is some confusion, or a lack of awareness, this is something which needs to be examined further.

Thanks in no small part to various port welfare committees, most stakeholders local to ports and seafarer centres are well versed in what is on offer. So, it is hoped that port and terminal operators and agents can communicate clearly where crew can access facilities and how to get to them.

How happy about contact with family when at sea? 6.96 ↑ from 6.82

Rather surprisingly, the only question to show an upward trend in the data was that relating to connectivity, usually an area of dissatisfaction for seafarers.

Seafarers who commented said that “communication facilities have greatly improved over time”, though this was tempered with the view that there is still huge scope for improvement.

As one respondent put it, “companies should realise that people are at peace when they are in regular touch with their families. A happy ship is a safe ship!” The data once more bore testament to the fact that those crew who have quality, low cost access to the internet and good communication with their families are far happier than those who do not.

Furthermore, it seems that although crew are willing and able to accept that life at sea comes with certain issues attached, they are increasingly not willing to put up with a lack of connectivity.

There is a growing sense of dissatisfaction where access is denied, is slow, or is too expensive, and Masters and companies who are seen to be profiteering from charging for access come in for particularly heavy criticism.

Seafarers see connectivity as a “necessity”. It was also suggested that when access improves, seafarers will be less likely to leave their careers at sea. Whether that is the case remains to be seen, but it seems that there is a simple answer to any downturn in recruitment and retention.

Where

The majority of seafarer respondents were once again from the Indian Subcontinent, with South East Asia the next best representation. Indian seafarers scored a below general average score of 6.26/10, which was an increase from the last report. South East Asian seafarers, meanwhile, performed similarly with an average of 6.2.

The happiest seafarers this time were from Africa, with an average overall happiness level of 7.09. Elsewhere the results showed a drop from previous high water marks. The happiness of Eastern Europeans continued its downward trend and they were again lower than all the others, registering just 5.6. Their Western European counterparts saw happiness continue to drop too, but not as dramatically, with a fairly average result of 6.38.



- Africa **2%**
- Central America **2%**
- Eastern Europe **11%**
- Indian Subcontinent **38%**
- Middle East **1%**
- North America **1%**
- North Asia **4%**
- Oceania **1%**
- South America **1%**
- South East Asia **31%**
- Western Europe **8%**

Conclusion

Once more 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.

Alas, there was a fall in the overall level of seafarer happiness, which has now slipped down to 6.13/10 from a high of 6.59 in Q3. Analysing the data and assessing the returns, we saw consistent drops across all questions, with only connectivity proving a surprise riser. As ever, it was the seafarers who shared their experiences who have helped to paint the real image of life at sea today.

Despite a slide in the figures, there were still some positives to emerge. According to the data, the happiest seafarers were those on container vessels, aged between 25-35, from Africa and serving as engine crew.

One of the most notable positives related to the pride seafarers feel when providing for their families and communities. The happiest seafarers spoke of the importance of their role as provider for their family, especially in giving their children a future and providing the best education and standard of living they can. There is a sense of sacrifice, but where that translates into positives at home, seafarers are happy to do whatever they feel is best for their families. There were, however, some concerns about the payment of wages back to their families, which is a problem for many seafarers.

There were worries about family too. These related to the issue of what happens in the event of illness or injury. There seemed to be a lack of confidence that employers would look after dependences in the event of something bad happening at sea.

With regards to training and education, there were many respondents who reported how pleased they are that their companies support them to learn and develop their skills. Whether in-house or external, they felt training brought a positive experience which went a long way to improving and advancing their careers.

The other most telling positive reported was something of a surprise, as the issue of connectivity is an area which seafarers have traditionally voiced their dissatisfaction and frustration for. This time though, seafarers reported improvements and there was a sense that the industry is waking up to the importance of providing good internet access for crews, although there is of course still huge scope for further progress.

The data clearly demonstrated that crews who have good quality, low cost access to the internet and good communication with their families are far happier than those who do not. Indeed, there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction where access is denied, is slow, or is too expensive, and real anger directed towards masters and companies who are seen to be profiteering from charging for access.

While it is great to hear of the pride in providing for others, the pleasure that good connectivity can bring, and the positivity felt about career development and training, there were some negatives voiced too.

Perhaps the most troubling element of the Seafarers Happiness Index in this Quarter was the reported racism experienced onboard. There were indications that this is a problem on the rise and seafarers felt that there was nowhere to turn when they faced such abuse. There were calls by some respondents for an independent complaint line or procedure, something perhaps the industry should explore.

Seafarers also stressed that life at sea is constantly changing, and while conditions onboard may be ok, perhaps even good, it does not take much to tip the balance. They stated that quick rotations of port calls, heavy traffic, demanding cargoes or weather can all have a massive impact on the quality of life onboard.

There was also some frustration about the levels of administration and paperwork that is still expected of crews. As one respondent put it, "shipping is tricking itself if it thinks being safe on paper makes it safer on the water". Systems which are meant to raise standards are seemingly compromised if they are making seafarers more stressed.

The Seafarers Happiness Index also highlighted areas where there are opportunities for improvement, where companies and the wider industry can look for solutions to give crews the facilities, access and services which will make them happier.

These could include changes to the ways in which crew management companies deal with remittances. Numerous seafarers stated that their remittances which are sent back to their families often appear to have been "unfairly" tapped at source with either brokerage fees or questionable exchange rates applied. Given that there is so much pride in the role of seafarers as providers back home, this impacts not only individuals, but the profession itself.

Other improvements would be to ensure that better quality food is purchased, and to ensure that ships have some form of social interaction onboard such as sports.

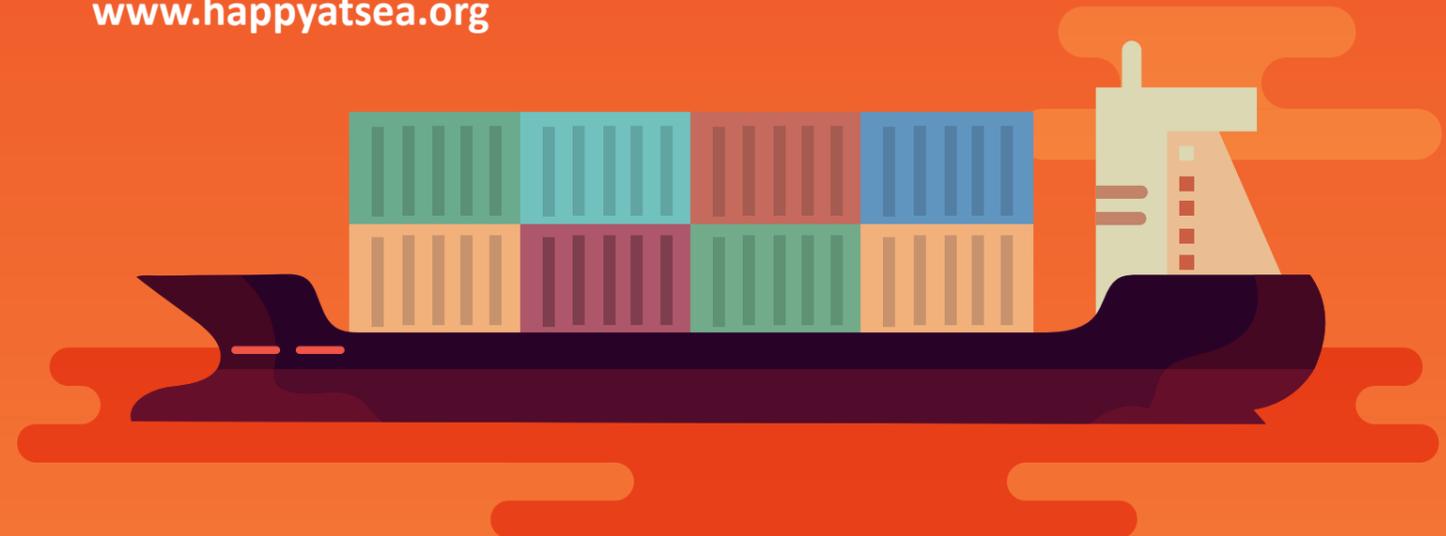
We always need more data, and to hear the stories of more seafarers...and for those who have already done so, to share again. We are building new online capabilities and applications to process the data, and to make sure the voices at sea are heard. So please visit www.happyatsea.org to find out more, and to complete the survey. We also want to get these reports spread far and wide across shipping, so please do share these findings. We must also thank the companies which have approached us about setting up bespoke happiness surveys for their own fleets, and those who see the value in benchmarking their own performance against the wider population of seafarers.

What makes your crew happy at sea?

The Mission to Seafarers is now able to run bespoke Happiness Surveys for your crew, so you can benchmark your quality of care against the international survey.

If you're interested in finding out more, contact ben.bailey@missiontoseafarers.org

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