

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MULTINATIONAL CREW IN THE CADETS' PRACTICE

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### ABSTRACT

For today moment, the shipping industry is a multinational one. All the activities in this industry are based on interaction and collaboration between people from different counties and cultures. In an international company, these details are common, due to company necessity in having offices placed in different countries according to the business interests. But these aspects become more complex when we refer to onboard ship activities. For this reason, it is necessary to observe and study the kind of compatibilities or non-compatibilities that exist among seamen from different countries in order to create a proper working environment onboard the ship.

The present paper intends to illustrate different elements encountered in the human resource management and their appliance in a multinational crew situation, to see how is to work inside of a multicultural crew as cadets or younger officer, through experiences of our university students during their onboard practice on different ships with different nationality crew members.

**Keywords:** *Cadets' practice, shipping industry, multinational company, multinational crew*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Starting from the 90's, the concept of single nation crew had become less met on the world level. This situation was caused by the transfer of the ships from the public sector to the private one, especially in the eastern European countries and along with the ship flag changing under a more permissive one. These changes accelerated the implementation of the multinational crew onboard ships, the new owners wanted to put their own people in the ship's management positions covering the rest of the onboard positions with the possible cheapest hand work.

The new conditions do not represent a problem if the crew is prepared to face this change. Put in front of a new working environment, many seafarers had accommodation problems, difficulties in working relationships onboard and the biggest problem was generated by the use of a foreign language, mostly English, in the daily duties communication. Many of these first unpleasant conditions have been covered by the option of a most attractive payment, the salary onboard of these ships being higher than for the same position onboard of a national flag ship. It was necessary a long period to accommodate seafarers to the present situation, but it was usefully, because the crew was familiarized with the ships and for the beginning they represented the basement of the safety crew. In time, the contact with other nationalities crew members permitted the knowledge transfer and option to replace them.

Beside these problems of nationality, culture and language differences, another problem that can exist onboard is raised by age differences between crew members, in many cases younger persons have to coordinate and control older and more experienced crew members, situations generated by position and rank. These problems are bigger when we talk about a person on first experience onboard ship and particular in a multinational and multicultural crew.

Due to these facts, it was compulsory for the maritime training institutions to reflect and change the

training concepts in order to facilitate the accommodation inside of a multinational crew, mainly onboard ships with a various cultures crew. One of the solutions proposed included the possibility to cover the requested onboard practice to foreign or multinational shipping companies.

Trying to find how cadets and younger officers have felt their first contact with the actual onboard environment, a multicultural one, a group of lecturers from our University realized a study about, using for this reason the experiences of our students during their onboard practice.

### 2. A MULTINATIONAL CREW – BETWEEN CONCEPT AND REALITY

The multinational crew appeared on the shipping market as result of different economical reasons. First of all is the necessity to reduce the costs with personnel, but also to keep the requested standards onboard.

In this way, owners changed their crew resource option to work force markets from Asia and Eastern Europe mainly. At beginning, they took position onboard as O/S or A/B in deck compartment and as motormen in engine department, after, the owners started to accept also deck and engine officers, even at managerial level, as Master, Chief Officer and Chief Engine.

The change from the single nation crew to multinational crew has not avoided by problems and difficulties, mostly due to different concepts applied by the owners onboard related to multiculturalism and working relationships. An ideal solution is to have seafarers from the same nationality in one department and if it is possible to assure the operational officers from the same nation. In order to satisfy owner's certitude that everything is alright onboard and his property is used in good condition, the ship management will be cover by owner's people, same nationality with the owner or very confident owner's persons. In present, many companies apply this concept, even better, the onboard ship, the operational is covered by one

nationality crew members and only the ship management is from other, in case of impossibility to be from the same nation.

In addition to different nationalities, multiculturalism can also involve different cultures for the different groups aboard, meaning that the different groups may have different ways of seeing things and different ideas about who is the most important aboard. They might, for example, be the people on the bridge rather than those in the engine room, or the young rather than the older people aboard.

Cultural differences represent the fundamental of communication and involve development of understanding skills among different nationalities. These differences became visible when we were in contact with other nationality persons, a frequent fact onboard of multinational crew ship. People see, interpret and evaluate the things around them in very different ways. What seem to be right in one culture can be, for many times, inappropriate for other culture.

Misunderstandings due to cultural differences appear when a person of a nominated culture wants to impose own point of view to another person, from a different culture and with different principles. Wrong interpretation is the main element arisen when we want to induce to other person our own concepts.

Without a good knowledge of others cultural characteristics, it is preferable to adopt a diplomatic approach for different aspects which keep by a particular culture. To become consciences by the own culture dynamics is a difficult task. From our first life days, we are learned to see and to do some things at an unconscious level. Own experiences, personal values and cultural bases are leading us to do things in a designated way. There are moments when must to pass over our cultural borders to realize the impact of other culture on us. It is very usefully to have answers from different nationalities colleagues and also from different cultures, in order to help us in development the own style regarding to cultural treatment applied to other peoples.

Even cultural similarities can create misunderstandings sometimes. When consider than other persons have a similar culture with ours, we take the risk of wrong interpretation of our actions, with result in a negative reply from the others.

There are many references levels which can help to express the cultural differences perception, as:

- Primary level or parochial, when peoples do not know to do different things other than personal way. At this level the impact of cultural differences is ignored.
- Second level or ethnocentric, peoples accept others thinking way, beside of their own, but still considers own style as the most indicated one. At this level the cultural differences are seen as a source of problems and peoples have tendency to ignore or reduce the importance of these.
- Third level or synergistic, person conscience own thinking way and others thing ways and choose the best solution for the present situation. At this level, peoples realize that cultural differences can lead to problems, also to benefits and they are interests to use the cultural diversity for creation of new and alternative solutions.

- Last level or cultural participation, is the stage when persons from different cultures belong together to create a common thinking culture. At this level peoples talking one each other, creates new understandings, new rules to help in solving of a particular situation.

Increasing of the cultural knowledge means to observe the positive and negative aspects possible to appear inside of cultural differences. The cultural diversity can be a source of problems, especially in the fields where is necessary to collaborate and work together. The diversity increases the complexity and confusion level and make more difficult to reach a common sense.

In order to manage well the cultural differences is important in the first time to know and understand them, not to be afraid of.

So long, each of us is the product of his own culture is necessary to increase the self and collateral knowledge. For this objective there is not a book to treat the cultural differences, not exists written rules to be followed in such kind of situations.

When peoples achieve the necessary cultural knowledge, they realize than:

- we are not the same;
- similarities and differences are both important;
- there are unlimited ways to reach the same goals of living together;
- best solution depend by the particularities, each situation is different and may request different solutions.

A correct approach of the cultural differences can be done through some concepts acceptance, like:

- accept that you don't know
- judge before
- be sure to be understood
- become familiar with ambiguity
- accept diversity.

These are few concepts regarding the correct deal with cultural differences. Not all of these can be applied onboard ships, but ones can provide good results, mainly when make references to an environment which request a very good collaboration and work relation.

In many cases, the cultural differences exist inside of the same nationality and are passed very hardly. When put together more than two nationalities persons, these differences become extremely difficult to be passed and in this situation it is necessary to know to manage them and to try to find a middle way if the best solution cannot be found.

Also, the cultural behaviour is different from person to person and the approach modalities must to be adequate to each person. It is very important to know from the beginning how to deal with these cultural differences, especially if you want to perform a longer carrier inside of a multinational working environment.

### **3. CONSTANTA MARITIME UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ONBOARD PRACTICE**

Until 2004 Constanta Maritime University students' practice has developed onboard of the scholarship

“Neptun”, but due to a lot of engine and hull problems this activity has been suspended.

After the suspension of this activity, the solution found was to send our students in international voyages with different shipping companies, local or international, for this action been contacted the local crewing agencies or owners offices. This was the first step, when over half of our students covered their requested onboard training on ships of different owners, most of them, international shipping companies with a great rename on the world shipping market, as NYK Ship Management, Japan, Peter Dohle from Germany, Maersk, Denmark, CMA-CGM from France and many others, in totally, 22 shipping companies being part of the partnership.

Taking account of the present regulations regarding onboard training period as cadet, 12 months for deck cadet and 6 months for engine cadets, our university took decision to help and facilitate students' onboard practice. In this way, in the present there are agreements signed between shipping companies, their local representatives, and our university, where there are stipulated the requested training objectives, onboard live and work condition and schedule for students and the level of theoretical knowledge necessary to be acquired by our students before to proceed to the onboard practice.

Adopting this solution, in time, the number of the shipping companies interested to take cadets has increased and the number of students trained has also increased. During the year of 2008 through this protocol a number of 555 students covered their onboard practice on ship owned or under management of collaborative shipping companies.

Inside of this protocol, the companies have possibility to offer scholarships to our students during their study years and other facilitations in order to create the own group of future company's officers. In the present, there are ship owners which select students, through tests and interviews, from the first study years and include them inside of the future companies' personnel development program, offering to our students' monthly scholarships, opportunity to cover the necessary onboard cadets' practice and to be sure on the end study, position inside company.

In the same direction, our University, as participant at European Erasmus Programme for the students' mobility, in partnership with European shipping companies, has gotten the possibility to other 182 students to cover their onboard practice, including an Erasmus scholarship as Erasmus students. After the first months of this project development, an increased number of students have became interested in this possibility, the advantage being represented by the cumulative amount between scholarship and cadet monthly payment.

For the future, we are interested to increase the number of partner shipping companies and also to extend the Erasmus programme in order to offer to more students the possibility to have the necessary cadets' period at the end of study years and to make possible participation to officer certification exams after their graduation.

#### **4. STUDENTS' BEHAVIOUR INSIDE OF A MULTINATIONAL CREW**

Starting from the present situation, when the world fleet is based on multinational and multicultural crews, and taking in consideration that our students make their onboard training on ships of international owners, a group of lecturers from our University had the initiative to realize a study about what are the students apprehensions and considerations regarding the first voyage or voyages onboard ships with multinational crews. This initiative has risen after a number of bad feedbacks from students, very disappointed by the first cadet voyage who intended to give up a maritime career after finishing their academic studies.

To do the study, the questionnaire and direct discussions techniques have adopted, involving in this action student from different faculties, in connection with maritime carrier, just arrived home from a cadet voyage.

The questionnaire was based on a set of questions about company where they made the voyage, crew structure by nationalities, social life and working activities onboard, type of relationships developed onboard with the others crew members, what nationalities and cultures they consider to be closer to own culture, if they have difficulties to socialize onboard, how long period consider necessary to achieve skills in order to understand other cultures and what are the opinions about the direction of their future maritime careers.

Analyzing questionnaire answers we were able to open a free discussion with students and to try to find the motivations for different answers. During discussions, the highest difficulty was to made students to speak freely about their experience during onboard stage or stages and to pass over the fact that they talked with a teacher.

The analysis of the answers allowed having a percentage view about students' opinions and the results showed that they are more compatible with the European countries' seafarers, have more possibilities to develop social and work relations with these ones and accept more easily orders and instructions from European officers and Masters. Part of them acknowledged that they interacted without problems with Asian seafarers also. Most difficult was to collaborate with superior officers or nominated onboard training officer when they are from an Asian culture. Some difficulties were noted in relations with the Eastern European officers, but these were produced due to different personal opinions, not professional.

A very important point found in almost all questionnaires studies was about difficulties in communication with other crew members, part because of poor English language knowledge, part because the English was talked with native language spelling influence and many words were difficult to be understood. Starting from the language problems, a part of the students avoided to socialize with some of the crew members and maintained a strictly professional relationship.

Period considered as minimum necessary to accommodate and start to interact with other nationalities crew members onboard has varied from one week to one month, more accessible on ships with a strong cadet training programme developed. Longer has considered being the accommodation period to daily duties and to the training schedule, some students taking the give up decision due to their forbearance about possibility to reach the conditions requested for duty onboard.

Many students had difficult to express an opinion or a point of view about cultural similarities or differences with other nationalities, they did not have enough knowledge about these matters, but talked about what they felt in relation with other nationality crew members considered as to be cultural correspondences or differences. They found many common aspects with persons from all over the world, especially about the free time spending or passions for sport activities and events, about musical preferences and in many cases these common activities represented the starting point in a future personal and friendly relationship. The differences were based, as expected, on religious problems or native social life characteristics, most of them in relation with Asian or African seafarers met onboard.

As a general opinion, the problems arisen from the nationality and cultural differences have considered possible to be passed if there is interest to develop a long and nice career in the maritime industry, especially onboard ships. An interest opinion has obtained from a part of the questioned students, who considered that problems and misunderstandings can appear every time and in every working environment. They acknowledged that the onboard environment is a particular one, with restrictions imposed by the space and activity characteristics, but the attraction for this job, a not easy one, but with many satisfactions, can lead to a personal approach more open to understanding and acceptance of the other nationality cultures and particularities.

On the other way, the students who expressed their option to give up to an onboard career, wants to perform in a relative activity field, where they have possibility to put in practice the knowledge acquired during the study years.

### 5. CONCLUSIONS

We have to accept the presence of a multicultural crew onboard ship. Also, the idea of correspondences and differences among cultures has to be the acceptance and in this direction to know to understand and manage the cultural relations. From the beginning, it is better to understand that differences are more visible than similarities and to try to pass over the first and to reach the seconds. When we talk about multiculturalism, it is important to realize as obviously the differences between concepts and reality and to learn to treat correctly each

culture, as a unique entity, not to apply the same format to all contacted cultures.

The multicultural problems are harder to be managed at the first contact, especially by the younger maritime cadets and officers, persons who can be very affected by difficult relation with other nationality persons. A solution can be represented by the involvement of the training institutions in preparing of the younger cadets for a multicultural work environment. Before their first experience onboard ships, a special training about multicultural concepts and social activities in a multicultural crew can be welcome in order to offer the necessary knowledge about and how to deal with problems coming from cultural differences. For this reason, it is absolutely necessary to know what deficiencies have met the previous students onboard and to create a training programme based on these.

Our University lecturers study represents the starting point for more other studies on the same or additional subjects, offering an image about the actual students' position regarding the training activity onboard of a multinational ship. The present study shows that more than half of students who made their first voyage are not afraid by the idea to work in a multicultural environment, considering more interesting the opportunity to know and interact with other cultures. The students who considered as almost impossible to perform onboard of a multinational ship, took into consideration the capacity to work with persons from other cultures in a different activity field.

Maybe, our study will not reduce the number of students who wants to give up to a maritime career, but helps us to understand better what problems are met onboard and in this way to be able to offer solutions to be passed over.

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