



Seafarers Happiness Index

Quarter 1 / 2020: Special COVID-19 Edition



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Seafarers Happiness Index Quarter 1

The Seafarers Happiness Index is a live barometer of the key issues facing those at sea, and as such COVID-19 is naturally reflected in the latest set of responses from crew globally. Across this quarter one can almost sense a growing feeling of confusion, and of responses from crew changing as the landscape shifts around them.

There are perhaps no set of workers more exposed to a pandemic than seafarers. Nations have been closing their borders and crew changes have been delayed for long periods, perhaps indefinitely. There are moves to quarantine crews, and shipping companies have been renewing contracts of employment, even when seafarers are desperate to go home.

Shore leave, already a problematic issue, has become a remnant of a different age. Ports are locked down, and there are real fears too of contracting the illness and the questions of where, when and how they will get treatment have come to the fore.

Respondents reported feeling trapped, concerned for their own health, but also struggling to comprehend what is happening in their home countries and to loved ones. As nations across the globe go into lockdown, many seafarers reported feeling utterly helpless and sadly useless to their families as the distance between them is felt more acutely than ever.

To be at sea in times of crisis is extremely challenging and seafarers spoke of a growing sense of isolation. Towards the close of the first quarter, seafarers were caught in different levels of distress and disquiet about whether they will get any relief at all. Many are losing hope and there is real concern about what the next few months might hold.

For others, there has been some sense, albeit reluctant, of acceptance. With companies increasingly confirming that crew changes are suspended, seafarers have at least some certainty about what the immediate future will bring, if no succour. Though of course, for the poor seafarers stuck onboard, one can debate whether terrible certainty is easier to deal with than doubtful hope.

Times are bad, but there is also an overwhelming sense of pride that seafarers and shipping are making a difference. Crews are reading of empty supermarket shelves and panic buying and are proud that they are doing everything they can to help keep society supplied with essential goods. Let us hope that their sacrifices and dedication are remembered in better times.

Every quarter, seafarers provide their input and insight. 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



Special COVID-19 Focus

There were many comments about COVID-19 and the distinct issues and pressures it has brought. We felt it was important to bring these together and give them the spotlight they deserve.

Seafarers reported feeling that not enough is being done to ensure the safety of those on board. They reported feeling physically exhausted, mentally disturbed, homesick and anxious.

The trend for crew changes being delayed or postponed has meant that many feel forced to serve beyond their contract period, and are now even being asked to renew their contracts to avoid censure.

The majority of seafarers felt that their vessels were safe from the virus and that people coming aboard from ashore was the real problem. It was commented that in every port the officers and crew are exposed to infection, be it from the health department, surveyors, shore crew, pilots or agents.

Seafarers mentioned solutions such as policies which demand “zero contact” with no one from ashore coming onboard. However, the realities of shipping operations place demands on the crew which many written policies either overlook or do not anticipate. Where people do come onboard, it was noted that different nations have very diverse ideas on social distancing. There were also concerns about security when people wearing masks board the vessel.

The pandemic has highlighted the fact that ports do not always see seafarers as a priority, and where there are health issues the focus has understandably been on local nationals. This means that seafarers can feel cut adrift from the medical and emotional support that they need.

There is a sense of constant dread and even paranoia creeping in. Seafarers are not only dealing with normal cargo operations but are also coping with precautions, sanitising and living under a constant fear of infection. Ironically, this can make them feel even more vulnerable and susceptible to the virus.

As cases over the last few months have shown, ships can be breeding grounds for infection. Seafarers spoke of their concerns that the closed environment on board ships, with air conditioning often running, is likely to assist in spreading the virus. There are real concerns about the impact of the virus onboard, and the lack of emergency response skills and equipment is a huge concern. Moreover, there is the added worry that an infected vessel could be denied access into port.

The issue of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is also a problem, both in terms of the lack of it onboard ship and the fact that when people come onboard who are not properly or adequately protected.

Crews feel they are doing their best to serve the world in these stressful times and they do so in the knowledge that their lives are potentially at stake. There is a sense of pride in doing so, and this will hopefully be felt further as states acknowledge seafarers as key workers.

Where

Seafarers from the Indian Subcontinent continue to dominate the Index, making up almost half of the total respondents. However, they scored slightly lower than other groups when it came to their happiness levels with figures sitting at 6.1, down marginally from the last report.

South East Asia was once more the next best represented region, with a small rise in happiness to 6.3. We saw slightly higher numbers of Eastern and Western European respondents, though both groups sit below average when it comes to happiness with results of 5.7 and 6.2 respectively. The happiest seafarers were from Africa. They scored an average of 7/10, but the number of respondents was down.

- Africa **3%**
- Central America **2%**
- Eastern Europe **8%**
- Indian Subcontinent **48%**
- Middle East **2%**
- North America **1%**
- North Asia **2%**
- Oceania **0%**
- South America **1%**
- South East Asia **24%**
- Western Europe **9%**



This edition of the Seafarers Happiness Index focusses on the impact of Covid-19 and particularly those areas of seafarer life, such as **workload**, **social interaction** and **shore leave**, where its effects are being felt most keenly. However, it is important to note that as much of the data for this quarter precedes the onset of the pandemic, we anticipate seeing its impact on crew reflected further in responses for the next quarter.

Workload 5.69 ↓ from 5.89

There has not necessarily been a large increase in work onboard, according to seafarers, as much of what goes on is business as usual. However, with many crews being forced to serve longer onboard owing to COVID-19 restrictions on movement, there are concerns about the sustained nature of the work. Seafarers are beginning to report greater levels of fatigue and burn out, as they are forced to keep on working without a sense of when they might be heading back home on leave.

Where there have been increases in workload, these were felt more acutely by those crew who have been charged with enhanced cleaning and disinfecting of accommodation areas. Seafarers reported having to keep vessels to “hospital standards” of hygiene, and they reported an ongoing and relentless struggle to ensure their vessels remain virus free. Scrubbing, hosing, and wiping are the new constants of daily life.

These additional responsibilities only intensify seafarers’ already heavy work schedules. Cuts in manpower, increased paperwork, constant demands from shore management, uncaring regimes onboard, all these add up to a workload tsunami which seafarers feel swamped with daily. Comments were received such as, “too much paperwork and no time for social life, a hectic schedule without proper shore leave”. Even well-known and respected companies were criticised for having, “less crew and too much physical work to do”.

The issue of workload onboard is seen as a reflection of the management ashore, and there were numerous criticisms about the way in which work and expectations are managed. Respondents said, the “quality of management support is going down day-by-day, with more performance pressure and less manpower”.

Others felt that management ashore all too often push for work to be completed in “unrealistic time scales”, and they “forget that this is ship”. As has featured in previous reports, there was a sense of detachment between the ship and shore: “They have a lot of excel sheet and other problems which need to be sent; management think that their crew are robots, that they do not get tired”.

There were repeated comments around the crewing levels compared to the amount of work to be completed: “Too much workload with little crew”, “Companies are not thinking of crew onboard or how they are balancing work and rest hours”.

Another bugbear was the amount of paperwork generated and the perception that much of it is meaningless. Being exhausted by tasks which you do not believe matter is a huge drain, something which seafarers seem to be dealing with constantly.

On top of these demands, seafarers are having to deal with virus precautions, sanitising and living under a constant fear of infection. The pressures of the pandemic are leaving crew members physically exhausted, with little certainty as to when their reliefs will arrive.

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Interaction with other crew on board

7.13 ↑ from 7.09

Although there was a small increase in happiness levels for interaction with fellow crew, the comments gave definite indications of increasing tensions onboard. Stress and uncertainty can exact a terrible toll on seafarers. Life onboard is one of a delicate balance and harmony, and where this is impacted social tensions can easily rise.

Seafarers reported that concerns about the safety and wellbeing of family at home, and doubts about when or if they themselves will return, are having a negative effect on relationships onboard. There is perhaps even more emphasis on staying connected with family and friends, and less sense of camaraderie as crew simply want to know how and when they will get back home. Such access to communication is difficult in a lockdown situation when the traditional access to phone cards and data is restricted due to port chaplains and welfare organisations being unable to visit the ships.

The stress and worry of the situation make it harder for seafarers to feel like interacting onboard, and as such any semblance of social life has been diminished. All they want is some certainty as to when their reliefs will arrive, and to hear the news that their families and home communities are safe.

These worries only exacerbate existing problems, such as the ability to enjoy down time and the spaces and provisions for relaxation. We received comments such as, “It seems that all too often crews are worked to a drop. We wake up to work, work some more, grab some food and sleep, repeat, repeat and repeat”.

Even in normal times, there is often little opportunity for social interaction or recreational activities onboard. “No time due to often working over 14 hours to get things done”. “Life onboard is only about work, we do not have a gym, a pool, or any entertainment. We have nothing to enjoy or to entertain”. “People onboard now only work, eat, and then they rush to get inside cabins, watch movies on their laptops, and sleep”.

There was regret at the lack of social or enjoyable aspects of life onboard. “Nobody uses common spaces, and nobody is bothered to organise gatherings, games, or events”. “We are a very mixed multinational crew on board and sometimes is difficult to get the things lined up and make everybody happy”. “The TV room always has some films on I cannot understand, and even the subtitles are not my language. So I cannot stay there”.

Onboard camaraderie can be sorely tested when seafarers feel under stress. However, there were many respondents who praised their fellow crew and said they felt “part of a big family” with some even feeling that their crewmates understand them better than their family at home.

The stress and worry of the situation make it harder for seafarers to feel like interacting onboard

Shore leave 5.80 ↓ from 5.90

The issue of shore leave and of getting time away from the vessel is one which has proven problematic across previous Happiness Index reports. 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.

Amongst the comments made before the virus took hold, one respondent claimed, “Most of the time, some inspection, maintenance, or stupid management decision will make access to time off impossible”. Even when there is time, unfortunately the cost of shore passes and transport can impact the decision to go ashore. The chance to save money and stay onboard and rest often win out.

A regular contributor to the Seafarers Happiness Index stressed once more the view that “shore leave is dead. Instead we should make ships a more favourable place to be on in the first place”. This seafarer also added, “We are down to absolute minimum levels of crew which means taking shore leave in port requires someone else to cover you and therefore fatigue themselves more”.

Seafarers recognise the potential benefits of time away from the vessel. One response stated, “We need to destress, and need people to recognise the importance of relieving stress by getting ashore”, whilst another saw shore leave as “time to see the beauty of a country, free from your job and tension”. It was also encouraging to read one response which said, “My company encourages us to get off the ship when possible”, which seems like good leadership and management, where often such a view is lacking.

The current COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted the diminished role of shore leave in today’s seagoing life. Crews no longer expect to get ashore, and as such the rhythms of life onboard the vessel are changing. The pandemic has further exposed the fact that seafarers are more concerned with simply getting their contract completed and getting home, rather than expecting or anticipating any breaks from the ship.

With health at risk, seafarers are applying a sensible and pragmatic approach, and recognise that there are no opportunities to leave the vessel, and nor would they want to, as it would put either themselves, or the people in places they visit, at risk.

Seafarers have expressed their frustrations at not being able to access centres and services. In normal times, these facilities are welcomed and clearly serve as an important resource and welcome break from the pressures of life onboard. It is hoped that as the global pandemic slows, seafarer movement will once again be allowed and crews will be back visiting centres.

We need to destress, and need people to recognise the importance of relieving stress by getting ashore

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.

We focussed on the comments related to COVID-19 and the key areas where its affect is being felt, namely workload, interaction onboard and shore leave. Respondents spoke of feeling physically exhausted, mentally disturbed, anxious and homesick. The issue of crew changes has been an important one as seafarers feel forced to serve beyond their contract period and are being asked to renew their contracts to avoid censure.

The lowest points this time around featured seafarers feeling stressed and there appeared to be a growing trend for crews experiencing mental abuse from their superiors, with “name calling and harassment” a constant thread. Other concerns were the length of contracts, which are being further extended due to COVID-19, no access to shore leave, no idea of when they might get home, and the shortage of manpower and support.

Although they reported feeling relatively safe on ship, there were claims that not enough is being done to ensure the safety of those on board and crews expressed worry about shore workers who may spread infection. PPE is a problem, both the lack of it and the instances where officials come onboard but are not properly or adequately protected. In addition, policies which demand “zero contact” were considered unrealistic and difficult to manage.

There was a sense of pride, however, that seafarers are doing their best to serve the world in these stressful times, and optimism that their services will be more widely recognised.

Within the more general happiness reporting, there were some key concerns which were repeatedly aired by seafarers across the questions. Some of these echoed the responses which have gone before, but there were new areas of concern too. Despite the slight rise in the average happiness score, the general feedback from those who wrote tended to be more negative.

The comments captured a subdued, concerned and downbeat mood, which seemed to descend further as the early months of the year progressed. Fatigue, stress, and pressure were being felt and reported.

Workload was a key theme, with a growing sense of too much work and not enough time or manpower. There were numerous criticisms about the way in which expectations are managed ashore, with the quality of management support deteriorating whilst workload and performance pressures mount.

Perhaps prompted by this, there were indications of increased social tensions onboard. The COVID-19 situation is leaving seafarers feeling trapped and this appears to be exacerbating existing social frictions associated with mixed nationality crews. The current situation has shown that there are serious challenges when it comes to keeping people happy, entertained, and stimulated. The camaraderie of a crew can be sorely tested when seafarers feel under stress.

PPE is a problem, both the lack of it and the instances where officials come onboard but are not properly or adequately protected.

Events sometimes conspire to make debate irrelevant, and the effect of a global pandemic has rendered concerns about shore leave as seemingly academic. Seafarers are currently not getting ashore as it would put either themselves or others at risk. Most accept this situation, and there was an air of pragmatism from most of those who left comments.

The sense of maritime lockdown has also highlighted just how fundamental connectivity is to the happiness of seafarers. In the words of one respondent, but echoing many, “Nothing is better than being able to contact home”. There was once more a growing number who feel that, “internet access is a basic necessity and should be provided free to all seafarers”. Crews want unlimited high-speed internet, and there were once again calls to change the Maritime Labour Convention to reflect this.

In challenging times there is perhaps even more focus on food. With seafarers being stuck onboard, and with crew changes uncertain, meals become even more important. For those who are served good food, well-prepared and in a style they enjoy, this has a major impact on their happiness levels. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true. Where crews are served poor quality ingredients, badly prepared and in a way which does not reflect their culture and diet, this can have a huge impact on their enjoyment of being at sea.

In terms of keeping fit and healthy onboard, comments tended to fall into three main categories: those who can access good quality gym provisions and who feel they have the time to use them, those without equipment, and those who have the equipment but no time to use it. Intense working schedules and the associated fatigue are definite barriers to exercise and adopting a healthy lifestyle onboard. As one respondent put it, “workload and overtime sometimes are overwhelming, therefore it impacts the mood to go to gym or any type of exercises”.

Wage concerns were also on the rise this quarter. Inflation in seafarer nations compared against perceived stagnation in wages was a key cause of anxiety. Respondents spoke of being on the same salary whilst expenses at home shot up.

Elsewhere, the issue of welfare provisions ashore has become something of a moot point as seafarers are unable to leave ship. Respondents expressed their frustrations at not being able to access centres and services. It is hoped that as the global pandemic slows, seafarer movement will once again be allowed and crews will be back visiting centres again.

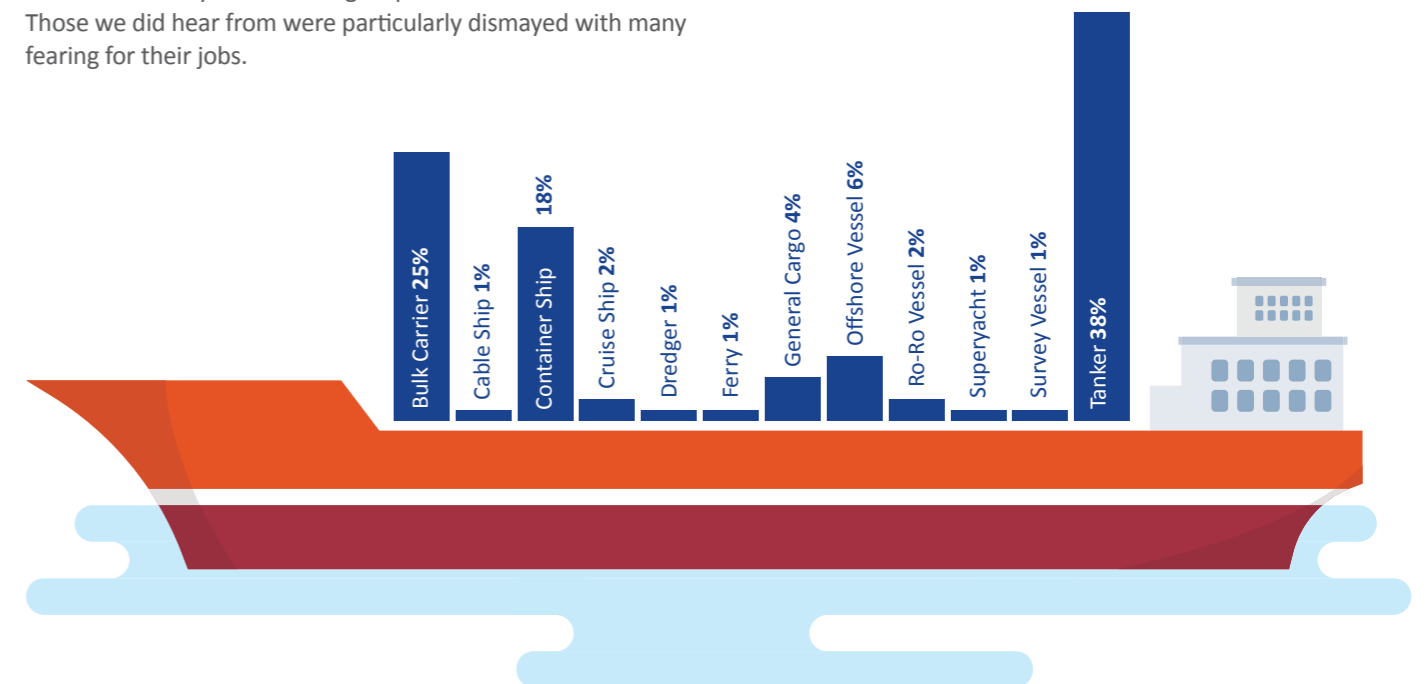
We always need more data, and to hear the stories of more seafarers...and for those who have already done so, to share again. So please visit www.happyatsea.org to find out more, and to complete the survey. We also want these reports to be spread as far and wide across shipping as possible, so please do share these findings. We must also thank the companies which have approached us about setting up bespoke happiness surveys for their own fleets as they see the value in benchmarking their own performance against the wider population of seafarers.

Responses

The latest average seafarers’ happiness score across all categories is 6.30 out of 10, which is down from the average of 6.39 in the final quarter of 2019. The number of seafarers sharing their thoughts fell slightly this time around but, given the current difficulties in accessing shore leave and the likely effect of limited internet access, this was perhaps to be expected. We worked through our usual dedicated survey channels, but also ensured that we captured data and responses from across The Mission to Seafarers network and social media to obtain both data and written submissions.

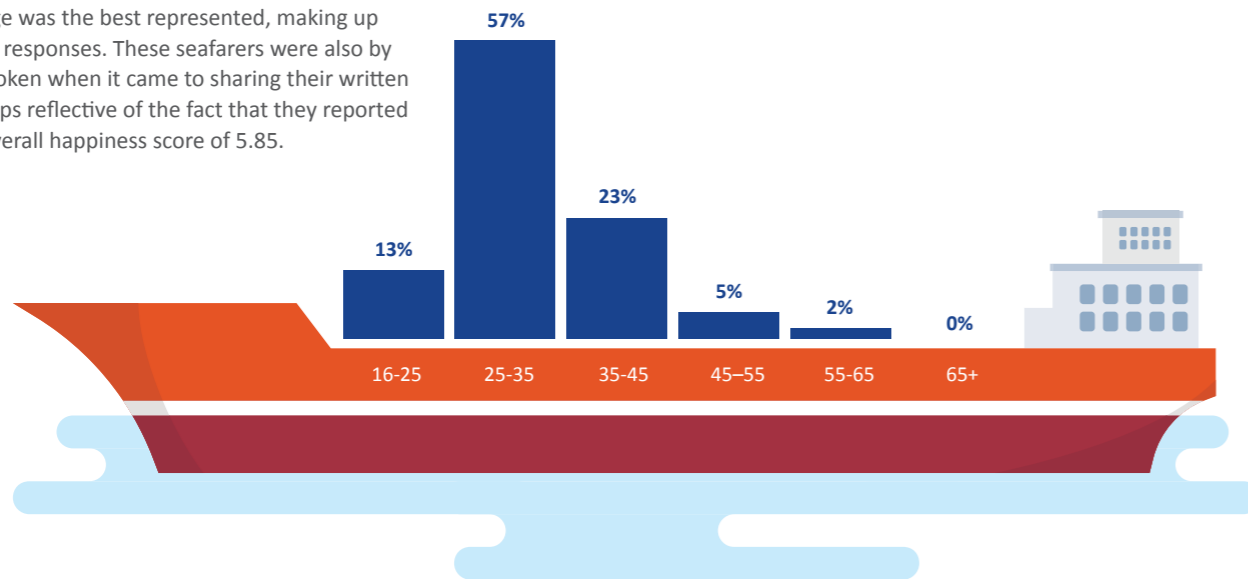
SHIP TYPE

The highest number of respondents served on tankers, though bulk carriers and container ships continued to provide a steady flow of responses too. The responses from cruise ships were seemingly heavily affected by the issues of COVID-19, and where we usually have a strong response there was silence. Those we did hear from were particularly dismayed with many fearing for their jobs.



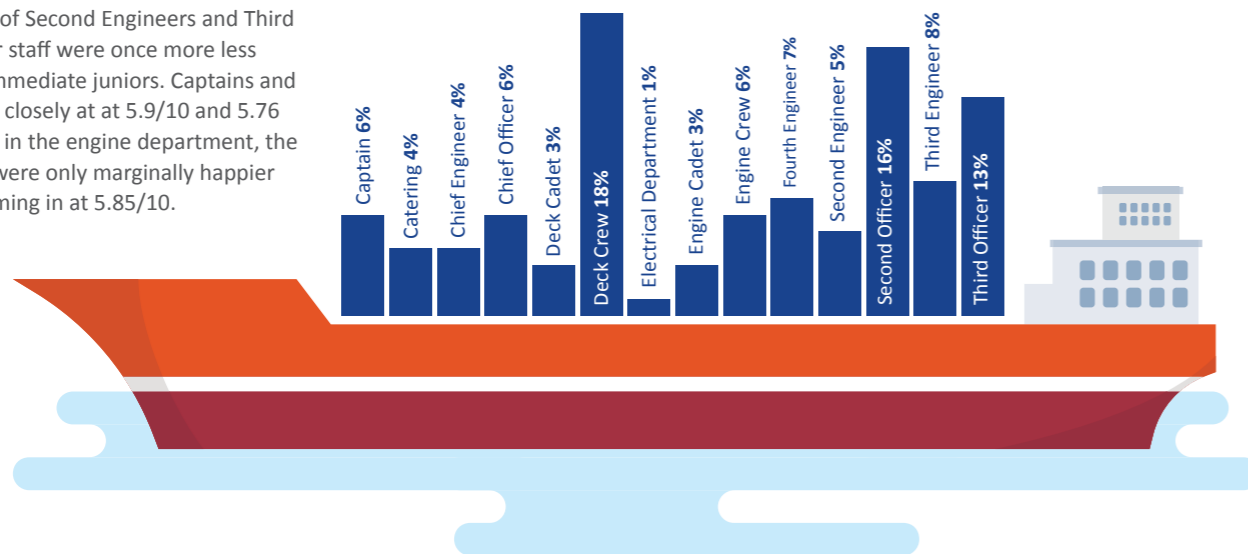
AGE RANGE

The 25-35 age range was the best represented, making up the majority of the responses. These seafarers were also by far the most outspoken when it came to sharing their written experiences, perhaps reflective of the fact that they reported a below average overall happiness score of 5.85.



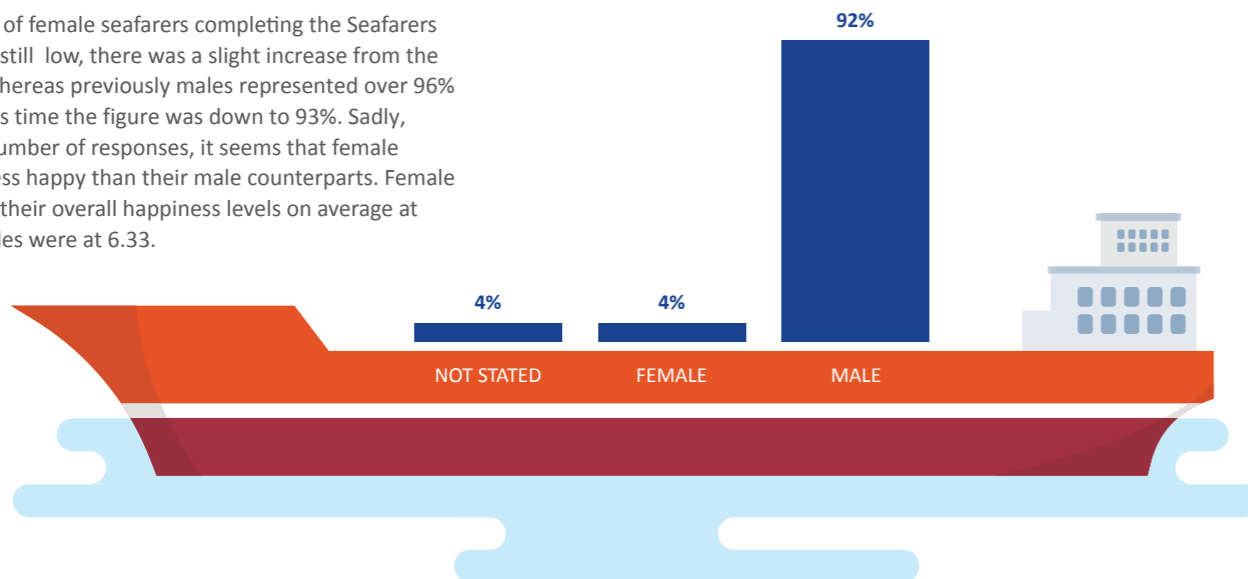
RANK

We received our usual wide spread of seafarers across all ranks and departments. Deck crews were the best represented once more, but there was a rise in the number of Second Engineers and Third Officers. The senior staff were once more less happy than their immediate juniors. Captains and Chief Engineers sat closely at at 5.9/10 and 5.76 respectively, whilst in the engine department, the Second Engineers were only marginally happier than their staff, coming in at 5.85/10.



GENDER BALANCE

Whilst the number of female seafarers completing the Seafarers Happiness Index is still low, there was a slight increase from the previous report. Whereas previously males represented over 96% of respondents, this time the figure was down to 93%. Sadly, regardless of the number of responses, it seems that female seafarers are still less happy than their male counterparts. Female seafarers reported their overall happiness levels on average at 5.95/10, whilst males were at 6.33.



The Mission to Seafarers: Providing Welfare during Covid-19



In line with many organisations, The Mission to Seafarers has closed most of its seafarers' centres and chaplains are responding to seafarer need on a request basis. Teams are in regular contact with port authorities, agents and seafarers themselves to discuss the need and to offer whatever assistance we can. In line with the data in this quarter's Seafarers Happiness Index, the need for crews to have access to good quality data is increasing, particularly when crews understandably want to find out how their loved ones are doing at home during the pandemic. We are providing access to Wi-Fi networks through Mi-Fi units and providing phone cards via "socially distant" ship visits at the top of the gangway. In Manila, The Mission to Seafarers Family Network has been asked by the Government of the Philippines to provide transportation facilities to returning seafarers who have completed quarantine. We have provided food to local dormitories so that seafarers unable to travel and unable to visit supermarkets can access a good, nutritious food supply.

At the beginning of the Pandemic, we took our chaplaincy online and launched Chat to a Chaplain. This project provides a 24-hour chat facility for seafarers and their families to engage with a chaplain from The Mission to Seafarers and chaplains from member organisations of the International Christian Maritime Association. At the time of writing, Chaplains have provided support to crews abandoned in Russia, directed crews to local teams where they can access phone cards and supplies from local supermarkets and provided pastoral counselling and support to seafarers worried about losing their job or securing new contracts.

To access Chat to a Chaplain, visit www.missiontoseafarers.org or www.icma.as and click on the Chat function.

Teams are in regular contact with port authorities, agents and 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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