

# Improving the image of seafaring – putting lipstick on a pig?

It is a telling sign when the majority of a room full of crewing and ship management executives say they would not recommend a career in shipping to their children. But what can be done to improve the image of the industry?

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## At a Glance

- Majority of delegates polled at a crewing conference said they wouldn't encourage their children to become seafarers
- Shipping has a poor external image and most people know nothing about seafarers
- Seafaring offers a masterclass in leadership, crisis management and resilience

The image of shipping and its impact on those deciding whether to take up seafaring as a career is a perennial topic in the industry.

In a recent episode of the Seatrade Maritime Podcast Larry Gwee, Deputy General Secretary of the Singapore Maritime Officers Union (SMOU), stated, “As an industry we don’t have an image problem, we have an image disaster.” It’s a blunt assessment of the wider world’s perception of shipping and as to why very few parents would recommend a career in seafaring to their children.

In 2023 at Seatrade Maritime Crew Connect Global a poll was run of the audience as to whether delegates would encourage their children to go into seafaring as a career and 57% said no.

In the opening panel session of the 2024 edition of the conference the ‘Crewing Think Tank’, conference chairperson Tommy Olofsen re-ran the poll with broadly similar results, although exact percentages were not given this time around.

Olofsen, who is also COO and President of OSM Thome, commented, “This has not moved a lot and its quite interesting that we are talking with those who care most about seafarers would not recommend it [as a career].”

Guy Platten, Secretary General of the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), noted, “It’s quite damning really. At least some people voted yes.”

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Platten himself is one of the minority who would, and indeed did, encourage his children to take up a career in shipping. “I’ve had an amazing career in this industry, I’m really, really grateful for it, and two of my children are in this industry as well now,” he said.

Speaking the following day on the panel entitled ‘Improving Crewing’s Image’ Capt Yves Vandeborn, Head of Loss Prevention Asia – Pacific for North Standard, said, “When I look at it personally from my perspective as seafarer I think it was a fantastic career and I would love to start it over....I certainly have very good memories of my time at sea.”



From the perspective of those working as seafarers in the industry he doesn’t think the job has a bad image among crew themselves, the problem is one of the external perception of shipping. “What I think we need to improve is the image the outside world has of shipping. People outside of our community have no idea what it is to be a seafarer,” he said.

Part of seafaring, and more widely shipping’s, image problem is that the industry is largely invisible unless something bad happens. The [Covid](#) pandemic raised the importance of shipping in the general public’s mind but was also accompanied by the [crew change crisis](#) – hardly a great advert for seafaring as a career choice. There are the stories of bullying, harassment and sexual assault, although it’s worth noting none of this unique to shipping, if the working and living environment in which they take place is.

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This year has seen the headline grabbing destruction of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore harbour by the container ship Dali. And, as I write this it is the first anniversary of the hijacking of the car carrier Galaxy Leader off Yemen, whose crew remain hostage, which was the beginning of attacks on commercial shipping by the Houthi.

Speaking in the Crewing Think Tank session, Ashok Srinivasan, Manager Department of Maritime Safety and Security for Bimco, believed that the industry focused too much on the negative.

“But what we not doing is trying to tell the good stories to the external world. Yes, I agree there is this issue about bullying and harassment. I agree that the seafarers are facing unfair treatment, but these are few and far between. There are 1.9 million seafarers, I don't think 50% of them are facing this kind of issues,” he said.

“So, there are many good stories but what we are doing, unintentionally of course, we are focusing on the negative stories rather than the positive ones and in a way we're scaring away the young generation. If we start telling the good stories we can attract the younger ones and also women.”

But could just focusing on the positives of seafaring also create a false impression of what is by its very nature a tough job. An aspect of working at sea that also enables rapid skills development for seafarers.

Simon Grainge, Chief Executive of International Seafarers Assistance Network (ISWAN), highlighted the conundrum between the rich experiences gained from working at sea, and the negative image the working environment can also present.

“You think about the skills and abilities you can develop by being a seafarer, not least the resiliency you would build. Going to sea where you have to cope with whatever happens, there is no-one there to come and rescue you, you have to do it yourself. So, there's lots of really positive things to say,” he said during the panel on improving crewing's image.



A similar point was made by Gillian Ferguson Vice Chair of the International Association of Maritime Institutions (IAMI) and Managing Director of Onboard Maritime, said, “A career at sea is obviously a unique opportunity. It's a master class in leadership, crisis management and resilience. We've got a new workforce coming through that isn't just looking for a salary, they are seeking purpose, growth, stability, and the maritime industry needs to align with these values.”

However, on the flipside to that are the worst of what seafaring offers - abuse, bullying, criminalisation, abandonment, fatigue, stress, and suicide. Grainge said it's not a good look but not something the industry can deny.

There are also the inherent challenges of seafaring – isolation, being away from family for long periods of time, living and working in the same space, and the dangers that are faced in the job from time to time.

“There's no doubt that seafaring is a tough job, but people will do tough jobs if they're properly led, if they're properly supported, and if they feel that what they're doing has purpose, a meaning, and other people appreciate it,” Grainge said.

He said that from his perspective there were two elements – image and reality.

“There is the image that we need to portray, but also actually what is the reality for some seafarers, and we have to address that as well. And if we just look at the image, I think we could be accused of putting lipstick on a pig.”

The bottom line is seafaring is not a career that will appeal to or suit everyone. What the industry needs to be able to do is to reach out to those who would enjoy the challenging nature of the work and the rewards that can bring both personally and financially. It also needs to address the negatives to ensure those who do take it up as career enjoy as good and as fair conditions as possible, so they both want to stay at sea and encourage others to join.