



Seafarers Happiness Index

Quarter 2 / 2020



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Seafarers Happiness Index Quarter 2

The Seafarers Happiness Index (SHI) is a barometer of the key issues facing those at sea today. This latest report for the second quarter of 2020 reflects the responses from crew members globally against the backdrop of a global crew change crisis precipitated by COVID-19.

Given that hundreds of thousands of seafarers are facing extended periods onboard, it was anticipated that positives would be hard to find, and so it has proven. The average SHI results for this quarter show seafarers' happiness at 6.18/10. This continues a very worrying downward trend that has existed since the middle of 2019.

Even more concerning this time around is the fact that almost all the questions, with the exception of wages and salary, saw a fall. Seafarers are not just unhappy with single isolated issues, they are feeling dissatisfied across the board.

While the previous quarter of 2020 captured a growing feeling of confusion and uncertainty amongst seafarers, the latest results show a shift in focus towards issues of leave. This time around we have heard the reality of crews not being able to get home, worries about the safety of family and friends, and frustration at extended contracts and even fears about entire careers, not just jobs.

The year so far has shown that there is perhaps no set of workers more exposed to a pandemic than seafarers, a fact that is becoming clearer and more certain with every day that passes. Although there was praise and recognition for the shipowners and managers who have rallied to the cause, and gratitude towards the industry organisations which have stepped up their stance and rhetoric, problems still remain.

As we hear from seafarers themselves, things are bad and there is a sense of them getting worse. Crew members are tired, fed up, lonely, homesick, sometimes even suffering illness and pain, and they desperately want to get back home.

Executive Summary

The results of the Seafarers Happiness Index in Q2 show the happiness levels of seafarers at 6.18/10, down from 6.30 in Q1. There was a downward trend across almost all questions when it comes to how crew are feeling. Increased stress, uncertainty and worries were all apparent.

Being apart and not knowing when they will get home is seemingly, and understandably, taking a heavy toll. There is real stress, frustration and annoyance building up, none of which feels like it can be resolved without the obvious solution of crew changes.

In this report we have looked to dissect the individual issues across the questions and pulled together a narrative. Many questions saw a fall in average happiness score and it is clear there is widespread, and growing, dissatisfaction.

There was one unifying theme across the results and that was how the uncertainty facing crews is taking a terrible toll. 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.

The crew change crisis has reached such a point that it seems seafarers are running out of patience. They want to be home, they want what they contractually signed up for to be a reality, not a hope. When crews are changed out, when seafarers can get home to their families, loved ones and communities, then we can expect happiness and satisfaction to climb once more. Until then, it is hard to anticipate how the mood can be lightened and spirits raised.

The message from seafarers is clear: crew changes are needed, and those who can make them happen must do so, now. Sitting on ships all over the world, trapped at work and living in fear of their health, sanity, livelihoods and the safety of their families, seafarers feel forgotten and overlooked.

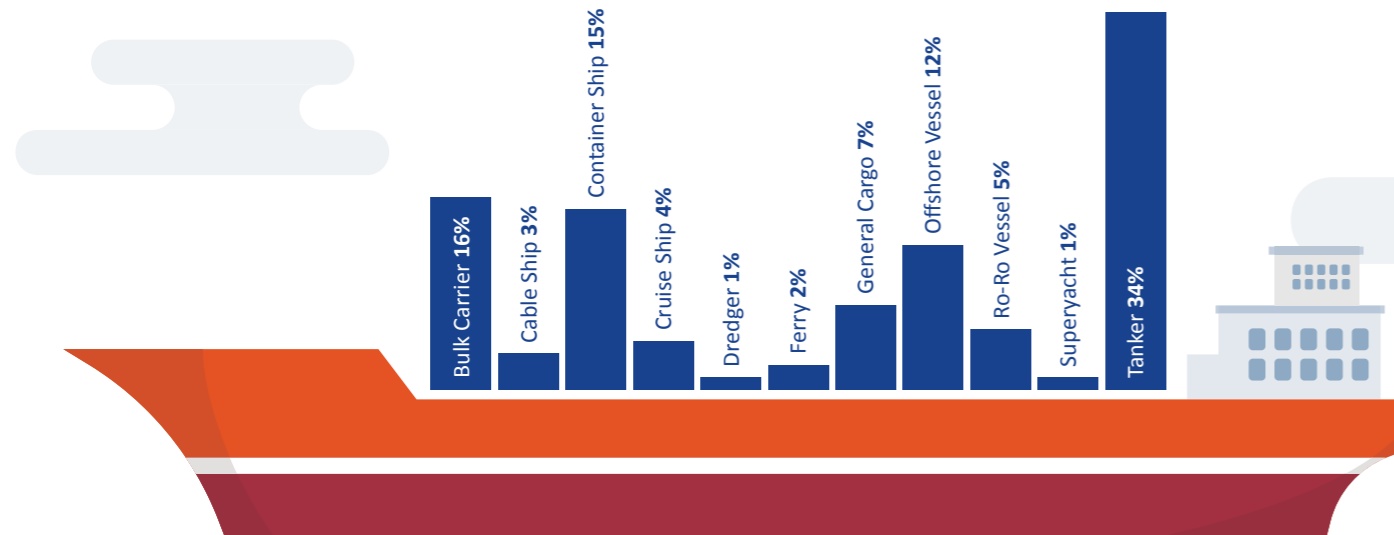
There is a sense of irony in some of the responses from crew; they see news about a world which relies on seafarers, but they themselves feel that they are reliant on others to act to get them home. We were also touched to receive messages of thanks from crews, saying that they valued the chance to talk and have their views heard.

Given the current difficulties in accessing shore leave and the likely effect of limited internet access, we are even more grateful to the many seafarers who took the time to share their experiences with us. Responses came from our dedicated survey channels, but also through The Mission to Seafarers network and social media.

Ship Type

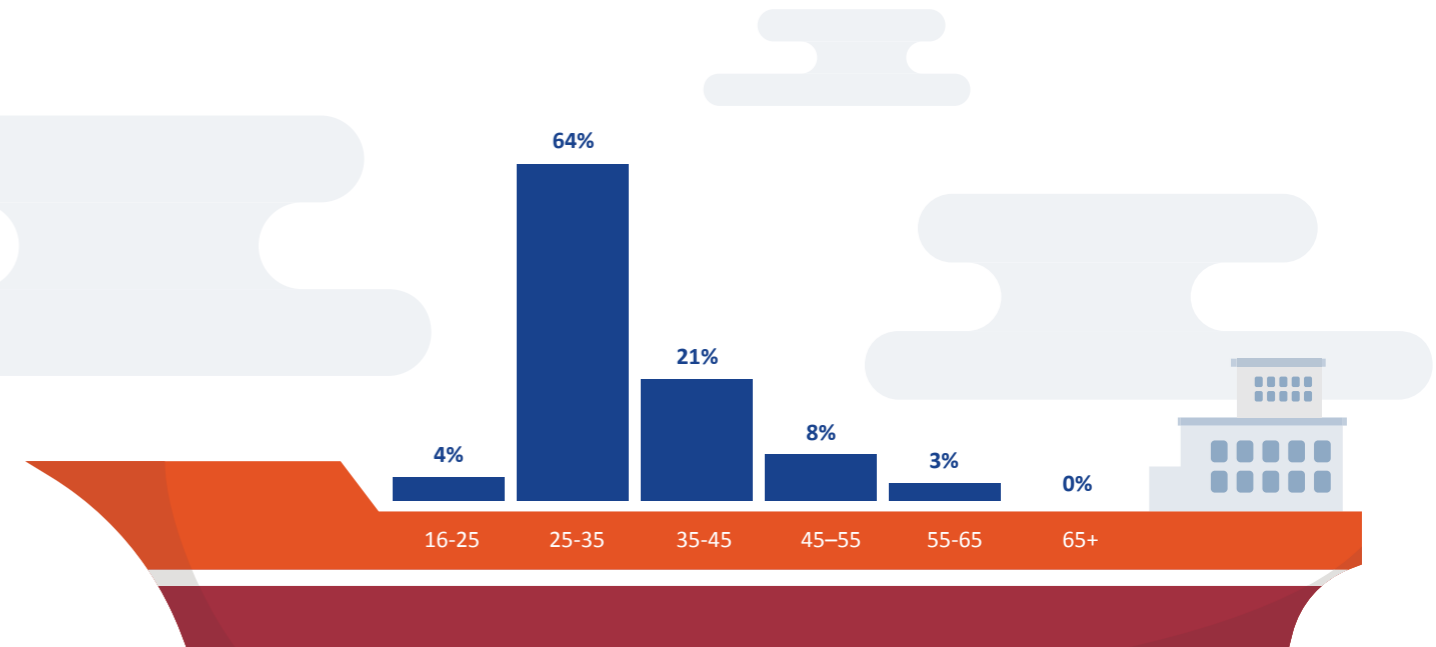
Once again, the highest number of respondents served on tankers, though bulk carriers and container ships continued to provide a steady flow of responses too. We saw an increase in responses from more specialised vessels and far more from offshore vessels than in recent reports.

Similarly to the Q1 report, cruise ship workers appear heavily affected by the issues of COVID-19 and crew change problems. Those we did hear from were particularly dismayed at so much uncertainty surrounding plans to get them home, but also concern as to their futures as the entire cruise industry is facing a crisis and job losses are feared.



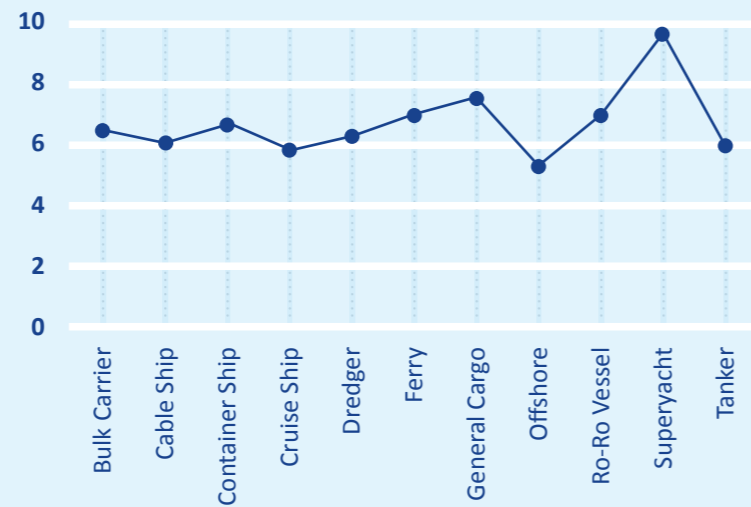
Age Range

The 25-35 age range was the best represented, making up the majority of the responses. There was a fall in responses from the senior end of the age spectrum, and we received no responses from seafarers aged over 65, suggesting they may have been kept back from work.



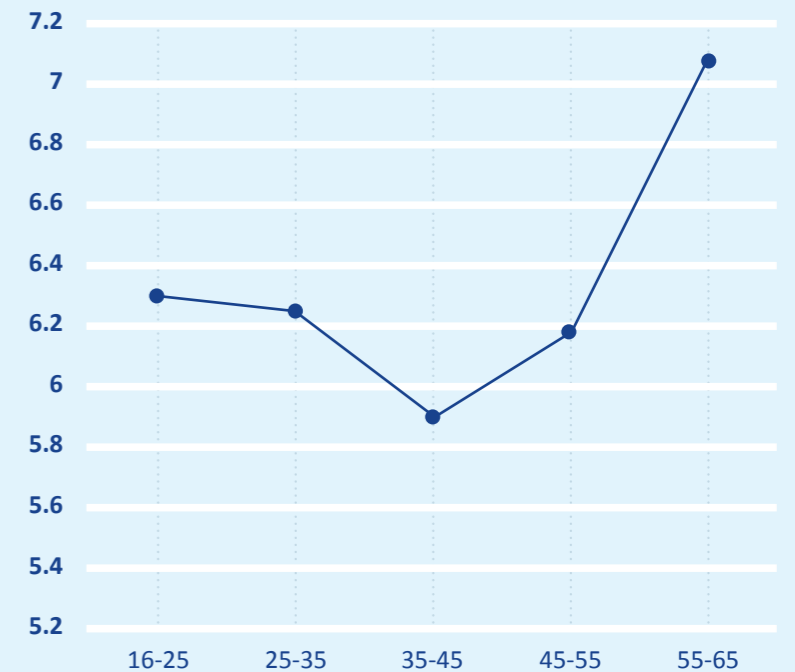
Ship types and happiness

The pattern of previous reports was repeated, with the most satisfied of the better represented vessel groups being general cargo vessels. They reported their happiness to be in excess of the average at 7.55/10, far higher than we have seen before. We did see some rather surprising outliers – superyacht crews, though we did not hear from many, were extremely satisfied. On the other extreme we saw a rise in offshore responses, but they did not report well on their overall happiness.



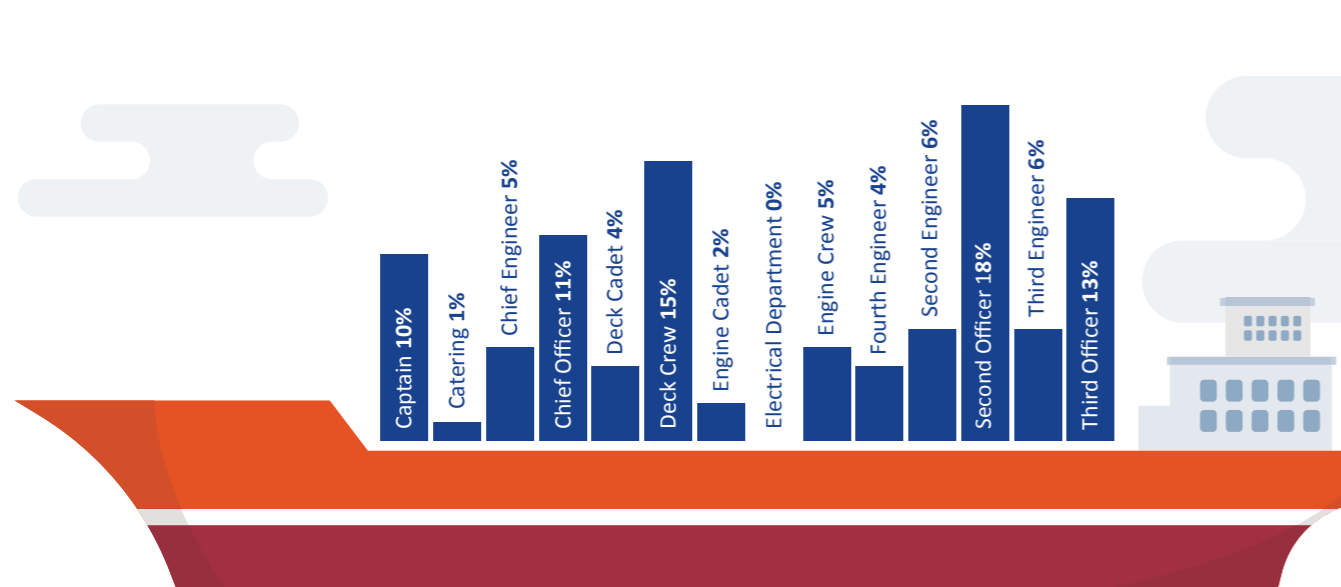
Ages and happiness

It was the older seafarers who recorded the highest levels of satisfaction, with those aged 55-65 coming in at 7.07/10. Younger seafarers were by far the most outspoken when it came to sharing their written experiences, and it was pleasing to see that their happiness was on the rise compared with past reports.



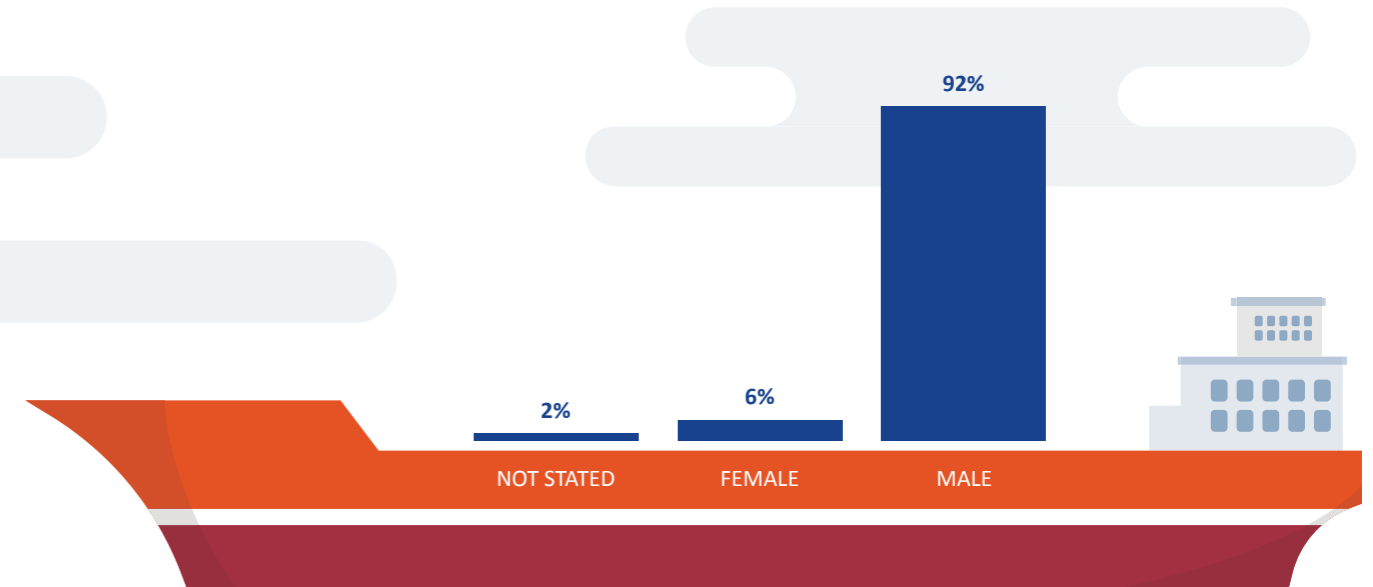
Rank

We received our usual wide spread of seafarers across all ranks and departments. Deck crews were the best represented once more.



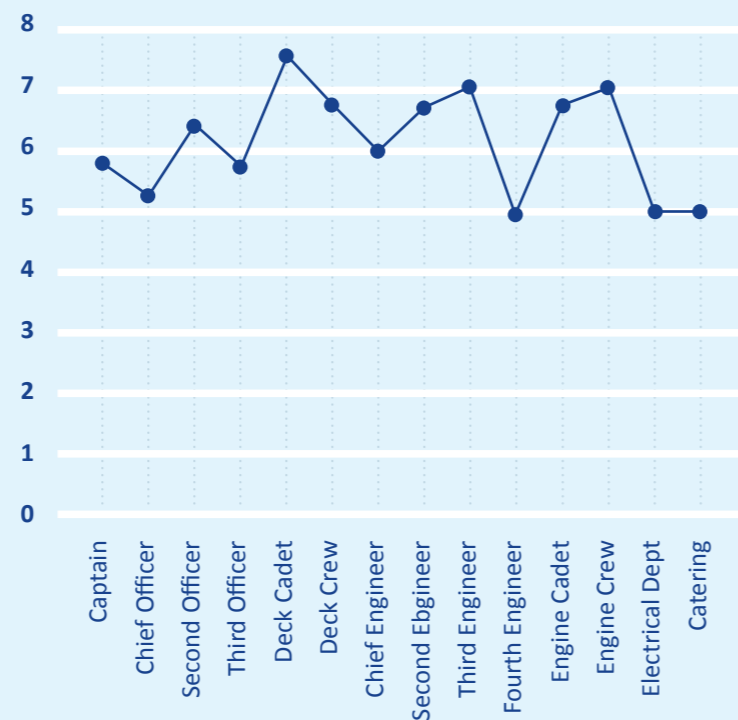
Gender

Whilst the number of female seafarers completing the Seafarers Happiness Index is still low, there was again a slight increase from the previous report. Whereas in Quarter 1 males represented over 96% of respondents, this time the figure was down to 92%.



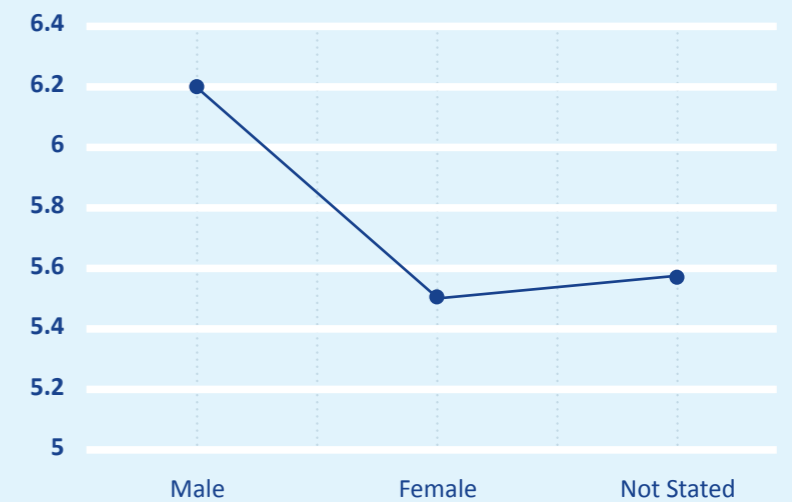
Ranks and happiness

The responses bounced around with lows of 5 and peaks of 7.57 for deck cadets. Senior staff scored marginally higher than has been the norm. We also saw a larger discrepancy between deck and engine crews. In written responses a number of engine staff spoke of the ramping up of maintenance work, so it could be that as some vessels have been anchored or laid up, the work in the engine room has increased.



Gender and happiness

Sadly, once again it seems that female seafarers are still less happy than their male counterparts. Female seafarers reported their overall happiness levels on average at 5.5/10, whilst males were at 6.2. Both represented falls from previous reports.



How happy generally when at sea?

6.05 ↓ from 6.12

General happiness levels have fallen. Some respondents even commented that we should expect a fall in the numbers: “If people are locked on vessels and have to continue working with no chance for crew change, don’t expect that they will be happy”.

There were a wide range of concerns which were voiced in response to this question, and, while there were a number of negatives, it was interesting to see that in testing times some positives yet persist.

Where seafarers saw the good aspects of their profession, it was based on pride at doing a difficult job well. Some commented that since the COVID-19 outbreak they have received gratitude from people at home and thanks for their role in keeping trade flowing. There was also satisfaction that they are succeeding in rising to the challenge, though tempered with disappointment that seafarers are not universally seen and recognised as key workers.

Sadly, for many seafarers it seems the challenges being presented are reaching intolerable levels, and that barriers are now such that they are questioning whether a career at sea is any longer attractive.

While it was expected that most responses would be focused on the difficulties of crew changes, and the fact that seafarers are either stuck at sea or at home, this was not in fact the case. We heard from many different situations and of a wide range of issues.

There were worrying trends which will be explored in other sections of the report, problems of sexism, racism and bullying appear to be on the rise. We also received a number of responses voicing concern about drunkenness onboard vessels. It seems that in lockdown, the stress may have seen some crew turn to alcohol, which is a very worrying development.

If people are locked on vessels and have to continue working with no chance for crew change, don’t expect that they will be happy.

How happy with your work load?

5.60 ↓ from 5.69

It is clear from the recent responses, and also the falling data received, that there is a serious issue when it comes to workload onboard. Vessels are reportedly operating short-handed, though presumably within safe manning limits, and this is taking a heavy toll on the others.

There were reports of crew being sick and unable to work, while others also spoke of the incredibly debilitating effects of lowered morale and lack of motivation. This was summed up by one respondent who stated, “With every missed pay off day it has been harder to care about the job, and that makes it harder to pass the days.”

Allied to the fact that crews are staying onboard longer is the fact that COVID-19 has led to a large increase in tasks onboard. Efforts to ensure maximum hygiene on vessels have risen to unsustainable levels according to some seafarers. They voiced concerns that they cannot stay on top of the cleaning regime: “We clean, spray, wipe and scrub constantly, then time is spent washing our own gear and trying to ensure that anyone onboard does the same.”

Another respondent captured the mood, “Before the pandemic, work onboard ship was very gratifying, but now it is just relentless”. Companies are even sending fewer crew to join vessels, but with the demands of Safety Management Systems and maintenance plans there is much more to do for those left onboard.

To make matters worse, it seems that for some the tradition of overtime payments has been eroded: “Overtime is now absorbed into normal work, and there is no extra payment”.

There was also concern not only about the time spent but on the demands of the tasks, particularly when working with inexperienced crew. One seafarer wrote, “Workload is not the amount of hours as much as it is dealing with crew with insufficient experience, knowledge or a poor attitude”.

We clean, spray, wipe and scrub constantly, then time is spent washing our own gear and trying to ensure that anyone onboard does the same.

How happy about the training you receive?

6.62 ↓ from 6.65

When discussing training, the comments usually relate to matters such as certificates of competency and career development. Again, as with other questions, we saw many responses this time around about COVID-19 and its impact on seafarers' lives. Also similar to other sections, we saw yet another fall in the data for this section.

There was anger and frustration as many seafarers said they were not being well enough trained or prepared to deal with the virus. It appears that though companies or organisations have been quick to get information to ships, the reality onboard is that they are not always able to keep in step: "Today we received guidance on the use of all kinds of different personal protection equipment (PPE). None of which we actually have onboard. Maybe next port, maybe not."

While it is hard for crews to manage with too little or missing equipment, there were also concerns that they were not being supported in how to deal with the specific new problems facing them. It seems too many companies are not communicating well with their seafarers, and there is little support to help crews deal with the stress or uncertainty facing them. Vessels were receiving posters and checklists, but no additional assistance in how to carry out the requirements.

There was also frustration about the training of others, especially when it was felt that the training of some shipboard visitors were not aligned to the regimes onboard and were therefore causing potential health concerns.

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How happy about interaction with other crew on board? 7.04 ↓ from 7.13

Interaction onboard has so often been one of the high points of the Happiness Index. Here we have often had reports and feedback on the importance of positive relationships, and the impacts of friendships and professional respect.

Unfortunately, as the fall in the data suggests, the impact of extended contracts and struggles to get shore leave or return home has had a significant impact on the atmosphere onboard.

Social distancing onboard is attempted, but often fails, and this can cause increased tension in a number of ways. The fact that seafarers are spending longer at sea but have less positive contact with each other leads to heightened loneliness and isolation. There are also reports of different nationalities treating the challenges of social distancing differently, another cause of conflict onboard.

The pressure to socially distance onboard takes its toll, and seafarers spoke of the tension this adds to their work and everyday life onboard. "We have separate tables during meals, and staggered times, which means it is very hard to even have conversations." Others commented that while guidance on their vessel encourages occasional special events, such as barbecues, the instruction to socially distance turns these occasions into a depressing farce.

In addition, where crew changes are possible, any new signers onboard are kept clear of existing crew, which again impacts the shipboard dynamic. Summing it up, one respondent stated, "Interaction is lowered, and morale has plummeted due to this pandemic."

We have separate tables during meals, and staggered times, which means it is very hard to even have conversations.

How happy about access to shore leave?

5.75 ↓ from 5.80

The issue of shore leave during a pandemic is a troubling one. It would be expected that as most nations have locked down seafarers would be confined to port, and so it has been.

This has been a cause of frustration. There are seafarers who have been bemoaning the ability to even get off the ship, just to be on land, perhaps to take a stroll around a port where safe to do so. With terminals often being so far from cities or towns, there are a number of seafarers who are keen to see some recreation areas in the port environs.

There were also concerns that some seafarer centres are not easy to reach, and so the sense of isolation and claustrophobia becomes ever more problematic. As one respondent summed up, “I just want to get off the ship, even for half an hour – just to walk and feel away from things”, a sentiment that many seemed to echo.

Even in normal times, pre-COVID, the issue of shore leave was felt to be “pretty much irrelevant”. The location of terminals can prevent seafarers getting away from ship, and increasing speeds in turnaround, something which many ports are boasting of as they seek smart port status and the ability to get ships in and out with maximum efficiency, is having an effect.

Such developments are natural for any industry and it is obvious that businesses will pursue efficiencies, but the impact on people should be considered. One respondent stated that in course of duties seafarers are asked to assess the impact of the vessel on so many different elements, but never ever the crew.

I just want to get off the ship, even for half an hour – just to walk and feel away from things.

How happy about wages/salary?

6.28 ↑ from 6.11

The only category of the Happiness Index to see a rise in average score this time round was the question of salary. It seems the only benefit of prolonged or extended contracts has been extra cash.

This has not of course been mirrored by the seafarer respondents who were stuck at home and unable to join vessels. We heard from a number who, faced with uncertainty as to when they might be able to return to work, were considering career changes and pursuing different roles ashore.

For those at sea there was a sense of viewing money as far less of a priority than we have seen in previous reports. Indeed, there was a huge sense of relief where companies had been seen to be looking after crews, paying on time and ensuring that families are taken care of.

For the shipping companies which have stood by their seafarers, it seems there is a huge store of appreciation and praise. As one respondent commented, “In so much turmoil, knowing that wages have been going to the bank and to my family has been so important to me”.

For those getting paid there was a sense of relief, but for those who were feeling unsure and uncertain, or who felt their efforts were not being reflected, the mood was far less optimistic. There was also a sense of the rumour mill causing concern amongst some crews with responses such as “We have heard that companies are looking to cut our wages but do not know what we can do”.

There was once more a growing sense of tension between seafarers of different nationalities. Multiple respondents from Asia, the Middle East and Indian Subcontinent felt that they were being underpaid compared to those from other regions.

We have heard that companies are looking to cut our wages but do not know what we can do.

How happy about the food on board?

6.32 ↓ from 6.64

Stuck on board with no idea when leave will be allowed or when reliefs will arrive, food is often the comfort that seafarers turn too – as long as it is fit for purpose. All too often it is not, and the mood onboard deteriorates as a result.

Those who have received good food scored consistently higher levels of happiness than others, and there was a real sense of the importance of meals in bonding crews. Where internet access is bemoaned as having a negative impact on the social life onboard, it seems that the difference between good and bad food is far more telling.

Where there are good meals and a sense of structure for seafarers to come together to eat well during the day, the respondents tend to be happier. One respondent commented, “We are so lucky to have very nice meals, good variety, healthy on occasion and with some treats.”

Food is hugely important to the sense of wellbeing onboard. It was also commented by some seafarers that where their companies told them to “stay healthy and boost immune systems” to stave off the effects of Covid, they did so without investing any additional funds and without providing any better quality food.

The standard of ingredients is of course important, but the skill of good chefs is recognised and celebrated. One respondent said, “We are so happy to meet a chief cook that’s served onboard passenger vessels”. Quality meals can lead to a big rise in happiness.

We are so lucky to have very nice meals, good variety, healthy on occasion and with some treats.

How happy about your ability to keep fit and healthy on board? 6.35 ↓ from 6.50

The issue of being “fit and healthy” begins to take on a very different meaning during a pandemic, and seafarers spoke out about some of the difficulties they have faced in the past three months in keeping their vessels clean and themselves free from infection.

Not unsurprisingly this section of the Index saw another fall in the figures, building on a previous steady downward trend. A number of seafarers told us of the confusion and conflicting guidance they were receiving on protection against COVID-19. There were many difficulties to overcome, and often contradictory realities to juggle and manage.

There was much frustration voiced too, and issues like ships receiving multiple visitors from ashore were uppermost in the problems. As one seafarer stated, “How are we meant to keep ourselves free from a virus when so many immigration officers come onboard?” There were multiple responses which highlighted the issue of trying to manage too many visitors.

Technical issues too were raised when it came to protecting against the virus, and vessel air conditioning systems were deemed to be a potential health hazard: “The whole crew is breathing the same air, and if one becomes ill, I fear for all of us”. This was particularly a problem for crews who were informed of the need to keep some form of social distance between themselves and others who came onboard.

Other issues related to health were especially frustrating to crews, and especially where instructions or well-meaning guidance was impossible or difficult to apply. “My company tells me to wash boiler suits after each watch, but fresh water is rationed so I cannot”. Comments such as this highlight the reality of trying to act in the right way when small details are not considered.

One seafarer summed up the mood, “the best we can do is to do our best, but no-one knows if that will be enough”. This highlights the mental stress and pressure of constantly trying to remain ahead of the virus for months on end, never knowing what the next day may bring.

Health is also about getting the right treatment when illness or accident hits, and it was clear that seafarers were worried about not getting access to shore treatment or concerned about how they would be treated. As one seafarer put it, “I have needed the dentist for the past three ports but am not allowed to get ashore. How can this be fair?”.

The whole crew is breathing the same air, and if one becomes ill, I fear for all of us.

How happy about contact with family when at sea? 6.53 ↓ from 6.81

There has been an almost constant clamour and demand from seafarers for as cheap and high-quality access to the internet as possible. This has become even more important to crews as they are unable to leave vessels for shore leave or go on leave.

Access to communication is absolutely pivotal to the state of mind of crews. Those who have good access, as we have observed in many previous reports, are far happier than those who do not. This pattern has remained, but the gap between the 'haves', 'have intermittently' and 'have nots' has become even more marked.

There is no equivocation from seafarers, the message is crystal clear: online access is fundamental to life at sea today. Many bemoan the fact that connectivity chips away at the social fabric of the vessel, but seafarers do not see it that way. Internet access is not what keeps people in their cabins, it is the lack of social life onboard – the cabin retreat is the symptom not the cause.

Time and time again the comments received were about how the internet was a lifeline. "Life without internet sucks" was one quote which seemed to capture the general mood.

There was also enormous relief from those who can access online services, especially as the uncertainty of crew change has thrown many routines awry. Seafarers commented that they were able to perform key administration tasks, both work and personal, thanks to online access. They were able to change banking instructions, to update and renew documents, to keep abreast of news, as well as being able to stay in touch with home. The problems of being trapped onboard were mitigated by access to the internet and calls.

For those who could be in touch with home, the crew change crisis felt eased slightly. At least they could talk, plan, console and support their families. There was praise and thanks for the shipping companies who had increased data or call limits. For those without, or with limited access, sadly this only heightened their tension, worry, stress and upset.

Life without internet sucks!

How happy with welfare facilities when you are ashore? 5.33 ↓ from 5.55

With seafarers not being allowed ashore, the issue of welfare facilities became far more centred on the reception given to them in the ports they called at.

The lockdown in many countries has had a terrible knock on effect for the welcome afforded to seafarers. While it is perhaps understandable that many nations have not been encouraging shore leave, the fact that vessels have been turned away, as in the case of many cruise ships, has started to leave an indelible mark on crews. In many places the lack of willingness to facilitate crew changes, to allow seafarers to go home or to join ship, has also been incredibly depressing and damaging.

In previous Happiness Index reports we have witnessed a real sense of pride amongst seafarers that they are key to making sure that people are fed, fuelled and that trade keeps moving. It has been very saddening to see that this sense of appreciation has evaporated as seafarers feel ignored or blatantly abused.

Although port welfare services are being continued where possible and new digital welfare services have been launched, the worldwide lockdown has meant seafarers have not been able to enjoy the same welcome in port or access to medical care and other services ashore as they would normally. The effects of the pandemic have left seafarers feeling let down, and as thousands struggle to get home or back to work, it is impossible to argue with this troubling assessment.

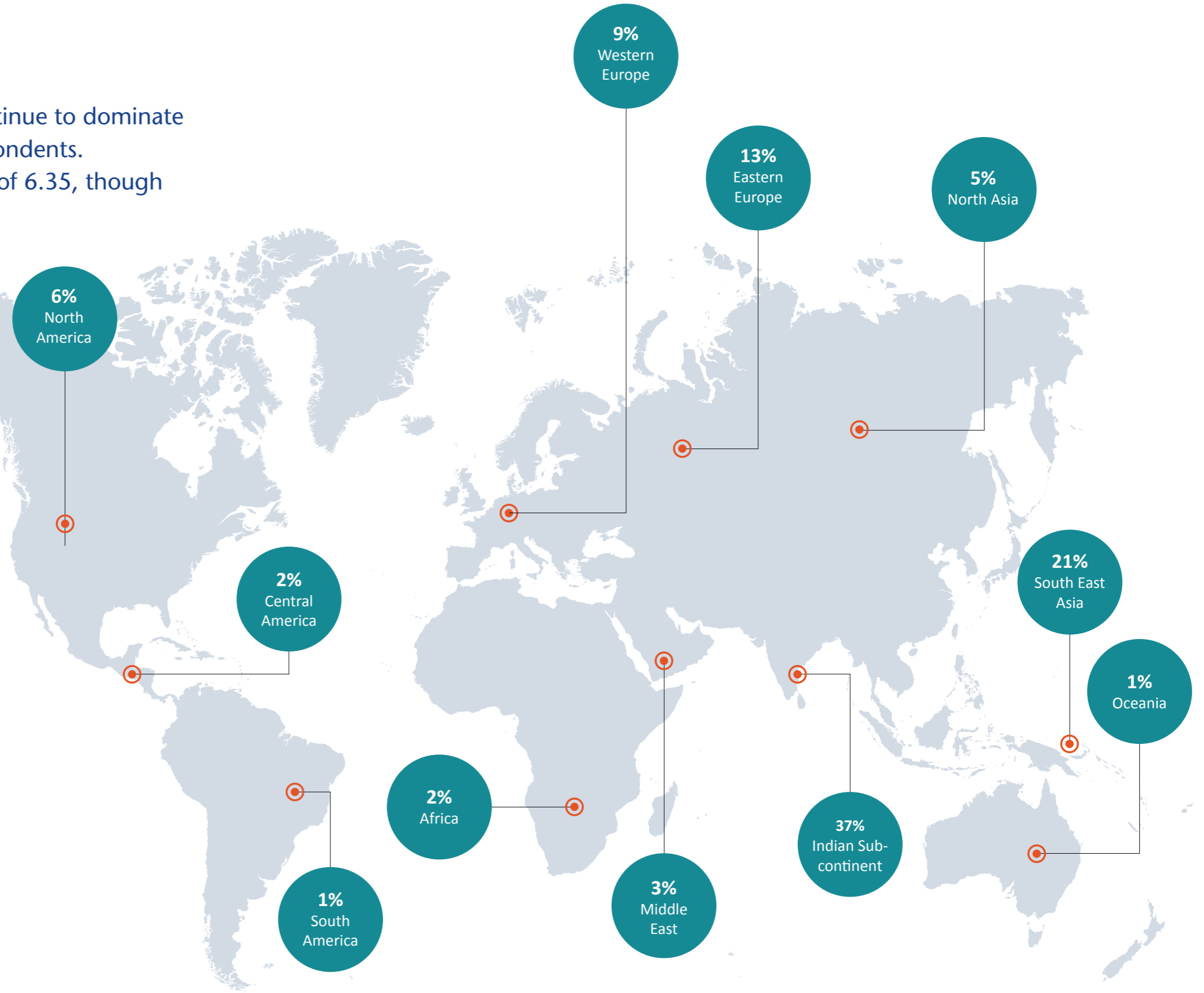
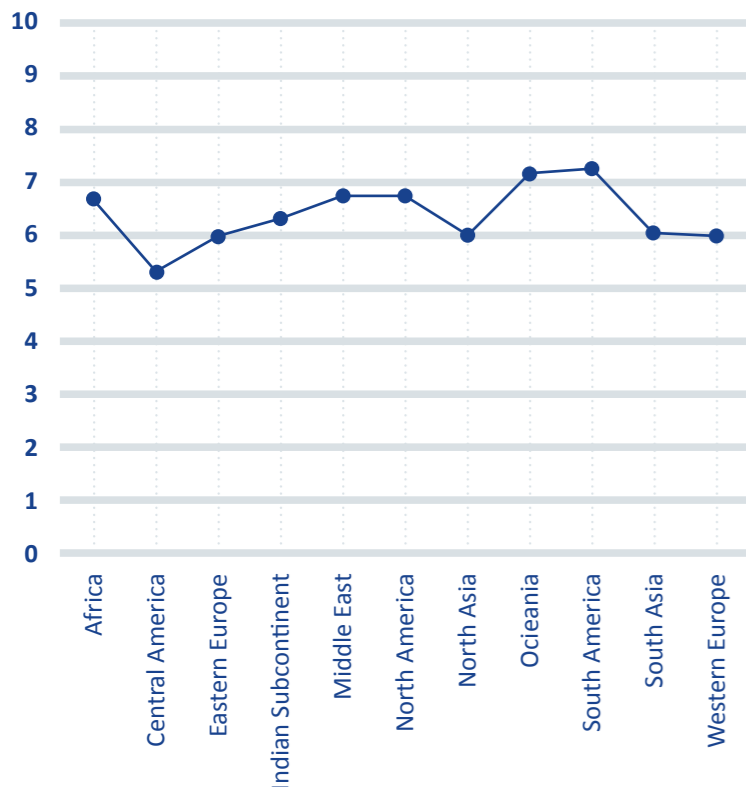
I have needed the dentist for the past three ports but am not allowed to get ashore. How can this be fair?

Where

Seafarers from the Indian Subcontinent continue to dominate the index, making up 37% of the total respondents. However, they scored a fairly average score of 6.35, though marginally up 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 by far were from Oceania and South America. They scored in excess of 8, which is far higher than we have come to expect from any groups usually. From the written responses it seems they may not have been as exposed to crew travel and changeover problems as others.



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.

General happiness levels have fallen, which is to be expected with so many seafarers feeling trapped at sea. However, there were other issues that came to light with reports of sexism, racism and bullying all seemingly on the rise. There was also talk of heightened tensions with reports of drunkenness and secret cabin drinking suggesting some are resorting to alcohol to perhaps numb the pain.

It appears that the stress onboard is exacerbated by workload. Crews are sailing with fewer people and there are reports of more sickness onboard and even suggestions of malingering. All this creates a toxic environment, especially when seafarers are expected to work harder than ever and there is a pressure to keep hygiene standards at almost hospital levels. The demands are relentless, with no sign of let up.

Ensuring cleanliness and hygiene is all well and good, but there needs to be the training and tools to do so. These seem to be lacking on many vessels with the result once more of heightened stress. Frustrations are intensified further as seafarers struggle to adhere to new guidance.

One issue which is perhaps symptomatic of the real problems facing crews is that of gangway security. Crews are advised that any visitors displaying symptoms should not be allowed onboard, which makes perfect sense. However, when we put ourselves in the position of the gangway watch it is not so straightforward. In hot climates, everyone arriving at the top of a long accommodation ladder is out of breath and sweating. Add masks and hard hats into this equation and there is almost a tragic comedy to the dance around seafarers being asked to do so much.

Such challenges begin to take their toll, and the uncertainty of getting home combined with tiredness and fatigue makes for a difficult atmosphere onboard. Social life, already a difficult issue, has been hit further still as distancing onboard is attempted.

Less positive contact and fewer interactions are leading to increased loneliness and isolation. With separate dining, no sports and fewer people in shared areas, the impact of social distancing is making life onboard very difficult. While there is acceptance that life is different now, there are also worrying reports of different nationalities treating the challenges of social distancing differently, causing consternation and sometimes even conflict onboard.

This brings us to the areas of potential succour for seafarers. Can food, fitness and the opportunity to remain in touch with family make a difference? Despite well-meaning shore management missives about nutrition and the importance of healthy food boosting immunity, responses in this quarter suggest food spends have not been increased, no additional training given to cooks, and there are no signs of increased stocks of fresh fruit and vegetables. Talk about helping crew stay healthier has seemingly remained just that on many vessels.

The same kinds of problems dogged the issue of fitness and health onboard. Crews expressed their concerns about the number of visitors they have to deal with, and anxieties about the role air conditioning units could play in spreading the virus onboard. Even if technically unfounded, these fears still exist and there does not seem to be much in the way of reassurance.

Stresses are exacerbated further by concerns about other health issues, for instance seafarers are very worried that they will not have access to medical treatment ashore if it is needed. Again, the signs suggest this concern is a real and valid one, as most ports are in lockdown and crew are not allowed ashore.

There is a growing sense that seafarers are suffering from not only the real stresses, but the imagined too. The anxiety is building, tensions rising, and it feels like there is a dam about to break. Often talking to family and loved ones can help, but with the world in the grip of an



unprecedented pandemic, the ability to speak or mail those at home only adds another layer of complexity. That said, crew would far rather feel connected than not be.

The only category of the Index to see a rise this time round was the question of salary. It seems the only benefit of prolonged or extended contracts has been extra cash. That said, however, there was a sense that money is far less of a priority than we have seen in other reports. The responses indicated that satisfaction is not about pay rises but simply the sense of relief when companies are seen to be looking after crews, paying on time and ensuring that families are taken care of.

This latest Seafarers Happiness Index report is a snapshot of a real crisis and shows the problems facing crews on a macro and micro level. Sadly, there are very few positive threads to pull. The message is that work has become almost intolerable and the sense of desperation to get home is only growing.

For this tired, irritable, stressed and overworked group, it cannot be long until the pressure gets too much. There is talk in the industry of a rise in suicides and the feedback we receive does nothing to ease those concerns. The number of accidents will likely rise too as people are not performing to their best when under stress. There are real concerns that seafarers are at breaking point.

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.

The Mission to Seafarers Support for stranded seafarers during Covid-19

The latest Seafarers Happiness Index report highlights many of the current challenges faced by seafarers both at sea and ashore. In these extraordinary times, the Mission to Seafarers has been responding to some of the problems facing seafarers and their families ashore.

At the time that the lockdown came into force in the UK in March, there were estimated to be around 255 Indian nationals studying at maritime colleges across the country. With the closure of all universities and the cancellation of flights to India, these students were left stranded, forced to stay in the country well beyond the period they had budgeted for. Many were left in serious financial difficulty, faced with great stress and uncertainty.

One of those affected was Ashwath, a Chief Officer, who had come to the UK to undertake his Master Mariner examinations in Blackpool. Arriving with his wife and 2-year-old son on the 2nd March, he had only expected to be in the country for a short period and was not at all prepared for an extended stay.



Although aware of the escalating Covid-19 crisis, Ashwath's focus was initially on his exams which were due to take place in April. As he recalls, "I started studying hard. I woke up early in the morning and kept studying 12 to 16 hours a day." Those few weeks, however, saw the spread of the pandemic rise at an alarming pace and it was not long before the idea of being stranded in the UK became a very real prospect. On the 18th March the Indian government shut down all airports and shortly afterwards all UK universities were closed and exams cancelled. As Ashwath recalls, "I was worried a little bit, but I thought it will be for short duration. The situation became

worse when our return flights on 9th April got cancelled and the airline company didn't refund our ticket fare. We had to pay our landlord and manage for groceries. We were finishing our money. In a foreign country with wife and a small kid with less money was leaving our family in stress."

Ashwath was referred to the Mission to Seafarers who had already assisted a number of stranded students with support from ISWAN's Seafarers Emergency Fund. For some, like Ashwath, who were here with dependents, financial help was vital: "The Mission to Seafarers came up like a flying angel for help. As soon as we registered with MtS, they helped us to pay our rent and grocery costs." The Mission has now helped over 100 students by covering their rental payments and providing supermarket vouchers.

The Indian High Commission began to arrange evacuation flights for the stranded Indian nationals, but the high cost of the flights combined with the family's already strained finances, left them in further difficulty. It was then that Ashwath decided to turn again to the Mission for help: "I requested MTS to help me get evacuated and I was surprised with the quick response. I was struggling to pay my return fares as the evacuation flights were 2.5 times the normal ticket price."

The Mission paid for the family's flights home to India and, after two weeks in quarantine, they were back home.

Ashwath and his family are very grateful for the support they received from the Mission during this challenging time: "MtS is really a flying angel for seafarers. There are many people who got stuck due to COVID 19, I was one of them and it would not be possible for me to return my home so easily without help of Mission to Seafarers."

To access Chat to a Chaplain, a 24-hour chat facility for seafarers and their families to engage with a chaplain, visit www.missiontoseafarers.org or www.icma.as and click on the Chat function.

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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