

## **Human Element Issues KPI-HEI-9-2012** **(Multinational Crews; Research Findings)**

➤ **Introduction:**

Multinational crews issue is a key element in today's ship-management. There have been various researches that focus on the matter & having MLC requirements on the doorsteps of the shipping & management companies; it is a wise approach to ponder on some valuable points concerning personnel management.

One of the projects which was conducted by the (Seafarers International Research Centre) SIRC researchers under the title of "Transnational Seafarer Communities" is quoted here. The results are worthy to study and be put into use.

➤ **The methodology:**

The methodology employed by the project was unusual in that it allowed researchers to board vessels and live alongside multinational crews whilst utilising a combination of observation and interviewing techniques in data collection. In total the project focused on fourteen ships and included taped interviews with 242 seafarers aboard these vessels. In addition the study incorporated findings from interviews with crewing managers in ten companies, 141 seafarers in North Germany and Holland, and 131 interviews with seafarers' families in India and the Philippines.

➤ **Main findings:**

1. Approximately 65% of the world merchant fleet have adopted multinational crewing strategies. Just over ten percent of the fleet is staffed with crews composed of five or more different nationalities.
2. Whilst many companies introduced mixed nationality crews solely on the grounds of cost and competitiveness, owners and managers indicated that there are a number of *unanticipated additional benefits* associated with multinational crews.
3. It became apparent that *stereotyping diminished with contact*. Thus seafarers were less likely to have stereotyped understandings of the nationality groups with whom they had sailed regularly and were more likely to generalise about national groups with whom they had little contact.
4. There was *no evidence of a correlation between nationality and behaviours* or qualities such as leadership or initiative taking.

5. *Teambuilding* and personnel management depended on the skills of individuals aboard and were *largely neglected in terms of the supply of corporate* or college based training.
6. The project found that *co-operation and integration increased amongst mixed nationality crews as the number of nationalities aboard increased*. Amongst crews composed of four or more nationalities there were higher levels of mixing and better collaboration, than amongst crews with two or three nationalities.
7. A remarkable degree of *cross cultural tolerance was evident* and it was noted that, in order to foster good social relations, seafarers carefully avoided discussing a number of specific, 'sensitive', topics whilst concentrating on widely accessible subjects for 'story telling' and joking.
8. Some senior officers reported that the *minor degree of social distance* frequently existing between members of different cultures, combined with an acceptance of 'difference', assisted with the maintenance of respectful relationships between super-ordinates and subordinates.
9. It was apparent that in most cases members of multinational crews *exercise care in attempting to avoid imposing their own values* onto other cultural groups.
10. *Different cultural practices and forms were a topic of interest* for seafarers who often discussed and explored these differences (carefully) with one and other.
11. It was noted that where crews were composed of fewer nationalities occupational *hierarchies tended to be 're-aligned'* to synchronise with differences of nationality.
12. Whilst discrimination on the basis of nationality was not commonly observed there were *some disturbing accounts of the practices and prejudices* of a small number of officers and ratings.
13. *Social isolation correlated more strongly with company policies* (e.g. alcohol prohibition) and the on board practice of senior officers, than with crew composition in terms of nationality.
14. *Language was found to be a critical issue for multinational crews*. Use of first languages rather than a common language fostered suspicion amongst multilingual crews. Poor use of the working language of the ship could result in frustration and militated against the use of humour, which was found

*to be a key element of social interaction and integration.*

15. *Catering for multinational crews was reasonably well managed on board. Food was least problematic where all ranks of seafarers were granted maximum access to food (e.g. provided in fridges or pantries so seafarers could help themselves at any time, day or night) and choice.*
16. *Faith was a fundamental part of many seafarers' lives. However religious differences within crews were respected and religious practices were generally privately observed and did not give rise to concern or conflict. Some seafarers regretted that only Western religious holidays were marked aboard many vessels.*
17. *Seafarers contributed to local economies to a significant extent, but in a very uneven manner.*
18. *Some seafarers were not the affluent 'big dollar' earners that they were perceived to be locally and lived precariously on the edge of destitution.*
19. *The impact of seafarers' absences on community and family life is considerable.*
20. *Company policies and practices (contract lengths, wages, communication facilities, demands on leave time, partners sailing, etc.) can alleviate the problems of seafarers and their families or, indeed, may contribute to them.*
21. *Expatriate communities of seafarers are less viable today than they have been in the past. Nevertheless they continue to contribute, in a minor capacity, to the local seafarer labour markets of hub ports such as Rotterdam and Hamburg.*
22. *Immigration and social security laws may be critical in determining the continued viability of expatriate seafarer communities.*

➤ **Conclusions:**

The main research findings demonstrate that multinational crews *are not only viable but can operate extremely successfully*. Multinational crews are popular with both companies and seafarers. A number of unanticipated advantages were associated with their introduction and these were highlighted and illustrated by both employers and employees.

*Seafarer families had generally been positively affected* by the growth of multinational crews. *Most associated advantages related to finance* but some companies had introduced other policies and practices that impacted positively on seafarers' families. These tended to relate to the provision of on board telecommunications facilities, shorter contracts,

positive practices in relation to partners of seafarers sailing, and so forth. Seafarers exposed to other nationalities sometimes *brought new habits and ideas back to their communities*. However, there was also evidence that the lifestyles of some seafarers encouraged them to maintain a conservative cultural outlook on return to their homelands, regardless of the influences they encountered at sea and abroad. Transnational communities of expatriate seafarers in hub ports such as Rotterdam and Hamburg are either in the process of being dramatically transformed or are in decline. Social security and immigration laws are critical in determining the long-term viability of such communities. The availability of expatriate seafarers continues to serve the labour market needs of a small number of local employers.

➤ **Recommendations:**

The research indicated that multinational crews operate effectively and harmoniously given the right conditions on board. In order to create such conditions there are a number of policies and practices that could be successfully introduced or developed by ship owners and managers. Briefly these include the following:

- ✓ ***Ensuring high levels of fluency in the working language of the ship amongst both officers and ratings***
- ✓ ***Pursuing policies encouraging stable crewing***
- ✓ ***Promoting social activities on board via Masters and senior officers***
- ✓ ***Adopting and implementing anti-discrimination policies and practices on board***
- ✓ ***Developing the personnel management skills of senior officers including existing as well as newly appointed Masters and Chief Engineers***
- ✓ ***Avoiding the circulation of materials reinforcing cultural and national stereotypes.***

For further reading a comprehensive paper can be addressed to be found in the NI Human Element project site [www.he-alert.org](http://www.he-alert.org). It is called "Multinational Crew in Words & in Action" by Captain Shahrokh Khodayari.

Downloadable from: [www.he-alert.org/displayArticle.aspx?articleID=HE00530](http://www.he-alert.org/displayArticle.aspx?articleID=HE00530)