

ISSN 2454-5597



ISFIRE WORKING PAPER SERIES

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL PREPARATION FOR SEAFARERS

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Working Paper – 46
[**https://ojsiire.com/index.php/isfirewps**](https://ojsiire.com/index.php/isfirewps)
Issue – May 2022

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MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL PREPARATION FOR SEAFARERS

Dr Poonam Kapoor¹.

Abstract

Working in the Merchant Navy can be rewarding, but also demanding. Seafarers face unique challenges that can affect their mental and emotional health, such as isolation, stress, fatigue, and culture shock. To deal with these challenges effectively, seafarers need to be mentally and emotionally prepared before and during their voyage. This article highlights the need for such preparation, not only for the youngsters but also to experienced officers and crew members on board.

Keywords: Merchant Navy, Seafarers, Mental health, Emotional health, Well-being, Work performance, Interpersonal relationships.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Merchant Navy is a vital part of global trade and offers attractive career prospects for individuals. It involves extensive travel, exposure to diverse culture, high pay, tax-free income, and chances to visit new places, makes it a desirable option for many. However, it also comes with challenges, some of them are:

1. Spending long periods away from friends and family,
2. Having limited social and recreational activities with peers,
3. Continuous studies and need to clear various written and oral examinations from time to time,
4. Facing risky and dangerous situations like piracy, storms, accidents, fires, etc,
5. Clearing medical fitness requirements and certain criteria of physical health.

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Like any other career, the merchant navy has its benefits and challenges. To work in any department of the merchant navy, one has to complete specific education and training, and pass the selection processes of the employer company. This ensures that the seafarer has the necessary education, knowledge, and skill for a certain rank on board a ship. However, the industry still faces problems related to the mental and emotional well-being of its sailing staff. The industry needs to improve its preparedness to deal with the wellbeing issues of seafarers. It is vital for every seafarer to have sound mental and emotional health, and to be ready mentally and emotionally before joining a vessel. The biggest advantage of using battery and motors instead of Internal Combustion Engines is the high efficiency of power conversion from electric to mechanical through the electric motor. Secondly, the need to reduce carbon footprint has encouraged governments to support and subsidize EVs rather than conventional IC Engine driven vehicles.

2. MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH:

Before we go further, let us understand what mental health and emotional health mean. They refer to the well-being of a person's psychological and emotional state. They are influenced by many factors, such as thoughts, feelings, emotions, behaviours, and social interactions. Mental health covers the cognitive and behavioural aspects of a person's mental state. It includes various conditions, from depression, anxiety, to normal changes in mood, stress, and rational function. Emotional health covers the ability of a person to understand, recognize, and manage his/her emotions in a healthy and appropriate way. It involves being aware of one's emotions, regulating and expressing them in a way that does not harm oneself or others. Mental and emotional wellbeing are related concepts that affect how we feel, think, react and act. Both are interconnected and important for overall well-being. A person's mental and emotional health can affect his/her physical health, relationships, and quality of life. It can also affect an individual's performance and productivity at work. Let us examine how and why mental and emotional health play such crucial role in a professional life of a person:

1. Performance and Productivity: When a person is mentally and emotionally balanced, he/she is better able to focus, think critically, and make sound decisions, translating into motivation, engagement, innovation, and higher productivity.

2. Resilience and Stress Management: A healthy mental and emotional state can enhance an individual's ability to cope with stress and setbacks in the workplace. It helps them bounce back from challenges, adapt to changes, and maintain a positive outlook. This prevents burnout, reduce absenteeism, and promote overall well-being in a professional setting.
3. Interpersonal Relationships: Mental and emotional health also influence a person's ability to interact. A state of mental and emotional well-being leads to better communication, collaboration, and conflict resolutions, which are essential for positive and effective interpersonal relationships in any work setting.
4. Decision Making and Problem Solving: Sound mental and emotional health gives an ability to avoid impulsive or irrational reactions and gives an ability to look for solutions in difficult situations. With the mental and emotional wellbeing comes ability to think critically, consider different perspectives, and make a thoughtful decision.

3. SOURCES OF STRESS AND ANXIETY FOR SEAFARERS: UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES ON BOARD A SHIP:

Joining the Merchant Navy means being away from family, friends, and comfort zone for extended periods, which brings feelings of homesickness and isolation. This can lead to various psychological challenges such as stress, depression, and anxiety (Bhatia et al., 2019; Roberts & Marlow, 2016). Studies have shown that voyage duration, job demands, job satisfaction and turnover intentions, can significantly impact the mental well-being of seafarers (Hansen & Jensen, 2017; Kalantonis & Bohlmann, 2016; Lee & Cho, 2017).

Interpersonal issues on board, communication gaps, and stressful situations at home can also increase the anxiety and stress of seafarers. A young cadet may feel disillusioned on board a vessel as his perception of life on board is different than what he or she experiences. Some more issues faced by sea fearers on board a ship can be listed as follows:

1. Workload and work-life balance: Maintaining a healthy work-life balance can be challenging for sailing staff on board ships. Balancing work responsibilities with personal time and recreational activities can be difficult, leading to stress and reduced job satisfaction.

2. Working hours and fatigue: Sailing staff on board ships often work long hours, sometimes there may be exceeding the standard working hours, which can lead to fatigue and in some cases may impact their performance, and well-being.
3. Crew dynamics: Living and working in close quarters with a diverse crew can sometimes lead to conflicts, differences in opinions, and personality clashes.
4. Career development and growth opportunities: Limited career growth prospects and monotony on board a ship may sometimes impact the motivation and job satisfaction.
5. Uncertainty about signing off: This can be a significant source of stress for seafaring personnel. Seafarers may experience uncertainty about when they will be able to sign off due to contract extensions or delays in crew changes. This can disrupt their plans and personal commitments and create stress and anxiety.
6. The stigma: The stigma associated with mental health also pose challenges. Seafarers may hesitate to seek help due to fear of repercussions, such as losing their job or being seen as unfit for duty. This can hinder their access to counselling and support services, leading to untreated mental health issues.
7. Weather Conditions: Adverse weather conditions, like too much rolling, pitching or storm makes life on board challenging.
8. Gap in the level of competency: Sailing staff require continuous training and development to maintain their competency and comply with industry regulations. Non availability of adequate training resources, opportunities for skill enhancement, and recognition of their expertise can impact their job satisfaction and performance.
9. Access to information and communication: Clear communication channels and access to relevant information are essential for sailing staff to perform their duties effectively. Challenges related to language barriers, communication breakdowns, and limited access to up-to-date information can cause confusion and anxiety.

4. FACTORS ADDING STRESS AND ANXIETY TO SAILING STAFF ON BOARD A SHIP:

In today's digital age, internet and connectivity have become an integral part of our lives, including the maritime industry. With the advent of satellite communications, sailors on merchant ships have access to the internet, allowing them to stay connected with their families and friends back home. However, while internet and connectivity offer numerous benefits, it also impacts the mental and emotional health of sailors at sea. It has been experienced that internet and connectivity aboard ships sometimes create additional stress and challenges for sailors, rather than providing a balance between work and personal life. The constant need to be connected impede the ability to unwind and disconnect from stressors. Additionally, connectivity brings some other issues such as:

1. **Information Overload:** With the internet readily available, sailors are bombarded with news, social media updates, and other information from the outside world. This constant stream of information can create feelings of overwhelm and anxiety, as sailors may be exposed to negative news or personal issues from home that they are unable to address while at sea. This information overload can contribute to heightened stress and emotional distress among sailors, affecting their mental well-being.
2. **Social Isolation:** Paradoxically, despite being connected to the virtual world, sailors may experience social isolation onboard. The reliance on virtual communication may not fully substitute for face-to-face interactions with loved ones, leading to feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and disconnection from social support networks. This sense of isolation can have a significant impact on the mental and emotional health of sailors, contributing to feelings of depression and anxiety.
3. **Distractions and Negative Influences:** Internet and connectivity can also expose sailors to various distractions and negative influences. Access to social media, online gaming, and other online activities can consume valuable time and attention, affecting sailors' focus on work, sleep, and self-care. Moreover, exposure to online negativity, cyberbullying, or other harmful content can further contribute to stress and emotional distress among sailors.
4. **Reduced Social Interaction among Sailing Officers:** Before the boom of internet sailing officers and crew used to engage in group activities and interactions in smoke rooms and other common areas, which helped them cope with the stress and loneliness of their profession. However, with the advent of personal devices that provide internet access, sailing officers now have their own means of entertainment and communication which has considerably reduced time and opportunity for social interaction among seafarers. Resulting in aloofness, which increases the chances of depression and anxiety.

Clearly the constant connectivity creates challenges in achieving a healthy work-life balance for seafarers on board. It is essential to acknowledge and address the potential impact of internet and connectivity on the mental and emotional health of seafarers.

We all know that in the realm of technical troubleshooting, it is often said that knowing the problem is key to finding the solution. However, when it comes to human resources (HR) issues, simply knowing the problem is never enough. In HR, understanding the issue is crucial, but it is just the first step in a complex and multifaceted process. HR issues involve people and their emotions, perceptions, and motivations, which adds layers of complexity, and it requires more than just knowledge to navigate effectively. Unlike technical problems, HR issues often involve interpersonal dynamics, communication challenges, and diverse perspectives. They may be rooted in deep-seated beliefs, biases, or cultural norms, making them intricate and sensitive to handle. Merely knowing the issue won't necessarily lead to resolution; it's just the tip of the iceberg.

5. HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN SHIPPING INDUSTRY:

Human resource management (HRM) is the process of managing people and their work within an organization, it involves planning, acquiring, developing, motivating, and retaining employees to achieve organizational goals. HRM in the shipping industry is challenging and complex. The shipping industry is dynamic in nature, and it operates in a global and competitive environment. In the industry various companies may employ seafarers from different countries and cultures, who have different expectations and preferences, this coupled with the need to spend long periods out at sea, away from their families and social networks creates issues of isolation, stress, and anxiety. In addition to these issues HRM in shipping also deals with the issues related to health, and safety for seafarers. HRM faces challenges because of shortages of qualified seafarers for certain ranks, high turnover rates, and lack of skilled personnel etc. The process of recruitment, retention, and career development, training requires attention to every detail.

Addressing or resolving human resource issues requires empathy, active listening, effective communication, and conflict resolution skills. It involves understanding the nuances of human behaviour, managing emotions, building relationships, and fostering a positive work culture. Furthermore, HR issues are often ongoing and require continuous effort to address and resolve. The issues faced by seafarers are well known and players in the industry are involved in various practices on a regular basis such as:

1. Careful Selection and Recruitment: Organizations understand that hiring the right seafarer is crucial for the smooth functioning of a ship. All companies have proper recruitment processes in place, including screening, competency examination, psychometric testing, interviewing, verifying qualifications, for selecting the qualified and competent sea farers.
2. Training and Development: Ship and crew management companies provides training and development opportunities to its seafarers and put them through various training programmes to make them competent and compliant with industry regulations. Many companies also have on-board training programmes.
3. Retention and Motivation: Retaining seafarers is critical for the efficient operation of a ship. HR management try to address factors like challenging living conditions, uncertainty related to joining and signing off, compensation-related issues, they also provide incentives, recognition, etc. to motivate and retain sea farers.
4. Discipline and Conflict Resolution: Conflicts or disciplinary issues among seafarers can arise on board ships due to various reasons, such as cultural differences, personality clashes, and work-related stress. Generally, companies have established policies and procedures for conflict resolution, disciplinary action, and grievance handling to maintain a harmonious work environment and resolve issues on board a ship.
5. Diversity and Inclusion: Ships sometimes have a diverse crew from different nationalities, cultures, and backgrounds. Companies through its policies ensure that diversity and inclusion are promoted on board, and discrimination or harassment based on race, gender, religion, or other protected characteristics are not tolerated. Some companies also organize training and workshops related to diversity awareness, inclusion, and equal and fair opportunity for all.
6. Compliance with Regulations: Ships are subject to various regulations related to labor laws, safety, and security, including the International Labor Organization's Maritime Labor Convention (MLC) and International Maritime Organization (IMO) conventions. Companies ensure that the ship and its officers and crew are compliant with these regulations, including issues such as employment contracts, wages, working hours, and crew certification requirements.
7. Emergency Response and Crisis Management: Ships can face emergencies such as accidents, piracy, or natural disasters that require effective crisis management and

emergency response. Companies have well established policies and procedures for emergency drills, communication protocols, and officers and crew training to ensure that all seafarers are prepared to handle such situations effectively.

8. Pre-Joining Briefing: The pre-joining briefing is a standard practice in the maritime industry aimed at ensuring that seafarers are adequately prepared for their contracts. Prior to boarding a vessel, the respective shipping company or manning agency conducts a comprehensive briefing to equip seafarers for their upcoming voyage. This briefing typically covers crucial areas such as:
 - i. Vessel details: The seafarer is briefed about the vessel's specifications, including its size, type, and cargo carrying capacity.
 - ii. Voyage details: The seafarer is informed about the planned route, the expected duration of the voyage, and the ports of call.
 - iii. Safety and emergency procedures: The seafarer is trained on the vessel's safety procedures, including evacuation drills, firefighting, and first aid.
 - iv. Crew duties and responsibilities: The seafarer is informed about their duties and responsibilities, including their role in the vessel's operations and their watchkeeping duties.
 - v. Compliance requirements: The seafarer is briefed on the compliance requirements of various regulatory bodies, including the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC).
9. Post-Sign Off Debriefing: When a seafarer completes their contract and signs off the vessel, they typically undergo a post-sign off debriefing.

This debriefing is conducted by the shipping company or the manning agency and aims to evaluate the seafarer's performance and gather feedback. The debriefing usually covers the following areas:

- i. Performance evaluation: The seafarer's performance during their contract is evaluated, including their technical skills, teamwork, and adherence to safety procedures.

- ii. Feedback gathering: The seafarer is given the opportunity to provide feedback on their experience, including any concerns or suggestions they may have.
- iii. Documentation and paperwork: The seafarer is briefed on the paperwork and documentation required for their sign off, including their contract, discharge book, and other relevant documents.
- iv. Future opportunities: The seafarer is informed about future job opportunities and provided with guidance on how to secure their next contract.

Overall, pre-joining briefing and post-sign off debriefing are essential components of a seafarer's journey in the merchant navy. They help to ensure that seafarers are well-prepared for their contracts and that their performance is evaluated and documented for future opportunities.

Above explanation demonstrates that industry recognizes the importance of effective human resource management on board ships for maintaining competent, motivated, and healthy seafarers, ensuring compliance with regulations, and promoting a safe and harmonious work environment.

However, despite having these measures in place, the industry still faces challenges with the mental and emotional wellbeing of seafarers.

The existing international regulations and policies are not enough to address this problem. There is a clear need for more vigilance and proactivity in managing and mitigating issues related to the overall wellbeing of seafarers.

6. ANCHORING WELLNESS, ADDRESSING MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AMONG SAILORS:

The health and happiness of seafaring personnel are vital for the safe sailing and the protection of life and cargo at sea. It is time to give priority to the overall wellbeing of sailors on board and create a culture that supports their wellness. We will examine the significance of wellness as an anchor and discuss strategies to cope with mental and emotional health challenges that affect seafarers. We will also explore ways to foster a supportive work environment, promote self-care, and build resilience among sailors at sea.

Shipboard Leadership: Shipboard leadership is a crucial factor for the wellbeing and performance of seafarers. As discussed earlier, seafaring is a challenging and stressful profession that exposes seafarers to various physical and psychological hazards. Seafarers need strong and sensitive leaders on board who can provide them with guidance, support, feedback, recognition, and empowerment. Good leader is one who can keep his/her personal biases and preferences aside to create an environment for inclusion. Shipboard leaders can influence the mental health, resilience, job satisfaction, motivation, safety culture and teamwork of seafarers. Some of the key aspects of shipboard leadership that can help create a conducive environment for seafarers are:

1. **Coaching and mentoring:** Shipboard leaders should adopt a coaching style that helps seafarers develop their skills, confidence, and potential. Leaders should also provide mentoring and guidance to seafarers, especially to the cadets and junior officers.
2. **Communication and feedback:** Shipboard leaders should communicate and provide constructive feedback frequently to seafarers. The communication must be effective, clear, and respectful.
3. **Recognition and empowerment:** Shipboard leaders should from time to time recognize and appreciate the efforts and achievements of seafarers, both individually and as a team.
4. **Delegation:** Shipboard leaders should also empower seafarers by delegating tasks, giving them autonomy and involving them in decision-making.
5. **Support and care:** Shipboard leaders should show empathy and compassion to seafarers, especially during difficult times such as emergencies, accidents, or personal issues.
6. **Diversity and inclusion:** Shipboard leaders should respect and value the diversity of seafarers in terms of their nationality, culture, religion, gender, age, and personality. Leaders should also foster an inclusive culture on board that promotes mutual understanding, cooperation, and respect among seafarers.

Pre-Joining Briefing and Post Sign Off De-Briefing in presence of a counsellor: The mental and emotional well-being of seafarers is paramount in the maritime industry, and it is vital that their needs are addressed during routine practices of pre-joining briefing and post-sign off debriefing. In this regard, the presence of an independent counsellor would be important to ensure that seafarers receive adequate mental and emotional support.

The counsellor's role in pre-joining briefing will provide seafarers the essential coping mechanisms, help them understand the emotional impact of the job, and equip them with techniques to maintain their mental and emotional well-being while on board. This can go a long way in mitigating the unique challenges faced by seafarers such as isolation, long working hours, and homesickness.

Similarly, during post-sign off debriefing, the counsellor can help seafarers process their experiences, manage negative emotions, and provide support for their transition back to shore life. Seafarers often face challenges readjusting to life on land, and the counsellor's presence can facilitate this transition and help them cope with any challenges that may arise.

Preparing for the challenges of life on board: young seafarers should be aware of the unique challenges that they may encounter while living and working on a ship. These challenges may include long periods of separation from home, limited social interaction, and different cultures and working conditions. By understanding these challenges, youngsters can mentally prepare themselves and develop coping mechanisms.

Developing effective communication and interpersonal skills: Effective communication and interpersonal skills are crucial for success in any career, including the Merchant Navy. All seafarers need to learn how to communicate effectively with their fellow crew members, superiors, and other stakeholders on board. This includes understanding the importance of teamwork, conflict resolution, and building positive relationships with colleagues from diverse backgrounds.

Managing stress and fatigue: Working on a ship can be physically and mentally demanding, with long working hours, and unpredictable workloads. seafarers need to learn how to manage stress and fatigue effectively to maintain their physical and mental well-being. This can include techniques such as time management, relaxation exercises, and getting adequate rest.

Coping with homesickness and isolation: Being away from family, friends, and familiar surroundings for extended periods can result in homesickness and isolation. Seafarers need to learn how to cope with these emotions and develop strategies to maintain their mental and emotional well-being. This can include staying connected with loved ones through regular communication, engaging in hobbies or activities that provide comfort, and seeking support from fellow crew members or professionals on board.

Developing resilience and adaptability: Life at sea can be unpredictable, with challenges and emergencies that may require quick thinking and decision-making. Seafarers need to develop

resilience and adaptability to cope with unforeseen situations. This can include problem-solving skills, decision-making abilities, and the ability to stay calm and composed in challenging situations.

Internet and Connectivity: Shipowners, management and manning companies and maritime authorities should prioritize the well-being of sailors at sea by implementing policies and practices that promote healthy internet and connectivity use, provide opportunities for rest and relaxation, and facilitate meaningful social connections. By recognizing and addressing the dark side of connectivity, we can support the mental and emotional well-being of sailors, ensuring a healthier work environment onboard merchant ship.

Role of Counsellor; Sessions with a counsellor can play a vital role in ensuring the mental and emotional well-being of seafarers. The sessions with an independent counsellor provide a safe space for seafarers to express their thoughts and feelings without the fear of judgment. Counsellors can assist seafarers in developing coping strategies, improving emotional resilience, and managing stress and anxiety (Williams, 2015). Moreover, these sessions can also promote positive qualities such as empathy, active listening, and cooperation among officers, leading to better teamwork and communication on board. These skills can help seafarers build positive relationships with their fellow crew members, superiors leading to better teamwork and conflict resolution (Lloyd et al., 2020). Moreover, counsellors can also provide support and share ways to manage stress and fatigue (Bhatia et al., 2019). This session can also address issues such as homesickness and isolation, (Lloyd et al., 2020).

Educate and Raise Awareness: Educating employees about mental health and emotional well-being can help reduce stigma and increase awareness. Companies must provide training, workshops, and seminars on topics related to mental health, stress management, emotional intelligence, and self-care. This can empower employees to recognize signs of mental health concerns in themselves and their colleagues and seek appropriate support.

Availability of Resources for Holistic Wellbeing: Companies can consider having an independent dedicated resources to support seafarers mental and emotional wellbeing. This can include providing access to confidential counselling services (CCS), employee assistance programs (EAPs), mental health hotlines. These resources can provide employees with professional support and guidance when dealing with mental health challenges and can help reduce barriers to seeking help. Although some institutions and organizations offer these services, they need to be more effective and responsive.

Facilitate the Culture of Self-Care and Wellness: Shipping companies need to create a culture of self-care and wellness by providing resources and opportunities for employees to take care of their physical, mental, and emotional health. This can include wellness programs, mindfulness activities, exercise facilities, and access to healthy food options. Encouraging self-care and wellness can help employees develop healthy habits that support their mental and emotional well-being.

Role of family for a stress-free seafarer: Family members of seafarers play a vital role in supporting their wellbeing and performance. They should understand the challenges and demands of the profession and provide them with time and space to focus on their work. They should also avoid sharing too much stressful information that might distract or worry them. They should create a positive and confident environment at home that reassures their family person on board a ship.

7. CONCLUSION:

While the Merchant Navy offers exciting career prospects, it also presents unique challenges that can have a significant impact on the mental and emotional well-being of seafarers. It is imperative to acknowledge the importance of mental and emotional preparation for seafarers, regardless of their age or experience, before they embark on a voyage. Adequate mental and emotional preparation, including counselling sessions, connectivity with counsellors while on board, support groups, and understanding and empathy from family, can equip seafarers with the tools to manage the challenges they may encounter at sea.

Prioritizing the mental and emotional health of seafarers is essential for creating a more robust and resilient workforce in the maritime industry. By taking these necessary steps, seafarers will be better equipped to thrive in their roles and make meaningful contributions to the industry. A healthy and productive maritime industry is one that values the well-being of its workers and recognizes the unique challenges they face, both on board and in their personal lives. In conclusion, prioritizing the mental and emotional health of seafarers is not only beneficial for them, but it also contributes to a thriving and sustainable maritime industry.

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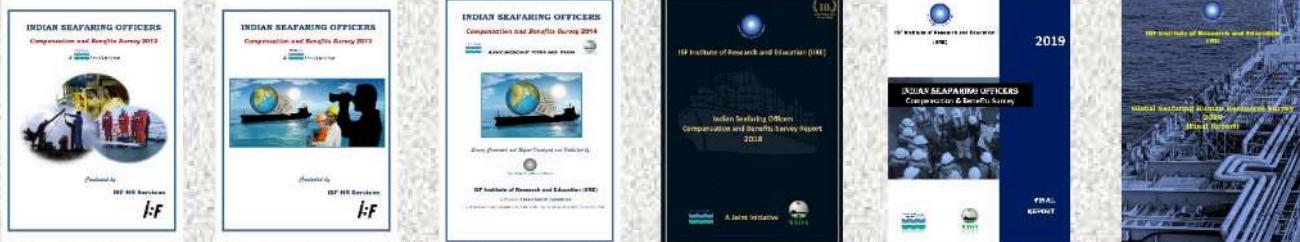
Other Publications

Developing and Delivering Integrated Educational and Research Programs

- ✓ *Benchmarking surveys*
- ✓ *Industry research*
- ✓ *Peer reviewed journal*
- ✓ *Working paper series*
- ✓ *White papers*
- ✓ *Application notes*
- ✓ *Training material distribution*
- ✓ *Book publishing*

Compensation and Benefits Surveys

IIRE has been conducting a 'Compensation and Benefits Survey' since 2009 for the sailing officers in various ranks of all types of merchant vessels of foreign shipping companies. The report of the survey has become necessary for the industry players helping them in positioning them-selves with regards to wages of seafarers.



Maritime Training Institutes Survey

This unique exercise, which is perhaps the first of its kind in the maritime sector was carried out for the first time in 2017. It has been initiated and supported by the dynamic industry associations FOSMA and MASSA. Twenty-Seven Shipping Companies with around 70000 seafarers on roaster and twenty-two Maritime Institutes conducting Pre-Sea, Post-Sea (COC) and various Modular Courses participated in the survey.



Shore Staff Salary Survey

A survey of salaries of the shore staff of shipping companies has been initiated in 2017. The survey covers a total of 1550 shore staff positions from 19 companies managing 29203 on board positions.

Global Seafaring Human Resources Survey

Global Seafaring Human Resources, which is a first of its kind covering various aspects of seafarers globally, FOSMA and MASSA members who have their offices in various countries have graciously introduced IIRE to key persons at those offices for obtaining data on various nationalities from various institutions, maritime administrations and unions. IIRE is thankful to all the support extended by these organizations who have helped IIRE obtain data.



IIRE Journal of Maritime Research and Development (IJMRD)

ISSN NO: 2456-7035

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