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Determinants of job satisfaction and performance of seafarers

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ABSTRACT

The ability to motivate and retain seafarers is a critical manpower issue in view of global labour shortage and high turnover rate among seafarers. The objective of this paper is to analyse the core determinants of job satisfaction and performance of seafarers. A survey was administered on 116 seafaring officers and the obtained data were analysed using structural equation modelling. The results show that job satisfaction is considerably correlated with job performance of seafarers. In addition, the amount of stress associated with working onboard a ship and attractiveness of rewards are key determinants of job satisfaction. The dispositions of seafarers and appeal of the job design also have considerable impacts on job satisfaction. Based on literature review and post-survey interviews, a management model consisting of policies and strategies to motivate and retain seafarers is proposed.

1. Introduction

The shortage of skilled seafarers, in particular officers and engineers, has been a growing concern for the shipping industry (McLaughlin, 2015). With more than 90% of world trade volumes transported by sea (International Chamber of Shipping, 2015), this problem is a global challenge to overcome. According to the scenario estimates by Baltic International Maritime Council and International Shipping Federation (2015), a global shortfall of approximately 92,000 seafaring officers is expected by the year of 2020.

This alarming finding has initiated a series of international campaigns such as ‘Go to Sea’ and ‘Day of the Seafarer’ which encourage governments to promote seafaring and address issues related to the work and living conditions on-board ships (International Maritime Organization, 2008, 2017). In line with these campaigns, the recent literature has proposed strategies for firms to attract seafarers. For instance, Thai et al. (2013) proposed several branding strategies to position a shipping firm as the employer of choice in the seafaring market. Some of the proposed strategies include improving the image of the shipping industry, and the use of attractive rewards in the form of high salaries and more employment benefits.

In addition to attracting seafarers, Fei and Lu (2015) argued that it is more important for shipping firms to retain their in-service seafarers. It was estimated that the annual turnover rate is between 25% and 35% in some shipping sectors such as cruise shipping (Bhattacharya, 2015). In general, attrition of seafarers is high, by virtue of reasons such as boredom at sea, single-task work environment, emotional and work-related stresses, and lack of family time (Singh, 2017; Thai and Latta, 2010). This is exacerbated by changes in the socioeconomic landscape where the younger generation favours shore-based jobs due to greater freedom and increasingly comparable salaries (Kantharia, 2017; Sulpice, 2011). According to a survey conducted by Ruggunan and Kanengoni

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(2017), approximately 55% of junior cadets do not intend to pursue a career at sea for more than 10 years, which further emphasises the importance of retaining in-service seafarers.

From the shipping firms' perspective, the ability to retain seafarers offers numerous organisational benefits. First, due to the shortage and rarity of qualified seafarers in the market, retaining seafarers can contribute to the competitive advantage of shipping firms. By possessing a competent and motivated pool of seafarers, the cost advantage of a shipping firm can be strengthened from improved productivity, and reduced absenteeism and attrition (Nguyen et al., 2014). Next, the ability to retain seafarers shall also render the accumulation of valuable knowledge and experience within the organisation. This valuable knowledge pool which is acquired through learning can be subsequently transferred to new seafarers and to the management of shipping activities ashore.

In recent year, much research has been conducted with the focus of formulating strategies to retain seafarers (Caesar et al., 2015; Papachristou et al., 2015; Pauksztat, 2017). The general conclusion from these research highlights the importance of job satisfaction (or motivation), which plays a key role in retaining seafarers. However, very little is known with regards to the factors influencing job satisfaction. There is presently a dearth of studies that adopt a theoretical lens to analysing the determinants of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction of seafarers. Furthermore, very few studies have investigated the relationship between job satisfaction and performance of seafarers. The performance of seafarers is measured by productivity and quality (i.e. making fewer mistakes). Performance improvements in seafarers have the potential of enhancing ships' turnaround time, meeting the efficiency demands of shipowners, and safety performance of ship operations (Fenstad et al., 2016). This could potentially translate to sizeable cost-savings and service improvements for a shipping company. Therefore, to bridge the gap in the literature, this study aims to introduce a research model that considers key theoretical approaches to explain job satisfaction, and examines its effect on the job performance of seafarers. Based on the results, policies and strategies to improve job satisfaction as well as job performance of seafarers are proposed.

This rest of the paper is presented as follows. A review of existing theories on job satisfaction, and the current situation in the job satisfaction level of seafarers are first presented; the hypotheses are then formulated accordingly. Following which, the methodology for the administration of an online survey and post-survey interviews are described. Thereafter, the collected data are analysed using structural equation modelling. The paper then presents and discusses the results obtained from the analysis and concludes with recommendations for future research directions.

2. Literature review and hypotheses formulation

2.1. Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction, a concept which is widely studied in organisational behaviour research, is 'commonly conceptualised as an affective variable that results from an assessment of an individual's job experience' (Fritzsche and Parrish, 2005). In a simpler term, job satisfaction is 'the extent to which people like their jobs' (Spector, 2008).

Job satisfaction can be explained using equity theory. According to Adams and Freedman (1976), equity theory refers to balancing or calibrating the inputs and outputs of an employee. The inputs are a composite of time, effort, ability, and loyalty which an employee commits to his (both genders) work. In exchange, the employee receives intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in the form of pay, bonuses, benefits, security, and enjoyment. Adams and Freedman (1976) posited that individuals become demotivated or unsatisfied when their inputs are not fairly compensated as compared to someone who is performing a comparable job.

Pursuing a seafaring career can be unsatisfying, despite the obvious attractions and benefits such as high wages and opportunities to sail internationally (Fei and Lu, 2015). The prospects and joy of visiting faraway lands have been reduced considerably due to faster turnaround in ports as a result of efficient cargo-handling operations and increasing demands from shipping companies to maximise profits (Fenstad et al., 2016). In addition, there are nowadays fewer incentives to pursue a seafaring career since salaries and perks offered by shore-based jobs are as competitive (Sulpice, 2011). A recent study by Sánchez-Beaskoetxea and Coca García (2015) found that the public generally portray seafarers rather negatively as seafarers' negligence or errors are often perceived to be the main cause of maritime accidents and pollutions (Uğurlu et al., 2013). The aforementioned factors have collectively reduced the overall attractiveness of seafaring while contributing to dissatisfaction among in-service seafarers.

Work-wise, there is a lot of stress associated with working on board a ship. This stress is mainly attributed to poor working and living conditions. According to Thai and Latta (2010), the shortage of seafarers and prevailing minimalist manning level on merchant ships have dramatically increased the work load of seafarers who face tighter and longer work schedules. It was reported that time on board a ship is either spent on working or resting. Ellis and Sampson (2013) found that only 23 percent of the seafarers have adequate rest, and this is worsened by noise and vibration in their cabins (Håvold, 2015).

Working on board a ship also affects the regular social life of seafarers. Seafaring has been described as a career which is isolated from human interactions due to restricted direct contact with home, infrequent and limited amount of shore leaves, low manning scales, and single-person tasking (Liang, 2011). Prolonged absence from families has been reported to be another major cause of dissatisfaction (Papachristou et al., 2015). The absence issue is magnified with the growing supply of Asian seafarers who are from collectivistic cultures that prioritise family bonding over individual needs (Abdullah, 2017). According to Ulven et al. (2007), the long-term absence of a parent or spouse has negative impact on the psychological well-being of the both the seafarer and his kin. In particular, heightened anxiety and depression are typically experienced prior to a seafarer's departure or return. As a result, conflicts may arise from the lack of support from the seafarers' families.

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