



Mentoring Seafarers

A report for the ITF Seafarers' Trust

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Executive Summary

The Mentoring Seafarers research showed that mentoring schemes are cost-effective and demonstrated clear benefits:

- for those being mentored - with technical and behaviour learnings;
- for those mentoring - being able to share their experience and becoming part of a self-perpetuating and ongoing learning cycle;
- for companies and organisations - in terms of staff recruitment, retention and engagement - providing safety and financial benefits as well as improving crew skills.

However, the research also discovered opportunities for improvement with respect to:

- inconsistencies across different schemes which resulted in lower impact from mentoring;
- poor communication of mentoring initiatives from shipping companies to employees (ship and shore) reducing the uptake of these initiatives;
- a lack of common understanding about what mentoring entails resulting in mentoring initiatives differing in what they set out to do and how they are implemented.
- expanding the cultural focus of the research to create an avenue for further understanding of cultural relativity and the ability to share experiences from other large seafaring nations (e.g. India and China).

Overall, individuals, companies and organisations in the shipping industry can demonstrate the cost-effective benefits of mentoring programmes (echoing research from other comparable industries). The research highlighted the potential of several immediate measures that companies could take in order to gain longer term benefit from developing mentoring initiatives. These are listed in the 'Best Practice' and 'Recommendations' sections.

This research set out to establish the extent of mentoring on board in the modern Merchant Navy, its benefits and best practice. It explored the barriers to mentoring and identified areas for improvement. It investigated areas of safety, well-being, equality, gender, seafarer retention, and the subsequent financial implications. Conclusions were drawn from secondary data sources from published literature and gathered primary data through two industry surveys. The quantitative data from the surveys was complemented by detailed stakeholder interviews.

The findings show that the term 'mentoring' is not universally understood and means different things to different individuals and organisations. Interpretations include elements of training, coaching and mentoring. The use of these terms appears to be driven by the objectives or end results required by individuals and organisations. This presents a fundamental difficulty when trying to obtain information on a topic where base understanding is not uniform.

The research highlighted a lack of development in non-technical skills, and leadership and management qualities which can inhibit the potential for team performance within the industry. Industry focus is predominantly on technical competence and theoretical learning

rather than leadership and people management and investment into one of its largest assets, the seafarers.

However, the research showed that mentoring still happens on board, both formally and informally, and continues to have significant impact, improving lives. The research also demonstrated that developing a culture of mentoring and support, to bridge the gap between the classroom and working practice, is often naturally paid forward or repeated by the mentee once experienced. It is clear that informal mentoring is widely valued, not only as a way of sharing knowledge, but also through the relationships that it engenders. The value gained by those sharing that experience is cherished and respected, often leaving a lifelong imprint.

The research highlighted several inconsistencies across organisations in respect of:

- training establishments, sponsorship and shipping companies communicating the availability of formal mentoring opportunities to staff;
- matching cadets' on-board role to pre sea-time expectations;
- the provision of suitably qualified and experienced mentors (including a reliance on hard-pressed training officers sometimes having to step in);
- mentoring scheme relevance across different cultures in a globally complex industry.

Mentoring is considered a vital building block, not only for use as a teaching aid but also for psychological support to engender confidence and competence. The research found that although mentoring is considered a tool that benefits safety culture, training efficiency and personal development, inconsistencies of its delivery can affect the well-being of individuals and the industry. Cost efficiency and poor communication mean that managers are often constrained by short-term goals. This means that, whilst the maritime industry is growing and acknowledges its need for qualified and skilled seafarers, the attraction and retention of staff is compromised by neglect of support networks and long-term management strategies. Without greater consistency in education to support an international and complex network of seafarers, there will be a 'void' in terms of experience as well as a greater prevalence of human error. This applies to both ship and shore networks.

This research finds that those engaged in mentoring as a 'best practice' recognise that theoretical learning requires consistent support to become applied knowledge and understanding. It also recognises that people need more than just technical training and that mental resilience can be developed through experienced support such as mentoring during transitional training periods. This is also recognised in other industries, for example in aviation and healthcare. A balance between technical and non-technical competence helps to maintain an industry resilience.

Findings of best practice

Where mentoring schemes or management and leadership training have been implemented successfully, organisations have been able to reduce expenditure related to safety, health, well-being and staff turnover. Cost savings where, for instance, fewer off-hire and vessel damage instances occur, can be made. Mentoring can be a long-term investment which ideally works best within a stable crew environment where mentor and mentee relationships have time to develop and flourish.

In all cases, the research suggests that top-down vision and clear leadership were key to the success of mentoring initiatives, supported by a company culture which strives to strengthen collaborative and long-term approaches.

Successful mentoring initiatives are continually trying to improve, but have, nevertheless provided better resilience and outcomes for their organisation. They work best in conjunction with good training and a long-term outlook on skills and personal development.

Examples of company best practice

This section describes examples of best practice being implemented within companies and at an industry level. These examples were selected based on detail provided from the research in terms of the mentoring initiative's structure, clear plan of intent and implementation, and measured outcomes.

Princess Cruises

Princess Cruises recognised that new employees were coming on board with varying levels of practical skills. Informal and formal schemes are applied with operational and non-operational supervision to address the varying skills' levels and ensure crew quality is maintained. The company training is conducted under strict guidance and with approval from department heads on board.

Ratings with potential for promotion are supported through a 'Pipeline' scheme to ensure they are equipped with leadership and management skills prior to taking up a new role. The company recognises the importance of leadership and management and the influence this has on the teams on board. The 'David Marquet'² style of leadership is applied to encourage empowerment and team cohesion.

² David Marquet describes a shift in leadership styles, moving from 'I command, you follow' to an 'intent (or empowering) based environment'. Teaching techniques that encourage everyone to engage at their optimum capacity, 'creating a place where people are happier and healthier'. www.davidmarquet.com

Seaspan

Seaspan have a 'Cadet to Command' programme in place for their seafarers which is promoted through their Career Development Initiative (CDI). This supports a learning culture that nurtures new employees through their journey from cadet to captain. Seaspan also recognise that leadership and management plays a large part in the success of the teams on board and ashore and acknowledge that non-technical skills are as important as technical competence.

The Honourable Company of Master Mariners (HCMM) Mentoring Scheme

HCMM offers a formal mentoring scheme to its members throughout the various stages of their career. The scheme was originally set up to improve retention within the industry and support new seafarers through to becoming a Master. Individuals are paired with experienced members who can offer 'a wealth of maritime seafaring knowledge' (HCMM, 2019) as well as support, encouragement and advice. This is primarily a long-distance mentor/mentee relationship but provides the invaluable opportunity to share experiences and demonstrate reflective practice outside of the working environment. This initiative is a long-term service that allows relationships and trust to build over time and helps the mentee to develop a foundation for resilience and confidence, both personally and professionally. There is no cost for this service for deck cadets, although engineering cadets must first join as member of the company to benefit from the mentoring programme.

Oil and gas industry

Recognising that safety is paramount within this sector, short sea programmes and psychometric testing are in place within the oil and gas industry. The short sea programmes provide supervision where there are high staff turnover, language issues and/or environments that are safety critical. Individuals go through structured competency tests before being allowed to work unsupervised.

Wightlink

Wightlink have initiated a programme called 'Bridging the Gap'. This recognises that organisational performance is dependent on the quality of leadership and management and ensures objective results to assess its ship and shore staff. Several days of performance analysis identify areas for improvement for individuals across all departments within the company. A further mentoring initiative will then work on areas identified for improvement by the performance analysis, with individuals. This is intended to be a long-term plan to strengthen organisational resilience and overall performance outcomes.

Key elements of best practice

This section identifies the best set of circumstances for implementing mentoring and offers specific recommendations for effective practice. These practices could apply to establishing or further developing mentoring within most companies.

1. Informal mentoring and sharing experiential knowledge with colleagues should be a culture that is encouraged. Even short bursts of time given to mentoring can mean that there is better understanding of a task or perspective.
2. Formal and informal mentoring systems that run simultaneously can offer the best advantage to those in the earlier stages of their career. As a shipping company, it is best to look at the elements of mentoring that you can provide and start there. Mentoring programmes can be developed over time.
3. Good communication of a company's training policy and available mentoring schemes are imperative to consistently and effectively raise awareness for all who could benefit from participating in them.
4. Shared experience and reflective practice needs to be encouraged at every opportunity in order to increase learning opportunities.
5. Becoming a mentor should always be voluntary. Companies should identify those in their organisation who would be willing to be mentors and who have the right aptitude for this work. Potential mentors may be willing to participate with guidance and encouragement to do so.
6. Mentoring should be free for those participating in it, to provide equality and equal opportunity.
7. Before providing formal mentoring, mentors should always be fully briefed on the company's expectations and the mentoring role. Support should be available for mentors.
8. Long distance mentoring can help manage some of the barriers to establishing mentoring initiatives, such as smaller crew sizes, time deficiencies and potential skills or experience gaps. Long distance mentoring then opens up a range of mentoring support which can be made available to all ranks on board and for those working ashore.
9. Mentoring initiatives should ideally provide long-term and consistent support for the personal and professional development of an individual in order to provide sustainable outcomes in safety, well-being and finance.
10. Mentoring should be available to support career development for all roles and ranks at sea and onshore. The investment of time in people development increases productivity and effectiveness.

Conclusions

The following conclusions have been made based on the research findings:

1. All forms of mentoring can provide benefits which assist with the personal development of an individual and help to improve safety, well-being and financial outcomes.
2. There is a mixed interpretation of the term mentoring within the industry which appears to be dependent on business objectives or an individual's viewpoint. This means that there is lack of consistency for companies developing and implementing their mentoring schemes.
3. Mentors can be required to undertake very varied support roles depending on the mentees' background, training, mental health and social skills. This increases the pressure of undertaking this role and highlights the need for mentors to be supported themselves.
4. Informal, unstructured or spontaneous mentoring in the industry is evident and more prolific than formal mentoring. It is harder to quantify and formally assess these initiatives, although evidence in this research shows that it can have a profound and direct beneficial effect on individual's well-being, training and development, and indirectly benefits safety and retention within the industry.
5. Technical skills are given more emphasis than non-technical skills within the industry, both at sea and on shore. Mentoring can positively impact on an individuals' technical and non-technical abilities and improve the balance in this area.
6. Mentoring works best when good leadership and management are in place as this has a significant impact on the lives of seafarers and shore staff, emphasising the need for continual training in these areas.
7. Inconsistent and poor communication of some mentoring schemes within companies, can lead to confusion about what support is available.
8. The research highlighted fewer available mentoring schemes for engineers and electro-technical staff compared to most of those working towards deck qualifications.
9. Mentoring can have a positive impact on attracting new recruits into the industry and retaining staff.
10. Those who have experienced the benefits of mentoring, are more likely to become a mentor. This is part of the cyclical nature of a developing mentoring culture.
11. Reducing high staff turn-over through maintaining stable crews (rather than those leaving the vessel after one voyage) offers opportunity to develop stronger mentoring relationships, build trust and extend support networks.
12. To ensure full value is realised from training, it should be supported with mentoring to maintain and further develop skills and knowledge.
13. Mentoring is a tool that can greatly support individuals working within the shipping industry, but its success is also influenced by internal and external industry elements such as legislation, market forces, training and human resources.

Recommendations

Further to these conclusions, the research team makes the following recommendations:

1. The shipping industry should agree on a working definition of the term mentoring and the explicit roles of the mentor and mentee. This would help to manage expectations and ensure greater consistency in the delivery of mentoring and the ability to measure its success.
2. Shipping companies should encourage their sea staff to mentor by showing them how this can be achieved and allowing time for it. This would help to embed the cyclical nature of mentoring culture within most company structures.
3. If mentoring is not readily available on board, sponsorship and shipping companies should think about sending cadets in pairs for their sea time. This would provide the opportunity for peer mentoring and help decrease the potential to feel isolated.
4. Informal mentoring and sharing experiential knowledge and reflective practice is essential for good skills' development and is a culture that should be encouraged. Even short bursts of time given to this can provide better understanding of the details of a task. This is applicable to sea and shore staff alike.
5. Where small, minimum crew numbers exist, consideration should be given to an additional and designated resource to facilitate mentoring.
6. On-going leadership and management training is recommended to help achieve better balance between technical and non-technical skills, allowing mentoring to have maximum impact.
7. Senior officers should undergo continuous management and leadership training, recognising that this has significant impact on crew well-being and safety culture on board.
8. The outcomes of Wightlink's new mentoring programme should be monitored to enable the industry to learn from their experience and share resulting best practice.
9. As there are fewer mentoring schemes for engineers and electro-technical compared to most of those working towards deck qualifications, and recognising that engineers are in short supply globally, it is recommended that a focused investigation into mentoring for this group would have wider industry and potentially cross-industry impact.
10. To provide a greater global understanding of mentoring, further research should be considered that would examine practice in other cultures beyond Britain and the Philippines; seafaring nations such as China and India could be of particular interest.