

# HEADWAY ON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES MUST BE MAINTAINED

Addressing crews' psychological and emotional well-being should be viewed as an investment, not a cost

Paul Berrill  
London

Concern about seafarers' mental health has been significantly boosted by the pressures they have been under during the crew-change crisis, but there is still a long way to go.

Mental Health Support Services (MHSS), which provides support for shipping companies, reported this month that problems among seafarers are getting worse not better.

Crew on ships reported that anxiety was a growing issue, with burnout and depression also cited over the three months to the end of February, MHSS said.

Asian seafarers topped the list of nationalities most affected, according to masters' requests for counselling support.

MHSS provides services — one-to-one therapy, training and a confidential 24/7 hotline run by clinical psychologists — to about 5,000 ships.

Chief executive Christian Ayerst, a former shipping lawyer, said: "It is vital we don't just pay lip service to the term mental health.

"We must ensure it becomes a lasting conversation, even as we look ahead to vaccine hopes to push us out of this pandemic."

## STRESS INCREASING

Clinical psychologist and MHSS managing director Charles Watkins, said mental health issues on ships are not new, but the stress on seafarers has increased with the crew-change crisis.

"Tending to emotional needs and health is just as important as physical health," Watkins told TradeWinds.

Seafarers' isolation can make it more difficult to recognise problems and in the past people tended to suffer privately, he said. But he added that there is now "more readiness among seafarers and management to change the environment".

After being stuck on board for long periods, seafarers may leave ships without telling management about their problems because they



## MIND MATTERS:

MHSS managing director Charles Watkins believes mental health is as important as physical health. Below left, CEO Christian Ayerst

Photos: MHSS



It is vital we don't just pay lip service to the term mental health. We must ensure it becomes a lasting conversation — Christian Ayerst, MHSS

are frightened of being seen to be unfit, Watkins said.

"Mental health is a normal part of life. We all suffer, and it is nothing to be ashamed of," he added.

Recognition of harmful processes is necessary before they can be stopped through raising awareness and setting clear boundaries.

MHSS runs training courses on bullying designed to change harmful cultures and to help other peo-

ple step in to stop incidents where necessary.

MHSS aims to train seafarers to spot behaviours and be alert to personality types and leadership styles to prevent systematic issues.

During the pandemic, seafarers have struggled with additional issues such as being unable to transfer wages to their families, quite apart from being stuck on vessels for extended periods with no

way home. In the past, they could leave a ship at an upcoming port.

Ayerst aims to challenge the idea that mental health is a cost centre, to make it an investment.

Watkins added that the goal is to give seafarers the tools and responsibility to help themselves so that "they don't need us".

"Creating a more caring and compassionate environment is better and more productive for everyone," he said.

## Crew-change crisis also put toll on shore staff

Seafarers were not the only ones to suffer during the crew-change crisis — onshore crewing staff also worked long hours with constant stress, frustration and pressure.

"One of the biggest fallacies of this pandemic is to think that there are only stresses and strains on board," Columbia Shipmanagement chief executive Mark O'Neil said.

"It is so frustrating and mentally draining to go through all the arrangements for a crew change and then have them fall down at the last hurdle and have aggravated crew screaming down the phone that you are not doing enough."

Mental Health Support Services clinical psychologist Charles Watkins said it is important to acknowledge the extra work shore staff are having to do to get crews off ships.

There is a mental toll from feelings of failure for crewing department staff when arrangements are not possible to see through due to no fault of their own, he said, adding that training can help redefine definitions of success.

Extra calls were made by crewing departments, fleet managers and directors to discuss how to cope with port calls in addition to regular day-to-day calls between superintendents and ships, and well-being services were introduced alongside upgraded online training systems.

Crewing departments also contacted families to keep them up to date with situations, and ship managers collaborated to share the cost of arranging charter flights for crew changes as well as chartering planes.



**SUCCESS:** Seafarers returning home

Photo: Danica Crewing Services

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New ways of working are opening up

Paul Berrill and Jonathan Boonzaier

Last year was challenging for ship managers but they can see light at the end of the tunnel amid the ways the business is changing.

Wilhelmsen Ship Management president and CEO Carl Schou said the pipeline of new customers tapered out in the middle of 2020 as the normally lengthy sales process of getting to know clients was stymied.

"Getting new business is difficult because we can't meet and greet new customers," he said.

But Wilhelmsen did complete the acquisition of Ahrenkiel Ship Management in 2020 and has started its integration, which Schou said was a major undertaking in the middle of a pandemic.

Anglo-Eastern chief executive Bjorn Hojgaard said the year demonstrated how managers can equip shipowners with the information to deal more productively with charterers. "Ship managers are moving away from a transactional [approach of] managing assets to a much more partnership role," he said.

Columbia Shipmanagement chief executive Mark O'Neil told TradeWinds: "I didn't want 2020 to be defined by Covid-19 because we had a lot of projects and joint ventures in process."

The group managed to set up Saudi and Greek offices and concluded an Italian set up with Premuda during the pandemic.

Thome Group CEO Olav Nortun said he is not yet sure managers are ready to take on all the lessons, but more new approaches should be expected.

"Ship management is a logistics exercise. We bring people, stores, spares on board a platform that moves. Are we going to allow so many people aboard? Is there anything we haven't thought about?"

# FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT FOR SHIPOWNER PARTNERSHIPS

Industry body Intermanager is looking to convince owners who do not use managers that maybe they should

Paul Berrill  
London

Ship management industry organisation Intermanager is looking for ways to convince vessel owners who do not use third-party managers that life could be better if they did.

Intermanager president Mark O'Neil, the chief executive of Columbia Shipmanagement, believes the resilience shown by managers during the Covid-19 crisis is proof that the future is bright for what he prefers to term "second-party" managers.

"If you think that some 30% of the world fleet is managed by third-party managers, then there is everything to gain in persuading the other 70% that: 'You have seen what we have done over the last year, don't you think that life would have been a lot easier for you if you had been with us?'"

"There will always be crises," O'Neil told TradeWinds.

"That said, the sector has to focus more on quality rather than driving down the price of the service to the extent it becomes very cut-throat," he added.

O'Neil said Intermanager is looking into ways to create an inclusive industry standard, which is aspirational but achievable for individual companies. "The focus is quality service at a fair price. If we do that, I think our clients will buy into that and the overall quality of service will rise across the industry."

But he added that he thinks "the



**MARK O'NEIL:**  
The Intermanager president says the organisation is looking at ways to set a standard for ship managers

Photo: Columbia

"You have seen what we have done over the last year, don't you think that life would have been a lot easier for you if you had been with us?"

— Mark O'Neil

about second-party management, more about partnership, joint ventures and collaboration," he said.

But what would an Intermanager standard look like, given the industry has previously adopted key performance indicators (KPIs) and benchmarking but still only attracts a third of the world's fleet?

O'Neil said he does not want to pre-empt what the standard will be as Intermanager is just starting the process of working it out.

"We will look at what that standard looks and feels like. The worst thing we could do, would be to divide the sector into the big versus the small, the haves versus the have-nots. This has to be inclusive, achievable and realistic."

"But by the same token, we have to be quite ruthless if there are operators that simply don't come up to the minimum standards. Just as RightShip [the bulk vetting scheme] is to the bulk sector, this can be a standard that clients benefit from," he said.

## RAISING THE BAR

Intermanager does not want to revive KPIs as they suggest a pass or fail approach, but there will be performance criteria built in that works for the majority, O'Neil said.

The organisation hopes to have a "living standard that can develop with the industry as we all learn and adapt" ready by the middle of 2021, he added.

Collaboration could be between competing companies to provide joint services rather than wasteful differentiation. Sharing information would also be needed, as both can help in "raising the bar of our collective performance".

O'Neil said: "No one benefits if a particular ship manager is held out for poor standards or malpractice. We should get to a point where second-party ship management partnership becomes a no-brainer."

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