



ITF Seafarers' Trust
London Metropolitan
University
Working Lives
Research Institute

Communicating with seafarers

Survey of seafarers

The ITF Seafarers' Trust carried out a survey of 1,000 seafarers. It aimed to assess the most effective ways of communicating with them and asked them about their communication habits while at sea, on shore leave, and at home.



'Seventy per cent of seafarers said they read the ITF's Seafarers' Bulletin'

'68 per cent of ratings said they had no access to email on board'

What the survey found

Seafarers want more contact with their unions

Seventy-five per cent of respondents, and 84 per cent of ratings, said that it was important to keep in touch with their national union – more than the 50 per cent said they were members, but only one in three said they were regularly in touch with their union.

Sixty-three per cent of the ratings and 49 per cent of the officers were trade union members. Both groups felt that it was important to keep in touch with their unions, but the proportion of senior officers in regular contact with their trade union was low.

For seafarers in the Philippines and India communication with their national union was linked to particular procedures; for example, the need to update passbooks and access welfare services.

Union and ITF awareness

Only 50 per cent of union members provided the name of their union, indicating a lack of awareness. Unionisation amongst Indonesian and Turkish seafarers was particularly low.

Seventy per cent of seafarers said they read the ITF's *Seafarers' Bulletin*, including 48 per cent of non-union members, making it a popular publication.

Ratings were much less likely to visit seafarers-related internet websites and know about the ITF Seafarers' website than senior officers.

Shore leave and at home offer the best communication opportunities

The best opportunity for communicating with seafarers was either when they were at home or on shore leave. The most popular ways for seafarers to communicate with their friends and family while 'at sea' was by phone from seafarers' centres (85 per cent), through mobile phone calls (82 per cent) and via SMS (74 per cent). In practice this means while they are in port or on shore leave.

More than 95 per cent of seafarers on general cargo and dry bulk carriers made calls from seafarers' centres, while seafarers on container vessels preferred to make mobile phone calls or use SMS. Seafarers on container vessels were the only group more likely to use email on board than while on shore leave, probably because of different turnaround times while in port.

'74 per cent used mobile phone text messages to keep in touch with family members ashore'

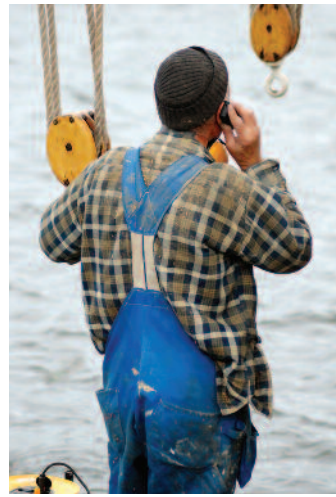
'Officers were much more likely than ratings to use the internet, mobile phones and social networking sites, whether at sea or at home'



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Onboard communication is limited

Onboard access to email has risen three-fold since 2007. Yet 52 per cent of seafarers, and 68 per cent of ratings, said they had no access to email on board, while only 18 per cent said they did have access. Rank played a part in onboard email access – overall, 72 per cent of officers had access, compared with only 36 per cent of ratings.

Access to onboard email also varied according to the vessel type – for example, 67 per cent of the seafarers on board dry bulk carriers and 65 per cent on board general cargo vessels had no email access at all.

Some 80 per cent of seafarers, and 97 per cent of ratings, said they had no access to the internet while at sea. Where access was available it was expensive, they said.

Only 34 per cent of the senior officers, compared with 78 per cent of the ratings, said the biggest barrier to communication with the outside world while on board ship was 'access to communication facilities'.

Seafarers are active on the web

Websites are a potential communication tool, as 50 per cent of seafarers access the internet at least twice a month while at sea. This rises to 80 per cent when seafarers are at home. Nevertheless, seafarers are much more likely to visit seafarer-related websites when they are at home.

Email and phone are the best ways to contact seafarers

Some 40 per cent of seafarers said the best way for unions to contact them was by email, although ratings marginally preferred a phone call. Home telephone (29 per cent) and mobile phone (18 per cent) were the next most popular options. Seafarers frequently communicated through SMS – for example, 74 per cent used mobile phone text messages to keep in touch with family members ashore.

Social networking websites are popular communication tools

Seventy per cent of respondents used social networking sites. Facebook was the most popular, while 78 per cent of Chinese seafarers used QQ.

Officers have greater access to digital technologies

Officers were much more likely than ratings to use the internet, mobile phones and social networking sites, whether at sea or at home. For example, 82 per cent of the officers accessed the internet every day when they were at home, compared with only 39 per cent of the ratings.

Ratings, on the other hand, relied more often than officers on phones in seafarers' centres or public phone boxes while on shore leave. However, officers and ratings had similar levels of access to email when they were on shore leave.

Improving communication with seafarers

- Use email, as seafarers considered this to be the best way of contacting them.
- Develop communications strategies targeting seafarers working aboard dry bulk and general cargo vessels, as they have limited email access on board.
- Build ways of communicating with seafarers from China, Burma and Turkey, as they have less contact with their national unions.
- National seafarers' unions affiliated to the ITF could encourage members to access the ITF Seafarers' website.
- Use existing social networking sites more effectively as seafarers are regular users of these sites.
- Use publications such as the ITF *Seafarers' Bulletin*, *The Sea* and *Balita* to publicise ways of communicating with seafarers, as they are widely read by seafarers.

To view the detailed findings, download the full report at:

www.itfglobal.org/seafarers/communicating-with-seafarers.cfm