

Alongside S3 E4: The Human Element: Prioritising Crew Welfare in Global Shipping

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<v SPEAKER_2>Hello and welcome to Alongside, the podcast from NorthStandard for the shipping industry across the world.

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<v SPEAKER_2>I'm Kait Borsay.

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<v SPEAKER_2>In this episode, we look at an issue that is at the heart of shipping and key to its continued success, the people and their welfare, in particular, seafarers.

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<v SPEAKER_2>In a world that is changing rapidly, crew welfare is essential.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Global events can have a significant impact on shipping, where crews may have longer or more dangerous journeys as a result.

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<v SPEAKER_2>On this episode, we look at how operators can ensure that crews are well looked after and their welfare maintained, as well as some of the frustrations and challenges that shipping faces when trying to ease some of those burdens.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Joining me to discuss this in more detail, Captain Yves Vandeborn, Head of Loss Prevention, Asia Pacific at NorthStandard, and a marine industry expert with over 25 years' experience.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Also joining us, Captain Kuba Szymanski, Secretary General of InterManager and Chair of the Board of the 200-year-old UK maritime charity, the Seafarers Hospital Society.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Yves, let's come to you first and talk a bit about crew welfare and get an understanding of what we mean by this in shipping.

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<v SPEAKER_2>So what specifically are we talking about here?

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<v SPEAKER_3>Thanks so much.

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<v SPEAKER_3>There's actually a really good question because welfare is such a simple word, but it means so many things.

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<v SPEAKER_3>It's very much a holistic approach that you need to take when you look at the welfare of seafarers.

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<v SPEAKER_3>You need to look at their physical well-being, making sure that they have the right types of nutrients in their food, and making sure that they have the right physical well-being on board.

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<v SPEAKER_3>But then it goes, of course, on to the big topic of the mental well-being and making sure that you have a happy seafarer on board and dealing with all those aspects related to mental well-being, which thanks to COVID has come very much under the spotlight.

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<v SPEAKER_3>But then also not to forget, there is the social well-being of seafarers, because as human beings, we are very much social animals and you need to have that cohesion on board of a ship that you need to be able to work as a team, which then ultimately is going to affect the safety of the ship as well.

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<v SPEAKER_2>So what are some of the best practices then in place to support crew across the industry?

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<v SPEAKER_3>Social well-being, I think, is so important, because we have seen that with the upcoming of Internet, that crew is hiding back into their cabin.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So we need to find ways to try and improve that social cohesion on board of ships.

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<v SPEAKER_3>But then equally best practices, you need to make sure that the crew is having proper healthy food, that the chef on board is trained into cooking in a healthy way, and that the crew is aware that they cannot eat too much.

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<v SPEAKER_3>It really very much depends if you compare a master on board of a ship who has quite a quiet life, well, quiet in the way that he is more sitting down compared to an AB or an engineer who is running around and doing much more physical activity.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So the amount of food required is quite different.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And family support, I think it is important for the seafarer that there is a safety net in place for the family that they have.

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<v SPEAKER_3>We see that in the shape of companies providing for personal insurance for the family.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So that if there is anything that the family can go and see a doctor, can go and see a dentist, of course, these are things that are not mandatory, but it improves the wellbeing, it improves the good feel of the seafarer.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And of course, in the long run, it will increase the loyalty of that seafarer to the company, because he knows that not just himself, but also his family or her family will be taken care of.

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<v SPEAKER_3>Other best practices, having a helpline available to the crew, it's a whole different topic, but you need to have an anonymous helpline in place where you can have properly trained people who listen to you, who can give advice to the seafarer.

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<v SPEAKER_3>Then if there is a feedback that is being given, for example, by the seafarer to the company, if there is such a system in place, the seafarer needs to see that that is being taken seriously and action is being taken upon it, because otherwise they are also going to stop providing feedback to the company if they know that they are not being listened to.

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<v SPEAKER_2>What about conflict and high risk areas?

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<v SPEAKER_2>Is the industry, do you think, doing enough to protect seafarers or even able to extract them quickly if they are at risk?

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<v SPEAKER_3>Again, a really good question and it is such a difficult one, because of course, assistance should be available to the seafarer at all time during these high risk transits.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And there might be seafarers who say, I'm really sorry, but I do not want to go through this high risk area.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So then, of course, is it even possible for the ship owner to go and disembark that particular seafarer?

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<v SPEAKER_3>Or can they come to an agreement?

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<v SPEAKER_3>So I think the dialogue there is really important.

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<v SPEAKER_3>Give the seafarer the option if the owner knows it's sufficiently long in advance, which also may not always be the case.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And then if they are going through a high risk area, make sure that a helpline is available to them.

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<v SPEAKER_3>If they have to deal with anything, make sure that the procedures, the guidelines are in place on what they need to do in case something does happen to the ship.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Okay, let's turn to Kuba now.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Kuba, you've got great experience of being at sea as well.

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<v SPEAKER_2>What would you say are the key issues affecting seafarers at the moment?

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<v SPEAKER_1>I think the message I would like to pass across and maybe discuss is that seafarers are actually human beings.

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<v SPEAKER_1>As simple as that.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So we are having the same demands with supplies.

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<v SPEAKER_1>We got the same pressures like everybody else in any other environment.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So very often we look at the seafarers, especially people who have never been to sea and feel pity.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And actually people going to sea are very often those who actually have been dreaming about it.

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<v SPEAKER_1>It's one of those professions like policemen, like a fireman, like a soldier.

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<v SPEAKER_1>You don't just end up being a seafarer.

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<v SPEAKER_1>You usually have a high dream to become a seafarer.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I don't want to be a seafarer.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I really want to be at sea.

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<v SPEAKER_1>It gives me this extra kick.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And especially if you have failed for some years, you go back home and you think, that's enough.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Okay, it's time for me to go back.

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<v SPEAKER_1>We feel very, very good being together at sea.

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<v SPEAKER_1>The situation is changing now, I have to admit, because the crews are getting smaller.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And there is definitely even with the same number of people on board, we are being loaded with work.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And that's why I really want to go to sea and experience that.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And being a KPI, Key Performance Indicator man, I always keep a record and I can see how much more we have to do nowadays.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And we forget about that this actually affects well-being of a seafarer.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Our colleagues are getting more and more stressed because they have to deal with A, B, C, D, E, F, G.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And usually at the same time, when we are on the bridge of the ship, that's okay because this is the environment we are more or less prepared for.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Talking about the deck officers now, in engine room very much the same.

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<v SPEAKER_1>However, our statistics are showing that we are spending less than 20% on the bridge.

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<v SPEAKER_1>In some cases, only 11%, which means 80% of the time we are somewhere else.

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<v SPEAKER_1>We are the paper pushers.

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<v SPEAKER_1>We are the managers.

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<v SPEAKER_1>We are the crew managers.

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<v SPEAKER_1>We are the procurement managers.

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<v SPEAKER_1>There is a lot of things happening.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And that's where I think the well-being of seafarers needs to be looked at.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And actually, seafarers do not have a job security.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And I think that affects the mental well-being of seafarers.

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<v SPEAKER_1>We are like actors.

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<v SPEAKER_1>We all have our agents.

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<v SPEAKER_1>When I'm on board of the ship, that's because my agent arranged my work.

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<v SPEAKER_1>As soon as I'm off the ship, I'm basically unemployed.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Yves, from you, how are issues affecting seafarers?

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<v SPEAKER_2>How have they changed in the last decade or so?

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<v SPEAKER_2>What are some of the modern day challenges?

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<v SPEAKER_3>I think probably life at sea is quite different from when Kuba or I were at sea.

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<v SPEAKER_3>It's a totally different generation that is out there sailing now.

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<v SPEAKER_3>We are living in a hyper-connected world these days.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And the new generation has very different demands compared to what we even were aware of back in the days.

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<v SPEAKER_3>During the pandemic, we had the whole key worker status, which was really incredible at the time.

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<v SPEAKER_3>But how much of that is actually left now for seafarers?

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<v SPEAKER_3>How much is that still being used?

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<v SPEAKER_3>So I think there is something that a lot more should be done about the well-being of seafarers.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And just to tie it into something else, I'm quite concerned about future recruitment of seafarers.

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<v SPEAKER_3>When is it that you see the shipping in the news?

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<v SPEAKER_3>It can be, for example, when the Suez Canal is blocked.

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<v SPEAKER_3>It can be when there is a bridge in Baltimore that gets destroyed.

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<v SPEAKER_3>It can be when there is an oil spill on the beaches in Singapore.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So those are the times when you see shipping in the news.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And then you need to try and convince people that that is a good choice as a seafarer as a career.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So I think more should be done to improve that public image that people have about shipping.

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<v SPEAKER_2>But this generation, these new generations are more connected than ever.

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<v SPEAKER_2>They are more used to, they're addicted in some ways of being in contact, staying in contact.

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<v SPEAKER_2>There is a generational difference here.

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<v SPEAKER_2>And I wonder if either of you have seen that reflected in some of the challenges for well-being, that there are less people who are at ease with being lonely now amongst our younger generations.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Yes, I agree with you.

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<v SPEAKER_1>But there's also the thing which we are telling people then, that's what they are.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And I'm sailing, I'm sailing with young people.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And you know what?

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<v SPEAKER_1>They love being there.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Because finally, there is nobody to tell them what to do things and how to do things.

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<v SPEAKER_1>We allow them.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Obviously, not every ship is the same, not every ship management is the same.

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<v SPEAKER_1>But I think it will resonate with you, Kait, as well.

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<v SPEAKER_1>If you entrust people, if you empower people, if you let them do in any kind of job, line of work, they will thrive.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And if we do that at sea as well, and at sea actually third mate or fourth engineer, the junior officer is immediately entrusted with quite a lot of responsibilities.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And you're 22 year old, and you are the third officer, you are the firefighter.

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<v SPEAKER_1>You've got 180 fire extinguishers to look after.

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<v SPEAKER_1>You've got three and a half ton of dry powder on board, and so on and so forth.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And I think I see, maybe I'm just lucky, I'm surrounded by people who love what they do.

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<v SPEAKER_2>But I was thinking earlier today about how it's different to airline crew, isn't it?

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<v SPEAKER_2>They can just get off the plane at the next destination.

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<v SPEAKER_2>There's only so long the plane can be in the air, and obviously seafaring doesn't necessarily have that benefit.

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<v SPEAKER_2>How are people able to communicate from a vessel now?

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<v SPEAKER_2>Are communications better because the technology is advanced?

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<v SPEAKER_2>Or is there a certain protocol to follow, Yves?

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<v SPEAKER_3>Of course, seafaring is very different from an airline crew.

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<v SPEAKER_3>An airline crew, they will go to a hotel once they land in their destination.

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<v SPEAKER_3>Whether or not they hang out together is their choice, and the day after or two days later, they fly back and they are back home.

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<v SPEAKER_3>For a seafarer, when you finish your work, it actually never finishes.

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<v SPEAKER_3>You can't leave your work.

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<v SPEAKER_3>You're literally living where your work is.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So you have to deal with everybody around you, and you have to be able to get along with everybody.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And there is an interesting link there, I feel, which I want to elaborate a little bit on.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And then to answer your question on communication, these days ships do have internet available.

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<v SPEAKER_3>In the vast majority of cases, the managers will make internet available to the seafarers as well, so that they can have their TikToks or their Instagrams or their WhatsApp video calls or whichever they want to use to make video calls.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So, it is easily accessible to the seafarers.

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<v SPEAKER_3>They can talk to their family after work.

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<v SPEAKER_3>It also means that seafarers don't socialize on board anymore.

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<v SPEAKER_3>Not as much as they used to be when I was at sea.

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<v SPEAKER_3>We didn't have internet.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So, what we did was after work, we all eat together and then we go and watch a movie together or we sing karaoke or we whatever.

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<v SPEAKER_3>We had a social life on board.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And that is something that you see less and less because the crew these days, they will go to their cabin and they will go and talk with their family.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And you do not have any social interaction with those colleagues of yours.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So, I see these points all as being connected.

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<v SPEAKER_3>Yes, it is really good that internet is available, but it comes with a flip side.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Okay, let's look at the future.

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<v SPEAKER_2>How does the maritime industry increase diversity and attracts a skilled workforce?

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<v SPEAKER_3>I look at it from two different things.

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<v SPEAKER_3>When you talk about diversity, diversity is such a big topic.

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<v SPEAKER_3>We are not just simply talking about having more female seafarers on board.

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<v SPEAKER_3>We are also talking about diversity in the sense of cultural, religious diversity, people with different orientation, neurodiversity.

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<v SPEAKER_3>There's so many different types.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And I think it's really important for the industry that we can increase this diversity.

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<v SPEAKER_3>What ship owners would need to do, you need to have clear procedures and guidance in place to maintain that on board social cohesion.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And people need to see that if these guidelines, these procedures are being broken, that action is actually being taken.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So that these people can feel protected, that they can feel that they are able to be themselves.

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<v SPEAKER_3>Guidance also, what I feel is important, needs to be provided to all the crew.

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<v SPEAKER_3>Because you'll have different generations also on board, you have different cultures, and people need to understand that what is good in one culture may not always be good in another culture, or that gets accepted in one is not acceptable in another.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And that type of guidance needs to be provided to the crew for all the types of diversity that are available on board.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And then separately, if you talk about attracting a skilled workforce, and I think we talked about this earlier as well, it's this perception about the industry that the outside world has, which we need to improve.

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<v SPEAKER_3>So if we can improve the impression that people have about shipping, that will stimulate the younger generation to take up a career at sea.

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<v SPEAKER_3>But then also they need to know quite clearly what can they achieve if they go to sea.

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<v SPEAKER_3>They do not know what is the next step when they come ashore.

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<v SPEAKER_3>What are the possibilities and how can they develop their career further after the career at sea.

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<v SPEAKER_2>What do operators or companies do to support staff and mitigate against longer times at sea?

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<v SPEAKER_2>That must be really important to address.

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<v SPEAKER_3>It definitely is.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And quite interestingly as well, there's a bit of a contradiction there.

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<v SPEAKER_3>Because on one hand, you may have a seafarer on board who is looking forward to signing off, for example, in the Suez Canal, when then suddenly the ship is getting deviated and has to go around the Cape.

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<v SPEAKER_3>The company will need to make sure that that seafarer is properly supported, has an additional salary or whatever they can do to support that.

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<v SPEAKER_3>But then there is the flip side of it.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And we saw this also in the recent Seafarer Happiness Index, where actually some of the seafarers were saying, oh, because of this deviation that we did around the Cape, we had a lot more time to work together with the senior officers on board, and we actually had a good time.

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<v SPEAKER_3>And it made them more happy to have that longer sea voyage.

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<v SPEAKER_2>And what future changes to crew welfare do you foresee, or other plans that are being looked at to help increase support for crew?

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<v SPEAKER_3>There's a few things there.

00:17:07.560 --> 00:17:15.120

<v SPEAKER_3>When you see how technology is developing, I think that is going to be fantastic when it comes to crew welfare.

00:17:15.120 --> 00:17:20.140

<v SPEAKER_3>It will allow so many additional ways of helping seafarers.

00:17:20.140 --> 00:17:29.380

<v SPEAKER_3>You have a lot more apps, for example, available now that seafarers can use to improve their welfare or to even monitor their welfare.

00:17:29.420 --> 00:17:36.360

<v SPEAKER_3>Because of the technology and because of the better internet connections on board, we are also having more telemedicine available.

00:17:36.360 --> 00:17:49.680

<v SPEAKER_3>And then, of course, with more and more ships having high bandwidth internet available on board, you have the connection to the family, which will definitely be an advantage for the seafarer.

00:17:49.680 --> 00:18:07.720

<v SPEAKER_3>Maybe if I look on future changes a bit from a wishful thinking perspective, I really hope we could get more crew on board of ships that would reduce the workload and would then generally improve the well-being of the whole crew, improve the accommodation for the crew.

00:18:07.720 --> 00:18:16.000

<v SPEAKER_3>These days, there is quite a lot of focus on maximizing the cargo capacity, of course, of the ship, because that's what causes the revenue.

00:18:16.000 --> 00:18:25.200

<v SPEAKER_3>But it's the crew that operates the ship, so we need to keep in mind that the crew needs a proper accommodation, which includes recreational facilities as well.

00:18:25.760 --> 00:18:28.140

<v SPEAKER_2>Well, it has been such a fascinating episode.

00:18:28.140 --> 00:18:37.440

<v SPEAKER_2>We've talked about how connectivity to the world is so important here, the use of technology, things like the internet to help improve communications with family.

00:18:37.440 --> 00:18:41.020

<v SPEAKER_2>Thank you to you, Yves, for being with us and also Kuba.

00:18:41.020 --> 00:18:44.000

<v SPEAKER_2>That's Yves Vandeborn and Kuba Szymanski.

00:18:44.000 --> 00:18:50.900

<v SPEAKER_2>We'll join us next time on Alongside when we continue to explore key topics affecting the maritime industry and those who are part of it.

00:18:50.900 --> 00:18:54.120

<v SPEAKER_2>Click follow on this podcast to ensure you don't miss an episode.

00:18:54.180 --> 00:18:56.340

<v SPEAKER_2>And thanks again to both of our guests.

00:18:56.340 --> 00:18:58.340

<v SPEAKER_2>From me, Kait Borsay, thanks for listening.