

NS_Seafarers Episode 2

[00:00:04] I always asked any seafarer before I went on board, like, "What was your day today? What do you actually do?" And you still don't know until you really start doing it yourself. So it was the unknown. The idea of visiting new countries, experiencing different culture, uh, and working with people from around globally truly inspires me.

[00:00:26] Before going to sea, I was really excited. I learn a lot better when it's... You're, you're actually carrying out the task, so I was really [00:00:34] excited to just get stuck in. Why do people choose a career at sea? What makes it special, and what are the challenges? As a seafarer myself, and with more than 25 years in the maritime industry, I'm often surprised at how little people actually know about the life of a seafarer.

[00:00:56] On this series of Future Thinking, we are going to hear more from seafarers and experts from the industry to explore those [00:01:04] questions and much more. Hello. I am Captain Yves Van Den Borren. I'm the head of loss prevention for the Asia-Pac region at North Standard. Welcome to episode two of this series of Future Thinking.

[00:01:20] In this episode, we look at those embarking on their maritime careers, the cadets. I want to have a chat about recruitment and retention of seafarers and the required training for cadets. Plus, [00:01:34] we will be discussing the work being done in mentoring and cadet support. To discuss all this, I'm joined by Lisa Oliver, curriculum manager at South Shields Marine School in the northeast of England.

[00:01:47] Lisa, welcome. Hello. And Johan Smit, head of wellness for The Sailor Society. Johan, thank you for joining us. Hi, Yves. Can I just start maybe by, by asking, uh, both of you and, and Lisa first, uh, to give a short introduction [00:02:04] on yourself and, uh, the company you work for? My name's Lisa Oliver, and I currently work at South Shields Marine School.

[00:02:10] Um, I am the curriculum manager for cadets who enter a three-year-long cadet program, um, to eventually be a fully qualified engineering officer of the watch. Previous to that, I served at sea myself. Um, I worked for the Royal Navy in an electrical role as well. I am the head of wellness at Sailor Society. I have now been in the industry for about [00:02:34] 15 years.

[00:02:35] Started out as a port chaplain in the Port of Cape Town, visiting vessels every day. Um, from there I developed the Wellness at Sea program, which was later taken over by Sailor Society. Sailor Society is an NGO, and we've been serving seafarers for more than 200 years and still doing that every day.

[00:03:00] Thank you so much, and again, welcome both of you. [00:03:04] Um, during the intro we heard a couple of sound bites from cadets, and I, and I would like to say thank you to Johan and The Sailor Society for letting us use these sound clips. Um, they came from one of your Wellness at Sea conferences, I believe it was in, in 2025.

[00:03:20] But Johan, let me, let me start with you first, a question. There are various industry reports, uh, that are referring to, to a big shortfall of, of officers, um, uh, for the, the merchant [00:03:34] navy, and your, uh, recently published cadet report is making reference to this as well. Do you have an idea why is this? Is, is this an issue with a lack of people entering the industry or is it a retention issue?

[00:03:49] I think it's probably a bit of both. So there's certain problems within the pipeline in terms of converting cadets into officers. But

[00:03:59] then I also think that seafaring has become less and less [00:04:04] attractive as a long-term career for young, for young people. Um, cadets are nowadays entering a very different industry from before. It's more digital, it is more demanding, and as everyone on the call will know nowadays, it is very compliance heavy.

[00:04:22] Um, and I think a younger generation has a very high expectation around wellbeing, around connectivity, and around support. And if the industry [00:04:34] can't provide that, we will see numbers going down. Also, I think salaries in the old days, um, it was considered considerably higher than shore-based jobs, but now, um, more than before, it is becoming more in line.

[00:04:53] So I, I think there's a few issues, um, that contributes to this. Retention, I think, is in some cases being [00:05:04] damaged by life at sea pressures, um, contract terms, family sep- separation, job access, um, things like that. In an older generation, all of these things were accepted as part of life. But our cadet research and reports shows that this young generation are very much focused on social justice, on fairness, on [00:05:34] wellbeing, and it is something that the industry must take into consideration if we wanna close this gap and address the shortfall of, of officers in the industry.

[00:05:46] And Lisa, from, from your perspective, you are working with all these cadets that are, uh, excited about going to sea. What, what is the feedback you hear from them, why is it that they are choosing a career at sea? The majority of them that are choosing to enter the [00:06:04] industry have got some sort of connection to the industry a lot of the time, uh, whether that is because they live in coastal regions, uh, from a UK-based perspective, um, or whether they've got a relative that works in the industry.

[00:06:16] There's normally a little bit of a connection as to why they've chosen a career at sea, um, in the first place. And I think because of that, there is a, a, a good drive for them, um, in terms of wanting to actually succeed, wanting to get to the end [00:06:34] of what is, from a college perspective, a qualification which is gonna set them up for life sometimes.

[00:06:39] Even if they don't follow it through into a, a fully fledged 25-year career at sea, um, they still see the benefit and the r- and the relative benefit in actually gaining an educational qualification that these cadetship programs offer. So all those tied together from a, a CV point of view for these, um, young adults is then beneficial whether they choose to stay at sea or not.

[00:07:01] Some of them, a lot of them do, [00:07:04] um, a l- and some of them don't. Do you think that people have a misconception about what, what it means to be a, a seafarer? There is a certain lack of visibility in terms of the, the career itself, and in the UK, the, the, The Company Careers at Sea did a, a brilliant, um, marketing campaign to try and make it more visible.

[00:07:24] Johan, is that similar from, from what you hear? Yes, very similar, Yves. I, I think in my mind there's two sets of misconceptions. On the one hand, [00:07:34] it is that if you enter into the industry, it's all sunshine and roses, so you will get to travel around the globe and see places, and life is simple, routine, adventurous, all of those words.

[00:07:49] And on the other hand, the other set of misconceptions is that it's, everything is really bad. You'll be treated bad. Um, you are constantly in danger from everything from [00:08:04] politics to pirates. So I, I think the truth lies somewhere in the middle, and that is often not well communicated. Uh, it is amazing career.

[00:08:16] It's a career that allows you to progress through the ranks and really grow. Um, you get global exposure, et cetera, et cetera. So there's so many positives, but in some way we are caught b- between these two sets of

[00:08:34] misconceptions. And I think as a industry, we, we can do to ... more to set the record straight.

[00:08:40] What we try and do as a training establishment is prepare them as much as we can for a life at sea. So yes, there is, the- there is a massive range in terms of the experience that some of these cadets actually get when they're at sea. But what we try and tell them is that one experience of going to sea does not represent the whole industry.

[00:08:59] Because from a UK perspective, it follows a, a structured, uh, [00:09:04] pathway. So they come to college in the first instance, then they go to sea, then they come back to college, then they go to sea again, and then they come back to college for the final stage. So the second sea phase, they are more prepared, they are more, um, experienced, they know what to expect to some degree.

[00:09:22] You, you mentioned that you are preparing them, uh, for their first contract. Can you just elaborate maybe a little bit more on, on how you prepare them? Yeah, certainly. So obviously they come to us, um, [00:09:34] roughly for about six months before they get their first sea trip. Um, and in that six months, as well as the academics that are going on in the background, they also get like an hour a week with a pastoral care tutor, and they will go through with them the practicalities in terms of the things that they need to take with them, things that they may not have thought about taking with them.

[00:09:54] We get the Sailor Society in to actually talk to them as well. We get Nautilus, the, the union, to come in and talk to them. We get lots of different [00:10:04] external speakers in to talk to them in this kind of care provision, um, that is gonna try and give them, again, like I say, a bit of an overview. The ... What can, what, what is gonna be brilliant, but also what to prepare yourself for just in case things go wrong.

[00:10:17] These are the charities that you can speak to. This is the 24-hour, uh, support that you can actually tap into. Um, keep in touch with each other is one of the key things that I always tell them. Um, have that sort of support network of other people and different people that you can then latch onto to [00:10:34] try and give you

[00:10:35] If you have a question, they may know the answer. Because a cadet position, they, they may, they may be the only cadet on board. They may be the only English-speaking person on board. They may be far away from home.

They may be traveling on their own for the first time. So all of these different firsts can be quite a big step Yeah.

[00:10:55] And, and Johan, from, from Sailor Society perspective, what, what do you hear from the cadets and, and how their experience on board is, uh, has been? I, [00:11:04] I think we hear quite a lot from youngsters who are on their first vessel, and they come back with feedback that this is not what I've signed up for. But it should also be seen in context in terms of the number of cadets that actually goes to sea.

[00:11:22] So, um, i- if I say we get reports like that, it can't be generalized and say this is sort of the general, um, experience of cadets around. [00:11:34] I do think the things that Lisa mentioned is, um, is spot on, um, i- in terms of what they should know before they go on board. We do things like the wellness at sea training that very specifically deals, I wanna say, with the human side of shipping, because ultimately on a vessel we are dealing with people, and I think that sometimes gets lost, um, in [00:12:04] translation somewhere.

[00:12:04] We are so focused on safety, the technical side of things, that we forget that ultimately we are dealing with human beings. Um, and they must have the ability to deal with diversity, with conflict, with mental health challenges, with being away from family, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Um, and one thing I think that is important, again, if we, um, sort of [00:12:34] name all these negative aspects, one things f- that I admire most about seafarers is just how resilient they are.

[00:12:43] Um, you talked earlier about what is the misperception, um, a-around seafarers, and even today when people ask me, "What do you do?" And I say, "I work with seafarers," they say, "Sjo, that must be really rough." Um, they are rough and tough, and they drink, almost that [00:13:04] drunken sailor, um, totally wrong conception, while seafarers are amazing, resilient, professional people, um, who are really ultimately ensuring that, uh, the world goes round.

[00:13:23] There are a number of reports out there who are referring to This is predominantly, uh, Filipino, uh, seafarers who are graduating [00:13:34] and who are having issues finding a ship to complete their sea time. Now, m- I'll, I'll ask you both, but I'll go to Lisa first. I, I imagine from a UK perspective, the numbers, uh, that graduate will be different than, than the number of Filipinos that graduate.

[00:13:51] But do you see from, uh, cadets leaving your school anybody that has issues finding a ship to, to complete their sea time? From a UK point of view, no, basically. Um, they, they follow a [00:14:04] structured program, so they sign up to a sponsor. Um, there's obviously a, um, a, a process of application that they have to go through to actually get the sponsor in the first place, and then the sponsoring companies basically sign in to this contract.

[00:14:18] So they come to college for a certain amount of time, but they also get, um, a certain amount of time as well to a- to, to get enough sea time. It's a three-year program, so within that three-year program, as well as the academic studies that they do, and like you say, all the safety things that they have to do, [00:14:34] they also get enough time to actually go on board ship.

[00:14:37] So by the end of the three-year program, they've got the required sea time that they need to then get the certificate of competence. And Johan, you are dealing with, with, uh, Filipino cadets, with Indian cadets. What, what is your, uh, view on, on cadets getting their sea time in? If I must say what the number one question is that we get after cadet conferences, just to say at the cadet conference we deal with, give or take, 10,000 cadets [00:15:04] per year, it is, "I, I don't have a ship.

[00:15:07] Um, can I... Where do I get a job?" Uh, and I think the, the reasons behind that is complex. There's of course countries, especially in Africa, not on the IMO's white list, for example. The other problem is that there's schools across the globe who are very keen to take your money without ensuring that you've got a [00:15:34] placement, um, after you've left the school.

[00:15:37] So the problem is complex, but I do think it is something that needs to be addressed urgently, whether on a regulatory basis, um, or from the IMO side, to ensure that if you enter into a school, you need to have in, like in the case of South Shields, have that process in place to ensure that you [00:16:04] will eventually be able to do your sea time.

[00:16:07] Johan, on your cadet report that was published, uh, last year, um, which quite interestingly you are calling the, the first digital seafarer, uh, generation. Uh, one of the points that you are talking on in your report is connectivity and how it affects, uh, the wellbeing of cadets and seafarers on board. I thought that was a really interesting discussion because it, it clearly [00:16:34] shows both the pro and the con that connectivity, uh, on board has.

[00:16:39] And with this new generation of seafarers now that we, that we have, how do you see that, that, uh, mental preparedness of, of, uh, being on board of

a ship, uh, how, how does that affect them? Yes, um, connectivity is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is, uh, keeping seafarers close to home, but on the other [00:17:04] hand, it's also keeping the problems from back home constantly present on board.

[00:17:10] Um, I, I think the study that we've done prior to the conference, we did a research study on the relationship between wellbeing and connectivity, and it was evident that connectivity can really assist in terms of wellbeing through family contacts, entertainment, learning, peer support [00:17:34] groups. But the other side, um, is also true, the FOMO part, fear of missing out.

[00:17:40] We're dealing with a generation that live their lives online, and how do we as a industry tackle that? I think that- What companies try to do is restrict connectivity in many cases. I don't think connectivity as such is the issue. I [00:18:04] think it is boundaries that is really the issue, and assisting seafarers in their thinking around what's the boundaries that I must set on a personal level to ensure that my online life, um, does not impact the safety of the vessel, my personal safety, things like that.

[00:18:26] So it's not about restricting connectivity blindly, but it is [00:18:34] about digital discipline, um, a- as part of preparing people for life at sea. I think that's a good point because it's, it's so important to have a good social cohesion on board of a ship. It's, it's ... If, if you know the person that is, that you're living with instead of running away to your cabin and isolating yourself, if you know your colleagues on board of a ship, you're gonna care for them, you're gonna look out for them, you're gonna

[00:19:01] It, it, it improves, I feel, the [00:19:04] safety of the, of the vessel if you have a good social cohesion. Johan, the, the, the Sailor Society has a program on cadet, um, mentoring as well, or cadet support groups. Um, can, can you talk a little bit on that? So we've got comprehensive cadet programs where we try to build a broad range of services around cadets to build a supportive environment.

[00:19:32] This starts out [00:19:34] with some training, the wellness at sea training, then they become part of our cadet peer support groups. Peer support groups are groups of not more than 20 seafarers, or in this case cadets, where they can talk to one another and support one another. But in all of these groups, there's always two moderators from the society present.

[00:19:58] We've got a cadet helpline, the cadet conferences, so really a whole [00:20:04] ecosystem of services. And I think the key message in all of this is

the day you set your foot on, on the vessel for the first time, you are not alone. Um, that is sort of a one-liner that underlines everything, um, for cadets to really know you are not alone whatever happens at sea.

[00:20:27] As a takeaway for the listeners that we are having, what is your message? What do you, um, [00:20:34] how can they assist you with, um, improving the life that cadets have, improving the, the wellbeing that they have on board? Um, how can they assist you, Lisa? I think for me, the, the key word is mentorship. When they're at college, there's multiple people around, there's multiple...

[00:20:53] The, the, the kind of two, um, two steps away from home, mom's on the end of the phone. When they step on board ship, they are on their own. Um, but like Johan said, they are not alone. Th- [00:21:04] what we would like to see from a shipboard perspective is the, the mentoring scheme that will take someone under the wing, that will show them the ropes, that will try to give them the experience that they possibly had, or if they had a bad experience, to then change it for the next person, so kind of passing it forward, paying it forward I think for me, one of the things that I've seen over the past 15 years is tremendous growth in terms of our awareness around things like mental health, um, [00:21:34] diversity, how people are treated.

[00:21:36] So my message would be that the industry is constantly improving and that we are taking mental health, wellbeing, that we are taking those topics very seriously. If you step on board with vessel, I'll stick with my one-liner from before, just saying you are not alone. There's the Sailor Society. We've been around, as I [00:22:04] said, for more than 200 years.

[00:22:06] There's other organizations, there's your maritime school. There's so many people out there who are willing to listen and willing to take care of you. Don't lose that opportunity. Don't miss that opportunity. Reach out. You're not alone Two very good messages. Thank you so much, uh, to both of you for, for being here.

[00:22:28] Um, Lisa Oliver from South Shields Marine School and Johan Smit from [00:22:34] Sailor Society. In the third episode of this series, I speak to ship owners and hear about some of the great work being done to address the issues we've heard about in this series. If you haven't heard episode one yet, then you can find all the episodes in this Future Thinking series, as well as North Standard's other Alongside podcasts at north-standard.com or on your chosen podcast [00:23:04] player