

# NS\_FUTURE\_THINKING\_Seafarers Episode 3

[00:00:04] 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 the seafarer. On this series of Future Thinking, we are going to hear more from seafarers and experts from the industry to explore those questions [00:00:34] and much more.

[00:00:35] Hello, I'm Captain Yves Van Den Borren, head of loss prevention for the Asia-Pac region at Northlander. Welcome to episode three of this series of Future Thinking. In this episode, we are looking at how ship owners and managers are helping to improve the wellbeing of seafarers and tackling the issues of a changing world and changing behaviors.

[00:00:58] I want to find out about what makes a happy and safe crew, how we can retain some of the [00:01:04] talent being lost from maritime, and how we can meet the challenges of the future and the frustrations that we have in ports. For this, I'm joined today by Jeremy Sutton, CEO at Swire Shipping, and Nick Potter, CEO at AET.

[00:01:20] Welcome to both of you. Jeremy, would you like to give a short introduction about yourself or about Swire Shipping? Thank you, Yves. I'm delighted to join you today. I've been involved in shipping now for 30 years. I've [00:01:34] been based here in Singapore for much of that time with the Swire Group. But it wasn't until nearly, well, four or five years ago when I moved into the role of CEO that I started working much more closely with our ship management part of our business, and it, it really brought me into this world of the seafarers, which I have really enjoyed.

[00:01:52] I find it a, a really rewarding part of the business. And in, in a world where there's so many things that we can't control these days, I think of geopolitics and everything, it's a really rewarding part of the business to work more [00:02:04] closely with our seafarers. And Nick, from your perspective, a brief intro.

[00:02:08] Yes, absolutely. And it's a pleasure to join you today. I've been involved in shipping my entire career, um, but I started out as a, as a seafarer working on tankers, and I think that is what's anchored me in my passion, uh,

for working on and around ships and supporting the success of, of seafarers. We hear quite regularly in the industry about the wellbeing of [00:02:34] seafarers' mental, social, physical wellbeing, but how can you make the link now between the seafarers' wellbeing and the safe operation of a vessel?

[00:02:46] Nick, shall I come to you first? Well, look, I think at its core is the culture on board, uh, that you have a culture that people have the values that align with the organization, and at the same time that those values support the work that they do. [00:03:04] It's really about doing the right thing, uh, when no one else is around.

[00:03:08] So I think culture is at, uh, uh, is at the heart of, of what you have and what you need. And I think if you then build on that, it's around creating the right environment. Uh, seafarers are like any other part of your human capital. Uh, they need to feel valued. They need to feel understood, listened to, and cared for.

[00:03:30] For me, yeah, safety has always be completely [00:03:34] linked to the, the wellbeing and the performance and the happiness overall of our seafarers. Thanks, Nick. Jeremy, from your perspective? Well, I think, Yves, building on what Nick has just said, I think we also recognize that life on board a ship is, can be different to other parts of the work environment.

[00:03:54] There are some barriers, some stereotypical barriers in many cases that, that all of our seafarers are facing with hierarchy or- Nationality, gender, seniority. [00:04:04] We'll, we'll talk about all of these today, but I think in order to recognize that this concept of psychological safety, trust effectively, I think is, is something that I'd add onto the list that Nick has just mentioned, and I think if you have that trusting environment that gives people the ability to say stop before something going wrong, notwithstanding these difficulties and these barriers, then you have a safe vessel.

[00:04:31] But I, I agree at its heart, happy crew [00:04:34] is about being motivated and focused, and that leads to much safer operations. One other point that we hear a lot about in the industry is the number of cadets that are unable to find a ship to basically complete their sea time. Now, I know, uh, Jeremy, for you in Swire Shipping, you have a really good record of, of keeping your retention very high.

[00:04:58] I think the key thing we have found is, is starting early, so plan [00:05:04] things early. Regular engagement with cadets when they join our vessels, uh, company-initiated training, boosting motivation, building

competencies, building their knowledge. But of course, probably the most important thing then is around retention is to make sure that you have a visible pathway from cadet to officer.

[00:05:28] So making sure that the pathways and, and what is made up of that is [00:05:34] very clear, what, uh, things that are very properly tracked, that are monitored, that are fed back to the cadets along the way And of course, constant encouragement to make sure that they continue to look at ways to upgrade themselves as well.

[00:05:47] One of the ways to make sure that we have good retention is to ensure that you're not over-reliant on singular nationalities, for example, or singular gender. Make sure you have a diverse track of cadets, and of course, that helps also. Nick, how does AET approach, uh, cadets and [00:06:04] retention? To me, it starts with attraction because if you've got the right value proposition to come into the industry and come into the company itself, then you're setting things up for success in terms of a foundation for retention in the future.

[00:06:21] I, I do think we as the industry have got more work to do on attraction. I think we're still coming to terms with generational changes, and I'm not sure as an [00:06:34] industry we've necessarily adjusted. In terms of then retention as those cadets, because yes, you're making a long-term investment. We talk about eight to 10 years of training and, and, and growth before you've got the potential for captains and chief engineers.

[00:06:51] That's a considerable investment by the individual and by the company. So a little bit goes back to why does a person stay in the role? They, they, they align with the values and the culture of the [00:07:04] organization. The employee engagement that you have is underpinned by what motivates them and being valued and cared, as I talked about before.

[00:07:11] What I wanted to check on, and this is something you both mentioned as well, is the onboard taking care of your cadets, of your crew. Now specifically with regards to cadets, these are young guys, young girls who are coming on board of a ship for the very first time. They do not necessarily know what to expect.

[00:07:32] They do not necessarily know how [00:07:34] to deal with the isolation or with being away from their families or being disconnected from the internet. How can you prepare your cadets for that type of environment on board? How, how do you get them ready for the sea? Well, I think in this day

and age, uh, Yves, you, you touched on this yourself, a lot of it, of course, is around connectivity, and one of the positive things, of course, is I think coming on board a ship these days is far more, can be far more familiar to someone coming on board for [00:08:04] the first time because of the benefits we have of, of as part of training and as part of simulations, understanding what life on board a ship looks like, largely because of, uh, the, the benefits with connectivity.

[00:08:16] So I think some of the isolation aspects perhaps are reducing. Nick, from your perspective, how does AET prepare, um, your cadets? Providing support and counseling services, not just when you feel challenged, but in terms of kind of mentoring even as a [00:08:34] way to support seafarers. Jeremy talked earlier about psychological safety.

[00:08:38] I, I'm a massive fan of psychological safety. You've got to have that environment where cadets feel it's, it's very different from what they're used to. They've got to have an environment where they feel they can be open and share, voice their concerns or their questions. And yes, some gaming stations and some other ways to, uh, to kind of feel, uh, normal and, and perhaps used to what they're doing is, is goes down a, a treat too.

[00:09:02] What we see a lot on board of [00:09:04] ships these days is that the crew is disappearing into their cabins after work because they all want to stream a movie if they can, or they want to phone home or anything. Is there anything specific you do with your accommodation to make it more amicable to, to life on board?

[00:09:22] Creating that community on board is critical. So how do you create that community? You create incentives to bring people together. We as humans are fundamentally social [00:09:34] beings, so you need an environment to foster that. I- in AET, uh, we're developing modern, bright accommodation where, where people really want to hang out together and, um, can create energy from the environment that they're in.

[00:09:50] So that's a big focus area for us. We haven't really changed the design of accommodations on ships for decades, and in some cases, if at all. And then if you create the right environment for people to come together, it [00:10:04] also has a knock-on effect in terms of their connection to the company, their connection to their colleagues, that employee engagement that you're, that you're so importantly looking for.

[00:10:13] So creating that need to come together is ... It cannot be underestimated. I don't think we should resist technology. I think we should embrace it. If I think back to traditionally why one would go ashore, for instance, during a port stay would be to see the world, uh, and would be to make phone calls and, and, you [00:10:34] know, both of those issues these days, because port stays are busier, and you don't need to go ashore in many cases to make phone calls, have changed.

[00:10:41] And so getting people off the ship and going ashore and then making life on board the ship is a difficult challenge that we all need to work through. But I think, I think we'll see a swing back to people wanting to spend time again as, as, as humans. We're starting to see that on some of our vessels at the moment.

[00:10:56] So I think we need to, uh, take it in our stride. Earlier on, we were talking about, and I think it was you, Jeremy, who mentioned you have a [00:11:04] wide variety of nationalities amongst your crew. When you have that, which I think is fantastic, that also means it comes with a wide variety of cultural background, religious background.

[00:11:16] So basically, a question on the DEI on board. How can we make sure that it's not just about religious or cultural or gender, uh, diversity, but it's also about other preferences that crew may have? How can you make sure that [00:11:34] people are aware of those differences and know how to deal with it and feel safe on board?

[00:11:40] As a general comment, the crux of it is these things need to be principle led and, and not rules led or guidelines led. And I think the principle for me is that a, a, a diverse team is a, is a better performing team from a business sense. So I think if we start at that simple level, then we need to understand, well, what do we actually do to make that [00:12:04] happen?

[00:12:04] And that, that includes things, of course, like taking a zero tolerance around discrimination of certain groups. But it's not just on board the ship. I think it's important to think about and remember this all starts before one joins a ship or in the office for that matter, whether it's how we recruit people, how, whether, uh, whether it's how we develop or, or, or promote people.

[00:12:27] This starts a long way down the chain, and I think any risk that biases maybe in the industry, you know, [00:12:34] start well before someone joins a ship. And I think once you've then got a clear idea of that, then we need to reinforce it culturally. So the concept of sort of employee engagement

groups, we find are always very useful, sort of blending together top-down thinking and, and ideas coming from the grassroots Unconscious bias training I always think is incredibly useful, particularly for leadership.

[00:12:58] And that's some of the ways that you can sort of reinforce all of this with the culture and make it, make it real day [00:13:04] to day. Nick, how does AET deal with diversity? Um, well, first of all, diversity, um, inclusion, belonging are absolutely critical aspects and, and core to who we, we are. You know, from a business perspective, just get a better answer is through diversity of thoughts and experiences.

[00:13:21] We know that we have potential shortfalls in, in seafarers for, for the future. Um, our industry we know is at 2% females. Now, within the MIC group, we're doing better than the [00:13:34] 2%, but we've got a long way to go like much of the industry. Training is important, so we, we provide diversity training to our staff on board to at least set, set the tone, set the expectation, and give people some of the tools to understand how to appropriately interact.

[00:13:52] But it's an opportunity area, and it's an area I think us as an industry we've got, we've got a lot more work to do at the same time. I agree with you, Nick. There is certainly a lot more that we can do as an industry. [00:14:04] And to that point, I know that both AET and Swire are part of the All Aboard Alliance, which was founded in May 2022 to recognize that raising standards at sea requires coordinated industry action.

[00:14:16] We have asked Susanne Justesen, who is the director human sustainability at the Global Maritime Forum, to explain what the four strategic goals are of the All Aboard Alliance and what they stand for. Late last year, the All Aboard Alliance launched our new 2030 [00:14:34] strategy for improving lives at sea. And within that strategy, we aligned, uh, between us, it took us a year and a half almost, uh, on four strategic goals that we are focusing on between now and, and, and 2030.

[00:14:52] Uh, and the first goal is safe working conditions at sea. And when we focus on safety, it's primarily on psychological safety. So within the strategic goals, we're [00:15:04] keen to address, in particular, fatigue at sea and also focus on how to allow seafarers to feel safe from abuse and, and misconduct at sea. Our second strategic goal is improved physical and mental health at sea before 2030.

[00:15:24] Uh, and within this goal, we are focusing on medical care, healthy living, and social life at sea. Our third strategic goal is [00:15:34] inclusion and

diversity, and with that, the alliance is very much focused on driving or improving leadership skills at sea, making them more inclusive, but we also want to strengthen overall crew and leadership diversity as well as make the physical conditions at sea and onboard vessels more inclusive overall.

[00:15:57] And the fourth and final, uh, strategic goal is that we want to make careers at [00:16:04] sea both more attractive and more flexible. Uh, so with this goal, we are focusing on how to make employment overall more family friendly, but also focusing in on upskilling and driving more transparent career paths at sea.

[00:16:20] That was Susanne from the All-Aboard Alliance. Now, Jeremy, do you have any practical examples of how you implement these strategic goals in your fleet? I can give an example, Yves, of this is specifically around gender.

[00:16:34] When we first started a couple of years ago, we worked very closely with GMF, the All-Aboard Alliance, to join one of their programs specifically focused on, uh, improving the, the percentage of female seafarers.

[00:16:46] And before joining that program, we were very much of a view that, uh, the best way for us to, uh, encourage, uh, female seafarers was to have a buddy system on board our ship and, and have that across as many ships as possible, and that would be a way to build a, a safe system and welcome new female seafarers on [00:17:04] board.

[00:17:04] The All-Aboard Alliance, um, encouraged us to think very differently about that and, and ran a f- very successful pilot program which promoted the opposite. So having a far greater number of females, up to nearly 50% on one of our vessels On perhaps a fewer number of ships. And the thinking behind that was that it leads to a quicker culture change on board the vessels, which it absolutely did, and then leads to things accelerating quicker.

[00:17:32] So I think that was a [00:17:34] really good example of where thinking differently, collaborating with other, you know, ideas in the industry worked. But the one thing I'll just finish off to say, while this was not part of our All Aboard Alliance experience as such, is that you need to prepare for success. And what I mean by that is I all too often hear people saying in the industry that, you know, "We'd love to have more female seafarers on board, but w- they're not available through the manning companies or through the colleges."

[00:18:02] And I think that's on us as [00:18:04] shipping companies to create a pipeline for five years into the future, not five weeks into the future. It's something that we can do. Nick, I think Jeremy did a fantastic job of promoting

the All Aboard Alliance there. How would you convince more ship owners and managers to actually sign up, uh, to these principles?

[00:18:22] Well, we, we signed the All Aboard Alliance commitment, um, and I definitely encourage more ship owners to do that. That's really about a commitment to a shared ambition, uh, for the [00:18:34] industry around health, safety, inclusion, and wellbeing. If ship owners just focus on those four areas, I believe the collective impact can be huge. Just perhaps on one example on diversity and inclusion, we spent time redesigning the boiler suits for women on board.

[00:18:53] That might seem like something that as an industry perhaps, you know, should have been addressed some time ago. But when you start to look at female [00:19:04] needs on board vessels and how that then manifests in PPE, it really starts to remind you of what we need to recognize as the important needs across a diverse workforce set.

[00:19:16] Um, that has been a very successful project, and that was also about listening, listening to our people. What do they need from PPE in order to, um, go about what they need to do in the, in the workplace, um, as well as being comfortable in a, in, in the environment that they operate in? [00:19:34] As a ship owner, where do I start?

[00:19:36] What should I be doing? Is there a, a roadmap available that I can follow? Is there a gold standard? Um, of course, a lot of these, these services, the examples that you have been mentioning, you know them from experience. You know that they are working. But if I am, for example, a smaller ship owner, where do I start?

[00:19:57] What does good look like, Jeremy? I think unfortunately there's no playbook on this one to go and buy off the shelf. [00:20:04] Internally, we look at benchmarking this, this question you're raising two ways. One is how can we learn from others in the, in the wider industry, and how can we benchmark essentially against ourselves through ensuring we're continuously improving, surveying, monitoring after each contract, the feedback from our seafarers?

[00:20:26] But in terms of the external benchmarking Uh, some of the work that Nick and I joined recently with the All [00:20:34] Aboard Alliance was looking at exactly this point. How can we create some, some standards, some ambitions long term that address your point? And I think the first acknowledgement is we need to measure what we don't know.

[00:20:46] And so there'll be a phase that we go into over the next, uh, number of years, and we'd encourage everyone to participate in that as best as possible to measure all sorts of things, uh, that constitute what good looks like on board a ship. One of the really interesting opportunities if, if owners and ship managers are, are [00:21:04] interested is to look at ways that your own crew are benchmarked against the broader industry happiness index, and that's a, that's a service that The Mission to Seafarers provide.

[00:21:15] In this day and age, getting feedback and collecting data is easy with the technology that we have, and I sense that we possibly are asking too many questions and doing too many surveys for all well-intended parts of the industry. Whenever we're doing surveys, I think it's really important to close the loop, to [00:21:34] feed back what we've done with that information and keep that feedback loop going.

[00:21:39] And in the other episodes of this Future Thinking series, we are talking with, uh, the various charities. We have, uh, discussions with The Mission to Seafarers, with Stella Maris, with Sailor Society, and like you mentioned, the Seafarer Happiness Index is a fantastic tool that is available, um, and that can give you a really good indication of what is happening on board.

[00:22:02] Nick, from AET's [00:22:04] perspective, in which ways are you working together with, uh, the various charities? We're st- a strong supporter of The Mission to Seafarers, for example. Uh, we're actually currently doing a, a piece looking at how we can advocate further on gender diversity and increasing women's participation at sea, um, and in fact, creating a, a video at the moment to support that.

[00:22:28] I think we're coming close to, to the end here. We've, we've had a really fantastic discussion so far, [00:22:34] but I want to have a takeaway for our audience. And Jeremy, from your perspective, if there is one piece of advice that you would be able to give a smaller ship owner on convincing them to implement some of these initiatives that we have been discussing, how can you convince them?

[00:22:54] I think we've touched on this concept a few times today, but I think generally wellbeing on board a vessel, we should all look as, firstly, as an investment and not [00:23:04] as a cost. If we ever need the encouragement to do so, we need to remember we're all humans and at its, at, at the center here is really about looking after one another.

[00:23:15] And from a business perspective, I think a lot of this is about risk management, and risk management creating a very, a very diverse and a very safe culture leads to good business outcomes. So I think my encouragement for people starting to think about this more and more is to st- start small, [00:23:34] uh, is to listen, as we've all said today, make sure you do something with that feedback, and then set the right leadership tone.

[00:23:42] Nick, from your perspective? There's three sides of a triangle here, good business, good safety, and happy seafarers, and you can't achieve one side of that triangle without the other two. Perhaps our industry has traditionally looked as, uh, you know, we almost u- use the, the narrative of minimum manning requirements [00:24:04] as opposed to that, that human or c- human capital, the, the resources.

[00:24:08] And I think valuing the resources, listening to our seafarers, being connected to them, creating the right environment, we have to approach it from, from all three sides of the triangle. But I think that if you do that step by step, you will reap the rewards, and you'll have a, a more energized organization that's supporting you.

[00:24:30] Thank you both very much. I think those are fantastic pieces [00:24:34] of advice. And I want to thank you both, uh, for joining us here today, uh, Jeremy Sutton from Swire Shipping, Nick Potter from AET. Thank you both. And that's it for this series of Future Thinking About Seafarers. To listen to the whole series, as well as North Standard's other Alongside podcasts, head to [north-standard.com](http://north-standard.com) or listen on your chosen podcast player.

[00:24:59] If you have any questions or topics you would like raised on our podcast, then [00:25:04] please do get in touch with us. Details of how to are in the show notes.