

Officers as Prostitutes: Myth or Reality? (A Study on Poaching of Officers in the Philippines)

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ABSTRACT: This descriptive-qualitative research looked into the reasons why a seafarer is likened to a prostitute and in what aspects they are alike. It also aimed to determine from the key informants the practices and or procedures employed by shipping and manning companies in order to fill in the much needed position on board that has become a scarcity in the last years. Likewise it aimed to determine how these manning companies keep their present pool of officers in their rooster. What are the strategies employed by the different manning companies in keeping their officers and crew loyal to their respective companies?

1 INTRODUCTION

The current shortage of officers in the world manning industry has become alarming with the estimated shortage of about 16,000 officers as of 2006, and predicted to rise to about 46,000 by 2010 according to a study conducted by Belcher, et. al. (2003).

About 1/3 of the world's seafarers today are Filipinos (Amante, 2003). It is observed that a great number of Filipino officers transfer from one company to another in consideration of a higher salary.

While it is true to some seafarers that salary is important to keep them from their jobs, to some seafarers, security of the job is more important than salary. Thus, the questions is, "Is the amount of salary an assurance for a manning or shipping company to keep their officers and crew?"

During the 8th Asia-Pacific Conference for Manning and Training held in Manila last November 14-15, 2007, one of the speakers mentioned that seafarers are just like prostitutes.

But why is a seafarer likened or compared to a prostitute? A prostitute in a club goes for the guy with the most money, or the highest bidder. Likewise, Filipino seafarers today, also go to the company which offers the most money for the position.

Doris Magsaysay-Ho, chairman of Magsaysay Maritime Corporation and president of the Philippine Seafarers Promotion Council, said that ship owners who refuse to spend money on training are spreading havoc by poaching qualified crew from companies that have invested wisely (Lloyd's List, 2006). She further claimed that other ship owners

have not prepared for the shortages of manpower and have been causing havoc to the market by pirating people.

The same opinion was aired by Wang(2006) and he warned that despite the ship owners efforts to train quality officers and ratings, they are under the constant threat of losing their skilled people to companies which do not invest in the training, and do not build up quality seafarers. The combination of this poaching and the scarcity of skilled seafarers had driven the salaries of some masters to \$16,000 per month.

According to Chee How (2007) ship owners and ship managers must invest in the training and upgrading of the skills of the seafarers sailing on board ships to grow the pool of skilled manpower.

It is in this context that the study was studied.

2 THE PROBLEM

This inquiry aimed to determine the following:

- 1 What are the practices of the different crewing and manning companies in the recruitment of the officers and crew?
- 2 How many of the companies practice poaching? Are salaries determinants in keeping their officers and crew?
- 3 What other programs do companies have for the seafarers and their family in order to be able to wisely manage the allotment or even increase their monthly salary?

3 METHOD

This descriptive-qualitative phenomenological research delved into the investigation of the different hiring practices employed by the manning and shipping companies amidst the shortage of qualified and competent officers in the global manning industry. It also aimed to determine if salary is a determining factor in keeping their officers and crew. Likewise, it aimed to find out what measures are taken by the manning and shipping companies for their officers and crew to be loyal to their company.

This study utilized in-depth interviews with key informants in this research. The respondents were the different manning and shipping company managers, officers and some crew members.

3.1 *Modes of analysis*

3.1.1 *Career development plan*

Keeping their officers and crew one company which does not join the game of poaching is K-Line. As of September 2007, the company has a retention rate of 96% of their officers. It has a career development program for their scholars. They frequently visit their scholars in the different maritime schools in the country, making them feel that they are part of the company. True enough, this researcher personally attests to the fact that it is K-Line who is among the very few companies that recruit their potential officers through scholarship programs. This manner of training potential officers was stressed by the company president, Mrs. Virginia Linesis during the interview. She further mentioned that the company always looks forward to the development of its officers and crew, which means that the officers are not only trained to be competent for the present position but also for the next position. In this company, all the officers and crew have a career development program. "If you are a 2nd Officer now, you should take courses required for a Chief Officer, We even advise 2nd officers to study the job of the chief officer during their break times," said Mrs. Linesis. These researchers were happy to note that of the six (6) scholars who have become captains in their company, four (4) are from this university.

At K-Line, the career path is strictly followed. Opportunities are given, but it is really up to the crew to grab it. Some of these courses are career development, emotional quotient, psychological test and anger management.

At Philippine Transmarine Carriers, the turnover rate is 85%. They lost some of their officers to poachers despite the fact they are giving other benefits like health and insurance plans. As part of the program on social responsibility, PTC has developed

the PTC Villages, a housing development program in Imus, Cavite. Presently, there are 300 houses through PAG-IBIG Fund, payable in 20 years. Just like K-Line, PTC likewise has a career development program for its officers and crew.

3.1.2 *The practice of poaching*

On the issue of poaching or prostitution of seafarers, majority (12 of the 14 respondents) of the interviewees practice poaching. They usually assign an employee to do the hiring at the Seafarers Center near Luneta in Manila. According to a general operations manager we have interviewed: "If other companies are doing that in order to attract the seafarers, they, too are doing the same thing." Poaching is the name of the game right now according to Mrs. Linesis. This was also aptly mentioned by Surish (2007) that right now, there is a wage war in the Philippines. Wage wars are inevitable when demand outstrips supply, but wage wars do not buy loyalty. On the contrary, wage wars encourage mercenary attitude among officers, which results in company hopping. These also discourage professionalism and career development through loyalty to a single employer. According to Mrs. Carla Limcaoco, Vice-chairman of Philippine Transmarine Carriers, the word prostitutes being likened to seafarers is true. "It seems we are all scary and we are all concerned because it removes professionalism." The money according to her is so tempting. It's hard to resist. If this practice continues and younger generation will use this as work ethics, then it is indeed scary for the profession.

3.1.3 *The offers are too tempting to resist*

On the part of the seafarer, these researchers were able to interview two captains who have just disembarked their vessels. They are forced to accept the good offer because they have to be practical. The good captains told us that a seafarer is only as good as his contract lasts. What does he mean by this? If something happens to the seaman while he is taking his vacation, he will not be able to claim anything from his latest company because his contract has already terminated. After four months of the termination of the contract, a seaman cannot avail of his medical benefits anymore, unless he signs a new contract.

On other programs the companies have for their officers and crew. The Philippine Transmarine Carriers, not only has a career development program for its officers and crew, but also has a family and crew service department that focuses on the family. It conducts monthly seminar on different topics especially financial management for the wives of the seafarers. This is also practiced at K-Line. At Wallem Maritime Services, a family center which coordi-

nates with the families of the seafarers is one of its programs. Thus, the family is always welcome to entertain any inquiries regarding allotment, procedures and vacancies in the company. This company also considers health care insurances, seniority bonus and re-joining bonus for its officers and crew.

4 FINDINGS

- 1 Most of the manning companies practice poaching in order to lure officers to the profession. This is the present name of the game. Demand has dictated this game due to the short supply of qualified and competent officers.
- 2 The prostitution of the seafarers was also dictated by the shipping industry especially the ship owners who did not invest for the training of seafarers are the ones who are now openly offering exorbitant salaries not within the reach of some ship owners. With this practice professionalism is already lost in the profession.
- 3 The companies that invested on the training of the seafarers are the ones now reaping the fruits of their investment. they have very high retention rates of its officers and crew because they have effectively inculcated in the minds of these seafarers the value of loyalty.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the recommendation of the researchers to the different shipping and manning companies:

- 1 Design a well-defined career development program for the officers and crew. See to it that the company takes care of the career path of each officer and crew.
- 2 Provide a program for the promotion of the welfare of the seafarers' families such as housing program.
- 3 Assist the families of the seafarers to be self sufficient through skills training programs such as entrepreneurship, etc.

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