Introducing Work-Life Balance Concept on Seagoing Ships

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of this article is to examine seafarers' expectations regarding work-life balance solutions and to present examples of actions implemented on seagoing vessels. Authors want to identify activities encompassed by work-life balance conception on seagoing vessels and to identify opportunities to benefit from improvement working conditions in shipping industry.
Design/Methodology/Approach: The research is based on expert interviews with seafarers working for various shipowners and on case study conducted by one of the authors from shipping industry.
Findings: Implementing work-life balance practices on seagoing vessels is a new phenomenon in the maritime industry and not yet widely used.
Practical implication: The conducted research presented a number of practical solutions applicated on seagoing ship, hence the examples given may constitute good practices in the maritime industry. Seafarers' expectations regarding well-being on board a seagoing vessel may be available in the directions of development of the concept of work-life balance in this industry.
Originality/Value: The concept of work-life balance has been implemented in the shipping industry for several years. It is a new phenomenon in this sector.

Keywords: Well-Being.

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1. Introduction

The concept of work-life balance is becoming increasingly common in many companies. Implementing this concept improves employment conditions and, consequently, leads to greater job satisfaction. Taking care of employee well-being is essential in any business, even in maritime sector, where working on ships is fraught with challenges: prolonged separation from family, significant responsibility and stress, and confined spaces and a tight-knit group of employees.

A seafarer's job is intellectual and manual work requiring extensive specialized and psychological knowledge. Applying work-life balance practices allows for maintaining physical fitness and good mental health in a very demanding work environment and is increasingly expected by employees. Companies that implement such solutions are more favorably perceived in the labor market and can expect greater employee loyalty.

The aim of this article is to examine seafarers' expectations regarding work-life balance solutions and to present examples of actions implemented on seagoing vessels that can be considered best practices in the maritime industry. The authors posed the following research questions: Is it possible to implement the work-life balance concept on a seagoing vessel? What activities can be implemented on board within this concept? The authors conducted expert interviews with long-serving seafarers working for various shipowners on various types of seagoing vessels.

The article also presents a case study describing work-life balance practices on an offshore vessel, based on the professional experience of one of the authors. Implementing work-life balance practices on seagoing vessels is a new phenomenon in the maritime industry and not yet widely used, hence the paucity of publications on the subject.

2. Literature Review

The concept of work-life balance has been around for about 50 years. The term „work-life balance" was introduced in the 1970s in Great Britain, based on earlier work-life programs. Lockwood cites 1986 as the date the current term was coined. In the 1930s and 1990s, the concept became popular in the United States (Lockwood, 2003).

One of the definitions says that work-life balance is "the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in - and equally satisfied with - his or her work role and family role". The concept is based on three components: time balance (equal time devoted to work and family), involvement balance (equal involvement in work and family), and satisfaction balance (equal satisfaction with work and family) (Greenhause, Collins, and Shaw, 2003). The Cambridge Dictionary presents the following definition of work-life balance: "the amount of time you spend doing your

job compared with the amount of time you spend with your family and doing things you enjoy" (Cambridge Dictionary, access 2025).

In the literature you can find a list of four groups of determinants influencing work-life balance: individual, family, work and organization, and also social environment. Within the group of individual behaviors, can be distinguish type A (a person who is more active, more work-oriented, more passionate, competitive and unfortunately prone to workaholism) and type B (a person who is calm, patient, balanced, and right-minded).

Workaholism means being addicted to work, staying at work for very long hours, overworking and being preoccupied with work, sometimes being away from work, which causes family and health problems (Delecta, 2011). Individual factors also include: gender and age, preference for integrating or approving a given sphere of life, procrastination, or the tendency to postpone actions (Andysz, Najder, and Merecz-Kot, 2014), individual's spiritual, emotional intelligence and job engagement (Mokana A/P Muthu Kumarasamy, Faizuniah Pangil, Mohd Faizal Mohd Isa, 2015).

Work-life balance is a very important concept but hard to implement for people with families. Marriage, raising children, and caring for the elderly at home are burdensome and require a lot of work at home. Cutting work hours to meet domestic responsibilities can lead to career disruption, so this situation can be a source of stress (Delecta, 2011), family conflicts, poorer childcare, divorce, alcoholism, falling into drug addiction, addiction to cigarettes or sweets, lack of family and job security (Borkowska, 2010). To meet the organization's goals (e.g., increasing productivity or efficiency), an employee must have mental agility and devote a lot of time and effort to work (Delecta, 2011).

Organizational factors include: organizational culture, perception of the organization as a family friendly, values and stereotypes shared by management and employees (Andysz, Najder, and Merecz-Kot, 2014), organizational support and workload (Mokana A/P Muthu Kumarasamy, Faizuniah Pangil, Mohd Faizal Mohd Isa, 2015).

Actions implemented in companies to improve work-life balance include, among others: work organization (setting work priorities, automating repetitive tasks, limiting notifications, avoiding multitasking), working time (possibility of remote work, part-time work, weekly time management), leave (additional days for caring a child or other persons, the possibility of using additional and non-transferable parental leave, additional days of paid leave) (Dębkowska, Kłosiewicz-Górecka, Szymańska, Wejt-Knyżewska, and Zybertowicz, 2024).

Robak and Słocińska points that significant influence on the employees' WLB have social work environment aspects such as: the supervisor's management style, employee's ability to communicate his needs connected with personal and

professional life to the supervisor, supervisor's understanding for the personal and professional needs of the employee, employee's assertiveness in terms of respecting his personal and professional needs and their defense in a situation of their threat in a workplace, knowledge of the employee rights and its observance by the employer, satisfaction with the atmosphere in a workplace and the relationships with the supervisors and co-workers, the knowledge of the company objectives and the importance of the job performer for their realization, worker's sense of safety connected with the possibility to get some help from the employer or supervisor in case of difficult life situations (Robak and Słocińska, 2015).

Social aspects on a macroeconomic scale related to the issue of work-life balance include: the number of births, postponing the birth of the first child, the number of divorces, the number of single-parent families, social inequalities, the incidence of diseases, the problem of childcare, the growing pathology among children, unemployment, and the level of quality of life (Marzec and Szudlińska-Kanoś, 2022). To environmental factors should be added also technological advancement (Mokana A/P Muthu Kumarasamy, Faizuniah Pangil, Mohd Faizal Mohd Isa, 2015).

Work-life balance practices are used in many contemporary organizations. Global imperatives related to decarbonization, digitalization and sustainability are also being respected in the maritime industry (Chong-Ju Chae, Tae-Eun Kim, Seong-Hyeok Moon, Seung Ho Shin, and Hye Ri Park, 2025). Fudge, Ogier and Alexander (2023) draw the following conclusions in their research: "the specific quality of the marine environments and the values associated with the physical environment strongly influenced people's subjective and relational wellbeing experiences and the development of marine industries may negatively influence people's experience of wellbeing in marine places if not done in ways that are sympathetic to their connections with these marine places" (Fudge, Ogier, and Alexander, 2023).

3. Research Methodology

The aim of the study is to identify activities encompassed by work-life balance concepts on seagoing vessels and to identify opportunities to benefit from working conditions in shipping industry. The hypothesis is that implementing work-life balance concepts on seagoing vessels would impact seafarers' well-being. The research is based on expert interviews with seafarers working for various shipowners and on case study conducted by one of the authors. Respondents were selected based on their experience working on various types of ships with different shipowners. Analysis of the practical information allows for a synthesis in conclusion.

4. Research Results

The authors conducted interviews among twelve seafarers with long service experience between 17 and 30 years, who had worked for various shipowners throughout their lives. All responders have started families and are still working in

their profession. The seafarers selected for the study have been sailing for various shipowners, so they can compare working conditions and additional benefits. When asked whether it is possible to maintain a work-life balance while working on a ship, only five respondents said that it is possible, provided they have understanding, supportive relatives and the ability to quickly switch from work to home mode and vice versa.

Among the difficulties that seafarers' work creates in their private lives, respondents point to long periods of separation from family, which hinders close relationships with loved ones, lack of presence at important family events and holidays, inability to plan holidays in detail, problems with settling in at home after returning from work, little time to de-stress after work, inability to quickly return from work in the event of illness of a loved one or to help family in case of an emergency, and problems with communication from the ship, especially in different time zones.

Eight respondents listed the following well-being initiatives at their companies: free or limited internet access, healthy eating, access to physical activity at the ship's gym, private healthcare for employees and their family members, a pension fund, annual pay increases, the implementation of a mental health program, training in work-life balance and human well-being, access to telephone psychological support, access to satellite connections, opportunities to participate in company training for further development, and team-building events for crew members outside of work.

Four respondents stated that their companies do not implement any measures to improve employee well-being on board. When asked: "When changing shipowners, do you see any differences in the approach to employee well-being?

If so, what are they?" five respondents did not see any difference, while the remaining respondents, those with the longest service, saw the following changes not only among different shipowners but also in recent years even within the same company: concern for overall employee satisfaction, job changes, shortening contract lengths and daily working hours, better living conditions, constant internet access, better remuneration, work on newer ships with modern technologies, the possibility of permanent, direct employment with benefits such as health care and pension contributions, awareness training on various diseases, healthy eating, sleep, and exercise, the possibility of negotiating a different crew change date in consultation with the replacement in emergency situations, and the implementation of a no-blame policy.

The surveyed seafarers would like to see:

- greater stability and regularity in crew changes on their ships,
- greater flexibility in changing crew change dates,
- agreeing changes with the employee regarding sailing dates,
- lifting any limits on internet access, shortening long contracts,

- the possibility of improving qualifications through online training so as not to leave home during their free time,
- team-building meetings with other employees with the option of bringing their family,
- clear rules regarding overtime and rest hours,
- preventing burnout through continuous monitoring of workload,
- social benefits and pension program,
- changes in the organization of work by introducing an additional employee on the same position in crew rotation,
- maintaining permanent integrated crews, which allows for agreeing on change dates with a substitute.

This case study explores the experiences of one of the authors, who has worked on seagoing vessels in the engineering department for 25 years. The author sailed for six shipowners in search of better working conditions. Currently he works on ships in the offshore support vessel industry.

Direct employment is not always offered by his employer. For many years he was employed by agency with employment contract covering only single trip. In such case he had to pay health care when on leave and private pension program.

With changing agency employment to direct employment, employer provided international health care for him and his family. With this type of employment employer offered him contribution in pension program. Those above benefits are more and more desired by seafarers with the higher age, increase satisfaction of job and giving life stability. The shipowner's choice was also guided by the possibility of working on shorter contracts.

Working five weeks on board and five weeks at home allows for more time with his wife and children, as well as helping elderly parents. Shorter contracts don't cause the same painful separation and homesickness as six-month contracts. With such a work schedule, it's also much easier to return to family relationships and a life lived on land.

Planned and regular crew changes and the shipowner's permanent crews allow for advance notification of the need to change work schedules to provide an alternate when a seafarer plans to participate in family events such as baptisms, communions, weddings, etc. In the author's situation, such changes were sometimes organized with the consent of the alternate and the crewing department. Deviations from planned substitutions have occurred in the case of vessel routes or project activities. When the vessel is not in port, crew changes are performed by helicopter.

There have been instances where poor weather conditions prevented crew changes from being completed at the scheduled time. This leads to shortening of days with family. An interesting resource on the author's ship is the Crew Welfare Fund, which

is created to obtain funds from the shipowner through regular contributions and occasionally from the company's clients. It is available to the crew for organized team-building events (go-karting, dining, football matches, visits to tourist attractions). Crews can also access resources for gym equipment, video and board games, musical instruments, books, etc.

The fund is managed by the crew comity, who in consultation with the employees, decides how to allocate the funds. For physical exercise, the ship's crew can use the fitness room in their free time, and the ship's bicycles or golf clubs during their stay in port. The company implements programs that discuss healthy eating, proper rest and sleep, and physical fitness, as well as various training courses and brochures.

Since 2018, the "Resilience" program, designed to promote health and well-being, has been implemented. As part of the Mental Health First Aiders program, an informal session for personnel to share mental health experiences was organized, discussing ways to receive and offer help and support during mentally challenging times (Subsea7, 2025). A telephone service to a shore-based psychologist has also been available not only from the ship but also from home to discuss personal issues.

As part of employee continuous development, vessel management and supervisors participate in safety leadership training through a digital platform (Subsea7, 2020). Program is continued as "Leading Safety Refresh Programme" focused on developing and inspiring leaders to encourage a positive safety environment. One of the main goal of the company is safety of crew members.

This is achieved through short training sessions that raise awareness of the need to stay safe in every situation, e.g. "Work Safe - Home Safe", "Fingers, We Need Them All", "Stop Work Responsibility". Many other aspects related to the job can be developed by attending annual Festival of Learning. As an worker in the company author have access to a confidential Employee Assistance Programme that provides support for coping with life's challenges including health and wellbeing, financial problems, stress or anxiety and family issues (Subsea7, 2024).

The company organizes workshops, training, questionnaires, conversations, group sessions and sessions dedicated to key wellbeing topics (Subsea7, 2023). Company promote a healthy work-life balance through a combination of wellbeing initiatives, protecting against occupational health hazards and supporting employees (Subsea7, 2020). According to the author, the company can be an example of introducing good changes in the maritime industry, aimed at maintaining work-life balance.

5. Discussion

In recent years, scientific literature has been publishing comments and studies on the concept of work-life balance on seagoing ships. The work of a seaman requires 24-hour readiness, 7 days a week, from several to several dozen weeks during one

voyage. Holmgren and Pritschau (2015) are writing about person-environment fit model. A model that recognizes the diverse strengths of individual employees and their resulting ability to meet specific job requirements.

Failure to do so can lead to stress and illness. In addition to the above-mentioned model, the phenomenon of 24-hour availability at work can also be described by boundary theory and cultural theory. A seaman's work of this kind is considered normal, part of the chosen lifestyle, enhanced by ICT, obstacle to work-life balance, and a cause of stress, and other health issues (Holmgren and Pritschau, 2015).

Comparing the working conditions of seafarers in the past, the following changes can be observed today (Kołodziej-Durnaś, 2017):

- before – large crews on ships, living in multi-person cabins, relatively monocultural crews, months-long cruises, rare contacts with family, collective forms of entertainment during free time on board, long stays in ports, predominance of physical work and direct communication,
- now – smaller crews on board, single-person cabins, multicultural crews, shorter (on average four-month) cruises, more frequent contact with family thanks to telecommunications technologies, free time spent individually (digital forms of entertainment), short port stops, infrequent landfalls, predominance of intellectual work in a larger number of positions, predominance of indirect (electronic) communication.

The three most important factors influencing employee retention in maritime industry are competitive salary, advancement opportunities and job security. Employee turnover can be reduced by: job satisfaction, remuneration and financial security, work-life balance and family support, career progression and job security, emotional and psychological well-being.

Ausan (2025) suggests that seaman should have enough time with family, adequate shore vacation, convenient and affordable family communication at sea, emotional and psychological support from company for family challenges. Most officers are also experiencing work-related fatigue and high level of stress (Ausan, 2025).

The following factors influence the mental health, stress and fatigue of seafarers: work load and working hours, crew reduction, social isolation, time pressure, criminalization and unfair treatment, harassment and bullying, piracy. Reasons for leaving work: for cadets include difficult nature of working condition at sea, unsupportive attitude of superiors and learning difficulties, for junior and senior officers include lack of progression opportunities, stagnating salary, poor organizational policy and for ship masters include poor working conditions, family and personal reasons, piracy and criminalization (Nautilus Federation, 2025).

Managers in shipping industry should introduce flexible time and work arrangements, professional programs that focus on giving employees sufficient skills on how to handle job-relates challenges and introduce proper work-life balance policies (Rushna Prenna, 2021). The leadership style, work life balance and employee engagement tools can increase work effectiveness of shipping crew (Ricardianto *et al.,* 2020).

6. Conclusions, Proposals, Recommendations

The lack of work-life balance leads to many unfavorable phenomena both for the shipowner (e.g., frequent crew turnover) and for the seafarers (depression, burnout, family problems, etc.). Many seafarers plan a temporary career on board ships. After reaching a certain rank, they leave seafaring and seek employment ashore.

The maritime industry lacks mentoring and coaching for young seafarers. A technology-centered approach overlooks the human perspective of developing skills and advancing individuals' careers as maritime professionals (Baum-Talmor and Kitada, 2022).

In the maritime industry, measures should be taken to prevent burnout and health problems (Buscema, Cena, Cricenti, Zito, Bertola, and Colombo, 2025). The literature discusses the evolution of mental health practices in maritime industry. Mental health is applied to the safety, efficiency, and sustainability of maritime operations (Funmilayo Aribidesi Ajayi and Chioma Ann Udeh, 2024).

Work-life balance conception should be implemented for ship crews and some shipowner use it on their ships. In addition to the practices discussed in this publication, the authors propose the introduction of training for high- and mid-level staff in Human Capital Management and organizational management psychology. Sailors possess extensive professional knowledge, but are not trained in human resources management or work organization.

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