

# Addressing Workforce Motivation, Retention, and Transversal Competences in the European Maritime Sector

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## Abstract

The maritime sector is of strategic importance to the European economy and global supply chains; however, it is currently facing persistent and well-documented challenges related to workforce motivation, retention, and long-term employability. Despite its critical role, the industry suffers from acute skills shortages, a declining attractiveness of seafaring careers, and high turnover rates. These challenges are intrinsically linked to demanding working conditions, prolonged periods of isolation at sea, limited access to structured learning, and insufficient support for transversal (soft) competences. This paper examines the root causes of the maritime workforce crisis, focusing on the psychological burden, digital fatigue, and the lack of resilience-building mechanisms. By synthesizing current literature, industry reports, and psychological frameworks, this paper argues that addressing mental health and fostering transversal competences through structured mentoring and resilience consultancy are essential to sustaining careers and ensuring the future viability of the European maritime workforce.

## 1. Introduction

The maritime industry remains the backbone of international trade, transporting approximately 90% of global goods. For Europe, the sector is a vital engine of economic growth and supply chain security. Yet, the industry is navigating a severe human resources crisis. The attractiveness of a seafaring career is declining, resulting in critical skills shortages and alarmingly high turnover rates.

The modern seafarer faces a unique intersection of challenges: prolonged isolation, demanding physical and cognitive workloads, and a rapidly digitalizing environment. Furthermore, there is a pronounced lack of structured learning opportunities and insufficient support for "transversal competences"—such as emotional resilience, stress management, and adaptable problem-solving—which are necessary to cope with the rigorous demands of the profession.

This paper explores the multidimensional factors contributing to poor retention and motivation, highlighting the critical role of mental health support, resilience training, and structured mentorship in securing long-term employability in the maritime sector.

## **2. The Realities of Modern Seafaring: Working Conditions and the Psychological Burden**

The harsh realities of seafaring are well-documented. Shipboard life is characterized by isolation, confined living spaces, long and irregular working hours, and multicultural dynamics that can sometimes lead to communication barriers.

### **2.1. Isolation and Mental Health**

Mental health has emerged as a paramount concern in the maritime industry. Organizations such as the Mission to Seafarers and the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) have consistently highlighted the psychological toll of long-duration voyages. Being away from family and support networks for months at a time leads to profound feelings of loneliness and anxiety. According to maritime psychology experts (Denizcilik Psikolojisi), the unique stressors of the maritime environment require specialized psychological interventions that go beyond traditional corporate mental health programs. A critical examination by ITU's Marcolab emphasizes that personal factors, such as family circumstances and the feeling of isolation, are primary drivers of fatigue and anxiety among seafarers. The isolation experienced at sea subjects crews to unavoidable stressors that place their mental well-being at severe risk, leading to burnout and, ultimately, departure from the industry.

### **2.2. Digital Fatigue and Cognitive Overload**

In addition to traditional maritime stressors, the modern seafarer faces the challenge of "digital fatigue." The rapid digitalization of ship operations (e.g., ECDIS, automated engine controls) has shifted the nature of maritime work from physical labor to high-stakes cognitive monitoring. Recent studies demonstrate that prolonged screen use, intensive digital workloads, and constant connectivity demands contribute to sleep disruption and cognitive overload, further eroding the psychological well-being of the crew.

## **3. The Gap in Transversal Competences and Career Sustainability**

While maritime education and training (MET) institutions rigorously prepare cadets with technical (hard) skills compliant with STCW standards, there is a systemic failure to adequately equip them with transversal (soft) competences.

### **3.1. The Need for Resilience**

Resilience—the psychological capacity to "bounce back" from adversity—is a critical transversal competence for seafarers. Studies have shown that resilience acts as a vital mediator between the intense loneliness experienced on board and overall psychological well-being. However, resilience is not innate; it must be cultivated. Initiatives like the *Maritime Trainer Resilience*

*Consultancy* emphasize the necessity of structured programs that teach seafarers stress management, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping mechanisms. Without these transversal skills, seafarers are ill-equipped to handle the psychological riptides of their profession, leading to high turnover rates and truncated careers.

### **3.2. Long-Term Employability and Shore-Based Transitions**

The lack of structured career pathways from sea to shore further diminishes the attractiveness of the profession. The *Sail Ahead* initiative highlighted that while seafarers possess valuable transferable skills (e.g., risk assessment, teamwork, crisis management), they often lack the business management and advanced communication competences required for shore-based roles. Providing continuous professional development that bridges this gap is essential for ensuring the long-term employability of maritime professionals across the European sector.

## **4. Strategies for Improvement: Mentorship and Structured Support**

To combat the retention crisis and improve workforce motivation, the maritime industry must transition from a purely technical focus to a holistic human-centric approach.

### **4.1. Mentorship as a Catalyst for Retention**

Mentorship is a highly effective, cost-efficient tool for transferring experiential knowledge and providing psychological support. The "10 Minute Challenge" introduced by the Nautical Institute advocates for short, informal bursts of mentoring to foster a culture of continuous learning and support on board. Furthermore, pilot studies on alumni mentoring and veteran-to-cadet knowledge transfer reveal that structured mentorship bridges the gap between theoretical academy training and the harsh realities of shipboard life. Mentorship not only accelerates the acquisition of transversal skills but also creates a sense of belonging and value, which directly counters feelings of isolation and boosts retention.

### **4.2. Comprehensive Mental Health Policies**

As advocated by ISWAN and the Mission to Seafarers, the industry must move beyond reactive measures to proactive mental health policies. This includes:

- Providing free, confidential, and reliable telemental health services and connectivity for crews.
- Integrating resilience and psychological well-being modules into standard maritime curricula.
- Training senior officers to recognize signs of mental distress and fostering a "just culture" where seeking help is not stigmatized.

## **5. Conclusion**

The European maritime sector's challenges with workforce motivation, retention, and long-term employability are deeply rooted in the demanding nature of the profession and the historic neglect of the human element. To reverse the trend of declining career attractiveness

and high turnover, the industry must prioritize the mental health and psychological resilience of its workforce.

By investing in transversal competences, fostering robust mentorship programs, and establishing comprehensive, industry-wide mental health support systems, stakeholders can equip seafarers to cope with professional demands. Ultimately, ensuring the well-being and continuous development of seafarers is not merely a moral imperative, but a strategic necessity for the sustainability and safety of the global maritime supply chain.

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