

Rethinking an inclusive space for seafarers

One ship manager is paying more than lip service to improving the onboard experience for its crew

By Carly Fields

YOUR surroundings matter. They matter for your enjoyment of whatever task is at hand, they matter for your creativity, and they matter for your sanity. Whether you are writing a research thesis, brainstorming a project or undertaking a team building activity, a fit-for-purpose environment will foster the best results. Yet while onshore shipping employees are familiar with the benefits that accommodating surroundings offer in an office environment, colleagues at sea are not yet capitalising on the same advantages.

With a keen focus on future-proof and new-fuel-ready ships, commercial and operational design priorities take precedence. Consequently, aesthetically-pleasing design of crew quarters and mess areas don't feature highly, if at all. But shipowners and naval architects are missing a trick. With the right stimulus, seafarers could benefit



Crew gather in the social dining area

greatly from more fit-for-purpose living areas: better engagement, greater cohesion between the crew, and improved safety are just some of the perks of better design.

Eastern Pacific Shipping (EPS) is one ship manager that has embraced the importance of the onboard environment on crew wellbeing. The majority of its 5,000-strong workforce are seafarers, and their wellbeing is

a top priority. Consequently, it is continuously looking for ways to make the lives of its workforce, both at sea and onshore, a more enriching experience, both physically and mentally.

Sense of community

As part of a large industrial group, the Quantum Pacific Group, EPS has been able to learn from the best practices of its sister companies and implement them

at EPS. One thing it has learnt is how modern office spaces can create a sense of community, which in turn helps increase efficiency, build trust, and foster a positive corporate culture.

Speaking to *The Sea*, EPS chief executive Cyril Ducau explained how the company used that learning to completely renovate its Singapore headquarters earlier this year. The new space is a balance of form and function with wide-open spaces, standing desks, collaboration areas, and a large café for meetings and events, which is also a place to relax.

"The office has been a hit and many people who visit us say they feel like they are in a tech company, not a shipping company," says Mr Ducau. "While compliments are always welcome the main driver behind making these changes was to create an active community and reinforce our corporate culture, which it has. The challenge we faced next was finding out a way to implement this on our ships so our seafarer colleagues can enjoy the same benefits."

On its ships, EPS started with relatively minor changes that had the potential to improve engagement. Greater connectivity to shore, free WiFi in common areas to encourage socialisation, a single mess hall so that everyone, regardless of rank, could eat their meals together – these were comparatively simple to put in place.

A step up was the launch of its Gymnasium Living Onboard programme, with an aim to install a fully functioning and high-quality gym on every EPS-managed vessel. EPS also kick-started a number of social media campaigns designed to strengthen its community. But this was still not enough. "We wanted to go the extra mile to drive the agenda for seafarer wellbeing, but we were not quite sure how," reflects Mr Ducau. "It

Credit: EPS



EPS chief executive Cyril Ducau is giving high priority to seafarer comfort



Credit: EPS

EPS's Gymnasium Living Onboard initiative will see gyms installed on all of its managed fleet

was during a meeting about our expanding fleet that we had an 'a-ha' moment."

Lightbulb moment

That 'a-ha' moment led to the commissioning of world-renowned interior designer Wetzels Brown to reimagine the common and accommodation areas of EPS vessels to create an inclusive and collaborative onboard experience. The redesign process is being led by a team of former and existing seafarers from its fleet. Additionally, seafarers from across all ranks have been informally included in design discussions to make sure the proposals are practical and improve the life-at-sea experience.

"We continuously gather feedback from our colleagues about what's working, what's not, what can we improve on, and what should stay the same," said Mr Ducau. "Our shore teams regularly visit vessels, more for technical and operational purposes, but they use those visits to have candid conversations about life at sea." Mr Ducau, along with

members of the management and ownership team, visits vessels at least two to three times a month to meet the onboard staff, present long service awards, and to hold one-on-one discussions with seafarers. While specific feedback varies from person to person, there are overall themes that have emerged as to what is important to them. "That's why safety, connectivity, camaraderie, entertainment, and comfort are the main areas we are focusing on during the design phase, which is still ongoing," he said.

Some requests have been easier to address immediately, such as installing large screen ultra-high definition televisions, PlayStation 4s and karaoke machines in common areas.

Eye for design

The Wetzels Brown designs will be rolled out gradually across EPS's fleet in 2020 but the remodelling process started for vessels going to dry dock this year. The feedback from ships that have already been refashioned has been very positive, says Mr Ducau. The *Marmara Sea*,

a 2009-built aframax tanker, was the first vessel in the fleet to receive the design and accommodation upgrade earlier this year during its drydocking. "I met with the vessel's master at that time, Capt Amol Pujari, and the ship's crew to discuss the upgrades and again after a few months of her sailing at sea to gather feedback. The response was overwhelmingly positive." Mr Ducau even received a letter of appreciation from the captain, that said: "Sir, on behalf of our crew, I wanted to thank you for the improvement to the common areas and living quarters on board the vessel. It shows that the company cares about our wellbeing and reinforces our pride to be part of the Eastern Pacific Shipping family. The company's efforts for improving community living on board are very noteworthy. The messroom with the central serving station, the new stylish recreation room with the play station and karaoke have enhanced the interaction of the ship's staff and build-up interpersonal relations. The rooms where the walls have

foliage pictures reflect our company's vision towards a greener world. The gymnasium has been upgraded with the latest equipment and is an excellent motivation for being healthy and staying fit."

Fighting fit

That Gymnasium Living Onboard initiative builds on EPS's holistic approach to seafarer welfare. Fitness is already part of the onshore culture, with the company hosting a number of clubs, such as running, badminton, and futsal – a variant of association football. EPS wants its Gymnasium Living Onboard initiative to help seafarers feel part of the company culture even though they are miles away.

"The response to Gymnasium Living Onboard has been overwhelmingly positive," says Mr Ducau. "Not only have we received verbal feedback, but also photos and videos of our colleagues taking advantage of the facilities. One of our captains sent us a video of several of his colleagues using the gym. In his note, he said: 'In all my years of

EPS's social media initiatives aim to allow its seafarers to feel part of the company's wider family



sailing I've never seen such a diverse group of people engage in the same activity outside of the mess hall!"

Experiences are shared across time zones and cultures through EPS's social media initiatives.

Last year EPS launched Instagram and Facebook accounts to share photos and videos of its people and vessels. Although they are public pages, the intended audiences are

EPS's internal sea and shore colleagues. Mr Ducau says this has strengthened EPS's community and motivates them to do more and share more.

"The added benefit to this is that our seafarers don't feel like they are 20 people on a ship in the middle of the ocean. They are part of something bigger, a community that cares for each other's wellbeing."

Ask the crew

Redesigns come at a substantial cost and so processes to measure the expected direct and indirect impacts must be robust. EPS justifies the costs of contemporary spaces by pointing to the tangible benefits to its business: tightening the sense of community on board, attracting and retaining talents and improving communication among the crew which will, in

turn, create a safer and more productive work environment. "Companies always talk about giving their employees a sense of ownership, and this is a great way to empower them with that and show people that you care," Mr Ducau says.

With a new generation entering the workforce, EPS's crew engagement programme comes at a pivotal time. As the industry moves from technology adopters to native users, the next generation is one that is more connected than ever before. Despite increased efforts to improve connectivity at sea, the onboard experience still cannot compare with being connected on land. Add to this the growing range of onshore career options, all vying for potential seafarers' attention, and it is easy to see why ship operators need to do more.

"That's why it's up to shipowners and managers to create company cultures that can offer people a meaningful and rewarding career," says Mr Ducau. "EPS is investing heavily in our internal community efforts to help recruit and retain the best and brightest, and we hope our efforts inspire other owners and managers to do the same.

"If we work together to create new industry standards, then our seafarers will surely benefit." ■

Credit: EPS



EPS's shore teams regularly visit vessels to engage with the company's seafarers