

Victualling in the modern maritime industry

Most shipowners now recognise that the provision of good-quality food is vital to both the physical and mental wellbeing of their crews. But who should be providing the ship with provisions to ensure that it meets these needs?



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Several thousand seafarers put food near the top of their list of things that currently make them happy, according to The Mission for Seafarers' latest *Seafarers' Happiness Index* (Q1 2018). Food scored 6.73 out of 10, up 8% since last quarter and above average for happiness rankings.

However, there are still issues relating to the food chosen that need to be addressed.

Seafarers' problems with food **Cultural problems**

Regulation 3.2 of the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006 requires that on-board food 'takes into account the differing cultural and religious backgrounds' of the crew. But according to The Mission for Seafarers: 'There is little evidence, from the responses received, that this is happening, with nationals of a range of countries complaining that their diet did not reflect the norms of their homelands.'

Nutritional issues

The Mission has also received complaints about excessive amounts of fried food and a complete absence of a policy on volume of fruit and vegetables. While cooks may have been 'trained and qualified', as required by MLC, they are clearly not always serving food of 'appropriate quality, nutritional value and quantity', which may be related to the provisions available on board.

Tight budgets

There are calls from seafarers to impose a minimum acceptable spending limit on crew victualling, which currently languishes at around \$6.00–\$8.50 per head per day. No matter how good the cook, 'they need to be supported, resourced and properly budgeted', says The Mission. 'They need to combine their own skills with the ability to buy good-quality ingredients.'

Victualling

This raises the question: who should buy the food to ensure it meets the cultural, nutritional and budgetary requirements? In reality, the shore-based operations departments of most major ship managers contract all provisioning to one or more specialist ship supply companies. Others, however, allow self-purchase, with masters managing the ship's food budget directly and sending the cook out on shopping trips at each port of call.

Self-purchase

Certainly, there are potential advantages to the self-purchase option. In theory, it means that all the victualling budget is being spent on food rather than on paying fees to supply companies. It also allows the chief cook to take full advantage of low local market prices and to negotiate deals and discounts directly. Above all, the cook can pick and choose what they buy, ensuring only the freshest, highest-quality produce comes on board.

A win-win, one might think. The reality is that today's tight operating schedules and concerns over port security means that modern ships rarely spend long in port, leaving very little time for shopping trips. Cooks will also need to find additional time in their already busy daily schedules for such trips. Furthermore, local markets vary widely in the range and quality of food they have available – and may not even be open on the day a ship calls.

And finally, masters would need to keep and constantly account for significantly more cash than usual in the ship's safe. There is, of course, a risk that not all the food cash will actually get spent on meals for the crew, leading to further administrative burdens on ship or shore staff to investigate shortfalls.

Provisioning companies

The major provisioning companies argue that their bulk-buying of food and streamlined delivery makes their prices very competitive. They can guarantee food quality and quantity, on-time delivery, MLC compliance and financial transparency. They also offer online victualling systems, menu planning services and catering staff training, and some even provide the catering staff.

On the downside, using a provisioning company requires a significant amount of planning. Menus need to be planned well before the ship sails and reordering needs to be done significantly ahead of a port call. This gives cooks very little flexibility to change menus in response to feedback from crewmembers.

Above all, the provisioning companies exist to make a profit. Given the relatively low cost of victualling, spending this profit on food instead could make a significant difference to the size and quality of meals on board.

Conclusion

A happy, well-fed crew will form the basis for a safe and well-run ship. Shipowners must weigh the pros and cons of each approach to supplying their vessels with the necessary provisions and make a choice that maximises the opportunity for the crew to enjoy good-quality food. The key to success is to employ a great cook who serves sufficient healthy food that the crew enjoys eating.

