

6. Focus on pressure of work and stress



Over the past twenty years, working at sea has changed. Administrative work has also become an important part of tasking. This is mainly due to regulatory requirements for documentation on safety, occupational health and environmental matters but some owners and customers also demand documentation of various kinds. Greater efficiency and productivity are part of this.

More administration

Most of the seamen in this book feel they are under pressure from the increasing volume of administration. They find that the time they spend on administration tends to be taken from time spent actually working.

“ Demands for documentation and work processes have never been greater than they are today. When one job has been completed and a new one is about to start, there are lots of things that have to be documented. Just like ashore where home helps have to show how many minutes they have been with Mrs Smith, we now have to provide much more documentation than we used to. All societies worldwide want to have a greater say in what is happening at sea, for example in health and safety. Planning a route from A to B used to involve drawing some lines on a chart. Nowadays it is a massive twenty page document that is worked out to specific guidelines, standards and norms. ”

Lars Peter Jensen, Captain

Capt. Niels Kristian Klausen also reports that there is now more emphasis on documentation than other tasks.

“ It is the balance that has shifted and it leads to a certain pressure aboard. Sometimes it appears that if the paperwork is in order, it doesn't matter whether everything is rusting. ”

Niels Kristian Klausen, Captain



Paperwork has become part of the job.

Some of the captains under whom steward John Jørgensen has served say that all the administration is because at head office, they do not quite appreciate the captain's situation and possibly neither do they have an overview of just how many other tasks he has to do.

“ Sometimes I see that personnel ashore at the company each have their own little area of responsibility and don't think that the little request they make is anything special. It may very well not be: "Please send this and that information back home every week" but when ten or fifteen people say the same thing, the captain ends up with a lot of administration. ”

John M. Jørgensen, Steward

Capt. Niels Kristian Klausen points to the paradox in that all the surveys and inspections intended to ensure a good, safe working environment sometimes have the opposite effect. Inspections on tankers are very frequent and once in a while he feels that they do not have much to do with the realities of life aboard.

“ Recently, an inspector came aboard to check our safety gear and reported deficiencies. Well, it does not sound good to know that there is something wrong with our safety equipment. But when you check out the details to find out what it is all about, it turns out to be a complete non-event – a couple of fish hooks missing on the lifeboats. ”

Niels Kristian Klausen, Captain

The demand for documentation means that officers have to sort out a mass of paperwork and reports. And since it is important for it to be written correctly, you have to use a dictionary to make sure it is properly spelled. Paperwork has to be sent in to the office where personnel write back to the companies that make the inspections. Niels Kristian is concerned that if much of what is in these reports is minor, then some really vital things are perhaps being overlooked or ignored.

Manage working time aboard

When there is a great pressure of work, being able to plan and work together is especially important. On Lars Peter's vessel, they try to prevent people getting stressed out, amongst other things by ensuring that they are properly rested.

“ We are all busy in our daily duties but sometimes it is a question of ensuring that people aboard are properly rested. Some of our crew are employed on the basis that they are only paid for the hours they work. So they toil twelve hours a day for many months on end and that can also affect safety. They cannot see the danger themselves. Sometimes we have to intervene to ensure that safety issues are all in order. ”

Lars Peter Jensen, Captain

The captain has different working hours. He/she has to work all the hours required. The captain does not have fixed watches but has to be available when needed. This can also be stressful especially if there are many dockings when the captain has to be on duty.



Pressure of work depends on the type of vessel and duties.

Pressure of work depends on the vessel's tasking and route

Niels Kristian Klausen points out that the level of stress depends very much on the vessel and its routes and tasking. On a medium-sized tanker like his, ten hours is a long trip. They are in and out of port all the time which means that they do not get the long quiet periods out at sea. It is very demanding on everyone and they work hard aboard.

Lars Peter is thinking along the same lines when he says that with two weeks of just sailing, container vessels are lucky. It means that they get longer breaks between docking.

Steward John Jørgensen feels that it is especially docking that is very stressful and pressurized, especially for deck officers and engineers. Approaching land means having to check machinery and with the quick turnarounds we have today, people practically never get ashore.

“It does not matter whether it is night when we dock. People aboard sometimes gets very little sleep for periods. We used to be in port for 4, 5 or 6 days. Now it is just 6, 8 or 10 hours. Then it is great with a good long voyage of two weeks. Then we can slow down again, meaning that we are not constantly stressed out.”

John M. Jørgensen, Steward

Lack of well-qualified crew

Having three foreign watch keeping officers, the youngest of whom may only have had two years' training, can put pressure on the captain, who may feel much greater responsibility for the vessel and its safety as a result.

“ Well-trained crew are most essential but it is not always possible to get them. While it is great that we help them get more education and practical experience, having to do so on a daily basis also means extra pressure. ”

Lars Peter Jensen, Captain

John Jørgensen reports that repeaters have been installed in the captain's cabin, so he can keep an eye on radar, etc. Some feel it is an advantage but others that it is an extra load because they cannot completely switch off even when they are in their cabins.

Stress or busyness?

Whether pressure of work is seen as stressful also depends on how it is tackled, thinks Capt. Jens Evald Pedersen.

“ I make a real point of ensuring that I complete my outstanding work. I prefer to get it out of the way. I would rather work an extra half hour than leave it undone. If you don't get things done, they pile up and that is what can lead to stress. ”

Jens Evald Pedersen, Captain

He differentiates between stress and being busy and feels that on his ship, it is probably mostly about being busy.

“ Provided that it is not something that keeps on for long periods, I don't feel that it is stress because you can slow down again relatively quickly. ”

Jens Evald Pedersen, Captain

▶ ▶ See part 2: Focus on pressure of work and stress/
Signs of stress ▶ ▶

Preventing pressure of work and stress

Aboard Lars Peter Jensen's ship, they are aware that good planning, organisation and collaboration can help reduce the pressure of work.

“ It is a great advantage that the management team know each other extremely well and can support each other and take over if there is a lot to do. It is also a question of people knowing what they should be doing and how they should be doing it. And if they cannot do the job, they must know who to go to. They should also feel that they are trained for the job so it can be important to discuss continuity training and courses with people and the company. ”

Lars Peter Jensen, Captain

The way watches are planned can also be important. Capt. Niels Kristian Klausen points out that the way watches are organized aboard his ship with one month on duty and one month off helps relieve stress.

“ You can go home, have a rest and recharge your batteries. It helps de-stress. You know it will be tough going but then you can put your feet up when you get home. ”

Niels Kristian Klausen, Captain

Capt. Jens Evald Pedersen also feels that priority should be given to getting to know about crew's home circumstances.

“ It is clear that if you are under pressure at home and this does not get solved, it can make the situation worse and cause stress. Stress can actually be due to many reasons, not just from duties but just as well from home or trouble with workmates or a superior aboard. ”

Jens Evald Pedersen, Captain

Finally, Jens Evald feels that stress can be tackled by nipping it in the bud and talking about the things that work well aboard and those that do not.

▶ ▶ See part 2: Focus on pressure of work and stress/
Prevent stress – make for better well-being ▶ ▶

5 tips

- Make sure that people take breaks and are off-duty now and then.
- Be aware of your own situation and stress symptoms.
- Make sure you have a good dialogue with the company about pressure of work and what they can do to help.
- Planning duties aboard is important so people know what they are meant to be doing and who should be doing what.
- Get crew together for a talk about the things aboard that cause pressure of work and whether there is something to be done about them.