

Form over function (*older crew*):

In relation to my article posted a few weeks ago about ageing Captains, I received a very interesting point form a reader.

Here it is:

"I fully agree with you Iain and think that experience is invaluable. What I would say is there is probably a case of taste your own medicine within your well-written article. How many candidates do Captains just disregard CV's from 'older' 'experienced' Crew looking for jobs? It's because they don't look right... I'd like to hear your thoughts on that. I remember at METS three years ago there was a talk given on the subject of ageing Captains struggling to find work. Whether it's right or wrong, it might be what goes around comes around. I'll finish by saying I would much rather work for a safe, knowledgeable, grounded and experienced Captain."

I think this is an excellent point that has been raised and felt it was worth an article of its own.

I think that in almost all circumstances, who we employ, depends a lot on the individual vessel, it's needs, the crew, and (possibly) the owner. It is quite normal for example, for the Captain to be the oldest person serving own a yacht. Personally, I think it makes a lot of sense providing that the required wisdom and experience comes along with it in that the Captain, who is after all the person running the entire show, should have a solid background and very broad base of experience in many different areas.

Let's then look at what some of the main issues are in terms of age as a barrier to employment, by that I mean older crew. Given I have already written the article about ageing Captains, let's exclude them from the equation and we will focus only on other ranks. I have chosen seven common issues here, I'm sure there are more but it's already a pretty lengthy article so I'll cap it with these seven.

1. Possible concerns about how they will fit in with the younger crew
2. Their physical appearance, and overall image
3. Possibly less flexible, lack of compliance from being more set in their ways, or not yielding to coercion
4. Old dog new tricks
5. Possibly more likely to clash with external management / owner's reps
6. Possibly less enthusiastic than younger crew
7. Probably likely to show up those with much less experience including critically a younger Captain and or manager.

Let's now analyse each of the above in turn to try to identify in reality how much of a problem these issues could be, and where (if anywhere), would be the justification to be biased against older crew members.

1. Possible concerns about how they will fit in with younger crew.

How they will integrate with the rest of the crew can be a concern. I know from experience that people can get more quirky as they get older and I'm fine with that. I'm sure it's happened to me, but it does need to be considered when recruiting.

There are, by comparison, reasons as to why yacht crews that are made up of a single nationality often work very well together. It has nothing to do with excluding any particular nationality per se, but more to do with the fact that people from the same country and culture generally have a much better understanding of each other and this can eliminate a lot of issues that are based around cultural issues.

I have seen this be a problem with countries where they both share a common heritage and language. The UK and Australia, for example, has shown to provide plenty of misunderstanding onboard yachts where you might not have expected due to the seemingly common factors but it can be a big issue none the less, vocabulary is one contentious point. Minds too frequently wandering off to the beaches to go surfing is another. They may seem petty but they exist and do not go unnoticed.

Back to the main point, the same can be said for people of similar age. They generally have a better understanding of each other and therefore it is a lot easier for them to get on with each other. A good example would be something like generational standards such as punctuality. My own, and previous generations seem to be much more fastidious about punctuality which is a hugely important attribute in my book. The younger generation seems to generally, not consider it so important as their predecessors. Things that irritate myself and some older crew I have worked with are issues that younger crew are often completely oblivious to.

Lots of older crew are happy to keep a low profile and just get on with their life without upsetting the apple cart along the way. They tend to do far less stupid things and given they are generally much better house trained from a life at sea, tend to avoid so many of the little niggly things that can lead to a lack of harmony onboard. I have never even come close to seeing an insurmountable problem relating to the interaction of an older crew member that has been solely or evenly very heavily weighted towards their age being the main culprit.

It's not to say that it does not happen, I am sure it does, but in most cases, it should, (along with all other niggly little aspects onboard) be completely manageable.

2. Their physical appearance, overall aesthetic image.

Time in the long term is unkind to us all in varying degrees. There is very little that any of us can do about this that will have any significant impact on the preservation of our youthful features. The tendency for some owners, managers and Captains to choose form over function when selecting some of their crew, (generally interior) is an unfortunate reality of the business we work in. There is no question that it happens to varying degrees throughout the industry, and I find it rather sad that it is so prevalent when there are so many highly experienced crew, specifically interior crew are subject to the negative bias of their age based solely on their physical appearance.

A shining light of example in the industry that I often draw parallels with (commercial aviation) was British Airways. I have not taken a BA flight for many years as they have simply not best favoured by travel plans at the time, but they used to have a very high number of older cabin crew than virtually all other airlines. They obviously saw the benefit that these older employees with so many years of experience would and that they would so much bring to the operation, compared to those with youthful good looks but much less experience.

I am always slightly concerned when I see just how young so many cabin crew are these days and wonder just how well they would actually cope during an emergency compared to their older counterparts. Some airlines, I will not name them but, one in particular that I have met many people that work for them of and have heard countless first-hand stories to substantiate the claims, have extremely bad reputations in terms of putting far too much emphasis on physical appearance and that they actually ground their cabin crew if they put on any weight or other very minor aesthetic criteria are breached.

By the time a vessel / crew gets larger, then there should be enough scope for the people in charge of hiring to find a good balance between extensive experience and aesthetic attributes if this is in fact what a particular owner wants.

As the older crew develop in their careers then they will tend to naturally climb the ladder anyway making way for younger (possibly more attractive) crew below them. Even supposing that you have the type of owner that wants to be surrounded by beautiful (on the outside) people, which as I'm sure we all know, does not necessarily so beautiful from the inside, or have the required skills and correct attitude to do their jobs properly, which of course brings it's own problems onboard as well.

There should be room for organic career development whereby a highly competent chief stew progresses to a purser and very possibly has less face time with the owner and their guests anyway, spending a lot more time in an onboard office doing a much higher level of administrative tasks.

It should be noted I am specifically dealing with a male owner scenario here as the issue is generally more pronounced with a male owner.

If for example you have a very attractive young stewardess onboard that the owner wants to have kept onboard not necessarily on account of her ability, once this person is aware of this fact, then her status within the crew (and certainly in her own mind at least), and possibly beyond, is going to be somewhat elevated. I have seen this happen numerous times. It can cause huge problems with the rest of the crew for reasons that I'm sure do not need to be explained. It is thoroughly toxic and should be avoided wherever possible.

3. Possibly less flexible, lack of compliance from being more set in their ways, or not yielding to coercion.

This can undoubtedly be an issue. Much depends on the specifics of the case. If for example, you have an older crew member that is simply being stubborn, for the sake of it then this is clearly an issue. Stubbornness is however very prevalent in the young as well.

I have seen this type of outright stubbornness onboard from some older crew. However, in my own experience, it has never been difficult to alleviate the problem. I have always been able to eradicate it (on a case by case basis at least), with a quiet chat with the crew member in question, and if time allows a coffee ashore somewhere where we can put the matter to rest with an amicable solution, usually fuelled with a high degree of (sometimes apparent) empathy for their situation and light-hearted discussion about the slack ways of "the youth of today."

If however when you have an older crew member is standing their ground because their extensive experience guides them to do so for very good reason, then they clearly have a point.

Take the not uncommon scenario of an older Chief and a younger Master. Say there is a significant engineering issue onboard, only one M/E in operation for example, the yacht is not well maintained through lack of funding, the weather is not good and the Chief rules out going to sea until the faulty M/E is operational again. All on the grounds of safety. The younger Master may not quite see it the same way and may be more prepared to take a higher level of risk regarding the issue because he is less experienced and he is the one that is going to bear the full brunt of the owner's displeasure as it's him that is going to say the forbidden "N" word to the owner.

The Master is in fear of losing his first command because he knows his owner is not exactly the most reasonable of people. The Chief is not in the slightest concerned about losing his job because he knows that standing his ground in this case is the right thing to do. He also knows that as an engineer, he will probably have another job to go to by the end of the week if needs be, whereas the Master may be out of work for nine months before he finds a new position.

In this scenario that lack of flexibility / failure to comply with something that he knows is wrong, should be seen as an asset not an obstacle because the chief has put the safety of the vessel first, which is the right thing to do in all cases where the level risk is unacceptable, and additionally unnecessary.

4. Old dog new tricks.

I think it would be foolish to deny that most of us as we age, become a little more set in our ways, and the old adage of “Old dogs, new tricks” in many cases can be valid. There could be numerous reasons for this happening. Sometimes it is that people can simply not be bothered changing the way they are for whatever reason. I have always moved with the times and have always believed that what a young Bob Dylan sang in one of his early masterpieces was pretty on the ball:

**“Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'”**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7qQ6_RV4VQ

I do however maintain that almost all my views on life are very well founded due to lots of wide and varied experience. I am not arrogant about it, but I firmly believe that many of my ways, attributes and principles, specifically the ones that I operate to onboard, are justifiably well aligned with what's best in the long run. So, for example, I will accept wholeheartedly that I am entirely stuck in my ways on issues such as the following and this is not going to change, trust me. Why would I want to change the value I place on any of these words below when they are so fundamentally important?

- Work ethic
- Punctuality
- Integrity
- Loyalty
- Responsibility
- Respect
- Accountability
- Manners
- Humility
- Gratitude

So how much of a problem the person to whom the old adage applies will largely depend on what old tricks the old dog currently performs. If someone is set in there ways as above, then to my mind there is nothing to change that will benefit overall harmony onboard and it is, in fact perhaps the young dogs that should be learning all the new tricks.

If however the tricks that the old dog performs are leading to a lack of harmony, which can be the case, then it is going to be more problematic.

One such issue that I have regrettably seen a couple of times is that of drinking.

The culture of being allowed to drink onboard exists a little more prevalently with some ex Merchant or Royal Navy crew, especially the older ones. I will, however, point out that throughout my yachting career I have had to deal with three instances where people either drinking onboard or being drunk onboard has led to disciplinary action. Two of them were younger crew and one was older, so **I am not saying by any means this is a problem exclusive to older crew**, rather, I am just suggesting that it

is possible that if older crew are ex RN or MN, they are more likely to have come from an old fashioned culture where drinking onboard in moderation was fully acceptable.

This is the only situation I have ever had where the old dog new tricks issue was unsurmountable and resulted in a dismissal. It could however have just as easily happened with a younger crew member as we all know alcohol abuse does not discriminate by age, and I have mentioned above in my career 66% of the cases I have had to deal with relating to this were with younger crew.

5. Possibly more likely to clash with “management”.

I am sure that many people reading this will have had their own clashes with management companies or, (and here is where the issues tend to be much more serious), with people who fulfil the role of managers for their owners by way of being an owner’s rep. Most often the clashes will be on the front line so generally, the Captain or the chief will be the ones involved in the skirmishes.

I have been on several vessels where the, (let’s just call them “appointed people”), had no place being anywhere near a vessel of any kind in a position of authority. I have seen incompetence redefined to a whole new level on too many occasions to even remember. I therefore applaud any Captain or crew member that will call out any “appointed person” that is supposed to be competent, knowledgeable, responsible and have integrity and is purportedly acting on behalf of an owner, and is supposed to be looking after the owner’s best interests **which include the safety of the vessel and her passengers and crew**, when they have been found to be not up to the task. (I will be writing a separate article about this very issue as I consider it extremely important.)

Again the captain is in the most difficult situation here, as it’s usually their neck on the block, but I am trying in this article to not focus on Captains but rather other older crew onboard. That being the case let’s look at the scenario of an engineer again, as he is most likely to be the next one in line to find himself hand to hand combat (*hopefully only metaphorically speaking*) with the “appointed person”.

Let’s say we have an older and highly competent engineer onboard and the vessel is in need of X, Y, Z critical maintenance. The “appointed person” will not issue funds to do the maintenance. There is clearly going to be a clash here and the engineer is undoubtedly correct and is doing his job properly when he pushes to get the maintenance done.

In this situation, I say **“Let battle commence”**, if these so called “appointed persons” are in fact not fit to be doing their jobs, are going to endanger the ship and the lives of everyone onboard through their own incompetence and or fear of their overlords then this needs to be addressed before there is a serious incident

Just as a side note, I have found that these “appointed persons” often do not even know what their owners want, and in many cases are second guessing much of the time which makes the whole issue even harder and less comprehensible but it seems to happen frequently. I have seen irrevocable evidence of this being the case when one such person finally got booted, their replacement showed me budgets from the previous two years that in no way reflected the story their predecessor was telling us.

6. Possibly less enthusiastic than younger crew.

As age catches up with us all, there will come a point with most of us when we lose our enthusiasm to some degree or other. Even at my age, I do not suffer from this at all. I find new enthusiasm and inspiration from many areas and in many forms. What I am doing right now is case in point. Writing about my decades of experience as a seafarer has given me newfound motivation to engage with the industry in a whole new way. I am thoroughly enjoying it and the feedback I am getting continues to inspire and motivate.

I am not suggesting that my case is necessarily the norm and that such constant enthusiasm is always so prevalent, but so much really depends on what you choose to do and your attitude towards your job and, more importantly, life in general.

Yes, I have seen older crew be less enthusiastic, but I have also seen them be full of enthusiasm and be a great example to younger crew at the same time.

7. Probably likely to show up those with much less experience including critically a younger Captain and or manager.

What can I say? For sure this will happen. And as discussed above re “appointed persons” if they are incompetent and found wanting then they ought to be shown for what they are. If you aren't up to the task you should not be there. End of discussion.

When I have been presented with candidates that are a bit older (as with most things in life), I always look very much at the big picture. I have hired people that have been older than most of the crew numerous times especially when their role is critical such as a Chief Engineer. I think it's easier to hire an engineer that is a bit older as they tend to exist pretty much in a world of their own to a great extent and are generally less of a concern when considering their integration with the rest of the crew. This is not always the case as I have had numerous issues with Engineers but their age has not per se been the root of the problems. Having worked with older and very experienced engineers vs some of the younger ones, it is a no brainer for me, I will take the experience and depth of knowledge that the older more experienced ones have every time, even if that brings some more minor issues with it.

The keyword that is so critical is EXPERIENCE, as per my original article about Ageing Captains, there simply is NO SUBSTITUTE for experience. You could ask anyone on US flight 1549 if they would have rather had a 28 year old flying them on that fateful day, and you can guess what the answer is going to be in all 153 cases out of 155, (Pilot and Co-pilot excluded).

The very survival of the ship and all soles onboard could be dependent upon that very experience.

I have a chef (a couple of years younger than myself) that I have worked with on 7 yachts now over almost 20 years, we have in that time become very good friends. The chef is another role that is possibly more easy to not have to think about their age quite so much because a bit like the Chief, he / she can exist to some extent in their own environment. So long as there is a good strong relationship with the chief stew then there should be no inherent problem due to age.

I believe it can however be more difficult with other roles onboard though.

I think one of the main issues that younger crew have with their older counterparts is that they (generally) have such a different view of life and how things should be. The (late) Millennials are especially guilty of this in my opinion with their incredible sense of entitlement and inclusion that does not sit well with us Baby Boomers or Generation Xers, (I'm right on the generational cusp and arrived in this world just as a Baby Boomer but like the sound of being a Generation Xer :-)

There is a lot of intolerance of the general attitude of the Millennials, especially the late Millennials, which I believe is completely justified. It can, therefore, be difficult to get the older crew to integrate well with them.

As a Captain or Manager I believe that you should always try to recruit the people that will be the very best placed to do the job in hand. However, in our industry it is not always that easy. Yachting is known for hiring people that are shall we say, “easy on the eye.” As mentioned above if it's a Chief or a Chef then it tends not to be so much of an issue for the type of owner that generally wants to be surrounded by eye candy. I worked for an owner that actually wanted an all female crew for this very reason. As it turned out, it never worked out for him in the end.

The same owner also tried to thrust an additional crew member on us. She arrived late one night effectively unannounced because she had done a brief stint onboard previous to me taking command and so far as we had been informed by the owner's rep, she was there simply because the boss found her very attractive, which she was. However, we had no space to put her and I had already recruited a complete new crew just after taking over the vessel so I sent her on her way as I already had all the crew that I needed that I had satisfied myself were competent regardless of their age or appearance.

That was the end of the matter, well almost, it did come up again but I was not going to dismiss a good crew member for no good reason that was by then, well established onboard for the sake of someone who was clearly a high maintenance princess that would have brought no value to the equation and plenty of trouble for sure. No thank you.

Many owners seem to like, or at least tolerate the concept of "form over function" when it comes to interior crew certainly, and oft times female deck crew as well. This is where your older interior ladies and or deck crew may well find that they are subject to this type of discrimination in terms of what a Captain may feel (justifiably or not) that he has to consider to keep his owner happy.

Given full autonomy to recruit without any interference, I will (for the most critical roles) take function over form (that includes age/experience) every time. This in my case means; The Chief, the Chef, 1st and 2nd Officers and Chief Stew or Purser. It then depends on the size of the vessel as to which other roles I would be looking for a better balance of form and function, IF that were a criteria I felt I had to pander to for the sake of an owner's wishes.

Fact: Owners are not always right, despite what they may think, and when it comes to the safe running of the ship their views sometimes need to be overruled.

Other roles.

There is a flip side to this as well though. I know there is some positive discrimination out there in terms of the owner's wife that reigns in a world where she is or at least perceives herself to be the most attractive female on the vessel. This being the case she may veto the employment of any younger or certainly perceivably more attractive woman being employed onboard. The premise being that the older a person gets the higher the probability that their youthful appearance has diminished and is on a downward slope.

I have also heard of specific recruitment policies based on the more negative physical characteristics and shall we say a lack of what would be generally perceived to be classic good looks. Though not directly related not age it is the same principle of discrimination.

I can fully understand in general terms, what may appear to be discrimination against younger people, not per se because they are younger, but simply because in general they simply do not have the level of experience that an employer may be looking for within his team. It is therefore not discrimination but simply that they are not considered adequately experienced to do the job.

Take for example a private vessel who's the owner decides he is going to venture into ice infested water but in some place where an Ice Pilot is not mandatory.

Let's say it's a 50m, of dubious pedigree and not the greatest track record for maintenance and the Captain is there because the owner upgraded from a 35m and liked the guy but he's young and not that experienced. The rest of the crew are also young and keen but they have not had a day's experience outside of the Med. A perfectly plausible scenario you would agree? You see where this is going? How then is this vessel and crew going to get on when the owner announces that they re doing extremely high latitudes this year followed by extremely low latitudes immediate after on a vessel that is entirely crewed by young and inexperienced crew with nothing more than Med experience at best.

Even if the vessel itself is properly seaworthy this is going to be extremely challenging to say the least when they take this vessel out into wide open oceans in high / low latitudes and everyone onboard is going to be very long way out of their comfort zones with potentially catastrophic consequences.

Given the uniqueness of the seafarer's job and the inherent dangers that come with it, it makes sense to employ people that have a great deal of experience but these do not always fit in with an owner's "visual" requirements of the general image of yachting if they are older and especially if they look their age or older than it.

Let's now take a look at what the advantages of an older crew member may be?

1. Generally, have vast, and very importantly varied experience
2. Generally, nothing to prove
3. Generally much less attitude
4. More likely to know and appreciate that they are onto a good thing
5. Probably much more stable in their role, less likely to jump ship
6. Can be excellent teachers and mentors
7. Probably more respect for the chain of command
8. Probably more disciplined in general
9. Generally, take much less (if any) training for day to day tasks
10. Probably much less likely to complain about things
11. Probably more happy to be at sea for extended periods
12. Probably less likely to have a conniption fit if the internet connection goes down for more than three minutes
13. Generally much less reliant on technology in all forms
14. Generally more inclined to fix as opposed to replace
15. Generally, much better house trained and less likely to cause damage
16. Generally less troublesome than younger crew
17. Generally more consistent and reliable than younger crew
18. Often have many more skills and old school practices and techniques than younger crew
19. Less likelihood of issues with other crew onboard in terms of interpersonal relationships
20. Probably more safety conscious
21. Probably better administrators
22. Much more secure in their own perception of their role
23. Usually much more emotionally intelligent
24. More used to doing what needs to be done
25. Generally, need much less time spent on them than their younger counterparts
26. Generally have a much greater understanding of obligations, duty, responsibility, and accountability
27. Much less likely to bring drama with them onboard

It's been a while since I was stateside, but I noticed when I was last over there that there seemed to be a larger number of older yacht crew than we generally see on this side of the world. I'm not sure if this is still the case or not but would be interested to hear from people over that side if there is still a higher proportion of older crew working that side of the pond.

In an ideal world where the people best placed to make proper informed and critical recruitment decisions based on their own knowledge of what is required from many years experience on the job are allowed to do so unhindered, then all such appointments could be made on the basis of merit alone. I can see no rational reason what so ever why you would not want the best possible people working in every single role on your large yacht. This is however in many cases as we are all too aware not always the case and it comes at a significant cost.

The very safety of the vessel, the quality of the service, the highest standards of maintenance, the greatest level of organisation and adaptive thinking, the calm level-headedness of the Captain and

crew, the overall efficient running of the entire operation should to my mind always take precedence over employing those with less experience, both specific and that of life in general regardless of their youthful looks.

But sadly we are not always permitted to do our jobs in the way that we know is best and we have to consider external influences that coerce us to make choices that may, and often do, have a negative impact on the safe and efficient running of the ship in the name of keeping our owner's happy. This is in many cases a perennial issue that we constantly have to deal with.

I am sure it happens to some degree in other industries, and other sectors of the maritime world, but it is undoubtedly more prevalent within our sector due to the wishes of owners often having to be complied with, and, critically with potentially much more serious consequences.

The irony is that when the chips are down, it is ultimately the owners that will in some way suffer, be it financially, (crew turnover, probably the largest factor, damage to equipment of interior through inexperience) or from just having a less enjoyable experience because they, (or their managers or Captains) chose to employ less experienced people in a trade-off against youth and the aesthetics that are often enjoyed in those early years of our lives.

There is a thread that repeats itself throughout this article, and that is, that older crew equate to much more experience and when everything is weighed and measured, it seems that the qualities, attributes, skills, experience etc. that they actually bring to a vessel, and the additional value that they bring with them seems to significantly outweigh any reason that you may have for not wanting them onboard.

Here are my final words on the matter; and anyone that they actually refer to, (all you old dogs out there), will know exactly where this comes from:

“Remember when you were young,

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You shone like the sun,

- - -

Shine on you crazy diamond.”

(Gilmore, Waters, Wright. But all you old dogs like myself knew that anyway didn't you.)

Post Script:

I would be very interested to hear what other readers have to say on this issue and welcome any feedback or personal experiences relating to it. Please like, comment, if you wish to protect your own anonymity, then please just send me a private message.

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