

2: Before you employ a new crew member:

I truly believe that:

“ Retention begins at recruitment. ”

Many elements that may lead to a crew member moving on are not under your control. There however there are plenty of things that are under your direct control that you can do that may all help to reduce crew turnover.

The following is fundamentally important and so obvious, but it often simply does not happen.

Try to select the right crew in the first place.

Here are some suggestions as to how to try to improve the odds of getting more appropriate crew in the first instance.

Before you advertise your vacancies:

Think very carefully about what and who you need. Captains, meet with your HODs, managers meet with your Captains and HODs as appropriate and discuss your requirements in detail. You can not just assume that a deckhand, bosun, chief stew, chef or whoever who has experience will be appropriate for the role you have available.

I have always given HODs great autonomy to recruit their own subordinates. I always get very involved and give guidance, but as they often know the finer points of their own departments better than I do it makes sense to allow them a lot of freedom in the process. I also however retain the right to veto if necessary, and all appointments must ultimately meet with my approval, as I am the one that will be held responsible if they do not work out, but it is very much a team process.

Write detailed, accurate, and very specific job specifications for every position that you are recruiting for. Don't just copy paste old job specs from a previous vessel, as they may very well not be appropriate on your current vessel. Think about what and who you need and write new detailed job specs. for the current openings you have on your current vessel. Make sure it is fully relevant and matches it's specific needs as closely as possible.

Be very upfront about the reality of the job you are offering, tell it how it really is, and hide nothing from prospective candidates that may make them want to leave the day they arrive. If they don't like what they read in the job spec. they will not come in the first instance. Granted, this does make your recruitment a little harder but it's well worth it. I have been highly praised by some of the best crew agencies for the very detailed job specs. that I have provided them with. It makes their job easier and can narrow down your choice candidates significantly.

I have spent a lot of time in some of the world's less desirable yachting destinations and experience shows it's much better to be upfront. Owners do not like paying for new crew to be getting the next flight back home only for you to try again with another candidate. Be up front, and you eliminate a lot of this risk from the beginning.

If you paint a true all be it possibly not a so rosy picture of the role you have on offer, then those who after reading the job spec. still want to apply for the position, are generally made of exactly the kind of tougher stuff that will be needed in a more challenging role. These people are also likely to have more respect for you given that you told it to them how it was in the first instance.

One of the biggest challenges is that often we simply do not have as much time as we would like to recruit a new crew member once a position needs to be filled, especially if it happens mid season.

The first thing that probably comes to mind here is to use good crew agencies, which can save you a great deal of time and we will cover this shortly. Remember that they are constantly looking for people and have huge databases of existing crew at their disposal.

Here is another solution I came up with some years ago that depending on the circumstances can be very helpful and I have used it in numerous cases since.

Build a longer notice period into the employment contracts. Under UK law we have both statutory and contractual notice periods. Statutory notice periods are usually very short, and contractual notice periods tend to be a standard 30 days or one month. There is however no reason why you cannot increase the contractual notice period to anything (*within reason*) that is mutually acceptable to both parties.

It not only has the advantage that you have more time to recruit a replacement, but It will also make a crewmember think a little harder before accepting your offer in the first instance, when it is pointed out that their notice period is for example two months, twice as long as they may be used to. This can be surprisingly effective.

There is a potential down side to it, that is if you need to terminate a crew member's contract and you just want them to leave the vessel ASAP, as is sometimes the case, then you are bound to fulfil your contractual obligation of paying them for the full notice period. But think about it, if you have had much longer to find the right crew member in the first place and have followed philosophy below, there is much less chance that you will be seeing crew jump ship in the first place. So it's a trade off, that could well pay off.

You can also make other non obligatory contractual terms that may exist time specific. A common example of this is to only issue bonuses at the end of a season. This however does not really work in the long term in respect of retention. There is no reason why you can not have an annual bonus scheme but as the primes of many such schemes is based on loyalty then it follows that it's entirety reasonable for such a scheme to be paid after a substantial degree of loyalty has been demonstrated. So many crew expect so much these days and do not always offer much in return.

You can write into a contract that there is an annual bonus scheme but for example it is only paid in it's first instalment after three years of service, after which it is paid annually.

Similar time specific clauses can be attached to other incentives such as training at the employer's cost etc. I will cover such clauses in more detail in a subsequent chapter.

Check all their references properly !!!

You would be amazed at how often this simply does not get done. I only ever check references by phone, lots of reasons why, but written references are very generic and I have little faith in them. If you really want to get to the bottom of a person's work history, their character and suitability for the role you have available, then get on the phone and ask specific questions. Most referees will tell you a lot more on the phone than they will by e-mail for example.

Firstly there is no record of what's said over the phone. This should not be underestimated. Many referees will be cautious about what they may be prepared to put in writing in the event it comes back to bite them, this can be for comments that are either positive or negative. Most will be much more revealing over the phone.

It's also much quicker to get lots of pertinent information over the phone than it is to do it by e-mail and it takes less of the referees time to give you the answers over the phone than it does to write it all down.

You also generally get the information you need as soon as they answer the phone rather than an e-mail sitting in their inbox until they get round to replying to you. *(Especially if they are not so keen to reply re a specific candidate in the first instance).*

You can also get much more specific over the phone which is much more meaningful in terms of deciding if a candidate is going to fit in with your role.

Let's say a Chief Stew that was great on a 50m old money family orientated yacht, and you are recruiting for an 70m with a very different kind of owner, she may not fare so well. Unless you send over a lot of information relating to the specifics of the role to the referees and ask a lot of very specific questions you will in most cases simply not get the answers that you need.

You need to get very specific and ask the right questions, for example in the hypothetical scenario above:

"I appreciate that you said that Jenny was great at her job on your 50m with a solid family group as guests, but how do you feel she would manage on an 70m owned by a 30 year old party animal, has she got the skill set and strength of character to take this in her stride ?

"The yacht is on a very busy but constantly changing schedule, half the time the crew do not know where they are going and it's very difficult to organise much in advance. How would she cope with this ?"

"Do you think, and will she be good at managing a larger interior team ? There is also a huge amount of admin on this yacht, how good are her admin skills and will they transfer well to a much larger and complex workload do you think ?"

"Financial management of the boat is less than ideal and it can take long time or bills to get paid so very careful budgeting is required to prevent problems, how would she cope with that ?"

"The rest of the interior crew change quite a lot as they are predominantly from the owner's country and do not always meet his exacting criteria resulting in frequent if whimsically based replacement. Could she cope with frequent changes within her team."

Questions like this may well get much more meaningful responses out of referees and assist you in making more meaningful interpretations of a candidate's suitability to the role you need to fill.

Check all their paperwork properly !!!

Again, all of this is totally obvious but sometimes it just does not get done thoroughly enough or in good enough time and some people fall through the gaps.

Passport, how long left till it expires ? How many pages left ? Stamps from countries that will cause problems ? for example Israel if the yacht is in Dubai

Visas

STCW BST

ENG1

CoCs

CoECs

ECDIS

Radio Certificates

All other pertinent certificates SSO etc.

Tender driving and PWC

Diving qualifications

Basic food hygiene, and the list goes on and on.

I've had more than one crewmember (*recruited by managers*), turn up on a yacht that did not have the required CoC for the role on the vessel. The result equals a seat on the next flight back home, lots of explaining to the boss.

Investigate the candidate's online footprint:

When I get CVs through for review they go through a standard triage process and those at the top of the list immediately start to undergo the "online footprint" checking process.

This can be a total deal breaker. I have had candidates who's CV's looked fine but a quick check into their online activity and it's all over.

It is astonishing the number of crew that seem not to worry about, or are not careful enough about sanitising their online footprint. I will not go into any detail but I have seen so many instances of candidates who's online footprint tells a very different story from the one their CV is trying to convey. With the increasing prevalence and apparent oblivious addiction to some of these platforms that some people have, it becomes easier to use this method to get a good idea of the other side of a person's character / out of hours behaviour etc.

It could simply be unintentional indiscretion but as an example when you see crew photos of current or previous yachts posted online it will be setting alarm bells ringing for the Captain or HOD of a yacht that has an owner who's privacy is very important to them. Crew in the jacuzzi, using the toys etc. as if they were the guests. This is not to say that these things are sometimes permitted with owner's knowledge etc. but you may well want to be cautious when you see that a crew member would openly flaunt any such discretionary privileges that may be extended to them.

The other main thing to watch out for is just the general off the boat behaviour. Photos from nights out can be very incriminating. Just browsing through a persons photos on Facebook can be very revealing indeed.

This is a very important part of the process for me and it should be used as far as possible to see the other side of the story with potential candidates. See the section below on using social media as a way to recruit and take note of the final section....

Crew Agencies:

There are so many crew agencies now it is hard to keep track of them. I thought it had about reached saturation a couple of years ago but they just keep popping up as more and more people seem to want to get their a slice of what can be a lucrative pie.

It's worth noting that there has also been some attrition along the way. Most notably Peter Insull's Crew Agency is no longer. Notable in that it was probably widely regarded as the first proper crew agency. Peter sent out a circular announcing the demise of that part of his business which I found not only a little sad but also quite telling in that I felt it echoed some of my own beliefs on the way that part of the business is heading. YCO also gave up on this side of the business as well.

As with many businesses, there are good, bad, and mediocre players in the market, so you should make your choices wisely.

Try to use only those crew agents that you feel have the best interests of the vessel / you as a client, at the forefront of their agenda and who want to enjoy a good long term relationship with you as a captain or HOD, and the yacht.

Take the time to get to know them. Develop and nurture a strong relationship with them. (Crew are less likely to want to get on the wrong side of a crew agency than they are of a single Captain or Yacht.)

Some of the better agencies have a very strong team with many of that team having been there for many years. This is undoubtedly a good thing. Consummate professionals that have a detailed knowledge of their sector.

If you have an exclusive arrangement with an agency, consider negotiating a specific set of terms with them. You want them to propose only candidates that they genuinely feel fit your requirements so there is a better long term prospect.

Be very clear about the type of person you are looking for, (see above items that relate to all recruitment regardless of which medium you use, details job specs etc.) You don't just want whoever they have available.

Some crew agents, just like some car salesmen or yacht brokers will sell you whatever they have on their books just to get their commission.

A good crew agency that wants to enjoy this type of long term relationship with you will not just propose whoever they have available. They will endeavour to find you suitable candidates.

Keep your selected crew agents up to date with where you are in terms of your recruitment needs. If you feel you may need to make changes in the near future, or that a crew member looks like they may leave, let your crew agent know as soon as possible. Most will be completely discreet if that is what's required. The longer they have to help find a replacement for you (so long as it's a reasonable time frame), the better they are likely to be able to assist and potentially with a larger pool of candidates.

Social Media (as a recruitment platform):

Many jobs are now only posted in a very informal way on social media sites. This throws things wide open to all comers and you will need to be more vigilant in selecting potential candidates.

There is an ever increasing number of Social Media pages that have been constructed for the sole purpose of advertising crew jobs and for crew to use as a medium to find a job.

I am not for a second suggesting that you may not find good crew here. You may well do, but without any kind of verification process what so ever you will need to do your own homework and carry out due diligence of your own that you may not have the time to do.

I do not favour this at all as a way of recruiting and I am worried about the lack of professionalism that seems to go along with it. Yes lots of the well established big players as well as some of the independent outfits are of course using such platforms to augment their more conventional way of doing things. This is not who I am aiming this comment at. Rather the pages that just accept posts from all comers about vacancies they have to offer.

As an experiment I used such pages a while back to post a position that was available on a temp job I was doing. It was not a good all round deal on a very poorly funded vessel, but an interesting itinerary and the posting was absolutely transparent and detailed. The barrage of vitriolic comments that the posting attracted was absolutely shocking, and was a very sad reflection of the some types of people that are currently in the industry and the unrealistically high expectations that so many seem to have.

I made sure to note the names of all the people that spurted out their phenomenal ignorance and hatred in the comments section of the posts for future reference so they can be instantly ignored should they ever come my way looking for work in the future.

Interviewing:

Regarding the section headings below: I'm not trying to tell anyone how to do their jobs from an administrative perspective, but the reason for emphasising these points is that you are instilling confidence in your new crew member that you are organised and know what you are doing. Many crew will not have experienced such a level of administrative organisation before and it should come as

a refreshing change for them to see it. I am astonished and the lack of professionalism that exists with many owners “managers” and Captains when it comes to these administrative tasks that are both simple and essential.

From the very beginning, show your prospective and new crew that you are a true professional, organised and know what you are doing. This all helps to reduce the risk of churn in the first place.

I doubt anyone will disagree that a face to face interview is by far the best way forward. You will pick all manner of nuances that will otherwise go unnoticed if done over the phone, or even by a video / VoIP link.

Be prepared. Make sure you have done all your due diligence beforehand so that you are only interviewing candidates that have already been thoroughly checked out according to your background / certificate checks etc.

Have the full job specification and their CV to hand during the interview.

Have your specific questions for each candidate written down.

My own particular method is to first tell the candidate about the role and its requirements. This takes very little time because they already know all about it from the detailed job spec. they will have received previously. I always ask if they have any questions about the job spec first so we get that out the way and have clarified that they fully understand what the job involves. Giving the detailed job spec. in advance also saves you a huge amount of time interviewing as they should already know just about everything there is to know about the role on offer and the boat etc.

Now they have been given all the initial info. they need you can start to extract more information from them as you see fit relating to how they will perform and fit in onboard.

Follow your check list and make sure you have asked all the questions you intended to and give them the opportunity to ask anything else they may wish to know before concluding.

Be sure to give the candidates your expected time frame for making a decision. Good candidates may well have more than one option so you need to let them know your time frame. Ask them if they have other ongoing options.

Prior to sending a formal job offer:

If you have a candidate that shows promise for the position, start date and travel arrangements should be discussed so they can be entered into the employment contract or SEA and formal job offer (port of embarkation and repatriation location) etc.

Send a formal job offer:

Receiving a formal job offer will show your professionalism and gives the candidate a chance to review exactly what they are being offered. This all helps to build confidence in you as their new Captain / Manager etc. The more they know in advance the less likely they are to default on you. Many will never have seen a formal job offer before. Shocking but frequently true.

Make sure that they know what their responsibilities are before they accept your offer. Duties and responsibilities can be cited “as per the job spec. you were sent, document name and date sent.”

Ts & Cs as per attached contract of employment SEA as applicable.

The Contract / SEA, and formal job offer should all be signed in the appropriate place and initialled on every page by the employers representative (captain or manager) and then scanned sent as a *(locked, so it can not be amended)* .PDF file.

If the candidate accepts your formal offer:

Confirm their travel arrangements

Send them:

Specific joining instructions

Personal Details form, and the following if not included in a single Personal Details form:

NOK form

Bank details form

Uniform sizes

NDA

Whatever other details you need to collect.

IMPORTANT SIDE NOTE !!!

GDPR

Since the GDPR came into effect in May 2018, you need to keep a log of ALL PERSONAL DETAILS that are recorded onboard for crew, guests, etc. Whoever you take any personal details of.

Do not underestimate the potential complexity and extent of this in terms of logging every single location that such data is stored. Keep it under control.

To be continued.

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