


The impact of onboarding practices on employee retention in the cruise industry

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates effective onboarding practices in the cruise industry, examining the interplay between onboarding, hospitality and seafaring occupations due to limited existing research. Using an exploratory mixed-method approach, the researchers employed insider and outsider perspectives to critically analyse employee challenges and company onboarding practices. The research, conducted through qualitative surveys and semi-structured interviews with purposive sampling, reveals that while companies generally provide a welcoming environment, there is a need for improvement in meeting expectations and providing detailed, structured information. The findings emphasise the importance of enhancing these areas to boost new crew members' preparedness, confidence and satisfaction. Additionally, data highlights the critical role of managing expectations and satisfaction during preboarding, underlining the significant impact of effective communication on employee retention in this unique industry.

KEYWORDS: adaption, communication, expectations, hospitality, preboarding

Introduction

The luxury travel industry faces unique employee onboarding and retention challenges, particularly in the premium cruise sector. This study focuses on a premium cruise company that caters to high-end clientele and examines its specific onboarding challenges. The maritime hospitality environment presents distinct hurdles for new employees, including extended periods at sea, confined living and working spaces and the need to maintain exceptional service standards for discerning guests.

Effective onboarding is crucial in this context, as it directly impacts employee satisfaction and the quality of customer experience. Integrating new staff members into the unique shipboard environment goes beyond typical workplace orientation. It involves acclimating individuals to life at sea, familiarising them with maritime regulations and safety protocols and instilling the high standards of service expected in luxury travel.

This research aims to identify and analyse the main issues in the onboarding process specific to the company under study. While this study originated from examining a specific company's challenges, it addresses a broader gap in the literature concerning onboarding practices in the cruise industry as a whole. Despite the industry's significant growth and unique working environment, research on how onboarding practices affect employee retention in this sector remains limited. This study aims to contribute to this under-explored area by examining how the distinctive aspects of shipboard life — including extended periods at sea, confined living and working spaces and the need for exceptional service

standards — impact the effectiveness of onboarding processes and, consequently, employee retention. By doing so, this research seeks to provide insights that are valuable not only to the company being researched, but to the wider cruise industry, potentially informing improved onboarding practices across the sector. By conducting a thorough investigation, we seek to uncover the root causes of onboarding difficulties, including factors such as miscommunication, unrealistic job previews and inadequate preparation for the demands of maritime hospitality work.

In addition to examining the company's current practices, this study will review relevant literature in the fields of hospitality management, maritime industries and employee onboarding. This review will provide a theoretical foundation and offer insights into best practices and innovative approaches that have been successful in similar contexts.

By synthesising the findings from our investigation and the literature review, we aim to develop evidence-based, practical solutions tailored to the company's specific onboarding challenges. These solutions will consider the cruise industry's unique aspects, including regulatory requirements, the cyclical nature of cruise operations and the high expectations of luxury travellers.

The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate benefits to the subject company. Enhancing the onboarding process has the potential to improve employee retention rates, increase job satisfaction and ultimately elevate the quality of service provided to guests. These improvements could be pivotal in strengthening the company's position in the competitive luxury travel market.

Context and rationale

The subject company offers passengers exceptional voyages characterised by premium service. Despite its boutique scale and individualised approach, it encounters challenges related to those prevalent in the broader cruise and hospitality sectors, particularly concerning personnel recruitment and retention. Literature has long acknowledged the recruitment and retention difficulties inherent in the hospitality industry. Bonn and Forbringer (1992) emphasised the importance of enhancing recruitment and selection processes to mitigate employee turnover. Contemporary research by Ghani et al. (2022) continues to underscore employee retention challenges in customer-centric industries, often attributing these issues to unfulfilled post-hiring commitments, misaligned expectations and inadequate communication. Previous empirical studies in the cruise industry have highlighted a recurring issue with realistic recruitment — the practice of presenting both positive and negative aspects of a job to candidates. These studies found that companies often fail to provide a balanced picture, leading to inaccurate expectations among new employees. Raub and Streit (2006) delineated the necessity for and approaches to more effective recruitment practices in the cruise sector. Recent investigations by Ghani et al. (2022) further emphasise the significance of efficient onboarding, a process they argue has been largely overlooked in the industry. The cruise sector presents distinctive challenges, including extended working hours, prolonged periods away from home and the challenging nature of maritime customer service. These factors accentuate the necessity for effective onboarding protocols to ensure employee preparedness and satisfaction, thereby reducing turnover rates and enhancing organisational well-being.

Purpose and relevance

This study investigates maritime working conditions, employee expectations and preparatory measures for life at sea. It aims to identify strategies to optimise onboarding procedures and improve human resource efficiency in the cruise industry, an area that remains under-researched. Despite the industry's significance, current literature is scarce when addressing these specific challenges. This research attempts to provide updated insights into this critical yet often overlooked aspect of maritime hospitality management. Effective onboarding is critical in minimising employee turnover and maintaining job satisfaction, factors which are essential for delivering high-quality service in the cruise industry (Raub & Streit, 2006). As the initial phase of collaboration, the onboarding process serves a dual purpose: it acts as a significant filter for ensuring appropriate job matches; and it facilitates constructive preparation for the unique demands of maritime employment. This study seeks to contribute valuable and contemporary insights to the maritime hospitality sector by focusing on these aspects. This could potentially lead to improved operational efficiency, enhanced employee well-being and, ultimately, superior service delivery. The findings may have broader implications for similar organisations in the cruise industry, offering an updated framework for addressing common challenges in employee integration and retention in a rapidly evolving sector.

Literature review

This review examines the interconnected aspects of onboarding and retention in the unique context of the cruise industry. By synthesising research on onboarding processes, seafarer working conditions and employee expectations, we aim to uncover the relationships between these factors and their impact on retention in the maritime sector.

Onboarding and its impact on retention

The onboarding process is crucial for employee integration and retention across industries. However, its application and effects in the cruise industry remain understudied. Klein et al. (2015) and Kumar and Pandey (2017) emphasise the transformative nature of onboarding, viewing it as a process that converts new hires from outsiders to productive insiders. While their studies provide a solid conceptual foundation, they do not specifically address the unique challenges of onboarding in a maritime environment.

Rubin (2019) and Pike (2014) highlight the importance of the initial onboarding phase, arguing that it significantly influences an employee's tenure. Rubin's claim that effective onboarding can increase retention by 25% is particularly intriguing, though it lacks an industry-specific context. When considering this in light of the high turnover rates in the cruise industry reported by Scherbl (2020) — between 25% and 35% — it becomes clear that the potential impact of improved onboarding in this sector could be substantial. Employee satisfaction, a key factor in retention, is closely linked to effective onboarding practices. In the context of the cruise industry, where work conditions are uniquely challenging, the role of satisfaction in retention is critical. However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding how these general findings apply to the specific context of shipboard work environments. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the relationship between onboarding practices, employee satisfaction and retention in the cruise industry.

Multiple studies have identified the pre-joining phase as a critical period. Kumar and Pandey's (2017) finding of a dramatic drop in employee satisfaction from the pre-joining phase to the first day aligns with Pike's (2014) emphasis on initial impressions. This underscores the need for cruise companies to focus on managing expectations and preparing employees before they even step onboard.

Unique working conditions and their impact on onboarding

The distinctive working environment of cruise ships presents unique onboarding challenges not addressed in general onboarding literature. Lang's (2011) categorisation of shipboard conditions into physical and social factors provides a valuable framework for understanding these challenges. When viewed alongside the high-stress levels reported by Kim and Jang (2018) and the complaints about working conditions noted by Nguyen et al. (2014), it becomes clear that standard onboarding practices may be insufficient in the context of cruise ships. Bolt and Lashley (2015) further highlight how the physical design of cruise ships, which often prioritises passenger areas over crew spaces, can lead to cramped working and living conditions for staff. This aspect of shipboard life can exacerbate the challenges of adaptation for new crew members, potentially affecting job satisfaction and, by extension, retention rates. Additionally, Bardelle and Lashley (2015) provide insight into the prevalence of

homesickness among crew members, with their study showing that while 48.7% of crew members felt homesick "sometimes", a significant minority experienced it more intensely: 13.1% reported feeling homesick "frequently", 8% "very often" and 6.5% "always". These findings underscore the need for cruise companies to address emotional well-being as part of their onboarding and retention strategies.

Cahoon et al. (2014) propose that improving onboard working conditions is essential for attracting and retaining employees. This suggestion bridges the gap between onboarding and retention literature, implying that effective onboarding in the cruise industry must go beyond traditional integration practices to address the unique aspects of shipboard life.

Expectations versus reality: a key challenge in cruise industry onboarding

A recurring theme in the literature is the mismatch between new employees' expectations and the realities of life at sea. De Grosbois (2016), Dennett (2018) and Parkman (2020) all note that recruitment often paints an overly optimistic picture, leading to unrealistic expectations. This aligns with the findings of Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp (2011), who describe an overwhelming environment for new cruise ship workers.

Raub and Streit's (2006) concept of "realistic recruitment" offers a potential solution, advocating for more balanced information during the hiring process. Their suggestion of using audio-visual previews complements Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp's (2011) recommendation of sharing experience reports from current employees. These approaches, when combined, could provide a more comprehensive preparation for new hires, potentially mitigating the "adaptation difficulties" cited by Özdemir (2020) as a significant factor in employee turnover.

Retention challenges: connecting onboarding, working conditions and employee expectations

As reported by Scherbl (2020), the high turnover rates in the cruise industry result from the interplay between ineffective onboarding, challenging working conditions and unmet expectations. Papathanassis's (2020) observation about generational preferences adds another layer to this issue, suggesting that traditional retention strategies may need re-evaluation for younger workers.

Scherbl's (2020) direct link between living conditions and retention rates aligns with Wagner and Samkange's (2019) recommendations for improving onboard amenities. When considered alongside Özdemir's (2020) findings on adaptation difficulties, it becomes clear that effective onboarding in the cruise industry must address both practical job preparation and acclimation to shipboard life.

Synthesis and research gap

This review reveals a complex interrelationship between onboarding practices, working conditions, employee expectations and retention in the cruise industry. While general onboarding literature provides a valuable foundation, the unique challenges of the maritime environment necessitate tailored approaches.

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 illustrates these

relationships, highlighting several key areas that warrant further investigation:

- The specific components of effective onboarding in the premium cruise context, including pre-joining preparation, mentoring and the use of technology;
- The direct and indirect impacts of working and living conditions on employee satisfaction and retention;
- The role of employee expectations in mediating the relationship between onboarding processes and job satisfaction; and
- The specific stressors (e.g. workload, isolation) that may negatively affect employee satisfaction in the premium cruise environment.

Despite the insights provided by existing literature, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these factors interact, specifically in the premium cruise sector. This study addresses this gap by examining these relationships in depth, focusing on the unique context of premium cruise lines.

This research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of onboarding and retention in the premium cruise industry by investigating these areas. The findings will not only advance theoretical knowledge, but also provide practical insights for improving employee satisfaction and retention in this unique hospitality industry sector.

Conceptual model

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model illustrating the potential impact of onboarding processes on new employees in the hospitality department at the subject company, a cruise industry operator. This model synthesises critical findings from the literature review, encompassing onboarding practices, staff satisfaction, seafarers' working conditions and employee retention in the maritime sector.

The model highlights two critical aspects of the onboarding process: (1) Prepared for the job: This represents a comprehensive onboarding programme that adequately prepares employees for shipboard life, including realistic job previews and thorough preparation for maritime working conditions; and (2) Unprepared for the job: This represents limited preparation, focusing primarily on positive aspects without adequately addressing the challenges of shipboard life.

These contrasting approaches are examined for their effects on employee readiness, adaptation to working and living conditions (physical and social factors) and subsequent impacts on employee satisfaction and retention. The model also illustrates how stress, workload and isolation influence these factors.

Methodology

Six sub-sections show the method's details. Figure 2 shows a visual representation of the research design.

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to investigate onboarding practices in the cruise industry, focusing on the subject company. This approach was chosen due to limited existing research in this context and its suitability for gaining an in-depth understanding of stakeholder experiences (Saunders et al., 2009; Forslund, 2022). Data collection involved two instruments: an open-ended survey; and semi-structured interviews, with the researcher adopting both insider and

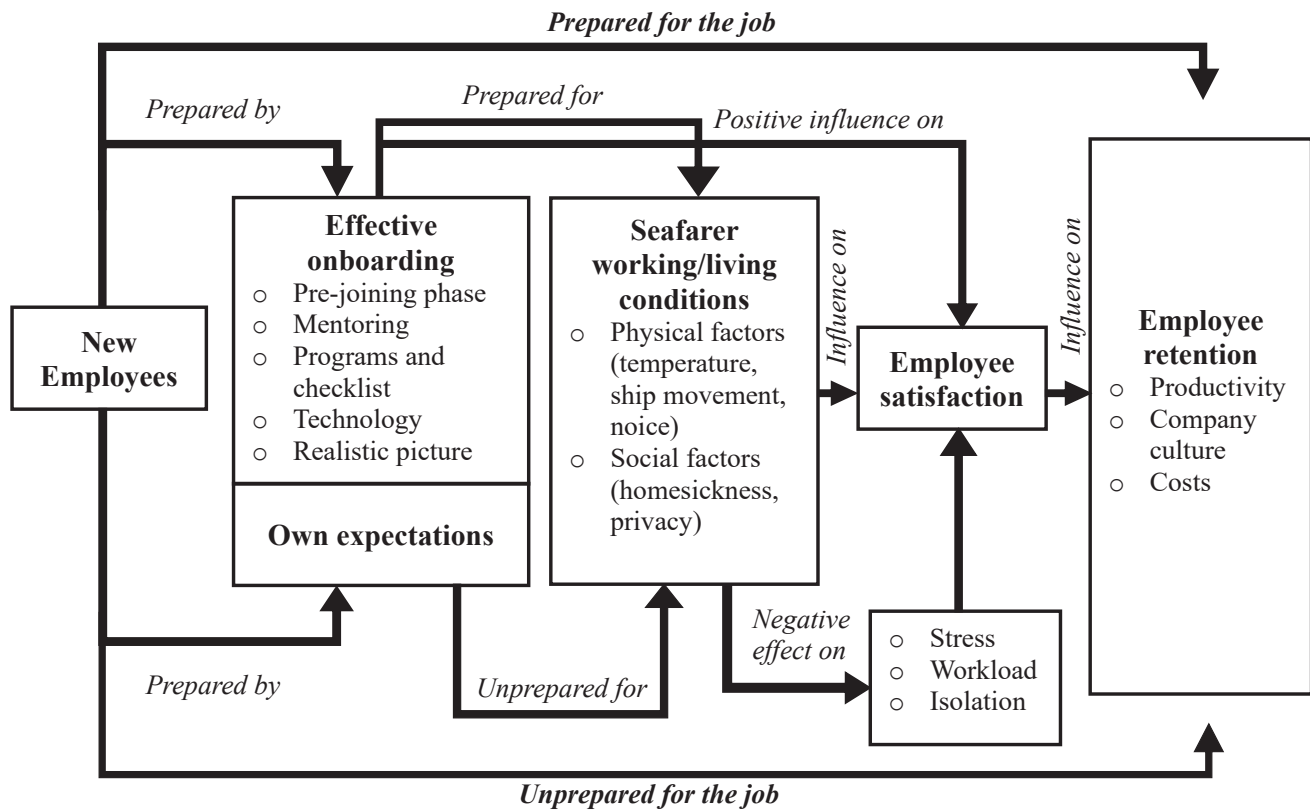


FIGURE 2: Conceptual model

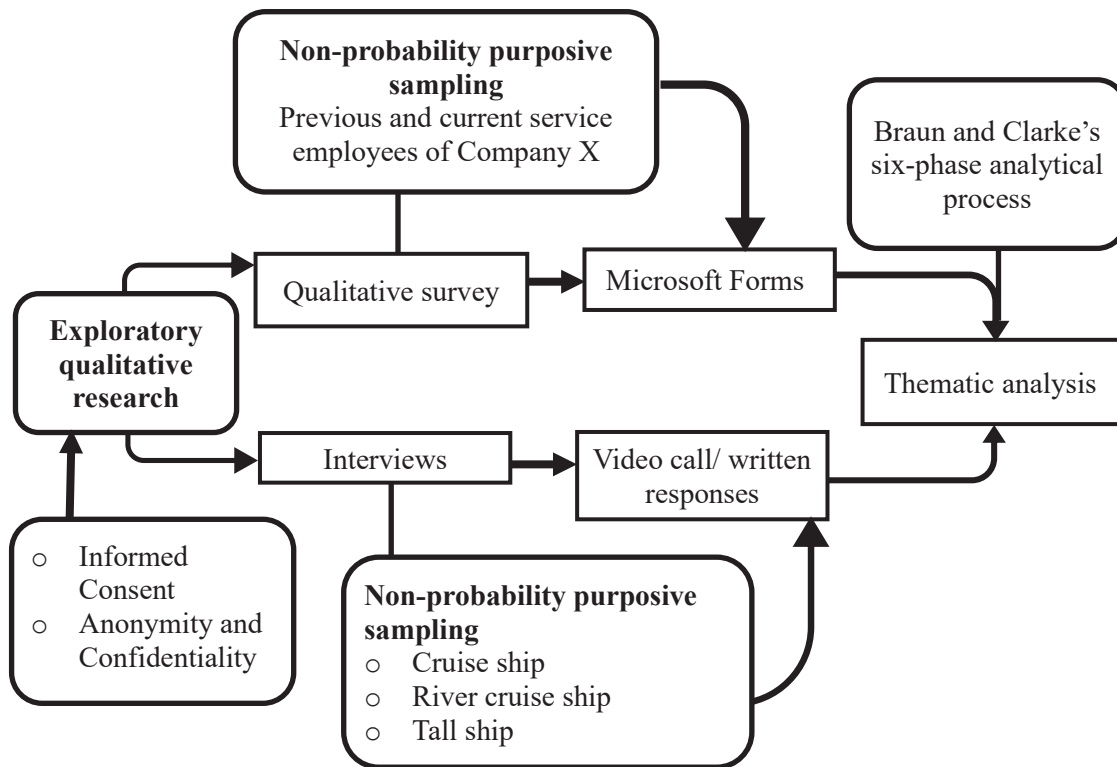


FIGURE 2: Research design flowchart

outsider positions to facilitate critical reflection and multiple perspectives (Stevens et al., 2013).

The study population comprised two groups: (1) current and former (within three years) hospitality employees of the subject company, excluding interns and managers, with purposive sampling targeting 15 employees since 2020; and (2) three companies with operational similarities to the subject company, including a cruise company, a river cruise company and a tall ship with a service department. Non-probability purposive sampling was employed for both groups, acknowledging potential sampling bias.

Data collection involved emailing surveys to participants, with a two-week completion window and two reminders and interviews conducted via video call or written responses, depending on availability. Thematic analysis was conducted using a six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), which included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. This comprehensive approach involved transcription, translation, coding and theme development, ensuring a thorough and systematic analysis of the collected data. Instruments were tested with a diverse panel to mitigate potential confirmation bias and all findings were considered.

The sample size and selection were determined based on the principles of qualitative research saturation. We aimed to include a representative cross-section of roles and experience levels for the subject company, resulting in a sample of 13 participants. For the other companies, we selected three organisations with operational similarities to provide industry context, interviewing one participant from each. Although this sample size is limited, it is suitable for exploratory qualitative studies in organisational research. While this approach may restrict the generalisability of our findings, it enables an in-depth exploration of onboarding experiences in the cruise context.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality (Arifin, 2018). Survey responses were anonymised, and the subject company reviewed all questions for ethical compliance. This methodology provides a clear overview of the research

approach, acknowledging limitations while highlighting the study's rigour and ethical considerations.

Results

The study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative research elements, involving staff, former staff and comparable companies offering the same product. The comparison with other companies was conducted to determine whether the challenges were unique to the subject company, or commonly experienced across the industry.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase process, the thematic analysis yielded three primary themes: preparation, onboard experience and retention. Figure 3 shows the thematic map. The quotes used in the following paragraphs are linked to a number (#), which connects to one of the created initial codes.

Theme 1: Preparation

The preparation phase is a critical part of the onboarding process, creating the foundation for the integration and eventual satisfaction of the new employee. Adequate preparations ensure that employees feel welcomed, informed and equipped to dive into their new life at sea. This theme covers the sub-themes' expectations and information provision. Both involve the most efficient way to prepare for a new, unique work environment.

Expectations

Creating realistic expectations is critical in preparing new employees for work. The participants had a wide range of expectations, from social media influences and anticipating a *Below Deck* TV series (#4) to wanting to travel the world (#5), expecting a hardworking and higher professional environment (#4) and a pleasant one (#5). Overall, they expected rapid crew integration and a cosy workplace (46%). These diverse expectations emphasise the different motivations and preconceptions that new employees bring to their roles. This underscores the importance of clear communication and realistic onboarding processes to align these expectations with the actual realities of life onboard.

A question about how well the expectations matched the first

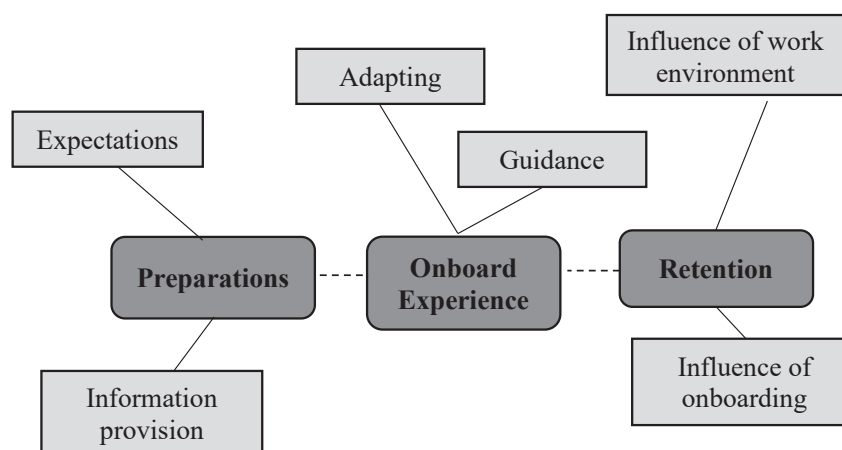


FIGURE 3: Thematic mindmap

weeks on board is answered by 15% of the respondents that the first weeks onboard did not fully meet expectations, but that it aligned with expectations over time:

"Did not get shown how we work on board the XXX very well the first few weeks. After a few weeks, I got a better explanation" (#2).

These insights emphasise the need for ongoing support and clear communication during onboarding to help new employees adjust and align their expectations with the reality of life onboard.

Information provision

The provision of information and resources is an essential factor during the entire process of onboarding. The information prepares you for what will come and will decrease any possible overwhelming or insecure feelings. The question: "How did you experience the information and guidance you received before your first working day?" provided valuable insights. 54% of the participants were unprepared or uncertain due to a lack of clear, practical information.

"Missing some practical things of the living onboard" (#6).

"Little unclear to me what my work times were and how the schedule worked" (#7).

"But some information was shared very last minute" (#13).

Furthermore, participants mentioned the heavy work and busy programmes right after the first workday as obstacles to explicit information provision.

"The crazy busy programmes right after starting did not allow for much training and onboarding, which worked out well, yet it would have been nice to have more guidance throughout the first two periods" (#14).

Regarding the helpful aspects of onboarding, 39% of the participants mentioned helpful resources, such as staff manuals, crew handbooks and other online resources, and 39% of the participants underlined clear communication with the HR department. The question regarding the participants' experiences regarding the information and guidance they received before the first day was answered with 54% *"positive experiences with communication"*.

Clear information and resources are vital for effective onboarding. However, 54% of participants felt unprepared due to insufficient practical information and difficulties in providing it due to busy schedules immediately after starting.

The preparation phase is crucial for successful onboarding, ensuring employees feel welcomed and informed. Participants had diverse expectations, requiring clear communication to align them with reality. While some initial mismatches were resolved, some felt unprepared due to insufficient practical information. Suggested improvements included better communication, early check-ins and comprehensive written materials. Effective HR communication and resources like staff manuals were vital for a positive onboarding experience.

Theme 2: Onboard experience

On board, the new employee is paired with a current crew member "buddy" who will provide guidance throughout the first weeks. The buddy will assist the new employee in adapting to the unique work/life balance, the ship and the daily routines. This support system is designed to help new employees navigate challenges and ensure a smoother transition into their roles.

Adapting

Adapting to the unique work/life balance, the movement of the ship and the amount of privacy can all be quite overwhelming. 36% of the participants shared their difficulties with the amount of privacy and the socialising, in general, the lifestyle. Furthermore, to the question "What point did you miss during onboarding?", 50% of the participants stated a need for a comprehensive orientation of life onboard.

"Being surrounded with people all the time and the big lifestyle change took me some time to adapt to" (#18).

"It is hard to explain life on board a ship through a step-by-step email" (#17).

Other participants (36%) shared that the overload or lack of clear resources was challenging for their adaptation process. This aligns with adapting to the new lifestyle, as transparent sources can inform them beforehand about the expected changes. The following quotes answered the question "What was difficult to adapt to?":

"It would be nice if I had known that I would be working 7/7 days a week, as this was only disclosed when I arrived on my first day" (#19).

"Amount of information to retain in the first 2 to 3 weeks is immense" (#19).

This indicates that the clarity of the resources is a significant factor in the adaptation process for new employees to this new work and lifestyle. Furthermore, some (21%) noted the lack of video material. The research indicates new employees' difficulties adapting to a ship's unique work/life balance and lifestyle.

Guidance

Guidance plays a crucial role during onboarding in helping new employees navigate their new roles. This sub-theme analyses the data regarding the support provided by experienced staff, in the subject company's terms "the buddy system", the clarity of instructions given and the availability of resources.

The buddy system is well known on board as it is a common term throughout the gathered data. 43% of the participants happily experienced this system and mentioned peer support, including the buddy system, as a helpful aspect of onboarding by 69%.

"The buddy system is a great way to allow a designated person to help and track the onboarding of a new employee" (#21).

On the questions about the buddy system, 64% of the participants acknowledged its importance, but due to gaps in its elaboration, their experiences were mixed.

"What I would improve is assigning people to an experienced buddy and ensuring enough experienced colleagues are present when new people are hired to prevent loss of knowledge" (#22).

The buddy system is essential for onboarding new employees, with 43% having positive experiences and 69% noting its helpfulness. However, 64% reported mixed experiences due to buddies leaving early or lacking skills. Improvements were suggested, including assigning experienced buddies and integrating more structure in this process.

Participants struggled with privacy, social interactions and adjusting to the new lifestyle. Unclear work schedules and expectations were also common concerns. Problems with understanding work hours upon arrival and absorbing a lot

of information initially added to the adaptation difficulties. To enhance onboarding, more apparent resources and communication, like a crew directory and introductory onboard-life videos, are recommended. Improving buddy guidance will establish a supportive framework for adapting to the unique work/life balance, ship life and daily routines.

Theme 3: Retention

Different factors influence the retention of employees. In this study, the influence of the work environment in the subject company and the influence of the onboarding created sub-themes throughout the analysis. The research provides interesting data on when the respondents worked or are still working at the subject company. Out of the 13 participants, six former employees from the service department had been with the company for less than 1.5 years. Furthermore, only two of the seven current crew members had been with the company for over a year. This suggests that other factors may be at play, influencing their decisions to leave after a relatively short period. This data suggests that employee retention in the service department of the subject company is particularly challenging, highlighting the need for targeted strategies to improve long-term engagement and satisfaction.

Influence of work environment

All the participants positively experienced the atmosphere, culture and overall work environment, which was seen as an influence on their duration of stay on board. 55% of the participants showed appreciation for this positive work environment, which contributed to their retention as employees. 45% of them talked about feeling valued and appreciated.

"I think the most important factor for retaining employees is feeling valued and appreciated" (#25).

In addition to the opportunities for travel and a sense of adventure, being surrounded by a trustworthy and supportive environment played a crucial role in employee satisfaction and retention at the subject company. This suggests that fostering a positive and supportive work culture where employees feel valued and appreciated is essential for enhancing employee retention and overall job satisfaction.

Influence of the onboarding process

As the aim of this study is to create a link between the onboarding process and employee retention, data showed the views of current and previous employees on this correlation. First, a 38% response rate regarding the warm welcome and positive atmosphere positively correlates with the onboarding process and satisfaction.

"Without proper initial preparations, the whole experience would not be as good as I view it" (#30).

However, 31% of participants had mixed feelings about the correlation between their initial preparations and overall satisfaction, citing pitfalls in the onboarding process.

"Before I joined for my first period, it positively influenced my satisfaction; in my first week, it negatively affected my satisfaction" (#27).

"The onboarding on board, as I said, was mostly done by new employees, leading to mistakes and misunderstandings. For me, that has been a bigger influence" (#27).

Thirty-six per cent of respondents answered yes to a question

regarding the direct contribution of preparation to retention: Effective onboarding and preparation contribute to longer retention. Another 29% named communication and expectation as specific factors that influence an employee's longevity.

"A positive note and feel prepared. Then, I think you look at your onboarding and general view of the ship as positive, which I think helps retain the crew" (#28).

"A good start is half the battle. By being clear and transparent up front, a new employee knows what to expect" (#29).

While a positive and supportive onboarding experience can enhance employee satisfaction and retention, instability and other issues can lead to dissatisfaction.

Employee retention at the subject company is challenging, with most service staff leaving within 1.5 years. A positive work environment helps retention by making employees feel valued. Effective onboarding and clear communication are essential for long-term engagement, though participants had mixed experiences due to onboarding issues. Clear communication and proper initial preparations are essential for fostering long-term employee engagement.

Industry best practices and challenges

Semi-structured interviews with three comparable companies provided valuable insights into industry best practices and challenges, revealing five primary themes: preboarding, managing expectations and satisfaction, communication, integration of technology and retention.

Preboarding

Interviewees emphasised the critical nature of the preboarding phase in setting the stage for successful onboarding. One company representative highlighted their proactive approach:

"Once the crew member has sent in all the personal information, we will generate a contract, and the crew member will receive the necessary information" (#1).

This early engagement was seen as crucial for building a connection with new hires before they even step aboard.

The unique nature of shipboard work necessitated comprehensive preparation. As one interviewee noted,

"Here, they can also read documents like 'business across cultures', 'uniforms for hotels', 'how their cabin looks', 'how family can reach the ship', etc." (#10).

This detailed information aims to create a realistic picture of life at sea, addressing potential concerns before they arise.

Some companies even arranged preboarding ship visits:

"Where possible, we try to have our new employees visit one of the vessels prior to boarding to get a better understanding of the life onboard and the expectations" (#11).

This hands-on approach reflects an industry-wide recognition of the importance of realistic job previews in the maritime sector.

Managing expectations and satisfaction

Creating realistic expectations emerged as a critical factor in ensuring long-term satisfaction. Interviewees acknowledged the potential for culture shock among new crew members. As one participant starkly put it, *"You never get a second chance to make a good first impression" (#22)*, underscoring the importance of the initial onboarding period.

The challenges of adapting to shipboard life were well-recognised:

"Employees and trainees that board a ship for the first time in their life say the first two weeks are overwhelming. They enter a new environment, most likely far away from their homes, and must absorb a lot of information in this time too" (#22).

This sentiment echoes the findings regarding adaptation difficulties and information overload.

The unique work schedule was identified as a particular challenge:

"The main challenge for new seafarers is getting used to the seven-day week working environment" (#23).

This acknowledgement of the intense work rhythm aligns with the findings and highlights an area requiring special attention during onboarding.

Communication

Effective communication emerged as a linchpin of successful onboarding and retention. Interviewees stressed the importance of clear, consistent communication from the outset. One participant noted,

"I do believe that if you keep clear communication with the employees and they feel valued and listened to, this contributes to their decision to remain with a company" (#28).

This perspective aligns closely with the findings on the importance of feeling valued.

The quality of preboarding communication was seen as setting the tone for the entire employment relationship:

"During the preboarding administration, if the communication is quick and efficient, this helps them feel valued and makes them feel like part of a professional organisation" (#30).

This emphasis on early impressions underscores the critical nature of the preboarding phase.

Despite the prevalence of digital communication, the value of personal contact was repeatedly emphasised. One interviewee shared,

"They appreciate the personal contact so much. And that when they see me, then they can just walk up to me" (#25).

This human touch was seen as crucial in building trust and connection in an industry where face-to-face interactions with shore-based staff are limited.

Integration of technology

While technology was widely recognised as a valuable tool in the onboarding process, interviewees stressed the importance of balancing digital solutions with personal interaction. Many companies utilise online platforms for information sharing and community building:

"All crewmembers are added to our 'crew community' website, so they can be in touch with each other on the community website if somebody has certain questions about the voyage, hotel/hostels, places to visit, airport information and also questions regarding clothing" (#34).

The efficiency gains of technology were acknowledged:

"Also, the online courses give a lot of structure and efficiency to the process, as you can make use of photo and video material" (#38).

However, there was also recognition of potential downsides:

"Technology is beneficial, but in my experience the contact moments with the crew (using e-mail, WhatsApp, phone call, etc.) are getting less" (#40).

This observation highlights the ongoing challenge of maintaining personal connections in an increasingly digital world.

Retention

The link between effective onboarding and long-term retention was a recurring theme in the interviews with the other companies. As one participant succinctly stated,

"The onboarding in the first two weeks onboard with the guidance of the buddy and familiarisation is crucial for a successful career at sea" (#23).

This perspective aligns closely with the findings on the importance of the initial onboarding period.

The interviews revealed a holistic view of retention, emphasising the interconnected nature of onboarding, job satisfaction and long-term commitment. Clear communication, realistic expectation setting and ongoing support were crucial in fostering long-term engagement.

In conclusion, the findings paint a picture of an industry grappling with the unique challenges of onboarding in a maritime environment. The data suggests a growing recognition of the critical importance of comprehensive, well-structured onboarding processes that blend technological efficiency with the personal touch. The emotional undertones in many responses underscore the profound impact of effective onboarding on an employee's experience and long-term commitment to a career at sea. These findings provide a rich foundation for developing targeted strategies to enhance onboarding practices in the cruise industry. These strategies could improve employee satisfaction, performance and retention in this unique and challenging work environment.

While these findings are derived from a limited sample, they reveal consistent patterns across the studied companies, suggesting potential industry-wide trends. However, further research with larger samples would be necessary to confirm the generalisability of these results. The consistency between internal and external data sources provides a degree of triangulation, enhancing the reliability of our findings in the context of this exploratory study.

Discussion

This study incorporated quantitative and qualitative research elements involving staff, former staff and comparable companies offering the same product. The comparison with other companies was conducted to determine whether the challenges were unique to the subject company or commonly experienced across the industry. This comprehensive approach provides a holistic view of onboarding practices and their impact on employee retention in the cruise industry. This study contributes to the existing literature on onboarding and retention by providing insights into the unique challenges faced in the cruise industry.

While our findings are based on a limited sample and may not be fully generalisable, they offer valuable directions for future research and practical implications for industry stakeholders. The consistency of themes across the subject company and external organisations suggests that many of the identified challenges are industry-wide rather than company-specific.

Preparation and expectation management

The findings highlight the importance of comprehensive preparation and realistic expectation setting in the onboarding process. Both internal participants and industry representatives emphasised the need for clear, balanced communication during recruitment, aligning with Raub and Streit's (2006) concept of "realistic recruitment". The diverse range of pre-employment expectations reported by participants underscores this need.

The high percentage (54%) of participants feeling unprepared due to insufficient practical information and the emphasis on detailed preboarding information supports Ghani et al.'s (2022) assertion that efficient onboarding has largely been overlooked in the industry. This suggests a critical gap that needs addressing through more structured and comprehensive preboarding processes, a challenge that appears to be industry-wide rather than unique to the subject company.

Adapting to shipboard life

The challenges of adapting to shipboard life emerged as a significant theme across the data, indicating an industry-wide issue. The difficulties reported in adjusting to limited privacy, constant social interactions and the unique work schedule corroborate Lang's (2011) categorisation of shipboard conditions into physical and social factors. Bardelle and Lashley's (2015) study on homesickness among crew members provides additional context to these adaptation challenges. Their finding that a significant proportion of crew members experience homesickness (with 13.1% feeling homesick "frequently", 8% "very often" and 6.5% "always") underscores the emotional toll of adapting to life at sea. This suggests that onboarding processes across the industry must address practical job preparation and emotional and psychological adaptation.

Work environment and living conditions

Bolt and Lashley's (2015) insights on how the physical design of cruise ships often prioritises passenger areas over crew spaces, leading to cramped working and living conditions for staff, provide context for some of the adaptation difficulties reported by participants. This aspect of shipboard life can exacerbate the challenges of adaptation for new crew members, potentially affecting job satisfaction and retention rates across the industry.

All findings showed the positive influence of the work environment on retention, particularly the importance of feeling valued and appreciated. This aligns with Bolt and Lashley's (2015) emphasis on management's sensitivity to crew needs, particularly in balancing work and non-work time and space.

Communication and support systems

The findings emphasised the critical role of clear, consistent communication throughout the onboarding process. The mixed reviews for the "buddy system" from participants on its crucial role highlight its potential and current limitations. This suggests a need for more structured and reliable peer support systems across the industry, aligning with Cahoon et al.'s (2014) proposal that improving onboard working conditions is essential for attracting and retaining employees.

Retention challenges and opportunities

The retention challenges revealed in this study, with most service staff departing within 1.5 years, are consistent with the high turnover rates reported by Scherbl (2020). This appears to

be an industry-wide issue, not specific to the subject company. However, the link between effective onboarding and long-term retention supports Rubin's (2019) claim about the potential impact of effective onboarding on retention rates.

Limitations

This study encountered several methodological and contextual limitations that warrant consideration when interpreting the results. These limitations pertain to the research process, data collection and the generalisability of findings.

Firstly, the small number of directly relevant extant research necessitated establishing connections between various variables, potentially impacting the study's reliability. This approach, while necessary, may have introduced interpretive bias and limited the robustness of the theoretical framework.

Secondly, including some older research sources in the literature review, albeit validated with more recent studies, may have affected the currency and applicability of specific findings. While efforts were made to corroborate older sources with contemporary literature, this limitation potentially impacts the study's accuracy in reflecting current industry practices.

The research process itself faced logistical challenges, particularly in data collection. Conducting research aboard ships proved difficult due to sporadic internet access, which hindered consistent communication. Additionally, the predominance of non-oral qualitative interviews and the use of survey methods restricted the ability to probe responses in-depth or seek clarification, potentially limiting the richness of the data collected.

The study's reliance on three companies with operational differences to the subject company potentially limits the generalisability of findings. While these companies provided valuable insights, the variations in their operational models may have led to conclusions that are not fully applicable to the subject company's specific context.

Finally, the absence of statistical data directly linking onboarding practices to retention rates, both in the literature and from the participating companies, necessitated drawing conclusions based on qualitative data and interconnections in the literature. This lack of quantitative support limits the study's ability to establish definitive causal relationships between onboarding practices and employee retention.

These limitations potentially impact the research findings' depth and generalisability. Future studies should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs, incorporating a more extensive and diverse sample of companies and utilising mixed-methods approaches that include quantitative measures of onboarding efficacy and retention rates.

Recommendations for enhancing onboarding in the cruise industry

This study has revealed that onboarding challenges in the cruise industry are multifaceted and industry-wide rather than unique to any single company. The findings underscore the critical importance of comprehensive preparation, clear communication and ongoing support throughout the onboarding process.

What stands out most prominently is the disconnect between pre-employment expectations and the realities of shipboard life. This gap affects initial job satisfaction and has long-term

implications for employee retention. The industry's unique working environment — characterised by confined spaces, prolonged periods at sea and intense social interactions — demands a more tailored and nuanced approach to onboarding than what is typically seen in land-based hospitality sectors.

The prevalence of homesickness and adaptation difficulties among crew members, as highlighted by Bardelle and Lashley (2015), further emphasises the need for emotional and psychological support during the onboarding process. This aspect has been largely overlooked in traditional onboarding practices, but could be a critical factor in improving long-term retention rates.

Moreover, the study reveals a tension between the industry's increasing reliance on technology for efficiency and the crucial need for the personal touch in onboarding. While digital platforms offer valuable information dissemination and training tools, they cannot fully replace the human element in helping new crew members acclimate to shipboard life.

Looking forward, the cruise industry must evolve its onboarding practices to better address these unique challenges. This evolution should involve not just more comprehensive preboarding information and realistic job previews, but also a sustained effort to support crew members throughout their employment. When properly implemented and supported, the "buddy system" shows promise as a way to provide this ongoing support.

Ultimately, the key to improving retention in this industry lies in recognising that onboarding is not a one-time event, but a continuous process that extends well beyond the initial weeks of employment. By investing in this extended onboarding approach, cruise companies can improve job satisfaction and retention rates and enhance the overall quality of service provided to their guests.

As the industry continues to grow and evolve, further research into the long-term impacts of these enhanced onboarding practices will be crucial. Only through ongoing study and refinement can we hope to fully address the unique challenges of a working life at sea and create a more stable, satisfied workforce in this dynamic and demanding industry.

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