Cruising in the 21st century: Who works while others play?

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Abstract

The cruise industry is growing in scale and importance annually. Influences such as multiculturalism, globalisation, the increase in numbers of mega-cruise ships and changing passenger demography, suggest that the work environment is not as it might once have been and yet there is very little research to reveal insights into this complex and seemingly unique world. This paper aims to find out what it is like to work and live on a modern cruise ship by examining the views of employees across a number of cruise brands.

Keywords: Cruise industry; Employment motivation; Communities of practice

1. Introduction: cruise dynamism

The cruise industry is a modern day success story with: sustained, long-term growth; a constantly refreshing image that embodies, at one extreme, laid back luxury with hedonistic rituals and, at the other, a party ‘til you drop' culture; and a relatively untapped multinational market (Gibson, 2006). According to the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA, 2006), the industry has experienced an average annual growth of 8.2% since 1980. This is double the long-term average growth figure of 4.1% for tourism in general (World Tourism Organisation, 2006).

Cruise vacations reflect modern tastes and popular preferences (Ward, 2005). Ships provide a plethora of pastimes, pursuits and activities that are, when taken together, a mirror on the way society, or rather, the segment of society that is onboard, spends its time. In a similar way, itineraries, in terms of regions and destinations visited, are barometers, which provide a measure of those places that are deemed either sufficiently non-threatening or, in balance, sufficiently appealing, to the culture of those on vacation (Gibson, 2006). If, however, passengers venture behind the scenes, what would they find? Who are the people that work to make their holiday come alive and what is it like to live and work onboard a contemporary mega-cruiser?

This paper attempts to provide answers to these questions by examining the occupational nuances that exist for hotel personnel on cruise ships and, in particular, junior and departmental managers, in order to appreciate the real-life issues concerning working and leisure routines and ship life dynamics. In addition, the paper aims to draw comparisons between this form of employment and other similar tourism sectors. Ultimately, the findings help to inform cruise practitioners about opportunities and threats which arise from within the professional setting for this type of employee.

This paper reports on a longitudinal research project, which resulted in the collection of data from a broad range of hotel and associated employees who worked for a number of major US and UK branded cruise ships. The study is located in a body of literature that considers individual learning motivations (Gibson, 2004), the professional and social context of apprenticeships and the importance of the setting for personal progress (Lave, 1988) and, as such, it is claimed that, by reflecting on the data, the paper provides a discussion to highlight critical issues to reveal new insights into this complex, multinational, and under researched maritime world.

The next section provides a précis of theoretical matters concerning this industry, its working routines, the social and professional environment and the motivational elements, which can be said to inform individuals in this context. This is followed by the rationale concerning research. Thereafter, the findings are presented and
discussed before the paper concludes with recommendations for future research.

2. Pirates of the Caribbean?

The cruise industry is a truly global phenomenon. The various corporations and brands operate vessels that view the coastal regions of countries worldwide as their playgrounds, scattering dollars, pounds and euros in their wake and generating markets for shore excursions, attractions, restaurants and bars, port facilities, transportation and hotels (Gibson, 2006). Brands such as Princess Cruises, Norwegian Cruise Line, P&O Cruises and Royal Caribbean Cruises dominate the Cruise Industry (Mancini, 2000). Carnival Corporation is the largest cruise company worldwide (see Fig. 1 for a comparison of scale). The corporation owns 81 cruise ships (22% of all cruise ships worldwide) and employs around 60,000 people onboard their ships (Carnival Corporation, 2007). The second largest cruise company with 34 ships is Royal Caribbean (Royal Caribbean International, 2007) and the third is the Norwegian Cruise Line and Star Cruises group with 21 ships (Star Cruises, 2007).

Another reality that emerges to define the cruise industry in a global sense is the way the industry capitalises on sourcing and utilising its human resource. Weaver (2005a) summarises the situation neatly by generalising that lowest ranking employees (e.g., waiters and cabin stewards) are usually from Eastern Europe, Central America and Southeast Asia; middle ranking staff (such as supervisors and head waiters) are frequently from eastern or western Europe, while highest echelons (officers, hotel managers, cruise directors and pursers), usually originate from wealthy countries such as the United Kingdom or Australia. Shipboard life on many vessels is a multinational experience.

Arguably, the cruise business is, in and of itself, an ‘industry’, because of scale, function and focus (Gibson, 2006), yet it is also reasonable to categorise the cruise business as being related to tourism, leisure, hospitality and/or maritime industries. It has obvious connections with tourism, leisure and hospitality because of the connotations of being concerned with travel vacations and the provision of hotel services and entertainment. The sea-going context, with the potential for absorbing a maritime culture, the criticality of safety at sea, the notion of flags of convenience and foreign registration of ships for commercial advantage and the common shared bonds of communities at sea, support the claim that the cruise business is a part of the maritime industry. The sum of all parts emphasises the uniqueness of the business and further enhances the claim that this world is best referred to as the International Cruise Industry.

When considering motivations for employment one key factor that dominates theory relates to pay (Baum, 2006; Boella and Goss-Turner, 2005; Jerris, 1999; Mabey et al., 1998). Tourism, hospitality and leisure industries have frequently attracted criticism for being predominantly low skilled and, as a result, low paid (Baum, 2006). This characterisation is presented by those who focus on the nature of shore side jobs that have been subjected to technological change, outsourcing of labour, centralised production and reduction in manual input (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004; Ogbonna and Harris, 2002). Yet, according to Rigby and Sanchis (2004), this version of reality avoids placing any significant importance on the highly complex socio-cultural skills that underpin customer-service relationships or interpersonal communications. The authors argue that by applying this lack of understanding a serious injustice is practiced on service employees. It could seem to be the case that low pay exists because managers have low levels of awareness concerning the importance of these socio-cultural skills or perhaps hospitality managers are satisfied with inadequate service standards.

Are cruise ships low skill environments? According to Raub and Streit (2006), cruise ships operate within different parameters compared to conventional hotels. The levels of contact between guest and servers are more prolonged and the opportunity for interaction can be considerably greater. Vessels at sea are centres of production (e.g., most cruise ships employ butchers and bakers), with high staff–guest ratios, hotel skills are a necessity onboard and outsourcing of labour and skills attrition are not the norm (Gibson, 2006). This appears to suggest that comparatively, even when adopting the previously described, narrow view paradigm about skills, the cruise industry is at odds with, for example, the hotel industry.

Despite this contrasting situation, the picture that tends to be presented about cruise workers’ remuneration appears to replicate the aforementioned situation in tourism, leisure and hospitality. Klein (2002) highlights the inequalities of life between the servers and the served; the reliance on gratuities to raise income levels above what he refers to as pittance levels; and the use by ship brands of ‘flags of convenience’ to avoid employment and other legislation that would raise costs. On the other hand, Weaver (2005a) recognises that, for many, working at sea is highly lucrative and he cites examples such as the Maître d’hôtel, who can earn in excess of US$200,000 per annum.
For some employees, who select this type of work, direct
earnings are likely to be one financial consideration among
many in terms of job motivation. Indeed in the hospitality
industry in general and on most cruise ships, tipping plays a
major part in the theoretical act of rewarding per-
ance. This act is claimed to be theoretical because, as
noted by Azar (2004), there is a considerable complexity
bound up in the act of giving, receiving and managing tips.
While some nationals see tipping as normal practice, others
are distinctly uncomfortable about the reward system
(Lynn and McCall, 2000).

Is the cruise industry a good employer? The answer
appears to be difficult to ascertain, not least because,
there are so many cruise operators (Gibson, 2005). Most
studies focus on employees who are paid the least and who
come from poorer countries of origin (Weaver, 2005a), but
avoid considering others such as supervisors and junior
managers. In addition, there is little regard in literature for
the job satisfaction which is likely to be accrued from
working in a skills rich, highly interactive setting, but
which may be affected by long and arduous contracts
(Weaver, 2005a), nor the ‘all found’ aspects in relation to
living costs.

Cruise ships contain employees who, dependent on role,
experience, qualification, scarcity and, in some cases,
effectiveness, may be variably remunerated for the work
they do onboard. However, as Lieberman and Dieck (2002)
ascertain, this form of business is grounded on revenue
maximisation coupled with cost control and a significant
element of that cost is the wage bill. Cruise brands argue
that the combination of consumer expectation about price
and other operators’ competitive pricing policies put
pressure on cost control which naturally impacts on wages.
Weaver (2005b) points out that those crew members from
poorer countries who work onboard are often much better
paid than they would be at home and for them the choice
may be to work at sea or to be unemployed at home.
Indeed, in relation to perceptions about low pay for those
from poorer countries, the World Bank notes that evidence
suggests that a function of globalisation is that it can lead
to a faster level of equalisation in levels of pay across
nations (Rama, 2003). Fairness in this global setting may
depend on individual perspective. In reality, the scarcity
of research in this area undermines efforts to achieve a
consensus in this matter.

There is a wide of literature relating to motivation for
work and at work. For example, social identity theory (van
Knippenberg, 2000), Frederick Herzberg's motivation and
hygiene theory (Herzberg et al., 1993), Maslow's (1970)
hierarchy of needs, McGregor's X-Y theory and McClell-
land's motivational theory (Campion and McClelland,
1993), are but a few well known and oft quoted stances that
could be made use of to underpin studies that focus on the
workplace. However, because of a particular interest in
learning and education, the author preferred to adopt
theories that were more familiar in educational literature.
In particular, this approach was seen to be relevant because
of previous studies undertaken by Jean Lave considering
situated learning: relating to the importance of 'place'
when observing learning in practice, and communities of
practice: describing complex thought process and actions
ascribed to learners in novel group situations (Lave and

In essence, this work has a constructivist epistemology
drawn on theorists such as Dewey (1916) and Jean Lave
(1988). Dewey (1997, pp. 26–27) summarised his philo-
osophical orientation by claiming that 'every experience
enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and
undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish
it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences’. This
particular world view is developed by sociologist and
philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1986) in his work on social
and cultural capital and also when describing 'habitus' as a
representation of a personal set of dispositions that
individuals or learners engage with when dealing with
formal structures and their subjective interpretations.
Lave's work on communities of practice coupled with
Bourdieu's notion of habitus were instrumental in the
development of the circumstantial curriculum (Gibson,
2003a), a model that attempts to assist researchers when
seeking to understand learner motivations.

In a constructivist sense, the circumstantial cur-
riculum presents an argument that motivation is a highly
individual function that is derived through personal
appreciation of a broad variety of mitigating factors
(Gibson, 2003a). It is a theory which evolved from studies
concerning individual personal motivation in a further
education setting. This theory is predicated upon
the notion that learning is a cumulative and ongoing activity
and that it is both a matter of personal choice and
influenced by the individual’s personal feelings about the
place within which learning occurs. Thus, the circumstan-
tial curriculum develops Lave and Wenger's (1991)
theory relating to the notion of learning in specific settings
and group collaboration for learning, by stressing the
criticality of individual perspective. ‘Circumstantial’
factors allude to the individual with particular cumula-
tive knowledge, learning and beliefs located in specific
socio-cultural settings. While the ‘curriculum’ highlights
opportunities for further development in a world of
individually recognisable potential. Learners in this ‘world’
will constantly reflect upon choices and options based on
their needs and aspirations. The model emerged from a
study in an educational context but it possesses a quality of
elegant versatility in the way it can be used to interpret
motivations in complex settings such as the cruise ship
environment.

Action may emerge through consideration of a personal
set of ever-changing logical priorities and rationale
(Gibson, 2004). The model (Fig. 2) is useful as a template
for comprehending complex human action and for inter-
preting an individual’s interaction within a group. For this
research, the circumstantial curriculum model was impor-
tant as a conceptual framework in helping to understand
personal motivation and the individual’s ‘take’ on their uniquely understood cruise ship context.

3. Researching for authenticity

The research aimed to reveal a new understanding about what it is like for hotel staff to live and work onboard modern cruise ships. The objectives were to undertake a series of semi-structured interviews with a broad range of employees onboard cruise ships, to observe crew and officers in their natural habitat both in customer areas and in crew areas and to analyse data by constructing case reports. In order to maximise the quality of the data, a number of strategic decisions were taken. The research had an interpretive orientation (Clark et al., 1999) and by definition it was exploratory, adapting techniques associated to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Thereafter, it can also be described as qualitative in that it sought to develop a richness and depth of data (Cohen et al., 2000). This approach does not always lend itself well to the creation of generalisable statements because often the sample size is small (Shaw, 1999) and the form of data generation can be more related to the pursuit of understanding rather than being bound up in matters concerning the replicability or reliability of the research method (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Effective quality research that is carefully planned, rigorously implemented and systematic can get to the heart of the study and take into account the complex multifaceted issues that can relate to both people and settings.

As Cohen et al. (2000) assert, this form of research draws its strengths from the way it presents authenticity. By revealing the intricacies and noting the vagaries encountered on a cruise ship setting, a highly relevant picture of life can emerge that does not seek to tidy life’s jagged edges. This research seeks to engage the reader with an authentic version of reality and yet it will be but one version that could be presented. The researcher has made use of a number of features and plans aimed at making the version as usable as possible. This included designing a longitudinal element to the work so the data can be collected and then assimilated cumulatively. A case study approach was then formulated to add impact to the findings and to help with interpretation (Adelman et al., 1984; Bassey, 1999; Gibson, 2003b). Finally, the researcher brings some background information to the project because of prior experiences from the industry. This understanding helps the researcher to ‘tune in’ and to observe with a greater level of awareness.

The contextual and theoretical realities place a number of practical constraints on such a project. Cruise ships are remarkably difficult to access because of security and logistical reasons, yet, despite this, it appeared to the researcher that there were strengths in accessing personnel while they are immersed in the hothouse environment at sea or onboard their ships. Generally, ships go to sea for periods of time that vary between 7 and 14 days and this
meant data collection was focused on availability of ship's personnel, coupled with the researcher's own time constraints and the opportunity to gain access to cruise ships. This task was assisted by key personnel in training departments who helped negotiate access and acted as gatekeepers.

In all, a series of 38 interviews were conducted over a 3-year period. In 2004, 24 interviews were conducted onboard two contrasting cruise vessels: one targeting the United Kingdom (UK) and the other the United States (US) markets. The semi-structured interviews were undertaken over a 7- and 3-day period, respectively, with a range of hotel department employees. The sample was carefully selected, in negotiation with senior personnel ashore and on the ship, to give a broadly representative range of hotel 'type' and service employees. Occupational roles represented included operational, supervisory and management personnel from bars, restaurants, galley and buffet sections; assistant managers and junior assistant pursers representing a diversity of responsibilities; accommodation personnel; shops onboard and photography managers; the cruise director and senior managers. The sample included a range of nationalities, ranks and a mix of genders.

In 2005, eight students on internships working onboard UK- and US-based cruise brands, were interviewed onboard their respective cruise ships. Finally, five students on internships with a US brand and one on a work placement scheme with a UK brand were interviewed in 2006 onboard their respective ships. Those who were interviewed were at various points on their contacts and no attempt was made to influence this aspect of the sample selection. The interns were all part of a management trainee project connected with the B.Sc. (Hons.) Cruise Management at the University of Plymouth, UK. The individuals were similar in age and gender mix to their fellow co-workers and their experiences added an interesting dimension to the study that, taken together with the comments from the other interviewees, helped to illuminate assimilation issues, cultural and multicultural realities and synergies onboard. It was apparent from the interviews that the interns' perceptions were congruent with other young officers' perceptions and their individuality was as relevant to the study as any of the other subjects.

Semi-structured interview schedules were utilised for the data collection (Bell et al., 1984), and due regard was placed on planning to ensure the setting, the conditions, permissions and ethics were addressed (Cohen et al., 2000). The interview schedules, which were informed by literature and from information gleaned from recruitment and training managers, were piloted on early subjects. Confidentiality was offered in all cases, for ethical reasons, by withholding the identity of the cruise brands, the vessels and, in line with respondents' wishes, where appropriate, individuals' names are disguised. The data collected were recorded, transcribed, converted into case reports and analysed using framework analysis. This analysis was undertaken using the previously described circumstantial curriculum model (Gibson, 2003a).

4. What the subjects said

The research subjects represented a broad range of occupation types that fell under the heading of 'hotel services'. The following excerpts are taken from case reports and are intended to help to illuminate what it is like to live and work onboard a contemporary cruise ship. The subjects that are described in this paper have been disguised to ensure anonymity in line with agreements concerning confidentiality.

A cruise ship is, as has been noted, home to a uniquely constructed multinational and multicultural community. Managers develop a unique set of skills in the workplace to help them achieve planned outcomes while maintaining equilibrium. This first case describes one manager’s view in this context that shows how he has learned to develop sensitivity to the importance of the individual within a demanding customer service environment.

4.1. Excerpt from a case report—John the accommodation manager

John is very aware that the so-called 'soft skills' of working in accommodation are vital. Being able to construct and motivate a team, to treat people with respect and to understand their cultural differences, are each important elements in the complex task of managing a working community day in and day out at sea. An example of this is that John notes some nationalities seem more aggressive; they are not necessarily aggressive but they come across as such because this is the way they do things. People who work on a cruise ship need to get on with both crew and passengers. John also suggests that over the years he has been at sea, passengers have become more demanding influenced partly by: demographical changes; depending on the time of year; and the cruising season, and as cruise companies have merged that cost control and budget management have been managed more effectively.

Another feature that impacts on operations is related to the industry's growth. In commenting on this factor, Shirley also builds on the earlier points made to reveal some insights into onboard dynamics. Her views highlight the importance of leadership and management in terms of setting the tone as well as establishing and maintaining an appropriate atmosphere in the work place.
4.2. Excerpt from a case report—Shirley the reception manager

Shirley believes that cruise ships are all different. This may because of the crew, the passengers, the size of the ship and/or the itinerary. She believes that people onboard have their own individual reasons for working on the ship but that irrespective of this that everyone will probably feel differently because of the ship they are on. The ship’s dynamics are complex. Her company tried to put together a team of like-minded people to set the ship up and, subsequently, they use teams to replicate the set up. As contracts expire and people change so the ship may change. Equally, the managers are important. They set a benchmark regarding the tone of the leadership style. On this ship that she is currently working on there is a relaxed style, everyone appears to be happy in their work and life onboard and people are trusted to get on with their jobs. There appears to be an opposite potential in that managers on other cruise ships who are too strict may create a negative atmosphere that can affect passengers.

The aim to ensure equilibrium in the social/professional setting is underpinned by a number of subtle and less subtle interventions. Here, Carl discusses the importance of diet.

4.3. Excerpt from a case report—Carl the executive chef

The crew also require to be fed. The Executive Chef plans a 30-day menu that caters for their needs. The menu is constructed bearing in mind advice from nutritionalists and input from crew representatives. This ensures that crew members who may have a special preference or diet because of their nationality, cultural background or religion are appropriately catered for.

Shipboard life is punctuated by a series of critical events including port health inspections. This external regulatory framework is counterbalanced by the internal hierarchical framework that establishes standards of behaviour and norms. Simon discusses these issues and relates how he tries to ensure the team in his area remains motivated. His personal philosophy is in accordance with other subjects, who highlighted the importance of the individual within what could be referred to as a large-scale amorphous crew.

4.4. Excerpt from a case report—Simon the corporate chef

In matters relating to discipline the Captain is both the judge and in many cases, the jury, onboard the ship. There is a strict hierarchy with senior officers such as the Deputy Captain, the Chief Engineer and the Passenger Services Director (PSD). The PSD has the largest department to direct and for this reason he is supported by a relatively large team of managers. Some staff do not speak English particularly well. For many crew members, it is the first time away from home on a ship. It can take a month or two to settle in and managers try to check progress and check potential during all stages of their contract. In Simon’s opinion, a good chef is a good cook, a good manager, a public relations expert and a psychologist.

Supervisors are vital to ensure operational effectiveness. Danny is an experienced supervisor and, in this segment, he discusses his approach to work, team building and problem solving. In doing this, he reveals his obvious pride in his work and his affinity with the life at sea.

4.5. Excerpt from a case report—Danny the accommodation supervisor

Danny really likes being onboard—sometimes when he gets home on leave he can get to the second week and he is looking forward to going back to sea. He works with a team of 12 pool boys. They make standard set ups (putting out chairs and cushions in a clean and organised fashion). His team assists with gangway security in ports during disembarkation and embarkation.

He believes it is a very special life onboard. Every night he meets with his team to talk about how they are and how the work is going. He says that with 1100 crew, it is a small town and it would seem illogical for everyone to get on. It has been a long time since he has seen problems and most little problems get resolved in the crew bar. Danny always aims to return to the same team on the same ship.

Danny’s approach appears to be complemented by Arnie’s, in terms of his focus, his clarity of purpose, his view on the need to ensure harmony and balance and his awareness of the multinational team.
4.6. Excerpt from a case report—Arnie the buffet manager

Arnie is the buffet manager. His job is to make sure that service runs smoothly and that health and hygiene levels are high. The supervisors and managers train staff to prevent problems happening. The buffet assistants are multinational and Arnie describes the team as being like a big family. He describes this ship as being a happy ship. He says ‘everyone lives together and at the end of the day they are made of same materials—I should respect others and they should respect me’. He describes the ship as an example to the United Nations.

As suggested in earlier excerpts, all ships and the different cruise brands appear to create differing social and professional platforms on which the ship’s company plays out their lives. It would seem that the realities in relation to social harmony and professional effectiveness are a product of complex factors including: the mix of passengers, the mix of crew, the itinerary, contractual nuances, shared perceptions about the ship and company and the management style. Jim portrays some of the social realities that can shape this world.

4.7. Excerpt from a case report—Jim the photographer

The photographers on his ship are employed directly by the cruise brand but on other ships they can be working under contract for a concessionary. He says that a cruise ship is a very different type of environment. It can be that there is a lot of pressure away from family and for some people that is a big step. With some people that pressure shows. All ships have an individual feel and the people who work onboard should have an open mind. That said the life and routines can depend on the type of work and the amount of customer contact that is involved.

It would appear that for some life onboard generates powerful attractions. The routines, the way of life and the sociality that is at the heart of the type of work and leisure interplay are almost addictive. Others do not seem to fit in. Rupert describes this and also draws attention to the non-glamorous side of customer service.

4.8. Excerpt from a case report—Rupert the cruise director

Rupert believes that you either love or hate life at sea. Those that love it, and he says a lot do, are itching to come back as soon as they get home. His job is really complex but equally really rewarding. He manages all the entertainment onboard: there are 134 staff, musicians, production staff, dancers, youth team, cruise staff, acts and guest entertainers. He is heavily involved in planning, informing or promoting activities and in ensuring high levels of customer satisfaction. The passengers can be ‘interesting’, some people are genuine and some bring their problems onboard. There are professional cruisers who have been advised by their travel agent that if they complain they will get benefits such as upgrades or free gifts. The main ‘front line’ is the Pursers desk. They are always dealing with customer enquiries and it can be challenging. In this environment, Rupert says that it is important to listen to people, to be calm and if something has gone wrong to get to the root of problem.

Marie develops this point, in relation to the work and personal motivation. She has useful information on personal attributes, interpersonal connections and her own set of ambitions.

4.9. Excerpt from a case report—Marie the junior assistant purser

When she first got a job on a cruise ship Marie was employed as an assistant buffet steward but she then managed to get promoted to be a Junior Assistant Purser. She really enjoys life at sea. She enjoys the job rotations, which means she can be doing different types of work during her contract such as shore excursions, crew office or reception. The experience is very good for a single female. Her ambition is to secure a more senior management position. She finds it amazing how people get on onboard her ship. She says that she is friendly with people of all nationalities. Rank does create some separation but despite that people get on really well. When the ship arrives in port, a large number of the crew get time off in port—they split to cover jobs that need to be done. It is not always possible to go ashore but she has been able to see many really exciting places. She says ‘it is important to be people oriented, the people you work with are with you a lot and you become friends and then you visit them all around the world’.

Don adds to the emerging discussion by pointing out his part in the operational setting. He highlights key drivers that are in place to stabilise the community.
4.10. Excerpt from a case report—Don the food and beverage manager

Don says that when new people start they are allocated a buddy. This helps them learn and settle in quickly. He notes that the company is growing fast and believes the pressure must be enormous yet standards are being kept high. Don states that it takes time to build a good team but in trying to motivate people and encourage them they are giving them opportunity. He says the best incentive is to give staff promotion and a future. He aims to nurture a positive working atmosphere. He recognises that senior managers pass their management style down. He asserts that the evidence shows there are many individuals who are happy in their positions.

Don knows that everybody can have a bad day. Also in a large population there can be occasional trouble makers but they are soon peripheralised. In the social environment, they have a set of rules that are intended to ensure people get on. These are common sense rules relating to respect for cultures, people’s background, protecting the place where the crew live. Fleet regulations and captain’s standing orders cover matters such as uniform, appearance and conduct. It is important that people respect each other, that no-one plays their music too loud to disturb someone on a different shift pattern. The crew are told the implications of bad behaviour and as a result there is little in the way of trouble. Instances of drug taking or possession, fighting or sexual harassment lead to instant dismissal.

Finally, Ella reports from the perspective of a relatively new and junior appointee. She speaks with good levels of awareness about her part in the ship’s company and suggests that, like many social settings, all may not be plain sailing for some at sea.

4.11. Excerpt from a case report—Ella the waitress

Slovakian Ella was very surprised about the multinational nature of life onboard. She says the friendliness of all who work onboard is contagious. Some nationalities seem more insular than others. Occasionally, people originating from neighbouring countries stick together socially although often that is because it can be tiring using English if it is not your first language. She says that there are good ships and bad ships. This can be influenced by the type of passengers, the number of crew who are new, the length of a contract and the amount of a contract served. The work is hard but not impossible, the hours are OK (on other ships she hears it can be too long). She gets a chance to go ashore most ports. Her social life is good. She is not allowed in passenger areas. Ella says this sounds like staff are something less than the passengers but she does not care because her facilities are good, (pool Jacuzzi and gym) and likes being with her friends. There are more boys than girls onboard and it takes some getting used to as the boys often come on too strong. She says it is a career for many but that it could be difficult with relationships. That said there are a lot of married couples onboard.

These subjects are but a sample of those who were interviewed. However, the selected excerpts from the individual cases highlight a range of interesting and illuminating insights into the unique world onboard a cruise ship. The next section considers some of the developing interpretations that are identified from within the narratives.

5. Interpreting realities

The various case studies that were constructed help to illuminate the complex ‘community of practice’ issues onboard cruise ships. Cruise employees appear to be originally attracted to the work for a variety of reasons. In many cases, employees presented justifications that blended features such as the desire to travel, the luxury environment and the implied glamour of a cruise ship. Others focused on primary attractors such as the desire to work in an environment that provided a good income and a desirable lifestyle. Very few subjects stated single factor reasons for making the transition to working at sea. In doing so, the subjects highlighted their multidimensionality and individual complexity. As time progressed the employees presented evidence that they were constantly reappraising their lives in context and from within the setting developed new or adapted reasons for remaining within this type of employment. Thus, some subjects became increasingly aware about emerging or developing opportunities and others appreciated the strength of camaraderie onboard. In other reports subjects described the contrast between the socially rich environment at sea and the slower paced, less engaging atmosphere ‘at home’. It seems that those who work at sea can come to have an increasingly high regard for the allure of the social setting and that while original desires to travel become less of a priority, the reality of life cruising around the world, retains a high degree of magnetism when compared with other jobs.

Different cruise brands possessed different mixes of nationality. At its most extreme, one brand had 54 different
crew nationalities, but even at the other extreme it was still apparent that the nationality mix was in double figures. There was, generally, a 2:1 male female ratio and the average age of crew members was in the early to mid thirties. On all ships visited there seemed to be a sense of pride. The cruise ship setting is presented as a home and the community as a homogenous entity (and not some quirk of fate engineered by a Human Resource team). Often the community was referred to as a family, although this was more often the case within departments or on the ships with less than 1000 crew. There was overwhelming evidence that those who worked onboard valued harmony. In this respect, the experienced crew, supervisors and line managers shared their set of values with new appointees and there was open communication between all to clarify the notion of a ‘common purpose’. The members of the community presented a certain sense of satisfaction that the multinational/multicultural model onboard was ‘good practice’ and a lesson to the land-based communities. There were few signs of personal conflict observed and on most ships it was apparent that the members of each community acted in co-operation to deal with issues. All of the above is underpinned by the ships’ sets of regulations in relation to behaviour and conduct. All onboard were clear about the rules.

The cruise ship community appeared to operate at different levels. This was apparent because at any time there were a number of uniquely identifiable communities in co-existence and again it was evident that there was shared knowledge about these forms of community. The professional level created a milieu, within which individuals played their roles and interfaced with supervisors, managers, subordinates and passengers. In this community, working practices for a cabin steward were established by noting company specifications, attending training sessions, observing colleagues, listening to supervisors, learning from mistakes and refining routines through practice. A reception manager adopted similar approaches when learning about professional working practices, although in addition, this type of subject also had relatively good access to computer aided learning materials, had been provided with customised training and was periodically updated by line managers in relation to product knowledge and corporate practices. Senior Managers possessed accumulated knowledge and this was informed by company directives, relating to standard operational procedures and responding to demands from head office. Social communities were often sub-divided according to rank or position, departmental or occupational membership and in some cases, nationality or culture.

The case subjects regarded their ship in much the same way that a local population regard their village or town. In this sense, the subjects displayed an affectionate form of ownership for their place of work. This was sometimes challenged if an employee had cumulative experiences across a number of cruise ships but it still appeared the most recent was kept in highest regard. Time onboard was spent on and off duty: although it is important to note this was subject to each crew member’s safety responsibility. Depending on the person and the circumstance, off duty centred on private time, social time, the crew bar, officers’ mess or going ashore. Managers and officer had privileges that meant they could use passenger amenities and facilities. Managers often described the sociability of their jobs when dealing with passengers and crew. Working hours were long, reflecting the nature of the operation and the need to maintain continuity of services, yet invariably on the vessels observed, the crew and officers had opportunities to find time to explore ports of call and for personal time. This seemed to be the case because the managers believed their staff needed to be managed with due regard to the demanding nature of the job and to make sure balance was maintained. This being then case, it is worth reflecting on the importance of management styles.

Managers made a difference in maintaining a balance between the social and professional communities. This appeared to be because of the management style adopted by individual managers. However, if one deconstructs the evidence relating to the ‘way things are done’, it appeared that senior managers set the scene and middle level and junior managers followed the lead. This seems to be the case because of the hierarchical model in place—the Master/Captain is in total command. Managers gave the impression that they conform to a particular management style, i.e., a more democratic approach emerged when the Captain and senior officers acted in a more empowering fashion. This suggests that if the managers’ power is applied in autocratic style without regard for ethical fairness or the common good, or if a liberal regime exists, which is inconsistent in setting and maintaining behaviour-al boundaries, a different shipboard cultural could develop.

On the vessels that relate to this research there appeared to be data to support that two-way learning occurred: managers actively learnt about the people they worked with and the staff actively learnt about their managers and their environment. It is suggested that this adds another dimension to a study undertaken by Testa (2002), which implied that nationality and cultural background impact on leadership for the cruise industry. In the reported case studies individuals gave the impression that they were sensitive to and aware of the complex cultural differences that existed and that, at different times, decisions were made to subsume strong cultural beliefs or expectations so as to maintain the harmonious working balance. This was connected to the earlier assertion that the crew members possessed or became aware of the need to develop an understanding about the benefit of co-operation and harmony in practice. The level of awareness relating to these factors was such that individuals in the community acknowledged that they had a role to play in helping to maintain a balance. Those who did not comply were identified and repatriated very quickly and quietly. Using an apt analogy, cruise ships operating in this way are an example of a self-righting society.
Social relationships were noted as being important to all crew members. Because of the gender ratio, female staff learnt techniques to sidestep intensive male attention although initially that attention was, for many, a relative novelty and, for most, unwanted. The rhythm of shipboard life was bound up in a cycle of contracts and periods of leave. Subjects described the speed with which they found themselves settling into the community onboard after rejoining from their leave. They described the pleasure of reconnecting with former colleagues and the ease with which new and existing friendships were quickly established or re-established. The ships’ community members work in an environment where levels of interaction and communication are high and in this environment social isolates are noticeable.

6. The meaning of life (at sea)

Working at sea on a contemporary cruise ship can mean many things to many people but in essence it is ‘different’. It is possible to point towards resorts, large international hotels or similar tourism and hospitality businesses to demonstrate how, for staff, they all infer cultural variety, complex and novel working circumstances, the need for social acclimatisation, the notion of being separated from points of familiar domestic connectivity by large distances and the requirement to learn about the social setting in order to successfully survive. However, cruise occupations are different for a number of important reasons. It is most uncommon to encounter the scale as is found on a contemporary cruise ship in terms of volume of passengers and crew coupled with the range of facilities and services available. Equally, it is highly unlikely to come across a business with the scope of a cruise ship’s operations, which arise because of the limited opportunities to outsource in order to achieve high levels of excellence for facilities and services. Importantly, and despite the portrayal on advertisements and brochures of cruise ships on calm seas, the sea is not always benign and while modern cruise ships avoid bad weather, cruising conditions can change. The community onboard is unique because it is self-contained, contracts are lengthy and continuous, personnel rotations impact on professional and social settings and the community is evolutionary because there are frequent promotions from within and many opportunities can emerge for professional development. Finally, the views points of familiar domestic connectivity by large distances required traits in order to be less peripheral in the work community; getting used to working relatively long hours; learning new skills and building knowledge; and continuously looking forward to the next port of call. This complex mix impacted upon the individual and led each appointee to construct their version of reality in accordance with the theory presented in the circumstantial curriculum (Gibson, 2004). Taken a stage further, it can be claimed that the notion of community is highly individualised. Each person will understand what the community is, or communities are, depending on personally interpreted understanding. The challenge for cruise brands is to develop the manner that they communicate the realities of working and social life in an honest and balanced way in order to attract high calibre hotel employees and, arguably, based on this research, particularly managers. Cruise brands should raise awareness of the growing professional status that the industry is making for itself—it is unclear at this time that this is the case.

This research helps cruise practitioners to reflect on the complex realities that exist in their world. The findings are by no means conclusive, yet the work does point towards: the need to develop and raise the professional status of hotel department managers in this industry; the importance for individual cruise brands to highlight their involvement in aiming to achieve best practice in recruitment and employment for this type of employee; and the opportunities that can be attained by adopting a more transparent view concerning the true nature of work and life at sea as a hotel department officer onboard a contemporary cruise ship. Further research is undoubtedly required to develop understanding in relation to work onboard a cruise ship.

The research has certain limitations that arise from the research paradigm and are related to the methodology. While a broad range of employees was interviewed, the number is insufficient to generate generalisable conclusions.
relating to types of employees and for types of cruise brands. With more time and increased opportunity to gain access, this type of research would have been able to develop a greater quantity of data. Yet, despite this, interesting issues have emerged that suggest further research could be undertaken to examine this complex setting in greater depth. Much of what is done in the way of establishing equilibrium onboard could be described as happenstance, yet, it is suggested, that there are actions which could be taken to intervene and develop a planned approach so as to benefit operational effectiveness and maximise long-term human resource planning.

References


