

# You don't have to be mad to not work here...

Martin Conway picks through the relative merits of psychological assessments for seafarers and discovers that the owner's attitude is as vital as those of his crew

When it comes to crew pre-selection, most shipowners and managers are well aware of the necessity of stringent medical examinations, but comprehensive psychological assessments of potential seafarers could be equally important. After all, even the most rigorous safety and security training merely covers the mechanics of safeguarding a vessel from damage or attack – the attitudes of those on board determine exactly how such preventative action is put into place.

Marine Profile, a Sweden-based specialist consultancy of 'industrial psychologists', has, since its inception in 1994, worked with shipping companies to improve safety standards by getting to the crux of the myriad causes for oft-lamented incidents

of 'human error'. "Our main focus is on a person's psychological make-up," claimed director Bengt Schager, himself a former radio officer.

"A disorganised, emotional and impulsive person might make a very charming and colourful acquaintance, but may not be suitable in a professional area prone to risks and stress, and where many people are dependent on this person's judgement," he told *LSM*, citing the long hours and vital need for calm when dealing with complex emergency situations, such as passenger evacuation. Marine Profile's customers include Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, Norwegian Cruise Lines, Star Cruises and a number of shipowners in Germany, Sweden, Canada and the

UK, spanning the ferry, cruise, container and ro-ro sectors.

As an example of the group's work, Mr Schager highlights the extensive venture that Marine Profile conducted with Star Cruises between 1996

and 2002, in which 351 of 459 officers psychologically assessed were deemed adequate to serve with the Malaysian cruise company, based as much on Star Cruises' requirements as on general personality tests.

Some 99.6% of these 351 approved officers have remained with the company, with just two passed officers not making the grade once employed, with 'lack of emotional control' being one of the reasons cited for their later dismissal. Mr Schager explained: "Distinguishing between those who pass and fail normally takes between five and six hours of advanced psychological tests combined with in-depth interviews. So far, as a company, we have made full day assessments of more than 1,100 officers, engineers and shore staff."

Some critics may raise concerns that such assessments could be discriminatory, denying persons diagnosed with complaints such as depression the chance to serve at sea. Mr Schager pointed out: "One need not have a psychological problem to not meet a shipowner's requirement."

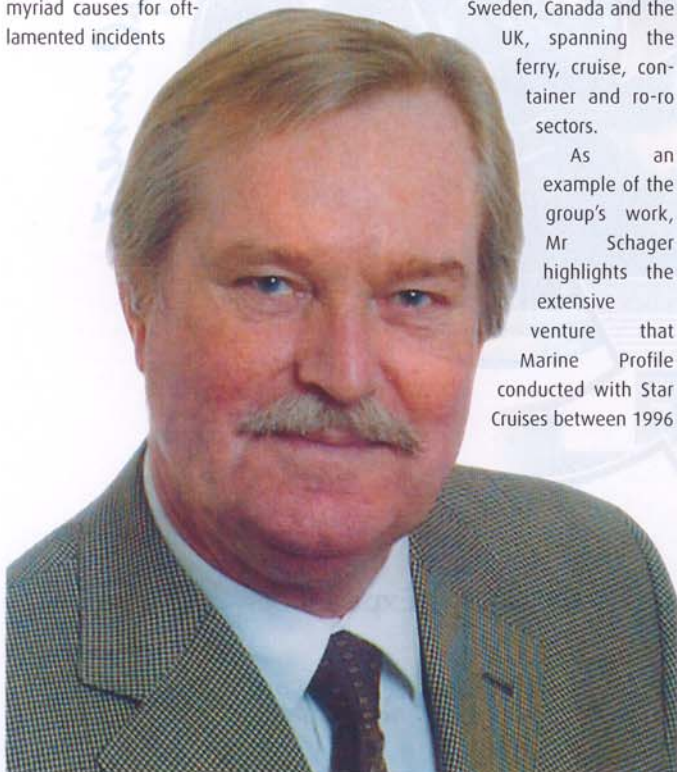
In many cases, the reference to psychology falsely conjures up images of mental health problems, whereas social skills, ability to interact with other personnel, especially across mixed nationalities, motivation and potential for development appear to be the most important qualities under scrutiny.

Ultimately, Mr Schager sees these assessments as paying for themselves, regarding the benefits that participating shipowners stand to reap. As well as boasting a crew more likely to defend the safety of the ship in times of crisis, the owner could also view psychological assessment as a financial investment, he argued.

"As is the case with Star Cruises, a shipowner becomes more attractive for business if they have a reputation for not just employing everyone, and this is reflected in higher levels of crew retention and turnover costs," he said. And, seeing as such techniques are not uncommon within the aviation industry, it seems that the maritime industry could perhaps benefit from focusing on to whom exactly they are delegating day to day operative responsibilities. "As far as I know, Marine Profile is the only company that carries out such services specifically for the shipping industry," claimed Mr Schager. "But it is wrong to look upon psychological testing as a low-key issue."

He identified some of the perceived drawbacks of these assessments, which may still be deterring a number of owners from experimenting with such schemes. "A shipowner who employs someone in spite of negative assessment results is informed about a risky individual, whereas one who is not using assessments doesn't need to admit that he knew," said Mr Schager. "An owner might, furthermore, have to handle sensitive personnel problems in cases where, because of assessment results, they have to diverge from an established seniority principle when promoting."

It is clear that the decision to apply critical selection techniques to a fleet personnel entails an additional, greater responsibility – the owner's own ability to cope with stressful decision-making. **LSM**



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