

LP 11/2025 Crew Performance Appraisals – Applications and Obstacles

The ISM Code provides that companies should ensure that each ship is manned with qualified, certificated and medically fit seafarers in accordance with national and international requirements to ensure safety at sea. According to the ISM Code, the definition of a competent seafarer includes two aspects – to meet the standards of training and certification of the STCW Convention, and to complete appraisal on the performance of their duties based on the requirements of company safety management system.

Crew performance appraisal (CPA) has now become an important tool for companies to evaluate the performance of seafarers on board. However, the tool is not always effectively utilised as companies place different levels of emphasis on performance measurement. For the human resources department of shipping companies, accurately determining the consistency of multiple appraisal results and how much do the results reflect the actual situation of the assessed remains a highly challenging task.

I. The Purpose and Significance of CPA

The captain-led appraisal system evaluates seafarers' skills, emergency response, and teamwork ability. It aims to verify job competence and support career development. From the perspective of compliance, this system adheres to the mandatory provisions of the STCW Convention on seafarer fitness assessment, ensuring that ship management is in line with the international maritime regulatory framework.

The appraisal data can also support decision making for optimizing the fleet's human resources allocation and provide quantitative verification for management measures such as the improvement of the probation. Therefore, the CPA led by captains has become a core part of shipping safety management, ensuring the sustainable development of maritime professionals and laying an institutional foundation for the safety and efficiency of global shipping.

II. Practical Problems

1. Weak Performance Tracking

Most companies focus on pre-employment assessment through review on seaman's record book, resume screening, structured interviews, professional skill tests, and psychological evaluations, but lack monitoring of crew performance on-board, relying mainly on talking and form filling.

2. Insufficient Assessor Ability

Assessors are required to have professional skills and be able to conduct constructive conversations at both the technical guidance and career development levels, but shore-based management personnel who lead the appraisal often lack training and don't have the ability to pass on the skills to ship officers, leading the appraisal to be merely paperwork.

3. Subjective Deviation

Since the assessors may lack direct observation of the crew's performance, the results may be inconsistent due to subjectivity and bias. Especially with limited time on the ship and cultural differences, assessors are prone to biases due to stereotypes or vague standards.

4. Mismatched Assessment Cycle

Differentiated contract periods (4-6 months for officer crew and 6-10 months for ordinary crew) under MLC lead to fragmented assessment time. Assessor changes can affect result consistency.

5. Overemphasis on Technical Indicators

The system gives high weight to technical indicators but less to soft skills like leadership and cross-cultural communication skills, resulting in a structural imbalance in the appraisal.

6. Insufficient Assessment Information

Assessors often just tick boxes without detailed remarks, especially for complex situations such as decision-making under pressure and crisis management, affecting application of results by shore-based management.

7. Avoidance of Negative Feedback

Assessors may avoid negative feedback due to concerns about retaliation and work arrangements, leading to vague or false feedback which may not conform to the reality.

III. Key Concerns

1. Should the engine department be assessed by the captain?

There are cases where each crew member is assessed by their department heads who are then assessed by the captain and there are cases where the captain gets to assess anyone onboard the ship. The captain, as the man in charge of the overall safety, usually performs the supervision function to ensure compliance with international regulations and SMS requirements. Having the captain assessing the engine department, especially on technical levels, may lead to inaccurate results.

A good practice is to have the chief engineer leading the skill appraisal regularly, including professional skill tests such as equipment operation and fault handling, and report the results to the captain, and have the captain review the crew's overall safety performance, building a "dual-appraisal mechanism" carried out by both the chief engineer and the captain.

2. Should the result be delivered to the crew?

There have been different views on this. For most modern enterprises, appraisal on employee performance is carried out in an interactive way where the assessor and the assesses are encouraged to discuss the appraisal report and the assesses provide feedback. The feedback will be considered, and the assessor will give a further response, which completes the entire process. Both parties discuss the personal development of the assesses in a constructive and motivating way and then evaluate their work performance.

The special working environment on ships has caused the appraisal for crews to be different. The appraisal results are more often submitted to the company upon completion without any communication with the assesses. It is a common concern that if a negative result is delivered on board, there might be intensified conflicts and extreme emotions, especially in a relatively confined environment, which may affect the safe operation of ships.

IV. Advice for Optimization

An effective appraisal not only benefits the company but also the seafarers themselves, the core of which lies in an optimized process with supporting tools and professional guidance and focus on assessors' leadership. To improve the appraisal, we can:

1. Establish a qualification and certification system for assessors in the shipping industry, requiring them to complete IMO-approved training and annual competency reviews.
2. Develop clear appraisal standards and provide feedback in a clear and concise manner.
3. The appraisal on crew performance is largely dependent on reviewing their abilities in navigation and engine management. Results of the appraisal, often shown in numbers, should be supported by detailed descriptions in the remarks column.
4. Establish a long-term feedback mechanism, combining the one-time, random, and end-of-contract appraisals with the regular ones.
5. The appraisal reports should be considered confidential to relieve the assessors from stress.

6. The company should share past experience with the captain and senior officers before they take up their positions on the ship so that they can further provide constructive feedback.

V. Strategic Value

The value of crew performance appraisal lies not in the piece of paper, but in the process of generating a high-quality seafarer ability analysis report through scientific and objective reviews. In the context of the accelerating transformation of the shipping industry towards intelligence, digitalization, and green development, a scientific seafarer appraisal system will become key to the core competitiveness of enterprises. The appraisal data, if shared across the industry, could promote circulation in the seafarer labour market and promote mutual recognition of appraisal standards, and ultimately forming a maritime talent ecosystem oriented towards ability.

For more information, please contact Managers of the Association.