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ISM Code research: the difficulties of fieldwork

Captain Syamantak Bhattacharya is currently conducting research leading to a Ph.D. at Cardiff University. The focus of his research is the way in which the requirements of the ISM Code are being implemented in practice – both on board ship and in the office ashore. He describes in this article some of the frustrations but also the progress and success he is achieving with his research.

Since writing '*ISM: A Way of Life*' in the Issue 4 of Report ISM, I have collected substantial data on the operation of the ISM Code from the shipping companies and on board their ships around the world. Having just completed my fieldwork at sea, I have yet to transcribe and analyse the raw data and it would be premature, therefore, to speculate about my findings. However, at this stage of my research I am keen to share my overall impressions about my fieldwork.

When I embarked on my research project, 18 months ago, I was well aware of the challenges posed by my chosen method of studying in depth, by means of a qualitative social science study:

- the Company Safety Management System (SMS) and related documents,
- visiting technical management offices to interview the managers, and
- sailing on company ships to interview the seafarers and observe them at work.

Although I had good contacts in the industry and took great care to provide repeated assurances that all my research findings would be treated with the strictest anonymity and confidentiality, most of the companies I approached were not overly enthusiastic to participate.

My research demands that I understand the actual practices associated with the operation of the ISM Code in sufficient depth such that I may uncover:

- (i) the socio-economic influences,
- (ii) the role of the statutory powers, and
- (iii) the constraints of a self-regulating occupational health and safety (OHS) management system that influence the actual operation of the ISM Code on a day-to-day basis.

Though I was interested in the in-depth study my research design could be misinterpreted as another oil major surveyor or vetting inspector or a Port State Control officer looking for faults or judging performances.

The level of access I was looking for effectively involved an in depth look into the company's operating practices in order to identify the underlying principles and true motives and beliefs

driving those practices. Potentially this kind of research can be damaging to a company by exposing its past records and revealing current practices in both a detailed and fully transparent manner that perhaps not every company is accustomed to. Thus it was not hard to imagine why most company directors and managers, already feeling overburdened with inspections, would not be very keen to oblige. For them I was essentially targeting a 'no-go-area'!

This is not to suggest that any of the companies who refused me access may have questionable operating or safety practices. Shipping companies have a habit of operating behind closed doors and of relying on mixing home-grown traditions with the proverbial new tricks of the trade. Taking time and possibly also spend resources to share operating procedures and practices with outsiders or voluntarily getting involved in safety related research has not been the norm in the industry.

After being rejected by dozens of companies and trying for nearly six months I finally experienced a break-through in July 2006 when a number of companies started to respond more positively. With each of the companies I first visited their senior staff in the technical management offices. This helped both parties in getting to know each other and developing trust and it also gave me the opportunity to gain a wider picture of the company's procedures and practices. During my visits to the offices, which typically took up three to five days of intensive work, I went through the SMS and related files and managed to conduct interviews averaging one hour each in several short bursts, taking numerous interruptions in my stride as interviewees also had to attend to meetings and phone calls. For the purpose of my study the experiences and the practices of the staff in the personnel and purchasing departments were no less important than those of the managing directors. Drawing on my own experience of working in a similarly structured, as well as hectic, technical management office I felt I could easily blend in with the company's working system. In fact, I must have blended in so well that by the end of the first day one of the senior staff in one company commented that I already looked like a part of the office furniture!

The ship visits were even more exciting for me as I was thrilled to go back to sea after two years. I spent over seven days on each of the ships interviewing officers and the other crew without interfering with their watch keeping or other tasks. I spent the initial days with the Masters, Chief Engineers and the Chief Officers explaining to them the nature and scope of my project and winning their necessary support and co-operation. I gradually worked my way around the ship - after word had filtered through to the other crew members that I was a harmless person who was not to be confused with surveyors, superintendents or inspectors! Interestingly, it did not take the seafarers long to understand that I was just like one of them, having been a seafarer myself, and also that I was merely trying to contribute to a common cause - safety. Soon nearly every one of

them was more than eager to share their experiences and to discuss constraints about health and safety onboard as well as their lives in general.

My next task is to engage in a rigorous analysis of all the data I collected in the past three months. Although I am very keen to express my appreciation to all the individuals who despite their busy schedules took that extra effort to participate in my research, it is for the same reasons of anonymity and confidentiality that I cannot name them publicly to acknowledge their invaluable contributions.

At ConsultISM we try and actively support and promote research into ISM related issues which will, hopefully, help to expand the boundaries of our knowledge and understanding of safety management for the benefit of seafarers and the industry generally.

We hope that Captain Bhattacharya will continue to keep us up-to-date with his findings and conclusions in this important piece of research.