



## Why do crew stay? And why do they leave?

By Lorna Titley

With superyacht crew turnover for some roles in excess of 50% per year, these are critical – and costly – questions for Owners, Captains, Managers, Recruiters and crew themselves to consider. The rate of attrition can be particularly high on newbuild vessels and amongst junior crew, stews, deck crew and chefs.

It was against this backdrop that Quaynote gathered crew experts in Nice, France this March for **Improving Yacht Crew Retention, 3rd Annual conference**. “We definitely see a higher turnover amongst the junior ranks, especially with interior crew”, observed **Katie Thornton Crewing Superintendent at Al Seer Marine**. “Although we have seen improvement since implementing a new package of measures designed specifically to tackle retention levels.” Al Seer reports a 50% drop in crew turnover over the last 5 years as a result of these retention initiatives.

Crew replacement, even at junior levels, entails significant costs for the Owner. Raising the Bar’s survey (2023) shows replacement costs of 14,200 euros for green interior crew, 15,100 euros for junior staff, 15,700 euros for green deck and 16,500 euros for junior deck. Once these costs are multiplied out across numerous positions, the costs of replacing crew alone could run into six figure sums.

Given these statistics, understanding why crew leave becomes more critical. The slight difference between what employers believe keeps crew happy and what crew are actually looking for is interesting. *"We did a survey amongst 450 clients and candidates asking the top 3 factors driving crew retention"* says **Nicola Morgan, Director at Wilson Halligan**, superyacht crew recruitment specialists. For crew, the top driver was salary, whereas clients thought the most important factor was better leave and rotation. *"The overall reasons cited for crew looking for a new position were the desire to enjoy better leave/rotation conditions, better salary and a lack of career progression in their current employment,"* adds Nicola Morgan.

**Marianne Danissen, Group Head of Yacht Management at Camper & Nicholsons**, points to *"lack of leadership as a key factor for crew wanting to move on. Although, in truth, there are a mixture of reasons why someone wants to leave."* The reasons given by crew can indeed be complex, with those given not always matching up to the "real" reason for their departure. *"All the surveys conducted evidence that salary is never the main driver,"* says **Karen Passman of Impact Crew**. *"It's often used as an acceptable excuse,"* she adds.

On the other hand, lack of career progression appears more likely to be a genuine reason to leave. **Tim Clarke, Director & Captain Consultant at Quay Crew** draws attention to what he calls *"the harsh reality of when you have improved everything on board a yacht. Then no-one leaves, and then the junior people do leave because they are never going to get promoted."* Of course, overall retention will still be better on a well-run yacht, but *"there will still be a level of attrition, even when it's a perfect boat."*

When it comes to rotation, a key factor cited for crew leaving alongside salary and career progression, some experts are changing the way this is done. *"I'm upgrading a lot of crew contracts currently so that the working pattern rotation, now called the work schedule, is fairer for Owners and crew,"* explains Marianne Danissen. She believes that the old system of working pattern rotation was open to being abused by crew, to the detriment of yacht Owners. *"When a crew member goes from a full-time contract to rotation and the Owner has to pay double or triple the number of crew to fulfil one role, you can imagine which kind of face they pull!"*

Marianne has looked for a solution that is as attractive to both crew and Owners. She is no longer offering the kind of 1-to-1 rotation agreements offered by merchant vessels. Now, her crew are paid monthly, as per the MLC schedule. Crew receive 170 days off, which does not include travel days or hand-over days. *"They are no longer paid for 183 and a half days. There's no nit-picking over travel days and hand-over days,"* she explains, adding, *"When an owner has two people sharing a role, he shouldn't be worried about the handover days. On a well-run boat, this should go smoothly. Often the crew meet and hand over at the airport anyway."*

Echoing the sentiment, Katie Thornton outlines Al Seer`s strategy for tackling the issue of some crew milking the rotation system. *“We have now recruited a Scheduling Officer who oversees everyone`s rotas and works with the pursers to make sure nobody is clocking up excess leave and that handovers are kept to an absolute minimum,”* she says, concluding, *“It seems to be working pretty well so far.”*

What of those who work closely with crew every day? Do Captains believe that their crew are motivated to stay or go by salary, rotation / leave and career progression? **Captain Luca Triggiani, Superyacht Captain**, who also represents the Italian Yachtmasters Association, believes that job security is an important driving force in crew retention. *“There are still too many Owners out there who are not fulfilling their contractual obligations,”* he asserts, *“especially amongst those boats that are not run by a serious management company. We would love to be working in a gold standard environment, but not every yacht implements this or has the budget for it.”* He and his peers see more shortages amongst ETOs and engineers, with junior roles more easily filled by *“back-packers who we can train up.”*

Work environment can also be important, as well as hiring intelligently in the first place. *“I think there`s a myriad of reasons why crew stay – money, leave, so on”* states Tim Clarke. *“As to why they stay, that is often down to the environment. I can think of multiple ships where the pay is not amazing, but crew stay because they have nailed the onboard culture.”*

Nicola Morgan finds that benefits have a role to play, even if they are not as important as the other big retention drivers. *“We are often asked if a yacht has decent internet, or increasingly if there is a gym on board,”* she says. *“Longevity bonuses, upgraded flights, and benefits that Owners offer after people have been there 2 or 3 years all help.”*



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