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INSIDER KNOWLEDGE

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Superyacht interior crew have to be able to do it all: From silver service to taking the owners' kids to a water park, working with other crewmembers to pitching in when under sail, they are placed under great expectations, by anyone's estimation. So are they living up to these high standards? And would they be doing it better if they had some traditional, formal hotel-style training to whip their service into shape? TCR set out to find answers.

Superyacht service is a high-end, bespoke beast, subject to the whims of owners and charterers and without the safety net of a set clocking-off time at the end of the day. The nature of a particular stew's role will be affected by owner, charterer, captain, vessel type and cruising ground; in short, by all the vagaries that make working on a superyacht exciting as well as extremely challenging. No two stew roles will be exactly the same, so is there a uniform answer for preparing crew to take on the widely varying world of superyacht stewing?

INTERIOR TRAINING

The obvious answer would be the specialised interior crew courses

designed for stews and wannabe stews. Courses, like recruitment and training agency Crew & Concierge's Secrets of a Stewardess three-day workshop, aim to give newcomers to the industry a whirlwind introduction to onboard essentials like watchkeeping, safety, stowing and crossings as well as more stew-specific topics like shopping, detailing and cleaning, housekeeping, flower arranging, cocktail preparation, service and table art.

But is completing a course enough to convince recruiters the candidate is right for the job? Iona Smith, head of interior crew for Camper & Nicholsons International, thinks that courses targeting stews looking for work do not necessarily translate into employment for those that complete them.

"I think they provide an introduction to the basics, especially for those with no previous

experience, but are too short to go into any depth or detail. What is more often than not requested from captains looking for interior crew is a strong service and hospitality background in high-end hotels and restaurants, not just a five-day rush through of the main points of interior care."

Triple S Consultancy's Lesley Philpott, though, believes that there are enough superyacht-specific courses out there to provide something for everyone. "Some are designed for entry-level stewardesses to understand the basics required on yachts, other courses are designed for experienced crew and focus on fine-tuning existing service skills." Annick Barbezat of world-renowned hotel management school École hôtelière de Lausanne (EHL) says, however, that training with a hotel school rather than completing a course designed specifically for

superyacht crew gives students a broader base to work from. "The best education for a career in hospitality is one that offers the opportunity to develop specific hospitality skills while providing a solid, broad based business education. [That offers] the hard financial and business knowledge and skills needed for effective hospitality and tourism management."

FALLING SHORT?

So with a range of courses out there, are stews demonstrating knowledge and prowess in their work? According to industry experts, not to the degree that might be expected. "In every ten girls we see [as an agency], there might be one who is amazing," says Sara Duncan of Crew & Concierge.

Rachel Simms, former chief stew, and founder of Crew4Superyachts recruitment and training agency, agrees. "Many times I have hired junior stews, only to find out that they thought it would be an easy ride, or they expected to be drinking cocktails rather than serving them. This is one reason I believe training is an important introduction to interior crews' yachting careers, to teach them the reality of yachting."

Smith also believes that problems arise from unrealistic expectations

held by crew. "Despite having been briefed about the expected duties, the yacht itinerary and schedule, there are occasions where crewmembers realise several weeks into their contracts that the non-stop long hours and high levels of service are just too much to take," she says.

MAKING AN INVESTMENT

One of the big considerations for crew is that more training means

ADDING AN ELEMENT OF HOTEL TRAINING COULD BE WORTHWHILE

extra cost. We asked our industry insiders if they could see crew dipping into their own pockets to top up their knowledge and increase their employability.

Barbezat says yes: "[Training] at EHL can definitely be a wise move for crewmembers who are thinking about long term career development. The sector is huge and offers immense opportunities; on the sea, in the air and on the ground."

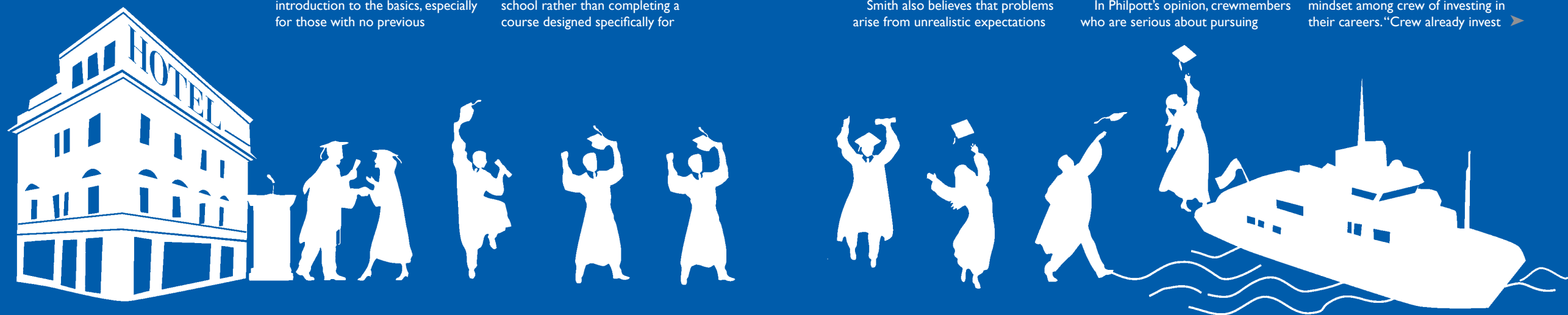
In Philpott's opinion, crewmembers who are serious about pursuing

interior positions as a career would recognise that adding an element of hotel training to their résumé could be a worthwhile investment and Simms agrees that prospective crew are usually willing to invest in training if it helps them to become part of the industry.

Donna Morris of Australian Superyacht Crew Recruitment & Training, however, believes crew would find hotel training too expensive and time-consuming. "There is still a bit of resistance

to getting any training at all," she explains. "Many people just do their STCW 95 because they have to, then jump on a plane and hope for the best when they get to the yachting hubs, only to discover that there is quite a lot of competition and captains will select the crew who have properly prepared and invested in themselves."

Contrary to this, Debbie Blazy of Camper & Nicholsons International thinks that there is an established mindset among crew of investing in their careers. "Crew already invest



time and money into their STCW 95 courses and more and more are coming to us having taken a general stewardess course or silver service. It would depend on the length of the [hotel training] course but it would be an idea [for schools like EHL] to offer a yachting specialisation or module to give [them] the choice.”

THE HOTEL QUESTION

Recruiter Philpott sees the appeal in hiring students as they graduate from hotel training. “When they come out of hotel schools, you know they have chosen service as a career and this can give them an advantage. You know they actually enjoy providing service.”

However, Duncan says the courses offered at Crew & Concierge offer elements that hotel training misses. “We teach them to think outside the box – hotel training does not do that. Standards on yachts are exceptional. Higher than you would get at a hotel, unless it is a really high-end boutique hotel.”

Duncan, who worked in the industry for 15 years, points out that a lot of people new to yachting perceive it to be a party industry, where there is lots of money to be made. But they do not grasp the breadth of work they will have to do.

“A good hospitality background is a plus but stewards must be able to be intuitive about guests’ needs. In a restaurant, you are not face to face with customers all day, every day. They have a menu and ask for what they want. On a yacht you have to be able to do whatever the guest needs doing.”

Though Barbezat says that modern hotel training recognises this need for intuitive service. “The hospitality function means being attentive to the quality of your guests’ experience and developing an ‘extra antenna’ to

unlearn some of their prior training to be able to incorporate the type of flexibility required on a yacht.”

Philpott believes an element of hotel-style training would be valuable for superyacht crew. “Knowledge and practical skills would improve and it would be a step towards creating an overall minimum service standard in the industry. The ability [of crew] to think on their feet – imperative in yachting – might be questionable though, if they had such a structured training background!” But she does point out that it could have positive

IT COULD HAVE POSITIVE EFFECTS ON CREW'S FUTURE EMPLOYABILITY

tune in to their expectations. More and more companies have come to see that the ability to create positive client experiences – resulting in trust and appreciation – makes all the difference in successful business transactions.”

Morris agrees with Duncan that simply having hospitality experience outside the industry is not automatically enough to guarantee success.

“The issue with hotel training, I have found, is that some people with hotel experience often think that they know it all but in reality do not have a clue as to how different [hospitality work] can be on a yacht. Hotels are different in so many ways and sometimes the person has to

effects on crew’s employability once they leave yachting: “Hotel training is recognised worldwide. Trying to translate working on a superyacht to shore-based people can prove to be a bit more interesting.”

Blazy thinks job-hunters with a hotel management background would be in a very strong position to pick up steward positions. “They have solid training in service, housekeeping, administration and managerial duties and so are better equipped when they start out.”

“It is down to the individual, they can have hospitality experience but ultimately it comes down to attitude and approach,” says Duncan, and all the industry experts we spoke to seem to agree.

The right person matched to the right job is what will stand out every time, and no amount of qualifications will make up for an attitude that leaves recruiters cold. ■

With thanks to Annick Barbezat (ehl.edu), Debbie Blazy and Iona Smith (camperandnicholsons.com/crew), Sara Duncan (crewandconcierge.com), Donna Morris (superyachtcrew.com.au), Lesley Philpott (triplesconsultancy.com) and Rachel Simms (crew4superyachts.co.uk).

