

Labor Motivation in the Fishing Industry: A Case Study in Thailand

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The fishery industry is a vital economic and nutritional lifeline for Southeast Asia, supporting millions of livelihoods and serving as the primary source of protein for over half a billion people across the region. From 2011 to 2022, Thailand's fishing industry saw declining catches but rising economic value, indicating a shift to higher-value species (Fisheries Policy and Planning Division, 2021). Southeast Asian nations are also facing widespread declines in wild marine catches, driven by climate change, destructive fishing gear, overfishing, and Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. These factors have heavily impacted coastal stocks, threatening local food security, ocean ecosystems, and the livelihoods of traditional fishers across the region (Geopolitical Monitor, 2018).

Researchers surveyed 394 Thai fishing vessel crews across 22 coastal provinces (a sample size determined to represent the wider workforce) using a structured questionnaire. Statistical analysis was then used to compare groups and identify relationships between variables.

The findings showed that social motivation, particularly family responsibilities and relationships with vessel owners, was the most significant influencing factor among Thai fishing crews. Individual motivations also scored highly, while workplace environment motivation (including safety and hygiene) was rated positively but remained less influential than personal and social motivations.

These findings point to ways on how vessel owners and policymakers can attract Thai workers to join the fishery sector: enhance job satisfaction, foster supportive social relationships, and improve workplace conditions. Doing so would help secure the industry's sustainability and economic growth.

However, demanding, unsanitary, and hazardous conditions have deterred local workers from entering the industry, leading to workforce shortage and increased reliance on foreign fishing crews. Labor data from January 5, 2022, showed a total of 60,967 crew members in the fishing industry, far short of the estimated demand of around 150,000. Among these, 25,433 were Thai nationals, while 35,534 were migrant workers (Resource Management and Measures Determination Division, 2021). In 2023, crew members decreased to 58,696 which 34,038 were migrant workers and 24,658 were Thai nationals (Department of Fisheries, 2023).

Thailand has been consistently striving to tackle labor issues within the sector to meet demand. Yet, despite these efforts, undocumented foreign workers continue to enter the country to work on vessels, exacerbating issues such as illegal labor, human trafficking, forced labor, and child labor. As a result, Thailand was downgraded to Tier 3, the lowest ranking, by the United States Department of State in its 2014 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report (U.S. Department of State, 2015). Following this, in 2015, the European Union announced that Thailand was at risk of non-cooperation in combating IUU fishing. Considering the issues, Thailand faces the risk of trade sanctions from both the United States and the European Union. Such sanctions could block seafood exports to these markets, which would negatively impact the industry and the economy. Moreover, it could lead to job losses, increased criminal activity, strained diplomatic relations, and damage to Thailand's international image.

While labor shortages have increased reliance on migrant workers, with an estimated 160,000 to over 300,000 migrants from Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar employed in its fisheries and seafood processing sectors (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2023), this study deliberately examines the motivations of Thai fishing crews to join fishing vessels, considering demographic, personal, social, and workplace factors.

Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the motivating factors that drive Thai individuals to pursue careers as fishing crews in the industry. By understanding these factors, targeted information campaigns can be designed to raise awareness and interest among potential local workers to join the sector, thus encouraging more individuals to enter this field. This, in turn, will ensure the long-term sustainability of the industry and establish it as a viable career path, ultimately contributing to GDP growth and overall national prosperity.

Introduction

The Thai fishery industry is considered vital to the economy and serves as a significant source of income for national development. It has created many businesses, with overall production value averaging THB 66,741 million (USD 2,134 million) per year over the past decade (2011-2020). In particular, the marine fishery sector has been the predominant contributor, accounting for THB 56,961 million (USD 1,821 million) per year, or 85.35 percent of the total (Fisheries Policy and Planning Division, 2021). Labor plays a crucial role, driving the momentum of the marine fishery industry.

Motivation, Job Satisfaction, and Labor

Motivation is the internal drive that stimulates a person's desire and effort to reach specific goals, guiding their behavior and satisfaction (Alcivar *et al.*, 2020; Astuti *et al.*, 2020). Intrinsic motivation is rooted in personal interest and enjoyment, while extrinsic motivation is influenced by external rewards or punishments (Sadiah *et al.*, 2023). An individual's motivation is shaped by their self-concept (Markus, 1977), alongside genetic (physical needs), social (need for acceptance), cultural (values and norms), and experiential factors (learned patterns), which is expressed through its intensity and direction (Smithikrai, 2022).

Workplace and social environments heavily influence employee behavior. As teams form, they develop norms and use social cues (such as non-verbal signs of disapproval) to control member behavior. While high social intensity fosters security, it can also lead to "groupthink," stifling an individual's initiative. Moreover, physical environments affect employee wellness and focus across ambient, sensational, and interactive dimensions (Horayangkura, 2019). Overcrowding can result in a "behavior sink," where social structures collapse and workers withdraw, permanently impacting work productivity.

Job satisfaction reflects whether worker's expectations are met (Muchinsky, 2000) and depends on factors such as age, nature of tasks, and compensation. Optimal job performance is achieved through the integration of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1993). Although recognition and responsibility are key variables for efficiency (Boonrueang, 2017; Boonrit, 2015), hygiene factors like salary and workplace relationships may have more impact to productivity where basic security is a primary driver (Bexheti & Bexheti, 2016). For Thai employees specifically, core drivers of effectiveness include human resource development, achievement orientation, and teamwork (Wongchiangyuen, 2015).

Methodology

Population and Sampling

The study population comprised 24,685 Thai crew members working on 9,594 licensed commercial fishing vessels in 22 coastal provinces of Thailand. The sampling method used proportional allocation formula by province to ensure widespread distribution of the sample. Using the Taro Yamane's formula with a 95% confidence level, the minimum required sample size was determined to be 394 Thai nationals of any gender, aged 20 or older. This

method ensured a statistically significant sample size that represented the target population, allowing reliable research results within the specified parameters. To collect the data, the researchers partnered with local fishery officials, who distributed the questionnaires to crew members during scheduled boat inspections after being briefed by the research team (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Conduct of survey interviews

Research Instrument

The questionnaire asked respondents to rate statements on a five-point Likert scale, from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Content accuracy was verified by the Deputy Director-General of the Department of Fisheries of Thailand, and the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) was evaluated by a specialist from the National Research Council of Thailand.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize and present the data, while inferential statistics, specifically ANOVA, were applied to draw conclusions and make predictions. Group differences were evaluated using *t*-tests and *F*-tests, while the strength and direction of relationships between variables were assessed using Pearson correlation coefficients.

Results and Discussion

The survey explored the driving forces that motivate individuals at work and how they impact productivity, performance, and overall job satisfaction.

Demographic Profiles and Their Impacts

Gender and Age

The sample exhibited a stark gender disparity, with males comprising 99.0 percent and females accounting for just 1.0 percent of the workforce, reflecting the physically demanding nature of fishing and traditional gender roles within the industry (**Figure 2**).

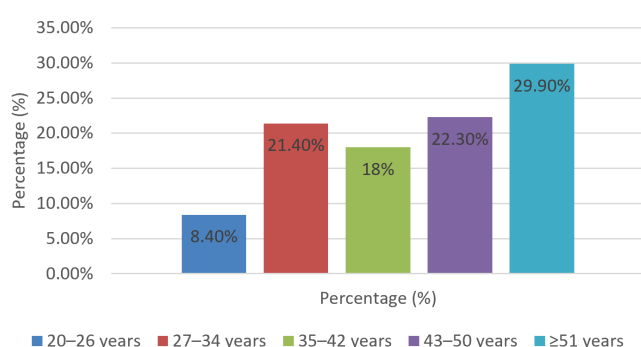


Figure 2. Fishing crew by age group

The local fishing workforce is aging: crew at least 51 years old comprise 29.9 percent, followed by those aged 43–50 years at 22.3 percent. The youngest cohort (20–26 years) accounts for only 8.4 percent, a sign that few young people are entering the industry. Age significantly influences motivation: crew members aged 51 years and older exhibited the highest motivation, while younger workers (35–42 years) reported the lowest, suggesting that veteran crews find greater satisfaction from industry longevity. Moreover, female Thai crew showed slightly higher motivation than males, although the variation was statistically insignificant.

Marital Status and Family Responsibilities

Half of the respondents (50.0 percent) were married or cohabiting, 35.0 percent were single, and 15.0 percent were divorced/separated (**Figure 3**). Married crew members reported higher motivation compared to other groups, consistent with the idea that providing economic support to the family drives work motivation, and aligns with Adler’s philosophy that work contributes to the welfare of others (Chan & Kalliath, 2020; Kishimi, 2018). This matches other research showing that financial stability for the family is a major motivator for married workers (Radević *et al.*, 2023; Kohnen *et al.* (2023).

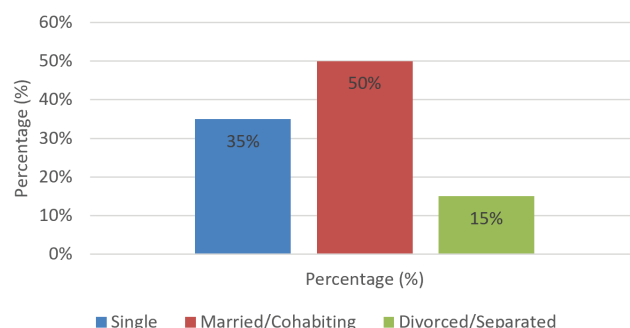


Figure 3. Fishing crew by marital status

Income, Tenure, and Education

Nearly half of workers (45.4 percent) earned THB 15,001–25,000 (USD 428–714) per month, 23.4 percent earned more than THB 35,000 (USD 1,000) per month, while just 9.4 percent earned at most THB 15,000 (USD 428) (**Figure 4**). Income level significantly impacted motivation; crew members earning THB 25,001–35,000 reporting the highest motivation, while those in the lowest income bracket reported the lowest.

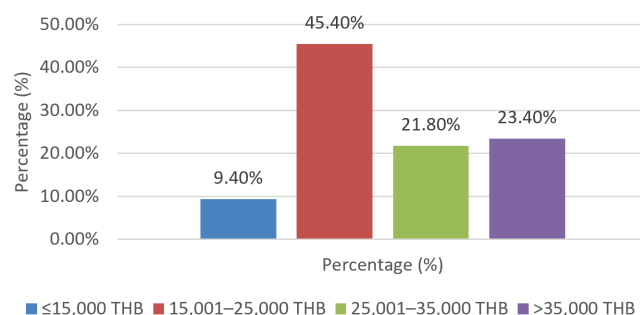


Figure 4. Fishing crew by monthly income

Most crew members (91.9 percent) completed high school or lower, while 6.3 percent held vocational diplomas and 1.8 percent had a bachelor’s degree (**Figure 5**). Higher educational attainment strongly correlates with elevated motivation, with bachelor’s degree holders scoring higher than those with high school education.

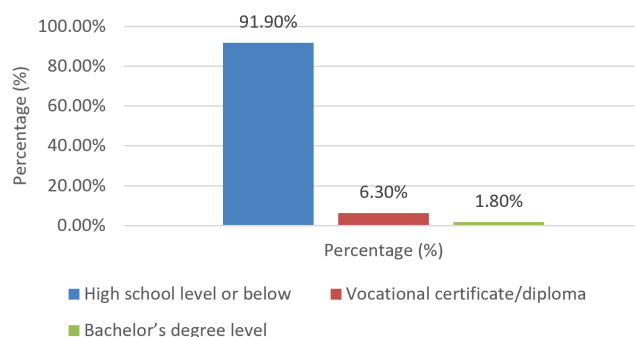


Figure 5. Fishing crew by educational attainment

Employment tenures also varied widely: 45.4 percent worked in the industry from 2 to 10 years, while 23.4 percent had served for 20 years or more (**Figure 6**). Crew members working for at least 20 years exhibited the highest motivation, whereas those in the 2–10-year bracket reported the lowest, indicating that while the industry faces retention challenges, long-term tenure builds expertise and commitment (Ngamlert, 2016).

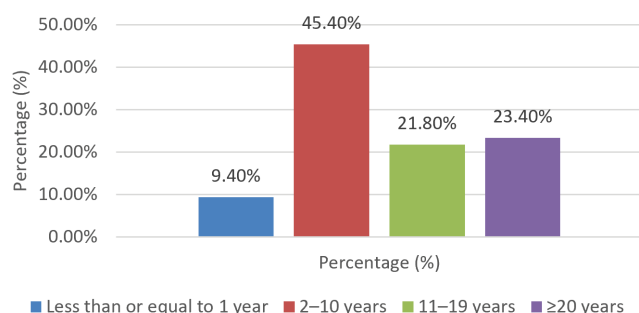


Figure 6. Fishing crew by employment tenure

Factors that Influence Crew Motivation

Individual Motivation

Individual job satisfaction was high, driven heavily by goal achievement, skill utilization, and task completion, reflecting a clear link between effort and outcomes. Grant (2019) posits that goal setting and performance measurements are key to sustained motivation. While anxiety-related motivation scored highly (indicating that a peaceful work environment free from competition or fear of termination significantly reduces stress), workers noted that strong relationships among colleagues and supervisors mitigate workplace anxiety (Jaikliang & Hongsangiam, 2018). Moreover, while crew members viewed their job as a fundamental purpose, long-term commitment to the industry remains low.

Social Motivation

Social motivation scored highly overall, with Thai fishing crews placing real value on compassionate colleagues. Supportive peer structures foster workplace happiness and belonging, which correlates positively with job satisfaction metrics (Kaenchan & Buddhawong, 2018).

A good relationship with the boat owners was one of the major motivators the crew members identified. Fairness and encouragement from boat owners promoted long-term retention. This aligns with studies showing that supportive management and empathetic leadership reduces turnover intentions, improve employee morale and motivation, and enhances problem-solving skills and commitment (Abu Shmais, 2013; Sadijah *et al.*, 2023; Suminthron, 2011; Tipraruksa, 2013).

Workplace Environment

Within the workplace, ease of work scored highest, as crew members consider themselves highly skilled and enjoy their jobs. Acquiring new skills and expertise contributes to job satisfaction, as it enhances work engagement (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Social motivation has the highest impact on overall motivation, emphasizing the role of social acceptance in confidence and achievement. This supports social exchange theory, which links employee satisfaction to workplace rewards and collaboration (Ejigu *et al.*, 2023; Günay, 2017).

Workplace hygiene, good ventilation and sanitary standards also boosted crew motivation. Research showed that smaller crews and less crowding improve air quality and reduce risks of disease (Horayangkura *et al.*, 2019). While Thai fishing crews acknowledged existing protocols, they still expressed concerns about personal safety, highlighting the need for a proactive safety culture to reduce workplace hazards and build worker trust (Koonchalee, 2017; Snell & Morris, 2019).

Motivational Interactions and Policy Implications

Results revealed that social motivation was the most powerful driver for the crew members, followed by individual motivation and workplace conditions. All three factors are closely linked, suggesting that individuals with strong personal motivation also exhibit high workplace and social motivation (Füz *et al.*, 2022; Pincus 2022). Furthermore, crew members perceive work as central to their lives and tied closely to their livelihood, skills, and sense of satisfaction (Bhandesa & Wibawa, 2022). While compensation and stability factors influence motivation, trust in boat owners and fair performance evaluations foster retention (Lorincová *et al.*, 2018; Wei *et al.*, 2024).

The findings emphasize that job satisfaction, social relationships, and workplace conditions are essential in sustaining workforce motivation. Policies focusing on fair compensation, supportive supervision, and work-life balance can enhance job retention and performance. Ultimately, addressing these insights will support evidence-based policies to improve crew conditions, ensuring sustainability and workforce well-being. Prioritizing worker motivation and job satisfaction will contribute to a more stable and productive fishing sector.

Conclusion and Way Forward

This study examined the factors influencing crew motivation within the Thai fishing industry. Thailand's domestic labor shortages in fisheries mirror a widespread workforce crisis across Southeast Asia, where gaps are typically filled by vulnerable migrant workers. For instance, Thailand relies heavily on crews from Cambodia, Myanmar, and Viet Nam, just as destination fleets in Taiwan and South Korea rely on migrants from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Viet Nam.

The findings show that workforce motivation is driven by job satisfaction, workplace relationships, and working conditions. Marital status, income, and experience significantly impact motivation, with higher earnings fostering greater commitment. Future research should integrate qualitative methods to capture Thai fishing crews' perspectives and cross-industry comparisons for broader insights. Longitudinal studies and intervention evaluations, such as safety measures and social support, can offer strategies to enhance workforce retention, fostering a more sustainable and productive work environment.

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