

International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978

Adoption: 7 July 1978

Entry into force: 28 April 1984

The 1995 amendments, which completely revised the Convention, entered into force on 1 February 1997. However, until 1 February 2002, Parties may continue to issue, recognize and endorse certificates which applied before 1 February 1997 in respect of seafarers who began training or seagoing service before 1 August 1998. This means that the original 1978 text will continue to apply to many of the world's ships and seafarers until the year 2002.

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The 1978 STCW Convention – Introduction

The 1978 STCW Convention was the first to establish basic requirements on training, certification and watchkeeping for seafarers on an international level. Previously the standards of training, certification and watchkeeping of officers and ratings were established by individual governments, usually without reference to practices in other countries. As a result standards and procedures varied widely, even though shipping is the most international of all industries.

The Convention prescribes minimum standards relating to training, certification and watchkeeping for seafarers which countries are obliged to meet or exceed.

The Convention did not deal with manning levels: IMO provisions in this area are covered by regulation 13 of Chapter V of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), 1974, whose requirements are backed up by resolution A.890(21) Principles of safe manning, adopted by the IMO Assembly in 1999, which replaced an earlier resolution A.481(XII) adopted in 1981.

The Articles of the Convention include requirements relating to issues surrounding certification and port State control.

One especially important feature of the Convention is that it applies to ships of non-party States when visiting ports of States which are Parties to the Convention. Article X requires Parties to apply the control measures to ships of all flags to the extent necessary to ensure that no more favourable treatment is given to ships entitled to fly the flag of a State which is not a Party than is given to ships entitled to fly the flag of a State that is a Party.

The difficulties which could arise for ships of States which are not Parties to the Convention is one reason why the Convention has received such wide acceptance. By December 2000, the STCW Convention had 135 Parties, representing 97.53 percent of world shipping tonnage.

The 1978 Convention – Chapter I

The technical provisions of the 1978 Convention are contained in an Annex, divided into six Chapters:

The 1978 Convention - Chapter I: General provisions

Includes a list of definitions of terms used in the annex. Regulation I/2 deals with the content of the certificate and endorsement form. All certificates must include a translation into English, if that is not the official language of the issuing country.

The 1978 Convention - Chapter II: Master-deck department

The Chapter establishes basic principles to be observed in keeping a navigational watch, covering such matters as watch arrangements, fitness for duty, navigation, navigational equipment, navigational duties and responsibilities, the duties of the look-out, navigation with a pilot on board and protection of the marine environment.

The regulations include mandatory minimum requirements for certifying masters and chief mates; for certification of officers in charge of a navigational watch; and for certification of deck ratings forming part of a navigational watch. The regulations also include basic principles to be observed in keeping watch in port and mandatory minimum requirements for a watch in port on ships carrying hazardous cargo.

The 1978 Convention - Chapter III: Engine department

Includes basic principles to be observed in keeping an engineering watch; mandatory minimum requirements for certification of chief engineer officers and second engineer officers; mandatory minimum requirements for certification of engineer officers in charge of a watch in a traditionally manned engine room or designated duty officers in a periodically unmanned engine room; requirements to ensure the continued proficiency and updating of knowledge for engineer officers; mandatory minimum requirements for ratings forming part of an engine room watch.

The 1978 Convention - Chapter IV: Radio department

Notes that mandatory provisions relating to radio watchkeeping are set forth in the ITU Radio Regulations and safety radio watchkeeping and maintenance provisions are included in the same regulations and in SOLAS. The Chapter in STCW includes mandatory minimum requirements for certification of radio officers; provisions designed to ensure the continued proficiency and updating of knowledge of radio officers; and minimum requirements for certification of radiotelephone operators.

The 1978 Convention - Chapter V: Special requirements for tankers

The Chapter was designed to ensure that officers and ratings who are to have specific duties related to the cargo and cargo equipment of tankers shall have completed an appropriate shore-based fire-fighting course; and have completed either an appropriate period of shipboard service or an approved familiarization course. Requirements are more stringent for masters and senior officers. Attention is paid not only to safety aspects but also to pollution prevention. The Chapter contains three regulations dealing with oil tankers, chemical tankers and liquefied gas tankers, respectively.

The 1978 Convention - Chapter VI: Proficiency in survival craft

The Chapter establishes requirements governing the issuing of certificates of proficiency in survival craft. An appendix lists the minimum knowledge required for the issue of certificates of proficiency.

Resolutions adopted by the 1978 Conference

The 1978 Conference which adopted the STCW Convention also adopted a number of resolutions designed to back up the Convention itself. The resolutions, which are recommendatory rather than mandatory, incorporate more details than some of the Convention regulations.

Resolution 1 - Basic principles to be observed in keeping a navigational watch. An annex contains a recommendation on operational guidance for officers in charge of a navigational watch.

Resolution 2 - Operational guidance for engineer officers in charge of an engineering watch. An annex to the resolution deals with engineering watch underway and at an unsheltered anchorage.

Resolution 3 - Principles and operational guidance for deck officers in charge of a watch in port. Detailed recommendations are contained in an annex.

Resolution 4 - Principles and operational guidance for engineer officers in charge of an engineering watch in port. Recommendations are in an annex.

Resolution 5 - Basic guidelines and operational guidance relating to safety radio watchkeeping and maintenance for radio officers. A comprehensive annex is divided into basic guidelines and safety radio watchkeeping and maintenance.

Resolution 6 - Basic guidelines and operational guidance relating to safety radio watchkeeping for radio telephone operators.

Resolution 7 - Radio operators. Four recommendations are annexed to this resolution dealing with (i) minimum requirements for certification of radio officers; (ii) minimum requirements to ensure the continued proficiency and updating of knowledge for radio operators; (iii) basic guidelines and operational guidance relating to safety radio watchkeeping and maintenance for radio operators; and (iv) training for radio operators.

Resolution 8 - Additional training for ratings forming part of a navigational watch. Recommends that such ratings be trained in use and operation of appropriate bridge equipment and basic requirements for the prevention of pollution.

Resolution 9 - Minimum requirements for a rating nominated as the assistant to the engineer officer in charge of the watch. Recognizes that suitable training arrangements are not widely available. Detailed requirements are contained in an annex.

Resolution 10 - Training and qualifications of officers and ratings of oil tankers. Refers to resolution 8 adopted by the International Conference on Tanker Safety and Pollution Prevention, 1978 (TSPP), which deals with the improvement of standards of crews on tankers. Recommendation in annex.

Resolution 11 - Training and qualifications of officers and ratings of chemical tankers.

Resolution 12 - Training and qualifications of masters, officers and ratings of liquefied gas tankers.

Resolution 13 - Training and qualifications of officers and ratings of ships carrying dangerous and hazardous cargo other than in bulk.

Resolution 14 - Training for radio officers. Detailed recommendations in annex.

Resolution 15 - Training for radiotelephone operators

Resolution 16 - Technical assistance for the training and qualifications of masters and other responsible personnel of oil, chemical and liquefied gas tankers. Refers to requirements in several Convention regulations and recognizes that training facilities may be limited in some countries. Urges Governments which can provide assistance to do so. Back to top

Resolution 17 - Additional training for masters and chief mates of large ships and of ships with unusual manoeuvring characteristics. Is designed to assist those moving to ships of this type from smaller vessels, where characteristics may be quite different.

Resolution 18 - Radar simulator training. Recommends that such training be given to all masters and deck officers.

Resolution 19 - Training of seafarers in personal survival techniques. A recommendation is annexed.

Resolution 20 - Training in the use of collision avoidance aids.

Resolution 21 - International Certificate of Competency. Invites IMO to develop a standard form and title for this certificate.

Resolution 22 - Human relationships. Emphasizes the importance to safety of good human relationships between seafarers on board.

Resolution 23 - Promotion of technical co-operation. Records appreciation of IMO's work in assisting developing countries to establish maritime training facilities in conformity with global standards of training and invites the organization to intensify its efforts with a view to promoting universal acceptance and implementation of the STCW Convention.

Amendment Procedure

Amendments to the 1978 STCW Convention's technical Annex may be adopted by a Conference of STCW Parties or by IMO's Maritime Safety Committee, expanded to include all Contracting Parties, some of whom may not be members of the Organization.

Amendments to the STCW Annex will normally enter into force one and a half years after being communicated to all Parties unless, in the meantime, they are rejected by one-third of the Parties or by Parties whose combined fleets represent 50 per cent of world tonnage.

The 1991 amendments

Adoption: 22 May 1991

Entry into force: 1 December 1992

The amendments were mostly concerned with additional requirements made necessary by the implementation of the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS).

The 1994 amendments

Adoption: 25 May 1994

Entry into force: 1 January 1996

The amendments replaced Chapter V on special training for crews on tankers.

The 1995 amendments

Adoption: 7 July 1995

Entry into force: 1 February 1997

The 1995 amendments, adopted by a Conference, represented a major revision of the Convention, in response to a recognized need to bring the Convention up to date and to respond to critics who pointed out the many vague phrases, such as "to the satisfaction of the Administration", which resulted in different interpretations being made.

Others complained that the Convention was never uniformly applied and did not impose any strict obligations on Parties regarding implementation. The 1995 amendments entered into force on 1 February 1997. However, until 1 February 2002, Parties may continue to issue, recognize and endorse certificates which applied before that date in respect of seafarers who began training or seagoing service before 1 August 1998.

One of the major features of the revision was the division of the technical annex into regulations, divided into Chapters as before, and a new STCW Code, to which many technical regulations have been transferred. Part A of the Code is mandatory while Part B is recommended.

Dividing the regulations up in this way makes administration easier and it also makes the task of revising and updating them more simple: for procedural and legal reasons there is no need to call a full conference to make changes to Codes.

Some of the most important amendments adopted by the Conference concern Chapter I - General Provisions. They include the following:

Ensuring compliance with the Convention

Parties to the Convention are required to provide detailed information to IMO concerning administrative measures taken to ensure compliance with the Convention. This represented the first time that IMO had been called upon to act in relation to compliance and implementation - generally, implementation is down to the flag States, while port State control also acts to ensure compliance. Under Chapter I, regulation I/7 of the revised Convention, Parties are required to provide detailed information to IMO concerning administrative measures taken to ensure compliance with the Convention, education and training courses, certification procedures and other factors relevant to implementation.

By 1 August 1998 - the deadline for submission of information established in section A-I/7 of the STCW Code - 82 out of the 133 STCW Parties had communicated information on compliance with the requirements of the revised Convention. The 82 Parties which met the deadline represent well over 90% of the world's ships and seafarers.

The information is reviewed by panels of competent persons, nominated by Parties to the STCW Convention, who report on their findings to the IMO Secretary-General, who, in turn, reports to the Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) on the Parties which fully comply. The MSC then produces a list of Parties in compliance with the 1995 amendments.

The first list of countries was approved by the MSC at its 73rd session held from 27 November to 6 December 2000 - it included 71 countries and one Associate Member of IMO.

Port State control

The revised Chapter I includes enhanced procedures concerning the exercise of port State to allow intervention in the case of deficiencies deemed to pose a danger to persons, property or the environment (regulation I/4). This can take place if certificates are not in order or if the ship is involved in a collision or grounding, if there is an illegal discharge of substances (causing pollution) or if the ship is manoeuvred in an erratic or unsafe manner, etc.

Other regulations in chapter I include:

Measures are introduced for watchkeeping personnel to prevent fatigue.

Parties are required to establish procedures for investigating acts by persons to whom they have issued certificates that endanger safety or the environment. Penalties and other disciplinary measures must be prescribed and enforced where the Convention is not complied with.

Technical innovations, such as the use of simulators for training and assessment purposes have been recognized. Simulators are mandatory for training in the use of radar and automatic radar plotting aids (regulation I/12 and section A-I/12 of the STCW Code).

Parties are required to ensure that training, certification and other procedures are continuously monitored by means of a quality standards system (regulation I/8).

Every master, officer and radio operator are required at intervals not exceeding five years to meet the fitness standards and the levels of professional competence contained in Section A-I/11 of the STCW Code. In order to assess the need for revalidation of certificates after 1 February 2002, Parties must compare the standards of competence previously required with those specified in the appropriate certificate in part A of the STCW Code. If necessary, the holders of certificates may be required to undergo training or refresher courses (regulation I/11).

Chapter II: Master and deck department
The Chapter was revised and updated.

Chapter III: Engine department
The Chapter was revised and updated.

Chapter IV: Radiocommunication and radio personnel
The Chapter was revised and updated.

Chapter V: Special training requirements for personnel on certain types of ships

Special requirements were introduced concerning the training and qualifications of personnel on board ro-ro passenger ships. Previously the only special requirements in the Convention concerned crews on tankers. This change was made in response to proposals made by the Panel of Experts set up to look into ro-ro safety following the capsizing and sinking of the ferry Estonia in September 1994. Crews on ro-ro ferries have to receive training in technical aspects and also in crowd and crisis management and human behaviour.

Chapter VI: Emergency, occupational safety, medical care and survival functions

The Chapter incorporates the previous Chapter VI: Proficiency in survival craft and includes mandatory minimum requirements for familiarization, basic safety training and instruction for all seafarers; mandatory minimum requirements for the issue of certificates of proficiency in survival craft, rescue boats and fast rescue boats; mandatory minimum requirements for training in advanced firefighting; and mandatory minimum requirements relating to medical first aid and medical care.

Chapter VII: Alternative certification

Regulations regarding alternative certification (also known as the functional approach) are included in a new Chapter VII. This involves enabling crews to gain training and certification in various departments of seafaring rather than being confined to one branch (such as deck or engine room) for their entire career. Although it is a relatively new concept, the 1995 Conference was anxious not to prevent its development. At the same time, the new Chapter is intended to ensure that safety and the environment are not threatened in any way. The use of equivalent educational and training arrangements is permitted under article IX.

Chapter VIII: Watchkeeping

Measures were introduced for watchkeeping personnel to prevent fatigue. Administrations are required to establish and enforce rest periods for watchkeeping personnel and to ensure that watch systems are so arranged that the efficiency of watchkeeping personnel is not impaired by fatigue.

The STCW Code

The regulations contained in the Convention are supported by sections in the STCW Code. Generally speaking, the Convention contains basic requirements which are then enlarged upon and explained in the Code.

Part A of the Code is mandatory. The minimum standards of competence required for seagoing personnel are given in detail in a series of tables. Chapter II of the Code, for example, deals with standards regarding the master and deck department.

Part B of the Code contains recommended guidance which is intended to help Parties implement the Convention. The measures suggested are not mandatory and the examples given are only intended to illustrate how certain Convention requirements may be complied with. However, the recommendations in general represent an approach that has been harmonized by discussions within IMO and consultation with other international organizations.

The 1997 Amendments

Adoption: June 1997

Entry into force: 1 January 1999

The amendments concern training for personnel on passenger ships. The amendments include an additional Regulation V/3 in Chapter V on Mandatory minimum requirements for the training and qualifications of masters, officers, ratings and other personnel on passenger ships other than ro-ro passenger ships. Related additions are also made to the STCW Code, covering Crowd management training; Familiarization training; Safety training for personnel providing direct service to passengers in passenger spaces; Passenger safety; and Crisis management and human behaviour training.

The 1998 Amendments

Adoption: 9 December 1998 Entry into force: 1 January 2003 (under tacit acceptance)

Amendments to the STCW Code are aimed at improving minimum standards of competence of crews, in particular relating to cargo securing, loading and unloading on bulk carriers, since these procedures have the potential to put undue stresses on the ship's structure. The amendments concern sections A-II/1 and A-II/2 under "Cargo handling and stowage at the operational and management levels".

The White List

The first so-called "White List" of countries deemed to be giving "full and complete effect" to the revised STCW Convention (STCW 95) was published by IMO following the 73rd session of the Organization's Maritime Safety Committee (MSC), meeting from 27 November to 6 December 2000.

It is expected that ships flying flags of countries that are not on the White List will be increasingly targeted by Port State Control inspectors. A Flag state Party that is on the White List may, as a matter of policy, elect not to accept seafarers with certificates issued by non White List countries for service on its ships. If it does accept such seafarers, they will be required by 1 February 2002 also to have an endorsement, issued by the flag state, to show that their certificate is recognized by the flag state.

By 1 February 2002, masters and officers should hold STCW 95 certificates or endorsements issued by the flag State. Certificates issued and endorsed under the provisions of the 1978 STCW Convention will be valid until their expiry date.

The list will be kept under review and may be added to as other countries meet the criteria for inclusion.