
How Recruitment Process Digitalization Can Increase Revenue for Ship-repair Companies Involved in Project-based Work - Romanian Manpower Case Study

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Abstract

This study is aiming at demonstrating that EU companies involved in the ship-repair and shipbuilding market can be more efficient and financially successful if they would use a real-time data, digital recruitment platform that can always fill all manpower requests, in terms of capable, experienced, available and interested Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians. This would be possible especially because such an aggregator, that uses and transmits real-time data/information both-ways (from candidate to companies and from companies to candidate), is a solution to having skilled shipyard workforce available both during high and low seasons at the same salary expectations.

Apart from the above, the study aims at understanding the specific position the average Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding technician takes, when asked about his preference regarding the means used to access seasonal and/or permanent job offers abroad. This has no prior dedicated research, and it is very important to understand, especially because this has major implications on major European Union shipyards and on ship-repair companies active around the globe.

Keywords: European Union shipyards, ship-repair, shipbuilding, real-time data, digital recruitment, Romanian technicians, skilled shipyard workforce

1. Introduction

Currently there are 11 naval shipyards active in Romania. Most of them have been purchased by EU major shipbuilding corporations that are operating them. Globalization has been accelerated since 1980s. After then, the competition between giant multinational companies (MNCs) mostly from developed countries and local companies from different countries reshaped the way of doing business. (Ensari, M. S., Gürsoy, G. 2020)

One of the main reasons global-leading shipbuilding companies are active in Romania is competitive pricing. Competitive in terms of procuring materials, tools, transportation but primarily because of a skilled, experienced and inexpensive workforce (Spataru, F. 2015), compared to other EU shipbuilding and ship-repair centers.

Romania started the privatization process of the shipyards from 1996 until 2002 (Spataru, F. 2015). Dramatic changes in Romanian state policies combined with the reorganization of the

most prominent local shipyards have led to massive lay-offs over the last 20 years and to an unprecedented exodus of skilled naval ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians from Romania to other EU countries with more stable and better paid shipyard jobs.

Hundreds of manpower placing agencies have been established in Romania since the beginning of the 1990's with the main purpose of aiding in this transition of sometimes seasonal work, and in some cases, permanent employment in other EU countries.

The increase in internet activities and social media in the last years has led the average Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding technician looking for a job, to be confused in front of hundreds and sometimes thousands of job opportunities flooding the market.

Most of these job opportunities are for seasonal work ranging from 1 week to 2 months. While the average Romanian technician might know his worth in terms of the salary he should gain out of his hard work, being confronted with sometimes a mirriad of job offers during the ship-repair "high season" (October – March) they then have to go through a "low season" (April – September) when job offers are scarce. This situation has led in the past to a rush during the high season when the market is lead by the companies offering the biggest netto salary and a mass disappointment during the low season when the market is led by companies that offer work during summer, however at lower salary hourly rates than during the winter.

Throughout this research, I considered the following objectives and hypotheses:

Objective 1: Determine how current job-offer applications process can be improved by implementing the use of a real-time data, digital recruitment platform for both seasonal and permanent ship-repair and shipbuilding jobs across the European Union

Hypotesis 1: The use of a real-time data, digital recruitment platform, by major players in the ship-repair and shipbuilding market can increase their revenue through improving critical markers such as manpower retention throughout the low season, while maintaining a proper level of skill and expertise across their working teams year-round.

Objective 2: Determine how the implementation of a real-time data, digital recruitment platform, will influence Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians in terms of facilitating access to job offers.

Hypotesis 2: The use of a real-time data, digital recruitment platform, can increase chances for Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians to gain access to better paid jobs and for a better possibility to schedule projects as per each individual specific needs.

Objective 3: Determine how to deal with the biggest challenge both ship-repair companies and ship-repair technicians have, which is maintaining long-term, close relationships with multiple manpower placement agents at the same time.

Hypotesis 3: Having access to a real-time data, digital solution, capable of always putting forward capable candidates available in short notice is a better preferred solution to maintaining long-term, close relationships with several manpower placement agents at the same time.

2. Method

This study follows an ethnographic qualitative research design with focus on active Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians. In-depth knowledge and detailed notes regarding subjective experiences and beliefs shipyard technicians have, were obtained over the course of the last 6 years.

The main tools used to collect data is by means of questionnaire and through keeping under close observation a community of 305 ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians. They were observed and data was logged about their work activity, and about their personal opinions on how certain aspects of their time spent at work and implicitly their personal life can be improved.

A questionnaire was sent to a number of 50 experienced ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians, and a number of 31 validated responses were used for this study. The questionnaires were delivered via e-mail. The 50 participants for this study were selected by simple random sampling out of a database containing 305 eligible candidate names.

Participants had the option to answer the questionnaire in both printed and online format, as per possibilities. Where printed format was required, scanned PDF documents were returned via e-mail and validated.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Condition	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18 – 25	1	3,23
	26 – 35	5	16,13
	36 – 45	8	25,8
	46 – 55	14	45,16
	56 – 65	3	9,68
Gender	Male	31	100
	Female	0	0
Trade	Welder	11	35,48
	Plate Fitter	7	22,58
	Pipe Fitter	10	32,26
	Rigger	3	9,68
Work experience	1 – 5 years	4	12,91
	5 – 10 years	3	9,68
	10 – 15 years	5	16,13
	15 – 25 years	8	25,8
Source: Author	25 + years	11	35,48

3. Results and Discussion

The questionnaire used to collect data from the sample has 25 questions, with the demographic characteristics of the participants emphasized in Table 1.

Going forward the remaining questions have been designed to be grouped into 4 discussion themes.

Theme 1: Drivers behind motivation

One of the challenges this study faces, stands in understanding what drives ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians towards certain shipyards or certain companies in the European Union. What is the decision-making process behind their decision to leave jobs local to Romania and work outside of their home country? The financial aspect of this decision is implied. However, there are many other aspects to be cleared. How do they choose the companies they want to work for? Are they looking for permanent roles in other countries or only seasonal jobs?

This study is concentrated on experienced and active professionals with 87,09% of the respondents having between 26 – 55 years of age. Table 2 below can help us understand the driving forces behind the decision-making process regarding what job they choose to take and when.

Table 2. Drivers behind motivation

Condition	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
¹ Months at work per year (Expected)	3 months	5	16,13
	6 months	3	9,68
	8 months	17	54,84
	10 months	6	19,35
² State of the job market (Opinion)	Many quality offers	7	22,58
	Poor quality offers	7	22,58
	Too few offers	13	41,93
	Quality offers not accesible	4	12,9
³ Projects in the last 5 years (Actual)	Enough / happy	16	51,61
	Too few / unhappy	15	48,39
⁴ Break between projects (Expected)	1 week	3	9,68
	2 weeks	17	54,84
	3 weeks	7	22,58
	4 weeks	4	12,9
⁵ Notice before departure (Expected)	1 week	9	29,03
	2 weeks	22	70,97

Source: Author

Full questionnaire questions:

- ¹ Cumulated, how many months per year do you wish to be working?
- ² What do you think about the ship-repair job-offer market today?
- ³ Are you happy with the number of projects you finalized in the last 5 years?
- ⁴ What is the ideal rest period between projects?

⁵ How much time do you need as notice before departure on a project?

Table 2 shows that 54,84% of the respondents would like to be working 8 months per year with another 19,35% opting for 10 months per year. This shows us that most of the experienced ship-repair technicians are interested in working for 8 or more months out of 12. Confronting this information with notes taken out of interviews and conversations had with hundreds of technicians over the last 6 years, we understand that ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians that are looking for jobs outside Romania, are interested in being abroad, at work, for 8 months or more each year. This raises the first issue identified and demonstrated by this study: the level of planning-skill required for the average Romanian ship-repair technician to have, to be able to work for more than 8 months, is very high. Considering the high and low seasons of the ship-repair market, and the dynamic of the ship-repair jobs, the average ship-repair technician would have to probably focus on lower-paid, shipbuilding jobs during the low season to be able to work for more than 8 months per year. Nonetheless, the stated interest of the worker is to have 8 months or more at work and that is an issue that needs a solution. This information goes towards demonstrating hypothesis 2 of this study and helps us understand that if the average Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding technician would have access to a real-time data, digital recruitment platform this would enable him to access information from a bigger number of potential employers at the same time and would also enable him to plan his projects in advance by leveraging this information in real-time.

Additionally, Table 2 shows the opinion ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians have of the current job market. 22,58% of the respondents answered that they see the market as being flooded with quality offers, while 77,41% of the respondents said that the market has either poor quality offers, too few offers or inaccessible offers for them. This goes to show that the prevailing viewpoint regarding the current state of the job market is negative. Hypoteshis 2 of this study states that having access to a real-time data, digital recruitment platform can increase chances for Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians to gain access to better paid jobs. This finding certainly shows that the workers are not happy with what the job-market offers them at this point.

Regarding the level of happiness when discussing the number of projects completed in the last 5 years 51,61% say that they are happy with the work done, while 48,39 % say that the number of projects completed is too low. This information gives us clear view into the workers state of mind. The financial unhappiness this category of workers had for the last 5 years is clearly highlighted by this result with 48,38% of the respondents considering they didn't meet their financial potential.

54,84% of the respondents opted for 2-week break between projects while 22,58% of them would like a 3-week break. Again, this information makes it clear that there is pressure on the average Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians to find a balance between work and personal life. While they desire to be at least 8 months at work, they also need 2-3 week breaks between projects. It looks like an ideal 2 months on the job, with 2-week breaks between jobs is what the average Romanian shipyard worker is looking for. In the current work climate, with chaotic rush after better paid jobs that sometimes prove to be shorter than expected, the

Romanian shipyard worker has a difficult planning challenge. This information is also helping us understand the reality behind hypothesis 2. A real-time data, digital recruitment platform can help the Romanian workers search for better paid jobs, while considering their annual planning, such as to meet the desired >8 months on the job.

70,97% of the respondents shared they need 2 weeks notice before the start of a new project while 29,03 said they need 1 week. Analysing this information, we understand that it just brings more burden on the planning efforts of the average worker. This means that while they want to have 8 months on the job, with 2-week breaks between projects they also need to know with 2 weeks in advance when and where their next project is going to be. Ideally this would be 2 months at work, 2 weeks at home, and by the time they finish one project they should know the exact start day and location for their next project. Because of the ship-repair business dynamics, only very few people within the organisations that take on ship-repair projects, know when a project is planned to start, when it should be over and if the final beneficiary has signed on the boarding plan. This means that whatever plan the average technician might make, it most probably will not be the same with what the employer asks from him. This contributes to an overall feeling of unhappiness, and it diminishes the worker’s self esteem making him more liable to sudden changes in mood, that ultimately leads to him looking for work elsewhere.

Theme 2: Approach towards new opportunities

The information revealed in Table 3 shows the usual searching patterns that emerge when discussing about how the average Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians looks for new job opportunities and more importantly, how they perceive the notion of company loyalty and how they act when they balance loyalty towards own financial needs.

Table 3. Approach towards new opportunities

Condition	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
¹ Contact employer/agent	Telephone	28	90,32
	E-mail	2	6,45
	Website	1	3,23
² Agent representation	Direct line with employer	5	16,13
	Represented by agent	26	83,87
³ Multiple employers (1)	Yes	28	90,32
	No	3	9,68
⁴ Multiple employers (2)	Same employer	13	41,94
	Various employers	18	58,06
⁵ New offer searches	Weekly	3	9,68
	Monthly	5	16,13
	I wait to be contacted	23	74,19

Source: Author

Full questionnaire questions:

¹ How do you connect with foreign employers or with manpower placing agents promoting ship-repair and shipbuilding job-offers?

² Do you want to be in direct contact with the foreign employer or do you want to be represented by an agent in your relationship with the employer?

³ If a specific employer cannot offer continuity in work offers throughout the year would you agree to work for multiple employers under successive temporary contracts?

⁴ Ideally, do you want to work for a single employer, or do you prefer working for multiple employers under similar employment conditions?

⁵ How often do you look for new employment opportunities?

Table 3 emphasizes that currently, 90,32% of the respondents get in contact with their employer or agent of choice, by means of telephone, while less than 10%, use e-mails or website to reach the person they want. This goes to show that the current, most common way to contact companies or agents promoting a job offer is by use of telephone. This result represents the main challenge towards demonstrating hypothesis 3. While accessing and learning how to use a real-time data, digital recruitment platform is certainly simpler than making and maintaining relationships with multiple manpower placement agents at the same time, there will always be a challenge to change something that has been going on for 2 decades.

Additionally, 83,87% of the respondents want to be represented by a local agent while only 16,13% of them want to be in direct contact with the employer. While being in direct contact with the employer might, in most cases, open opportunities for better paid contracts, the average Romanian ship-repair technicians, is looking to be represented by an agent, which, from his point of view, should make sure that his rights are being respected. While analysing this result, readers must consider the specific issues ship-repair technicians have had to deal with in the past, when some employers did not respect their contractual obligations. In view of hypothesis 2, a temporary solution to both be efficient and to make the platform users feel secure, is to have access to all the features of a real-time data digital recruitment platform and at the same time to a manned call center to ease the transition from telephone to application.

A solution to have a healthy number of employment options while maintaining a proper desired standard in terms of hourly rate/salary for ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians, can be to appear on multiple employer's short-lists. This way, the probability for them to get close to the ideal schedule of 2 months on the job and 2 weeks at home resting, is higher. The result of this study shows that while 41,94% of the respondents would ideally want to work with only 1 employer, the other 58,06% of the respondents would agree to being on the short-list for collaboration with multiple employers for successive temporary employment contracts. When asked what their choice would be, if their preferred employer is not capable of ensuring >8 months of work activity per year, then the percentage of respondents that agreed to working with multiple employers for successive temporary employment contracts, increases to 90,32%. This goes to show that while, from an ideological perspective, the average Romanian shipyard worker

shows intention to maintain and nurture a loyal relationship with one company for a longer period, then reaching their financial potential is more important. Further analysing the topic, each foreign employer gains access to Romanian manpower through respective local placement agencies. Workers have the option to contact all placement agencies without creating any conflict, however on the other side, when agencies start to pursue the same worker, several conflicts of interest arise from this. The employer, the ship-repair company, will always want the best workers available on the market and will pressure the placement agency to deliver on their request. Resulting from this, is a toxic environment with fierce competition, and the only one that stands to lose in the long-term is the worker. Towards hypothesis 1, this result is acceptable, because while it reveals a negative aspect of the market, it leaves great room for improvement. The improvement can come as a real-time data, digital recruitment platform with the option for its users to access multiple employers' jobs and to plan projects accordingly with personal needs. This way, the technicians who intend to work harder one particular year could do that, while those who think 3 months per year at work is sufficient can also have the option to access the jobs without being pressured by local manpower placement agents to work longer than their personal needs just to stay on a particular short-list.

Finally, 74,19% of the respondents said that they usually wait to be contacted in view of future job offers. Having access to a digital platform where employers can send real-time notifications to personal smartphones, highlighting new job-offers, is a better option than waiting to be called by an agent, and this result can be regarded in a positive way towards hipotesys 1.

Theme 3: Self-worth

This topic revolves around the underlying motives behind the ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians decision-making process regarding what job offer to pursue, what company to be interested in and what type of contract to request.

Table 4. Self-worth

Condition	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
¹ Netto salary Romania	RON 5,000 / month	0	0
	RON 6,000 / month	0	0
	RON 7,000 / month	2	6,45
	RON 8,000 / month	17	54.84
	Not possible to meet demands	12	38,71
² State pension scheme	Yes, I pay my own contribution	15	48.39
	No, I am not worried	16	51,61

Source: Author

Full questionnaire questions:

¹ If a Romanian company proposes a permanent employment in Romania, for what netto salary will you agree to stop chasing ship-repair jobs abroad?

² Are you preoccupied by the fact that most of your employment history abroad is under “offshore” conditions and your employers are not paying any contribution to the Romanian state pension scheme?

The information in Table 4 reveals that 54,84% of the respondents would settle for a local job if they would be paid at least RON 8,000 / month netto, while 38,71% have said that there is no company in Romania in the ship-repair/shipbuilding sector capable to pay them at their real value. Considering that the average netto salary a shipyard worker in Romania has, ranges from RON 3,000 to RON 5,000 per month, depending on experience, we can assume that those which chose the RON 8,000 / month questionnaire option, did this because they felt a prohibitive amount will make a statement about their level of skill and experience and implicitly their self worth. Technicians in this condition will not stop looking for better offers abroad and they are closer in their belief to those that opted for the clear statement that Romanian shipyards or other Romanian companies involved in the ship-repair market can never appreciate them at their real value. This brings us to a staggering 93,55% of the respondents that consider Romania can never give them what they want in terms of salary level. This result does not work towards demonstrating any of the hypothesis, however it clearly shows that the ship-repair and shipbuilding market in Romania is not ready to retain talent. This carries important meaning to anyone considering investing time and resources into the creation of a digital solution designed to service the needs of the ship-repair and shipbuilding professionals in Romania. New-age digital technologies enhance organizational capabilities and enable companies to develop new business models that can disrupt industries and markets. (Foltean, F., S., van Bruggen, G., H., 2022)

Additionally, Table 4 shows that 51,61% of the respondents are not paying their own contributions to the state pension scheme. This is a worrying situation because if they will go on to ignore this, when reaching retirement, they will not be part of any state-pension scheme which can represent a real burden on the society when these generations come to an old age. A real-time data, digital recruitment platform can be used successfully to raise awareness on this topic to all its users and could influence in a positive way thousands of technicians, thus having a major positive social impact on the society.

Theme 4: Real-time data, digital recruitment platform

In this thread we will showcase and analyse all data regarding the approach shipyard technicians take towards change and specifically towards the idea of using a digital solution rather than cold calling manpower placing agents when looking for a job.

Table 5. Real-time data, digital recruitment platform

Condition	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
¹ Platform testing team	Yes	24	77,42
	No	7	22,58
² Platform utility	Aplicable	29	93,55
	Useless	2	6,45
³ Efficient time planning	Yes	29	93,55
	No	2	6,45
⁴ Personal data consent	Yes	24	77,42
	No	7	22,58
⁵ Experience has priority	Yes	10	32,26
	No	21	67,74
⁶ Performance reviews	Yes	30	96,77
	No	1	3,23
⁷ Supervisor responsible with performance reviews	Yes	28	90,32
	No	3	9,68
⁸ Performance reviews influence future job offers	Yes	28	90,32
	No	3	9,68
⁹ Expired documents notification	Yes	29	93,55
	No	2	6,45

Source: Author

¹ If you were asked, would you agree to be part of a pilot testing team for a digital recruitment solution?

² Do you think using a real-time data, digital solution platform would improve the way you communicate with the employer?

³ If a phone application will improve your time-planning abilities would you agree to use one?

⁴ If you were to use a phone application to access and apply to job offers would you agree for the employers to see your personal candidate information without notifying you every time?

⁵ Do you think that only the most experienced workers should be allowed to use the application in the beginning?

⁶ Would you agree that for each project you will have a performance review?

⁷ Do you think the project supervisor is the suitable person to fill-in the performance review?

⁸ Would you agree if the employers would implement a performance review system through a digital platform, which they will then use to decide the teams for future projects thus rendering the whole process fully transparent?

⁹ Do you consider useful an app feature that will notify you whenever one of your documents is about to expire?

While Table 3 showed us that currently 90,32% keep in touch with their employer/agent by means of telephone, Table 4 emphasizes that 93,55% of the respondents consider that a real-time data, digital recruitment solution could be useful while only 6,45% of the respondents show rigidity towards change. Analysing this we understand that most of the ship-repair and shipbuilding technicians in Romania have a negative view on the recruitment process. Cross-referencing this result with personal notes taken during the last 6 years we observe that most Romanian technicians have grown tired of constantly having to keep a close relationship with multiple manpower placing agents and depending on them for future contracts and implicitly, their financial well-being. This result goes strongly towards demonstrating hypothesis 2 and hypothesis 3. The openness shown by most of the respondents is a strong indication that change in the recruitment process will be met with a positive attitude.

Additionally, the same percentage of 93,55% of the respondents considered that having a tool to help them efficiently plan their time is useful while only 6,45% have considered the digital platform will not bring any change.

77,42% of the respondents have agreed to be part of a pilot-team for testing a future digital platform, while 22,48% did not agree. Theoretically, a real-time data digital recruitment platform, as shown in this study, can have a major positive impact on the work-life balance of Romanian shipyard technicians. However, it should be considered that such a platform will need to run several testing sequences before becoming available to the wide public. This is important because a poor user interface or a process that has faults will make the community reject the solution very fast. Whether overtly or covertly, the value of innovation and management is also reflected in Schumpeter's Theory of Creative Destruction, where the underlying motto is "adapt or die". (Piñeiro-Otero, T., Martínez-Rolán, X., 2022). Or in other words, businesses which perceive digital transformation only as a technology movement are vanquished by losing their competitive advantage. (Serinikli, N. 2020)

67,74% of the respondents said that experience and long-term employment at one company should not influence the use of the digital platform while 32,26% consider that long-term employment at one company should enable them to be awarded this benefit of being the first and only users of such a digital platform when implemented. A platform could create fundamental changes in an organization and even in a whole industry. (Zehir, C., Zehir, M., Zehir, S. 2020). Analysing this result, we understand that at each ship-repair company and each shipyard there is a perceived difference in hierarchy between the workers that have been employed with a company for a long period of time, or for many successive contracts, and the workers that have only begun employment recently, despite them occupying the same position in the company's organizational chart. However, this can be overcome by the selfless decisions of the many. As we see most of the respondents said that seniority shouldn't be considered when deciding who

will be granted the right to use the digital platform early on. Considering 54,84% of the respondents are more than 46 years old, this result can be regarded as positive towards a smooth transition to the use of an online solution. In a highly competitive environment, the organizations should examine the consumer demands and requirements and should generate new ideas or provide new approaches by using knowledge management in order to gain new customers and increase loyalty of existing customers and be ahead of the competitors. (Adiguzel, Z. 2020). Furthermore, leaders need to educate themselves with the basic concepts of AI and build an intuitive understanding of the potentials that a company can gain. (Alkan, P., D. 2020)

The next 3 results are intertwined together and show us that the level of compliance the average shipyard worker shows towards authority is acceptable in respect to this study's objectives. 96,77% of the respondents agreed with having their work performance assessed at each project while only 3,23% said they don't agree with this. 90,32% of the respondents considered the project supervisor to be the right person to make their performance reviews and we see 9,68% of the respondents showing resistance to the idea that the project supervisor will write their performance review cards and implicitly will influence them being selected for future projects. We can associate this to bad experience some of the workers had in the past when project supervisors have abused their power.

The same 90,32% of the respondents think that the selection process for future projects and employment should be transparent and streamlined based on past performance review cards from finalized projects. 9,68% do not want to place future job opportunities in the hands of their project supervisors and do not agree with streamlining the process based on performance reviews.

Finally, 93,55% of the respondents considered that a digital platform should have a feature to notify them when one of their documents is about to expire while 6,45% said they do not need such a feature.

Having all the above information at hand we can observe how the objectives of this study have been met, making it clear for all readers that a real-time data, digital recruitment platform will be welcomed by the Romanian ship-repair and shipbuilding community. While some of the design and implementation aspect have still to be researched, the basic questions have been answered and we can conclude that an online aggregator that provides real-time information both ways between beneficiaries will not only increase the revenue for EU ship-repair companies and shipyards but will also impact the Romanian society in a very positive way.

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