

## The Titanic: A Decision-Making Case

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The Titanic was a huge luxury transatlantic liner that sank after striking an iceberg on the night of April 14, 1912 during her maiden voyage from England to the United States. The collision led to one of the deadliest disasters in maritime history, resulting in the death of more than 1,500 people.

The ship had been built using the most advanced techniques then available and was popularly deemed “unsinkable.” At 269 meters in length, 28 meters in width and 56 meters in height, the Titanic was one of the largest vessels of its time. She had a capacity for 3,550 people, although on its maiden voyage it was carrying around 2,230, including 897 crew members. Only around 700 people survived.

It has been claimed that the accident was inevitable, as events unfolded in a sequence that led inexorably to the sinking. Others argue that the disaster could have been avoided if certain mistakes had not been made. In fact, on the night of the accident, the Titanic was sailing at more than twice the recommended speed in the prevailing conditions, despite iceberg warnings from other ships sailing in the area.

What decisions were taken before, during and after the impact? If those decisions had been different, could the ship have been saved? Or could at least the number of victims have been reduced? Did the moonless skies that night play a role in the accident? Was it caused by the fact that the lookouts did not have binoculars because the only pair had been left behind? Or was it...?

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## The Titanic

In the early years of the 20th century, ships were the preferred means of transport for long distances. Shipping companies competed to be the fastest. The faster the ships, the better a company's reputation. The White Star Line, which owned the Titanic, decided to switch strategy and compete on luxury and comfort rather than speed.

So it decided to build the Titanic, the biggest ship ever. The Titanic would have very spacious lounges, numerous recreation areas and large cabins. The idea was to offer passengers a unique experience. It would also be able to carry large numbers of passengers and benefit from economies of scale.

The challenges were considerable, as there was no previous experience of building a ship of this size. The owners wanted it to mark an era and so wanted it to include substantial innovations. The designers therefore decided to add features that would make the Titanic "the best." White Star management had ultimate responsibility for the construction of the vessel and hired the top engineers of the day, with whom they discussed the various issues. Naturally, the final decisions on the ship's specifications were taken by White Star's managers.

Construction began in March 1909 in the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast, Ireland. The chief designer was Thomas Andrews. The launch took place on March 31, 1911, amid great expectation and in the presence of the authorities and the media. The ship went into service in 1912. To build the Titanic, a 67 meter high crane was built in the shipyard. At that time it was the biggest crane in the world. The ship had installed power of 59,000 hp and a tonnage of 40,000 gross register tons.

It had nine decks and a large dining room in the middle, with a height of three decks and a huge glass dome for a ceiling. The rooms were decorated in the classical Parisian style. There were three elevators for first-class passengers and one for second-class passengers. Third-class passengers had no access to the areas reserved for first-class passengers, and second-class passengers could access only some of them.

Initially, the ship was designed to include sixteen watertight compartments, separated by bulkheads, so that if one compartment were flooded, the rest would remain dry, preventing the ship from filling with water and sinking. The ship's designers gave in to White Star management's insistent demands that the public spaces – particularly the restaurants and halls – be spacious, so as to accommodate gala dinners and celebrations. In the end, the bulkheads were reduced in height, so that the tops of four of them extended only 10 feet above the waterline. Initially, the ship was to have three funnels, but a fourth was added to give an impression of greater speed.

It was often said in the press and radio at the time that the Titanic would not sink because the most advanced technologies had been used in its construction. Indeed, most people regarded it as "unsinkable." The climate was one of excessive enthusiasm and confidence. This confidence was bolstered by the fact that there had been no major maritime disasters in recent years.

The White Star Line's management and the engineers responsible for the construction of the vessel were excited about its capabilities. Captain Smith himself stated in a newspaper interview that modern ships were built in such a way that it was impossible for them to sink. Certainly, the construction had been planned using the best means and resources and the most modern technology available. The steel used for the hull, containing a large proportion of sulfur, was considered the best material available at the time, as it was the most resistant to pressure. Being a new material, it was not yet widely used.



The Titanic met all the legal safety requirements. Initially, the ship was designed with 64 lifeboats, enough for all the passengers. By law, a vessel such as the Titanic had to have at least 16 lifeboats. The legal minimum was clearly insufficient to evacuate all the passengers in the event of an accident and, in fact, the British maritime authorities had attempted on various occasions to change the regulations, but their attempts had been successfully opposed by the ship owners, who preferred to avoid the extra cost of carrying more lifeboats. Ultimately, in the interest of allowing clear views out to sea from the deck, the number of lifeboats on the Titanic was reduced to 20, amply meeting regulatory requirements. There were two lifeboats with capacity for 40 people each, 14 that could hold 65 people each, and 4 collapsible canvas boats taking 47 people each. In all, there were lifeboat places for 1,178 people.

## The Crew

The choice of captain for the new ship was a crucial decision, as the captain was ultimately responsible for everything that happened on board. The White Star Line chairman and managing director, Joseph Bruce Ismay, who survived the disaster by taking one of places on the lifeboats, opted for Captain Edward John Smith. Smith was a White Star veteran, who announced before the Titanic's departure that this would be his last journey, as he had decided to retire. Sadly, he died in the accident.

In shipping circles, Smith was considered a PR asset and was especially in demand among the upper classes. In fact, on the night of the accident Smith had attended a dinner given in his honor by a first-class passenger. It may have been because of this reputation that he earned twice as much as any other ship's captain. If the owners wanted Titanic to be a floating luxury hotel, who better to take charge of it than the company's most "glamorous" captain?

There had been some criticism of the Titanic in the newspapers in the months prior to its maiden voyage. Some critics claimed that it was so big and heavy that it would not be able to match the speed of other vessels. The chairman and managing director of White Star Line, Bruce Ismay responded publicly, stating that the maiden journey from Southampton to New York would be completed in one day less than initially planned.

Almost all the ship's crew had embarked two days before departure, as sea trials were to be conducted before the voyage. Weather conditions were unfavorable, however, so it was decided to cut the trials short. Only a short trial run took place.

The Titanic sailed from Southampton at midday on April 10, 1912. From there it headed for France, calling at Cherbourg at 6:30 p.m. The last stop before crossing the Atlantic was the next day, at 11:30 a.m., in Queenstown, Ireland, to take on more passengers, mainly Irish immigrants traveling in steerage.

## Warning Messages

Jack Phillips and Harold Bride, the Titanic's radio operators, had been hired to relay passengers' personal messages to and from land. Messages tended to accumulate, as transmissions to land could only be made when the ship was sailing close to a radio station, as was the case on the afternoon of the accident. When this happened, the operators had only a short window of time to clear their backlog. As the operators did not want to miss their chance, they put all their efforts into sending passengers' messages.