

# IT Just Got Easier

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## The advent of FleetBroadband promises to expand IT and communication capabilities on ships and boats

By Greg Trauthwein, editor

Since the development of means to communicate with working ships at sea, the companies that own and operate ships have been working to use this tool to create more safe, efficient and profitable operations.

While developers of new and emerging technologies are often premature in declaring the dawn of a new era, the shipping industry today arguably is at a transformational point in its history as the advent of increasingly cheap and reliable broadband communications to ships and boats is opening a host of new operational and lifestyle possibilities that link ships closer to shore.

"Major factors driving the use of ship to shore communications including online vessel and asset tracking, shore management of ship operations, improving the quality of life at sea and the advent of always on broadband services for businesses in general," said Michael Butler, President and COO of Inmarsat, during a recent interview in New York. "There is increasingly the notion of a vessel as a floating corporate node. There is a move toward streamlining of operations on shore and automation of processes on the vessel — as we have seen a reduction in crew — and quite simply they need the link to the ship."



**Higher speed and capacity, cheaper communications could revolutionize business, technical and personal transactions on ships and boats.**

(Photos courtesy Stratos)

Stratos, which is one of the world's largest providers of mobile satellite communication services to the marine industry, last month co-hosted an informational 'kick-off' to its brand of broadband: FleetBroadband from Stratos.

"The recent introduction of Inmarsat's FleetBroadband service was met with enthusiasm from ship owners and ship managers who are constantly searching for faster, more reliable, and more economical data and voice communications," said Michiel Meijer, Maritime Marketing Manager, Stratos Global Corp. "Recruitment and retention of well-trained seafarers is among the chief concerns of chief executives at ship-management companies. With thousands of new vessels being built each year, there is intense competition for qualified seafarers. Ship managers are

also cognizant of the recent ITF resolution stating that free email service must be provided to crewmembers while on board."

Inmarsat's Butler concurs, saying "Forward-thinking companies will use FleetBroadband as a way to attract and retain crew members."

Robert Johnson, CEO of Blue Ocean Wireless (BOW), who is a master mariner and spent 13 years at sea on tankers and nine years with Inmarsat, is certainly qualified to attest to the communication needs of crew at sea. Johnson said that crew welfare and retention are the driving forces for improved and expanded communication services onboard ships at sea. BOW is focused on expanding mobile communication capability in the merchant maritime market by providing, for the first

time, mobile GSM connectivity for seafarers at sea, where no other network exists. This allows users to make and receive voice calls, send and receive SMS text messages and, in time, GPRS like services such as email and access to the internet.

"With increased security, crews are finding it harder to even get on shore," Johnson said. "Our service is a good value, its easy to use and allows 24/7 crew calling. Shipowners who have deployed this service, including Dobson Fleet, have found that they are better able to attract and retain crew."

While BOW is still in its formative years, Johnson is bullish on its future. "The market uptake (for BOW services) and projects are being realized," he said, noting that the service is being adopted by shipping companies around the world.

The evolution of communication services to ships is opening infinite possibilities on the Information Technology end of the marine business, and many companies large and small are responding with products and services tailored to ensure vessel safety and efficiency.

"What we're seeing is a convergence in the market," aid Bob Landsfield, CEO, Skymira LLC, a company that provides a family of three main services — Sky~Forms, Sky~Track GPS Fleet Tracking, and Sky~Fax.



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