

Company credit for crew *calling*

SASI questions whether calling home is key to crew satisfaction

► **A good topic for an after-dinner debate** would be: "Shipowners are not becoming nicer, they're becoming desperate." It would then be possible to open a bottle and discuss whether improvements in crew conditions and welfare can be attributed to the enlightenment of owners or the realisation that, unless they change their ways, nobody will work for them.

It is doubtful if we will ever know the true answer, but when Inmarsat conducted a major survey in 2006 it found that attitudes were changing fast.

The aim of the survey was to quantify the industry's attitude towards enabling crews to send emails and make private voice calls

while at sea. It found that there had been a significant change since a previous survey in 2001, as more crew are now allowed to call. However, it appears that, despite leadership from a substantial number of admirable companies, the industry as a whole still has some way to go before it can be considered entirely caring and beneficent in this regard.

Although the survey was conducted two years ago, Kyle Hurst, maritime market manager for Inmarsat, told SASI that its findings are still considered to be accurate and relevant. "We still refer to this survey and generally believe that the theme of crew aboard vessels wanting better access to communications is even more prevalent since this survey," he said. "This is in line with trends in general society, as people of all ages

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and from all over the world become more comfortable with the information age.”

Because it is the ship’s master who is ultimately responsible for crew welfare, the survey was revealing in that it found that 65% of them think that the availability of crew calling makes for a more efficient ship. On the basis that a happy ship is an efficient ship, this would make sense.

However, a little less than half of the respondents (46%) thought it would encourage them to stay with the ship for longer. This suggests that although crew calling may reduce the incidence of worried, homesick, distracted, resentful, surly and potentially dangerous crew members, it will not persuade them to ignore better career opportunities, low pay or otherwise poor working conditions. Crew calling is not a universal salve, but it can certainly help make life better.

Keeping crew content

“I was a navigation officer for P&O Nedlloyd back in the 1980s,” said Michiel Meijer, marine marketing manager for communications provider Stratos Global Corp. “In those days it was just the post that would follow me from port to port. All radio communications were to do with business apart from family emergencies. In those days the captain would have a stopwatch and a fee would be deducted from your salary.

“The big change started five years ago with the arrival of pre-paid voice calling and now

ship managers are asking themselves: ‘What can I do to please my crew?’”

Granting crew access to a satellite phone should not be difficult for any ship, but on 81% of them the telephone is on the bridge where privacy is usually non-existent. The crew member who needs to call home but does not want his matrimonial problems discussed throughout the ship will suffer added stress as he struggles with the dilemma of what to do. The answer is for the owner to install a dedicated crew telephone in another location. This would appear obvious, but, according to the Inmarsat survey, just 32% of owners knew that this was possible. Since broadband has become widely available it is easier still and it is simply for the owner to decide how calls will be paid for.

Get in credit

Any manager wanting to demonstrate what a splendid ship he operates should consider emulating those who make a monthly allowance of free calls to crew. So far as we know, no owner has ever gone so far as to grant employees unlimited free use of the satellite phone – some calls must still be paid for by the crew member.

The most popular way of doing this is by using crew calling





Phones that seafarers use to call their families are commonly found on the ship's bridge where privacy can be a problem

cards that carry credit for the bearer. The crew member will typically ask the ship manager to deduct the desired amount from his or her salary and credit it to the card. Call costs are deducted automatically from the balance. Although the system is relatively simple, the salary transfer nevertheless requires some office administration.

The alternative is for the crew members to establish the balance of their calling cards themselves by paying the service operator directly with a credit card.

"This bypasses the administration and can be done by the crew or their families," said Meijer, "but we have not seen a big uptake of that, as the majority of

seafarers don't have credit cards. It's mainly for Western crews."

Although Asian crews may generally not own credit cards, they do own huge numbers of mobile telephones that they will use whenever they are within range of a network. This is generating interest in the use of technology that creates a mini GSM (Global System for Mobile Communication) cell on the ship, which is linked to a satellite service.

The GSM cell enables individuals to make calls on their mobiles in the privacy of their cabins anywhere in the world with charges going directly to their personal account. Stratos launched this service late last year as Blue Ocean Wireless, employing the AltoBridgE technology that is being used for the same purpose on Singapore Airways aircraft.

"It's more expensive but it gives more privacy," Meijer explained. He added that although call costs can be 50% higher this does not appear to be a deterrent. They consequently intend to expand the service using Fleet Broadband.

Second to email

If usage is an indicator of demand then the experience of V.Ships is very positive towards calling cards. "Judging by the demand there is certainly a requirement for them," said Neil Sayce, of SeaCom Electronics, the service support company wholly owned by V.Ships. "They are extremely well used." He told SASI that although they are not on every ship, the aim is to introduce calling card systems throughout the V.Ships fleet as they make it easier to separate business from social calls.

Despite the appeal of the human voice, it takes second place to email. Inmarsat says that 69% of crews have access to email and six owners out of 10 allow them to use it free, usually in the ship's office. Software is available that enables individual crew members' email accounts to be accessed on a dedicated and private crew computer. It is claimed to be an inexpensive and effective contribution towards crew welfare. So any ship managers who want their crews to think well of them should take note. ◀

Michiel Meijer, marine marketing manager for Stratos Global Corp – "Now ship managers are asking themselves: 'What can I do to please my crew?'"



[photo: istockphoto]



The need for speed

► **The launch of Fleet Broadband by Inmarsat** last November finally made it possible for seafarers to benefit from the sort of communication speeds that they take for granted on their computers at home. Though it may not be as fast as they are used to but it's pretty good.

It has taken Inmarsat a lot of effort to get this far. When telephone companies introduce broadband services on land they just have to string a few cables and tinker with the telephone exchanges. Inmarsat was faced with designing and building some massive satellites and getting them into geostationary orbit 22,000 miles above the Equator so their spot beams can be aimed downwards to transmit and receive data from ships and users ashore.

Kyle Hurst, maritime market manager for Inmarsat, told *SASI* that Fleet Broadband is undergoing a stringent market evaluation, with 10 systems being tested on an various vessels to ensure it works as it should. The evaluation is due for completion by mid-year but, said Hurst, "So far the feedback has been good." Following launch of the third Inmarsat I-4 satellite at about the same time, total global coverage for mobile broadband services will be in place by the year's end.

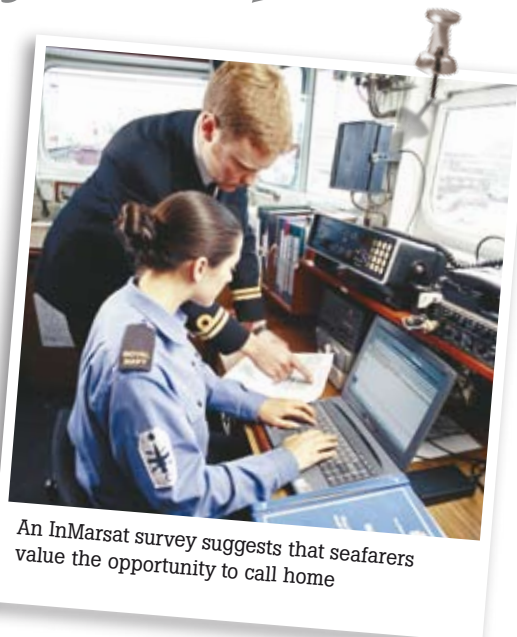
Available and affordable

The crucial aspect of Fleet Broadband is its affordability. Broadband has been available at sea for some 20 years aboard ships using VSAT technology. This requires a dedicated satellite channel and some expensive hardware on the ship, but, in the case of the Ocean VSAT service, it delivers speeds up to 512kbps. It also needs a large stabilised antenna that must remain precisely aimed at the satellite regardless of what the ship might be doing.

This compares with the service available from UK-based NSSL, which provides similar speeds using Ku-band links to around 90 clients, mostly in the cruise and superyacht sectors. Andrew Sirkett, programme manager for the company's Cruise IP sector, explained that in addition to being a major distributor of Inmarsat communications the company offers an alternative that provides high-quality broadband IP at a fraction of the running cost.

Invsat's sales and marketing director, Alastair MacGregor, told *SASI* that the data speeds available in the C-band used by VSAT are almost unlimited. Speeds of 2mb are not uncommon among Invsat's customers, many of which are in the offshore industry and need to move high volumes of data, MacGregor said.

But you get what you pay for. A VSAT terminal can cost up to 10 times more than



An Inmarsat survey suggests that seafarers value the opportunity to call home

a Fleet Broadband terminal, but it has a fixed monthly fee that assures ship operators of a guaranteed amount of bandwidth that they can use as they wish. For cruise ship operators with passengers demanding internet access, voice calls, TV and newspapers, VSAT is the only option.

The fixed monthly fee makes budgeting easier for the ship operator. It is, however, crucial for potential users to calculate correctly the amount of bandwidth they will need before committing to a technology and a fee.

Iridium is the newest player in the broadband game (see box, right). Its service's capabilities suit Zodiac Maritime Agencies, which is to fit its fleet of 125 ships with the system. The CEO of communications service provider AND Group, Ian Robinson, said: "After evaluating its projected requirements for ship-to-shore voice and data, Zodiac has made the decision to upgrade to Iridium OpenPort across the fleet."

Michiel Meijer, marine marketing manager at Stratos Global Corp, told *SASI* that evaluating a ship's long-term bandwidth requirements is tricky. "As soon as you are online, the availability of bandwidth creates a new demand for it," he said, explaining that people discover new functions that they are suddenly unwilling to live without.

No two customers have the same needs and the wrong choice can result in a costly commitment to unsuitable technology. Meijer noted that the broadband options are extended by the increasing availability of wi-fi in ports. This will serve to strengthen the expectations of ship's passengers and crew, who will become increasingly reliant upon the technology. ◀

A new line in crew comms

As well as their benefits to business, advanced communication applications can be good news for ordinary seafarers, claims Iridium Satellite, which recently unveiled its OpenPort IP data and voice service.

One breakthrough is that greater bandwidth means that more applications can be supported in tandem. OpenPort will support multiple voice lines, allowing simultaneous use of up to three channels – an obvious bonus for crew, who can make personal calls without disrupting the ship's vital communications. Seafarers can also use instant messaging services to stay in touch with loved ones at little cost, as data use will be billed on a per-MB basis, rather than by the minute.

The pricing system is key, said Matt Desch, Iridium's chairman and CEO, who underlined that "you truly pay for what you use". Packages will range from speeds of 9.6kbps to 128kbs. Iridium director Wouter Deknopper believes that the per-MB pricing will be a big boon for crew members.

Advanced communication systems offer other practical advantages – a vital one being more efficient fixing of IT problems at sea. Increased bandwidth makes it easier for problems to be identified and fixed remotely.

OpenPort is nearing the end of an extensive testing process, with commercial service set for Q3/08. According to VP Dan Mercer: "OpenPort's target markets will initially be deepsea commercial shipping and commercial fishing vessels, but the technology is suitable for all vessel types. It will be interesting to follow just how widely these improved communication systems are adopted at sea; now that the technology is becoming available to significantly improve seafarers' quality of life, just how many will see the benefits?"