

Communications provide a competitive edge

The global economic downturn has taught our industry many valuable lessons. To offset a temporary decline in revenues, shipping companies have been forced to carefully scrutinise each expenditure. This scrutiny has helped operators quickly determine which expenses are truly necessary to ensure crew welfare, reduce costs, increase operating efficiency and achieve a business advantage.

After carefully evaluating new technologies and solutions, what have we learned? All of us have learned that advanced satellite communications (satcoms) networks are critical to the efficient operation and long-term financial success of shipping companies.

Shipowners have learned that, even in the robust tanker segment, crew shortages are becoming acute. This means that operators offering broadband communications systems are much better positioned to recruit and retain qualified seafarers.

Shipmanagers have learned that the latest satellite broadband solutions can reduce costs by improving the efficiency of ship operations, resulting in a competitive edge.

Finally, satcoms service providers have learned that operators demand more than fast data transmission and reliable connectivity.



Michiel Meijer

Managers look to broadband to help retain crew and cut costs*.

We must be able to provide integrated multi-platform solutions, a vast geographic presence, local support, creative pricing, and value-added services to control costs.

Satisfied crew is fundamental

In an environment of crew shortages, the balance of negotiating power is slowly transferring from employer to officers. Young, Internet-savvy seafarers expect broadband connectivity wherever they are – to surf the web, stay in touch with family and friends, and participate in social networking sites.

In this highly competitive marketplace, ship managers realise they are at a major disadvantage if they cannot offer seafarers the latest satcoms' solutions. They also understand that reducing crew churn can profoundly reduce expenses associated with crew training – while improving crew morale and productivity.

One of the most effective ways to improve shipboard life is to provide advanced voice, private email, SMS and GSM services that are powerful, economical, easy to use, and available away from the bridge. One example, Stratos' AmosConnect Crew, features a vessel-independent personal mailbox and access to global and local news services.

The leadership of Wallem Shipmanagement, along with dozens of other shipping companies, has benefited from these services for many years. In addition to deploying AmosConnect Crew on more than 100 vessels, Wallem reported that ChatCards, which allow prepaid voice calling and Internet usage without cost to the shipmanager, have been widely used by the company's seafarers.

Remote management

In addition to voice and data for crew communications, new broadband services are helping the operator's onshore experts bring the vessel and the office closer together. For example, MPC Steamship recently deployed FleetBroadband on a vessel, which operates worldwide.

The service enables remote management,

which allows headquarters office personnel to help manage the ship's computers, thus eliminating the need for costly vessel visits. It also includes database synchronisation and access to the on board voyage data recorder. In the future, MPC also has the option to use FleetBroadband for engine-performance analysis and emissions monitoring, which has been proven to significantly reduce fuel-cost savings.

Cost containment

Most operators are well aware of the capabilities of the latest communications networks. What's even more critical is the service providers' ability to demonstrate that these systems are affordable and that they can be operated efficiently. The industry's leading distributors have risen to the demand by devising creative pricing schemes that feature equipment-service bundles and flat-rate pricing to lower entry costs.

To address concerns involving efficient use of available bandwidth, monitoring costs and minimising unnecessary usage, the most innovative service providers offer value-added applications that provide cost and traffic control, firewall management, data optimisation, high security options, easy VPN access, messaging services and full IP range.

One example of these strategic services is the online Stratos Dashboard, which provides real-time information on the amount of FleetBroadband traffic used for voice and data, plus the associated costs. This fully automated tool offers high-usage alerts to ensure budgets are not exceeded and it enables customers to manage the consumption per vessel, or groups of vessels.

Recently, when Stolt Tankers' officials announced a decision to deploy a high-speed satcoms network on the 75-ship fleet, the operator mentioned the critical importance of value-added services on its final buying decision.

So, it's easy to conclude that strategic investment in the right communications network is no longer considered a luxury, but rather a tool to ensure efficient business management. That lesson is more important today than ever before.

**This article was written by Michiel Meijer, maritime marketing manager for Stratos Global Corp. at www.stratosglobal.com.*

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