

May 2008

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IT Just Got Easier

The advent of Fleet Broadband 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."

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 Fleet Broadband 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

Case Study Harvey Gulf International Marine Inc.

The Company Harvey, La.-based Harvey Gulf International Marine, Inc. is a family owned and operated marine transportation company, that has been providing service to the energy industry for the past 40 years. Currently, Harvey Gulf International Marine, Inc. owns and operates the largest ocean going towing vessels in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Problem Harvey Gulf knew with its continuing growth, obtaining crucial operational information from their vessels using single side band and other voice communication would be inadequate. Daily logs, status reports and other daily communication were taking four to five hours a day. This, along with the requirement to know its fleet's location at any given time became vitally important.

The Solution Using Skymira's Sky~Forms service all of Harvey Gulf's paper forms were converted into electronic forms. Forms such as daily logs, status reports and grocery orders are entered on the boat, transmitted via satellite to a secure Harvey Gulf web site. Information is received accurately in a timely fashion increasing the efficiency across the operating areas of Harvey Gulf. Skymira uses specific cost-effective techniques to send data significantly reducing overall communication costs. In addition to web site access to forms, Harvey Gulf is using Skymira's interface tools to deliver and integrate certain information directly to operations and accounting systems speeding up the access of information to their customers and reducing billing time.

Sky~Track provides Harvey Gulf with GPS tracking of all its boats. From scheduled boat position updates to instant "pings" Harvey Gulf always knows exactly the location of its boats. Platforms in the Gulf of Mexico are plotted allowing important planning for boat operations. Geo-fencing allows for automatic notification when boats enter and/or exit platforms, docks or other important locations.

Sky~Fax is another example of Skymira's ability to help reduce communication costs. E-mail with Harvey Gulf boats is now routine and provides more complete communication throughout the company. As an initial adopter of Inmarsat Fleet Broadband, Harvey Gulf is able to exploit cost-effective communication capabilities for applications such as, weather updates, navigational chart updates and Skymira remote technical support.

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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.

"When we started in maritime several years ago at the Workboat

show, nearly no one had computers on their boats. This year, we found maybe one fleet that did not have computers on their boats."

Landsfield said that the introduction of Fleet Broadband will help to drive the cost down to a point where it is reasonable for most every commercial vessel owner to use, and as the cost of the communications come down, users will find more ways to use it to good effect.

"Skymira, as Shane Guidry has said, is the best thing since sliced bread" according to Captain Jake Stahl, Vice President, Harvey Gulf International. "Skymira has helped this company immensely." Stahl said the beauty of the Skymira and its system is that it worked with the company's existing standard forms, ensuring its ease of operation with Captains familiar with the types and locale of information. He said the system's payback was immediate and huge in the aftermath of Hurricane's Katrina and Rita, as the company was quickly and easily able to locate its fleet and assess its status.

Capt. Stahl touts the benefits of the emerging Fleet Broadband, and in fact a new Sailor 250 communications system is on test with Harvey War Horse, which is transiting to South America.



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