

View from the crew

How is the advance of digital at sea impacting on crews, crew management providers and their interactions with vessels and onshore teams? Tommy Olofsen from OSM sees opportunities, but also problems. If vessels and their systems are changing, he says, then the industry must follow suit.



TOMMY OLOFSEN
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Tommy Olofsen is a busy man. As Head of Crew Management for OSM he leads a business division providing experienced seafarers to over 500 vessels worldwide, with a crew pool of around 10,000, directed from 30 offices across the globe. It's a company that's grown by 25 per cent in the past year alone and, with an emphasis on tailoring solutions for individual vessels rather than segments, that curve looks set to continue. With that in mind just getting through to Olofsen, rather than his phone's constant engaged tone, is an achievement.

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Once connected he's affable and keen to talk, but it's immediately clear he doesn't have the time for platitudes concerning the seemingly inevitable rise of digital at sea.

A question of complexity

"The potential of increasingly widespread vessel and fleet digitalisation is huge," Olofsen begins, before adding a sobering caveat. "But, there's a but ...

It's all a question of what you're going to do with these systems and the data they capture. Are you actually going to empower the crew on board to make better decisions? Can you change the relationship and interplay between those on and off shore? Or look at the whole fleet and find out how to generate better performance as a company?

My experience so far is that most shipping companies have just added a column or two in their Excel sheets. There's extra data points, yes, but the industry needs to see actionable operational change based on that data. Without that you're not making things easier, you're just adding complexity."

Standard issues

And shipping is, Olofsen believes, complex enough already, leading to challenges in finding the optimal crew for each individual vessel. He puts this into perspective by referring to another high value asset transport sector.

"Consider aviation," he notes. "Here you have very clear standards and, comparatively speaking, very few suppliers. This means one plane has interchangeable equipment and structures with another. So, if you fly an A380 for Emirates, British Airways or Qantas, it doesn't matter, it's the same plane. Now, over to maritime ...



Moving from one ship to another can require very different training, experience and skillsets because the systems and structures can be completely different – even when the ships look the same, are in the same segment and conduct similar operations. There’s a growing ecosystem of competing systems, suppliers and approaches locking horns. Individually you can argue they are intended to make life easier, but together, with the lack of standardisation and clarity, they just increase complexity. This is a big problem.”

Individual understanding

So how does a crew management business like OSM tackle this? Olofsen rightly says it’s an industry challenge rather an individual supplier issue, with a joined up approach needed to enable a shift towards uniform standards. However, in the meantime his company focuses on a “one size fits one” approach rather than “one size fits all”.

He explains: “As crew management businesses grow and look towards increased efficiency and economies of scale they may opt to create a ‘package’ approach, whereby they look at a segment and offer a solution. At OSM we take the time to focus on individuals – individual vessels and systems, individual customers, and individual crewmembers. By considering all operational parameters, vessel and customer requirements, and then matching them with the crew that have the best profiles and experience, we can enhance overall understanding and performance.

We may be a growing global business, but we have personal service at our core. That’s something increasing digitalisation won’t change.”

People power

In terms of what it will change, or should change, Olofsen is clear. OSM has created a vessel ‘focus group’ whereby it works closely with clients and teams on and off shore to understand how more connected systems can form the foundations for a future operations model – one that drives enhanced performance and delivers competitive advantage.

The OSM man believes empowering crew members to make optimal real-time decisions, based on big data analysis facilitated by systems and

shore-based organisations, is at the core of this new way of working.

“The companies that lead this race,” he says, “these will be the ones that win. But it will call for a changed mind-set.”

Olofsen says that with greater automation and connected organisations manning levels will inevitably decrease, both on board and on land:

“There’s so many functions that don’t have to be carried out on vessels, needlessly tying up crew resources – with administration and reporting duties being the most obvious culprits, and perhaps the easiest to digitise. With seamless connections across fleets on shore systems could take care of these, playing a greater role in managing everyday operations. I don’t think we’ll head towards full vessel autonomy in the near future, but we will see greater automation and reduced manpower.”

Is that a problem for a crewing provider such as OSM?

Not according to Olofsen:

“You’ll have less people, so the requirement to have the very best people – to handle that increased responsibility – is crucial. That’s what we provide. As our company slogan states ‘it’s all about the people’, and that’s just as applicable when it comes to smarter, more automated operations.”

Digital connectivity at sea is increasingly important.

Anti-social networking?

With more than 10,000 crew on the books, OSM has as much of an insight into what they expect from digitalisation as to what the industry needs. Olofsen’s observations are broad-based – “I visit a lot of ships,” he stresses – and, to some extent, almost ‘paternal’ in tone.

“Digital connectivity at sea is increasingly important, especially to those that have experienced it before and especially to the younger generations

of seafarers,” he says. “It provides, for some, a better quality of life and can be a key factor in crew retention – it is, after all, an important benefit. But it is changing how people interact with one another.

Social life on board is changing.

There’s now more of a tendency to retreat to your cabin and connect with family and friends, whereas before you might have congregated in a communal area to connect with co-workers. So, social life on board is changing. There’s also the question of if someone is meant to be resting after a shift and they’re in their cabin interacting with a screen, is that really ‘rest’?”

Olofsen isn’t a disciplinarian, however, merely raising the issues because, he says, they should be openly discussed. Furthermore he believes it’s potentially counterproductive to try and impose restrictions on internet use, as it may create resentment, opting instead to educate crew in appropriate behaviour so they themselves understand what it is right and wrong.

“We, and our clients, want to retain the best crew,” he imparts, “and the way to do that is by creating the best environment for them.”

Promoting progress

With our opening in Olofsen’s busy day about to close, it’s time for a final insight. With increasing digital habits on land does that translate to increasingly digital savvy seafarers – eager to take advantage of the latest systems and, where possible, data-enabled decision making?

Yes and no seems to be the answer. He argues that as long as crew positions have to be filled according to rank and experience it could limit the progression of the most digitally savvy and ambitious seafarers.

“Say you create a digital environment onboard a vessel. Now, is the most important indicator of a crewmember’s competence to utilise it the number of years they’ve spent at sea? I doubt that very much,” he opines.

“So new systems place new demands on the structure and composition of crew. This is something, again, that the industry has to consider as a whole.

“If we really are going to realise the potential of digital,” he concludes, “then we have to be open to change. We shouldn’t be trying to just add systems to existing models, instead they should be the foundations for the models of tomorrow.”

