

Crew communications get easier

One obvious way of assuaging what some have called the current manning 'crisis' is to provide crew at sea with a better quality of life. In addition, the industry is slowly but surely coming to understand that the expectations of those that they are hoping to recruit are significantly different from those of the people who went to sea a generation ago.

Providers of satellite communications services have pinpointed the provision of crew communications facilities as an easy and cost-effective way of making a life at sea more attractive. Solutions in the past have been as simple as calling cards, bought in bulk by the shipping company and distributed or sold by the ship's master to his crew. However, there is now a push to provide crew with standalone facilities, away from the bridge, so that they can make calls and write e-mails in private.

One such product, to be launched at the upcoming Posidonia show in Piraeus during the first week of June, is Xantic's CrewConnect solution. The CrewConnect package includes a 'mini-C' terminal, a special terminal developed by Thrane & Thrane; Xantic's AmosConnect communications software; and the company's ChatCard Reload product, which enables seafarers to top up their calling cards while at sea, via the internet. Xantic points out that the key benefits of the package include the low price of the mini-C terminal, the lack of administration for the shipowner and the 'independence' of the installation.

"CrewConnect is based on SMS [short messaging system] texting and internet messaging," says Paul Ashton, maritime systems director. "We found that these forms of communication are growing very rapidly, and especially in crew calling solutions, we see a potential regarding these types of information exchange."

CrewConnect also addresses one of the wider problems of crew communications. While giving seafarers access to e-mail is admirable, the reality is that their families do not always have computers on which to receive and read them. CrewConnect, however, allows users at sea to send text messages to mobile telephones ashore, and people ashore to send text messages from mobile telephones to the computer onboard the vessel, where seafarers can easily access it.

ChatCard Reload is part of the CrewConnect package, but is also available separately. The card is 'rechargeable', i.e. users can top it up, via the internet if they wish, with their credit card.

"ChatCard Reload makes it very easy to reload the card," says Paul Ashton, maritime business director of Xantic. "It will have an initial value of 50 to 250 units and will be easy to reload through our website via credit card. If you're on a ship with the new Inmarsat Fleet, you could upgrade ChatCard using Fleet MPDS. And when you change ships, you can use the same ChatCard."

Phoning home

Although the advances in communications technology has widened the range of possibilities for seafarers onboard ships, sometimes the best way is the old-fashioned way: calling home. Almost all of Inmarsat's services have some kind of voice capability, but perhaps the most popular solution for voice is the mini-M phone, a small terminal that can be placed away from the bridge and operated as a sort of payphone.

However, in recent months, the name Iridium has popped up yet again. Iridium began life as a potential competitor to Inmarsat, with 66 low-earth orbiting (LEO) satellites. In 2000, the company went bankrupt and filed for Chapter 11. Its assets were finally bought by Iridium Satellite LLC in December of that year, and the company has since sought to sell its phones to remote industries, such as forestry, mining, oil and of course, shipping.

Iridium has recently launched a crew calling service in combination with subscription-based services for official ship communications. "The new service simplifies the burdensome task of managing fleet communication costs," says the company. "Our new crew calling programme allows vessel owners and operators to provide both official and personal communications from a single phone. Vessel operators can provide pre-paid scratch cards to individual crew members to allow for personal calling, while eliminating the arduous process of tracking those costs. For official business, the captain and crew can use the same phone for subscription-based calls. This eliminates the need to manually process complicated bills or to purchase additional equipment to support the two functions."

Iridium's service works on a flat-rate pricing system and does not charge for roaming or zone changes. It is available now in the Asia Pacific region through the company's network of service providers, including SingTel and Stratos.