

## Phoning home

**The ability for seafarers to make calls to their family and friends while at sea has been shown to boost morale; as a result, the provision of crew calling services has become more attractive than ever**

Crew calling services came into focus last year, with Inmarsat introducing Universal Crew Calling. Land Earth Station Operators (LESOs) offering Universal Crew Calling include France Telecom, KDD, the MVS Group, SingTel, Stratos, Telenor Satellite Services and Xantic. Other crew calling services also emerged, providing a range of products and packages including voice, email and SMS.

After interviewing 600 seafarers in the UK, The Netherlands and Singapore, Gilmour research found that "being able to call home at will is what mariners want most of all". For this reason, Crew Calling facilities have been attributed with the power to boost staff morale and increase recruitment and staff retention.

Current crew calling facilities are designed to function with minimal effort on the part of shipowners and operators, in accordance with their requirements. Like other crew calling services, Inmarsat's Universal Crew Calling requires seafarers to use prepaid calling cards, in an attempt to reduce the administrative overhead for shipowners. In addition, crew calling facilities can be located in crew recreational areas, increasing accessibility and caller privacy and ensuring that the bridge does not become crowded.

### **New services**

Telenor Satellite Services introduced a new suite of prepaid services for its communications services via the Inmarsat satellite system last year aimed at making crew communications easy and affordable. Telenor's tariffs for crew calling is currently 99 cents per minute until March 31, 2003. In addition, the company is offering free crew calling phones as part of the programme.

Marlink's @sea(mail) enables the sending and receiving of e-mail, fax and Telex. It can be used with Inmarsat -A, -B, -M, mini-M GAN/M4, Fleet F77 or Iridium and is also compatible with cellular/GSM and ISDN. The service can send and receive simultaneously and automatically compresses emails to reduce transmission costs. The network provides the additional benefit of a single mailbox with several separate addresses, which ensures increased privacy for each crew member and easy accounting for the owner or operator.

Marlink also offers its Crew Phone for voice calls, to be used in conjunction with its 'Scratch & Phone' prepaid phone card. The phone works with Inmarsat-B, M or mini-M terminals.

Xantic's ChatCard Reload is a prepaid scratch calling card that can be used with Inmarsat-A, -B, -M, mini-M and GAN, Inmarsat Fleet, plus e-mail and SMS via mini-C. Whereas ChatCard originally required users to buy a new card each time credits were used, ChatCard Reload allows crew to reload their ChatCards, thereby reducing administration costs.

Xantic offers a crew calling package called CrewConnect, which includes ChatCard Reload (one package comprises 30 ChatCards with 500 units per card), a mini-C terminal and CrewConnect software. According to Xantic, the service was designed to allow crew to send SMSs and small e-mails simply and cost-effectively.

CrewConnect also allows crew to receive SMSs and emails from family members, with costs charged to the crew member's ChatCard. Xantic believe that access to SMS communication will grow in importance, commenting that "more and more crews will have access to mobile GSM phones on shore and there is a growing demand to be able to send SMS messages from and to the crew members."

In view of the increasing importance and popularity of SMS, Xantic has also introduced ChatCard2C, a service for sending e-mails and SMSs to ships via Inmarsat-C terminals. E-mail messages cost 1 ChatCard unit per 20 characters (rounded up to next number e.g. 35 characters costs 2 units) and SMS messages are charged at a fixed rate of 9 ChatCard units per message (SMS/text maximum of 160 characters).

Hong Kong-based Txt2home also believe that SMS will become ever more prevalent in the future, commenting that "There is no doubt that the Short Messaging Service (SMS) has become a way of life." Txt2home has established an innovative service enabling seafarers to send and receive text messages from mobile phones for \$0.50 per message. The company is initially targeting Filipino seafarers, with the first Txt2Home country server and gateway SMS server to be installed in Manila, although it is currently in talks with telecommunications companies in other areas.

CrewLink, a not-for-profit organisation established by the International Committee on Seafarers' Welfare (ICSW) and managed by Marine Works Ltd, is a communications service designed specifically for seafarers at sea. All of CrewLink's services use prepaid calling cards and currently include CrewCall, a telephone calling service, and CrewMail, an e-mail service.

CrewCall can work via a dedicated a fully type-approved terminal, or the vessel's main satellite telephone system. To increase crew privacy, a handset installed in the recreational area of the vessel can be connected to the ship's main communications equipment via a CrewCall EasyDial connector. Prepaid cards are available in five, 15 and 40 minute denominations. At present, calls made between 23:00 and 03:00 GMT cost \$1.00 per minute to any destination. Calls made at other times using an Inmarsat Mini-M terminal cost \$1.67 per minute. Similar rates are offered using other Inmarsat digital services, with airtime is supplied by Stratos.

TEAMtalk Satellite's MarinerMail is a software package that enables crew to send e-mail and browse the internet using a pre-paid card. Cards have no value until the time of purchase, reducing the risk of valuable cards being stolen. Crew members select their own pin code, which can be recovered if forgotten.

The minimum charge per message is \$1. The software displays the cost of the activity and automatically deducts it from the card, which can be recharged to the minimum value of \$20.00. TEAMtalk Satellite bills the vessel 40 per cent of each card's top-up value every time a card is topped up. Unlike other systems, MarinerMail allows owners and operators to set the tariff, thereby allowing the opportunity to cover costs or generate revenue to offset any administration costs.

TEAMtalk Satellite argues that e-mail is more attractive to seafarers than phone calls, as call charges can be high and require that a recipient be there to take the call. The company suggests this can often be difficult when crew are in different time zones or, as Gilmour Research shows, access to phones is limited, as in the Philippines.