



Crew welfare at the centre

by Marigold Langley

The coronavirus pandemic has seen widespread international restrictions, including travel bans and port closures that forced the crew to stay longer at sea – some working many months beyond their contracts. In addition to missing family and friends, some needed medical advice and access to emails for personal transactions. And, of course, they wanted to stay up-to-date with the latest news from shore. We now see these same requirements for crew whom the war in Ukraine has impacted, which has particularly affected seafarers from key Baltic and Eastern European crew supply countries. Crew welfare has taken centre stage in the maritime industry in recent years – and digital communications are playing a crucial role in supporting the health and well-being of seafarers across the globe.

The Baltic region plays a vital role in global shipping. Some 15% of the world's cargo traffic is handled in the Baltic Sea, making it one of the busiest maritime areas. Up to 5,500 ships navigate through the region each month; at any given moment, there are about 2,000 vessels in the Baltic marine area.

Boasting a strong maritime history, the Baltic states control about 7,000 ships, representing 13% of the world fleet and 35% of EU-controlled vessels. The region offers a pool of 70,000 officers, with many crew supply agencies based in the area to furnish the needs of international and regional shipping.

A basic human right

With an ageing demographic and predictions of crew shortages by 2026, talent nurturing and crew retention have become increasingly important. Communication technologies play a crucial role in this context. Crew surveys repeatedly highlight that access to the Internet and voice calls are key factors in the employment decision-making process.

Recognising the significant benefit of crew connectivity to seafarers' health and well-being, stakeholders in the global shipping industry have recently adopted new amendments to the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC 2006), which aim to improve onboard living and working conditions. Mandatory Internet access for seafarers was high on the list of changes. Indeed, the International Transport Workers' Federation stated, "Being able to keep in touch with family and friends isn't just a nice-to-have, it's a basic human right." This commitment looks set to transform the way ship operators approach their satcom provision in the future.

Gwenaël Loheac, President – Europe and West Africa at the IEC Telecom Group, notes, "Reliable access to crew communication links is essential for seafarers' well-being, but also vital for recruitment and retention – a factor which will become increasingly important to meet the expectations of Generation Z and future recruits. And with crew costs representing the largest outgoing in vessel

operational expenditures, it is vital to protect and support human assets."

Improved working conditions and strengthened crew morale

The IEC Telecom Group is at the forefront of bringing connectivity to crew at sea. Working side-by-side with major satellite operators such as Iridium, Inmarsat and Thuraya, the company provides a wide range of connectivity solutions suitable for all vessel sizes. Loheac shares, "Today, there is really no excuse not to meet the planned MLC communication amendment. Access to crew welfare is no longer limited to VSAT-equipped vessels. There are a lot of affordable and compact solutions, powered by L-band, to match requirements of small and mid-sized boats."

The key to successfully providing crew communications is segregating this connectivity aspect from critical vessel systems. The OneGate network management system by IEC Telecom offers a solution for this challenge. This technology provides onboard management with complete visibility over communication links.



Photos: IEC Telecom Group



Gwenaël Loheac
President – Europe and West Africa, IEC Telecom Group

Featuring an easy-to-use digital dashboard, OneGate allows monitoring of the bandwidth distribution onsite and provides IT specialists ashore with remote access to filter management.

The need for enhanced crew welfare has spurred the development of specialised applications optimised for L-band. In particular, video conferencing is the

driving force behind a whole new range of smart services, including telemedicine, e-learning, and remote maintenance. Video conferencing is now commonplace onboard large vessels. Yet, using regular telecom applications, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, requires at least 500Kbps. Not only does this impact monthly expenses, but it also restricts the availability of video calls to a VSAT channel. Working with industry partners, IEC Telecom has developed a video conferencing app operational at 40-80Kbps, enabling this vital communication even over a backup channel.

Access to healthcare is another essential component of crew well-being. Satellite communication has made telemedicine possible at sea. The OneHealth kit by IEC

Telecom provides doctors with remote real-time access to a patient's vitals over an in-built application, supporting data transfer and video conferencing. As such, professional medical support becomes available to crew members as and when required, improving working conditions and strengthening crew morale.

Those who embrace change

The satellite communications industry is evolving at speed and bringing benefits to those at the very heart of international shipping – the seafarers. Loheac ends, “We are witnessing a time of fast-paced development in the digital world, which will ultimately benefit maritime users who embrace change, and crew welfare looks set to remain at the centre of this evolution.”



The IEC Telecom Group is one of the leading international satellite service operators. Renowned for supplying high-quality satellite-based solutions to customers for almost 30 years, we deliver efficient end-to-end voice and data services when and where it matters the most. We are committed to enabling digitalisation for the maritime industry as well as remote units on land, where GSM coverage is unavailable. For urban networks, we provide a powerful satellite back-up to ensure the business continuity of customer enterprises. Visit iec-telecom.com/en to learn more.