

Lars Fischer: Port agents take up with technology

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PPG's (NYSE: PPG) protective and marine business has received EU Funding for an exciting new project which aims to produce an innovative fouling protection system for commercial vessels.

One particular sector of our industry that is not well served by technology are the port agents. This unsung global army provides the critical link between the vessel, shipowner, charterer and port to deliver the vital services that enable a ship to operate effectively when alongside. The port agent is in a peculiar position and is often used as "Mr fix-it".

They're called upon to book the berth, arrange cargo operations, facilitate crew changes, ensure victuals are loaded plus a whole host of other activities that a modern ship needs in port. Consequently, they are required to maintain relationships with a great many service providers and gather, store, collate and regurgitate various types of information. At the same time, they need to track progress for the many ships they are currently looking after, account for all expenditure and remember to collect funds from clients.

Although spreadsheets and emails are commonplace, so are handwritten workbooks and post-it notes. This is becoming unsustainable, particularly as agents are often on the move between their office, the port and the vessel. Intelligent software solutions linked to the cloud and coupled with mobile technology platforms have yet to make an entrance, but it seems that change is on the way. Today's technology means that a solution developed specifically for port agents can take a leap away from the cumbersome heavy-weight

systems of yesteryear and settle directly on a slim, cutting-edge alternative that marries intelligent software with cloud-based technology.

Some large port agency networks have developed bespoke software and communications solutions to manage all this information, but the vast majority of agents – and there are some 10,000 companies across the world – are just too small to make this investment.

Maritime software expert, **Softship**, has made its name by supplying liner operators and agents with packaged software solutions that manage and streamline their administrative and back-office processes. Adopted by more than 120 companies, their software delivers a more effective and cheaper alternative to the bespoke solutions many large carriers are supporting. Transferring this experience into the port agent sector is a logical step, hence Softship's new creation, **SAPAS** - Softship Advanced Port Agency Solution.

SAPAS has been cleverly designed to store and then look-up all relevant information required by the agent. This does away with the paper and spreadsheets and, importantly, eliminates the re-keying and constant transferring of information from one medium to another. Its central database is flexible and can be customised to suit individual working practices. For example, port tariffs can be hugely complex and based on a range of factors such as vessel GRT, NRT, LOA, port stay days or some other measure. It is important to capture all this data and reuse it accurately.

Agents are continually being asked to quote for the likely cost for a ship's port call. This is a time-consuming process that doesn't always translate into a fee. **SAPAS** will take data already inputted to calculate an accurate quote – or offer – and present it in a bespoke report format that can be quickly emailed to the potential customer. If accepted, the data used in the offer is then translated into a working port call. **SAPAS** captures all the activities and associated costs to create a Statement of Facts and eventually a Disbursement Account. It creates tailored task lists and monitors progress to ensure the agent's performance is on track for each vessel they are currently working.

And all this data is stored, protected and backed-up in the cloud which enables **SAPAS** to be accessed from PCs, tablets and smartphones – in the office or on the move.

Remote data storage is sometimes thought of as a risk, but we need to remember that cyber risk is similar to any other business risk which must be understood and mitigated. Storing data externally in a professional environment involves state-of-the-art hosting farms with robust back-up systems and high level defence mechanisms monitored around the clock – this is not easy for a shipping company to replicate. Migrating a port agent's office to the cloud and marrying this with a range of clever, web-enabled solutions on a single platform will simplify and streamline their daily lives and enable them to deliver a more accurate and professional service to their customer. It's time for our port agency sector to take-up with technology.