Software support from the cloud

Softship's Lars Fischer explains why remotely accessible IT solutions can aid agency operations

Lars Fischer

Port agents are often used as the 'fixer' by the shipowner to arrange berths, cargo operations, customs formalities, crew changes, stores and a range of other vital activities. They sit at the centre of a complex web of outstations and agencies that must be co-ordinated if the ship is to perform its duties in port and depart on schedule.

Unless the agent is part of one of the very large global networks they are unlikely to be using any intelligent software solutions to help them perform efficiently. Instead, many independent agents rely on spreadsheets, emails and handwritten notebooks to keep track of the myriad of tasks required for each ship they service.

Alongside this, port agents must also tightly control their costs and claim back the many disbursements they pay out for their principals – in this business it is all too easy to stray into negative cashflow. On top of all this, an agent must continually lookout for new business which means calculating and compiling professional, but time-consuming, offer documents.

Mindful that agents are often on the move either between ports or visiting their ships, any IT solution designed to streamline their working day must be accessible remotely and from a variety of devices. Shipping software provider Softship recently launched a port agency product, SAPAS, which is a cloud-based tool aimed specifically at the world's port agents.

The thinking behind this type of software is to allow agents to do away with paper and stand-alone office programmes and switch to a single, web-based platform that holds all the relevant information in one place.

By utilising software, re-keying of information and the constant transferring of data from one medium to another can be eliminated. This system also allows agents to produce professionally looking reports and documents as well as keeping tabs on disbursement accounts for each client.

Can cloud based apps help agents?

> "Like most in the shipping sector, agents are operating in a thin margin environment where costs must be contained and revenues exploited"

Central database

At its core, is a flexible database containing pre-loaded information (terminal and berth data, for example) sitting alongside the agent's proprietary information such as customer and contact details. Agents can choose what information they want to store safe in the knowledge that only those with permission can access it.

Port tariffs form a large part of the cost of a port call but can be extremely complex. Sometimes they are applied as a lumpsum and sometimes as an amount per gross tonnage/deadweight, per teu, per metre length or as a more complicated calculation. SAPAS allows simple and complex tariff structures to be captured, stored and re-used including different rates for different cargo and/or vessel types. Once a tariff has been registered in the system, it is automatically 'looked-up' when required.

Owners generally require a comprehensive offer document detailing the likely cost of a port call prior to engaging an agent. This process is hugely time consuming but can be streamlined by re-using information already stored in the system.

By taking owner, charterer, vessel and cargo information and marrying it with cost items such as pilotage, berthing and bunkering, an offer document – using an inbuilt report writer – can be more easily created.

The system will also maintain a real-time statement of facts which can be customised and emailed direct to the client. This can then be used as the basis for the disbursement account which is automatically generated with supplier invoices attached. With this up-to-the-minute information, both the owner and agent retain full financial visibility and control.

Like most in the shipping sector, agents are operating in a thin margin environment where costs must be contained and revenues exploited. Software that is offered on a pay-as-you-go basis with no upfront investment required can help in this highly competitive marketplace and a comprehensive solution that streamlines workday activities allowing more clients to be serviced in a more professional manner can only be a good thing. **SN**

Lars Fischer is managing director of Softship Data Processing, Singapore, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Softship, a provider of software solutions to the international liner shipping sector.