



The Pursuit of Value

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For a function that is so fundamental to the day to day operations of every shipping company, ship agency is an area of the maritime industry that is rarely subject to the same level of discussion, of ongoing scrutiny or analysis as other core service offerings that ensure a vessel gets safely from A-to-B. This is largely because much of the work of a ship or port agent is routine, administrative and – above all – complicated.

Port agency is not a single offering or service that is easy to critique in isolation, but rather a multitude of tasks selected and delivered to meet the exact needs of a customer, vessel or call. Agents are responsible for coordinating the quay-side requirements of the vessel: ship supplies, spares and maintenance services, crew changes, husbandry, customs, and immigration formalities, to name a few.

In fact, FONASBA, the association for ship agents, identified more than 130 potential operations that could be undertaken by an agent in port – let alone the actions that require careful planning or follow up to ensure that everything happens when it should, and is billed accurately. Importantly, agents also act as vessel operators' trusted go-between for the manufacturers and product owners, and are therefore an important mediator and can provide trusted counsel. They are well placed, therefore, to add value to ship operations by saving time and money in port.



The value in others

Unfortunately, and to their detriment, ship owners and operators, as well as charterers, often fail to recognise the ability of ship agents to enhance their operations, to add value through the carefully tailored delivery of services or their ability to save money across every transit. In many ways, this is understandable. It is precisely due to the broad and diverse nature of

the ship agency function that it largely slips under the radar of ship managers, owners or operators, in the analysis of their business and operations, and their search to enhance efficiency and cost savings.

But, in a market where margins remain constricted and operating costs are likely to rise yet further, the role of the humble ship agent – the guardian of the vessel and crew in port – should not be underestimated, or maligned. Nor should the capability of all ship agents to deliver all services to the same high standard be assumed. Agents must be carefully vetted, assessed, and appointed based on their proven credentials and the manner by which they respond to enquiries. This includes a careful consideration of the agent's ability to handle, deliver and process large amounts of information, data and money and communicate their undertakings effectively and efficiently. In other words, an agent's use of reliable and intelligent software and information technology systems should be considered before their appointment.

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This is a key consideration, however, is often disregarded; even though ship agency is a sector marked by great disparity in the means by which services in port are coordinated, delivered and administered. No agent is the same as the next – some agency businesses utilise highly integrated software solutions, which they can

work from on-the go; anywhere at any time.

Other agency businesses meanwhile, still rely on a smorgasbord of desktop programmes from a range of operators and providers, accessible only from the agents' desk. If they have documents saved across multiple folders, finding the correct information quickly can slow them down considerably and tie them physically to a location if they are working from desktop-based software such as Excel or even paper notes, as is quite often the case.

Recognising potential

To compete in today's increasingly connected shipping industry, agents who want to add value have a responsibility to assess their own limitations, and potential to improve. There is being different to the benefit of customers; but there is a thin line to becoming irrelevant. Technology, however, is the great leveller here, if used properly.

Softship.SAPAS, for example, is an intuitively-designed cloud-based solution designed specifically to manage all administrative, reporting and service delivery functions of a ship agent of any size. The software was created with a responsive design to ensure it can be used from any web-enabled device, including mobile phones. It does away with the paper and spreadsheets and, importantly, eliminates the re-keying and constant transferring of information from one medium to another that can bog down even the very best agents.

Softship.SAPAS' 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, aggregate and synthesise it into useful information that can be automated and applied seamlessly to provide significant operational and efficiency savings.

Being open to suggestion

It is important to point out in this discussion, that differentiation in how agency businesses work is not necessarily a bad thing. The requirements of vessels are varied and unique and require tailored services, which most often benefits from local variation. However, this differentiation becomes problematic when agency businesses operate without adequate information and data; creating a significant difference in the ways in which these agency businesses conduct themselves.

The way for agents and owners, operators, charterers, or managers to harness the untapped value available in port is to work closely to look at the whole picture. To utilise an agents' local knowledge and relationships to enhance services, offer practical alternatives that save time and money, or to provide advice and counsel on how operational efficiency can be considered in different ways.

So, before your next port call, take a moment and look to your agent, the wallflower of the industry with a wealth of knowledge and insight that could benefit every voyage, and be so bold as to ask: 'What do you think can be done differently?'

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