

Why your port agent needs greater agency in their day-to-day

How and when we work has fundamentally changed in recent years, largely thanks to the accessibility afforded by the smartphone, writes *Lars Fischer, Managing Director of Softship Data Processing Ltd, Singapore, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Softship AG.*

How we consume information, how we communicate with each other or travel to where we need to be is now significantly influenced by our ability to access, manipulate, and document information in all its forms – from anywhere, and at any time. These mobile devices, which are increasingly automated and integrated in their functionality, have infiltrated our lives so much so that most of us would struggle to go about our normal day without our phone or tablet computer. This has its drawbacks, of course, but by-and-large, the benefits brought about by the smartphone revolution vastly outweigh the negatives; particularly for businesses.

KEEPING UP WITH THE TIMES

As such, the ability to work on the move is increasingly important to every business, across almost every industry, as our own behaviours as consumers, partners, suppliers, or customers have changed. We expect to be able to communicate at all hours, to access documentation when and where we need it, or to find a solution to any problem within a few taps of the finger. There is an expected immediacy to business that we all must find ways to work around, now, to compete long into the future.

It is, for this reason, it is surprising that many of the world's ship agents still operate almost exclusively from offline computer systems, disparate sets of spreadsheets and files and often from hardcopy notebooks. In many ways, this lack of connectivity means they have limited agency – the ability to act independently - in how they can go about their business in port.

This matters to ship owners and operators because time in port could be reduced, their costs lowered, and their

lives made much simpler just by working with a port agent with the right tools at their disposal, including the ability to work remotely, from any location. FONASBA, the industry association for port agents identified more than 130 separate operations that a port agent may potentially be required to undertake during any port call; and to document, communicate and invoice for. Many of these administrative tasks that ship agents perform for every port call could be simplified significantly by simply using a more appropriate IT solution, accessible at any time through the cloud on a web-hosted platform.

STREAMLINING THROUGH THE CLOUD

Put simply, cloud computing is the practice of using a network of remote servers hosted on the Internet to store, manage, and process data, rather than a local server or a personal computer. A purpose-built cloud-based IT software solution developed specifically for ship agents like Softship.SAPAS, which works through a web browser, enables agents to work faster and smarter. It also provides additional transparency across their operations, minimizes the risk of error or confusion and increases efficiency across the supply chain by automating routine data entry and communications tasks, and integrating information flows across all departments.

For bulk shipowners and operators, there are very important operational safety and insurance benefits to working with a more agile, better equipped port agent able to accurately document tasks in real time. According to the professional indemnity insurance provider ITIC, liner agents' errors or omissions resulted in claims presented to them in excess of US\$13 million over a five-year period. That's only one mutual insurance provider. Most of these claims, ITIC asserts, relate to simple negligence, omission, and human error in administration. In our experience, many of these errors occur during the administrative process, which is both complex and pressured. A digit or two

missing in a disbursement account, a simple manifest error, incorrect freight quotation or wrong port information provided can end up costing the agent considerably, and irrevocably damage their relationship with principals.

For example, verifying the condition of the cargo, recording measures taken to decontaminate cargo holds or engage the relevant port authorities are all done in person, whilst the agent is in port, and working directly with the ships' master. One significant mistake in reporting the interaction and measurements could have significant ramifications in a bulk supply chain, for example, if a vessel is held or cargo damaged. If the agent has to wait until they get back to the office to type up their notes from hours earlier, this risk is certainly amplified. Such errors in any organisation are to be expected – humans are, after all, inherently flawed creatures; but these mistakes can be avoided with the right IT solutions, and the ability to work on-the-go.

FUTURE-PROOFING SUPPLY CHAINS

Our ship agency clients understand by using the Softship.SAPAS platform that the prospect of long costly wait times in port is greatly reduced because they have a cloud-based solution that gives them the capability and confidence to complete port-side tasks, from any device and at any time of the day, efficiently. Port agents can access Softship.SAPAS by simply logging in to the software through a mobile phone or tablet where they can manage all port call processes through a simple, organized and easy to use platform.

As the dry bulk segment continues to benefit from relatively positive sentiment, it is critical that every opportunity is taken to modernize, improve and future-proof shipping supply chains. This means embracing the advantages provided by cloud-solutions, promoting transparency across operations, and making a concerted effort to improve the bulk shipping supply chain.