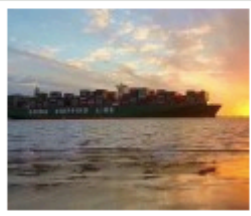




Reaching tipping point

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Thanks to our now committed relationships to our smartphones, more of our routine tasks have been reshaped with a digital solution. From how we manage our finances to how we travel, our ability to access information in real-time, and to quickly communicate our desired actions, has fundamentally changed how we live, work and play. It is because of our smartphones that – most of us – have come to expect the seamless

integration of our many tools, applications and tasks without having to give it a second thought.

For the most part though, many shipping organisations have not taken so willingly to adopting similar integrated digital solutions across their operations and administration. It seems a strange paradox that we do not expect to be able to benefit from the same use of integrated digital technologies in our work. Instead many maritime companies work off a disparate and diverse set of spreadsheets, workbooks, portals and platforms that do not speak to each other, let alone complement each other. But this doesn't have to be the case.

Identifying barriers to change

Admittedly, there is a plausible reason for the slower uptake of digital technologies in shipping. More so than most other industries, shipping relies on the development of physical infrastructure in every corner of the globe – including uniform access to broadband or 3/4/5G data networks. It is impossible for the pace of infrastructure development to keep a uniform pace worldwide, meaning affordable and reliable access to the Internet has not been available everywhere. This has been exacerbated by the difficulty in getting Internet onboard; a point many commentators simply brush over.

It is for this reason that over the past few decades, we have witnessed a piecemeal approach to adoption of new digital and information technologies across the shipping supply chain, and particularly for the management of back-office processes. IT adoption has been determined by access and cost, while often guided by short-term decision making. The consequence is that many shipping companies are now weighed down by the many desktop-based systems, services, tools and applications that they have taken on over time to address specific business needs. These programs often overlap, disqualify each other or are utilised only in part.

A fragmented approach

We can take ship agents as a prime example. 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. Today, many of these tasks are completed with pen and paper, and manually keyed into spreadsheets from a desktop computer. This opens the door to error, delay and additional cost – for the agent and for the ship operator or manager.

This lack of integration between these programs and tools creates friction in the workplace, duplication of process and also encourages "silo" working. The ultimate result is a highly fragmented and inefficient way of working across an industry that is counting on efficiency savings to provide a buffer against market volatility and rising operational costs. Thankfully, many of these administrative tasks that ship agents perform for every port call are simplified significantly by simply using a more appropriate IT solution, accessible at any time through the cloud on a web-hosted platform.

The importance of access

Driven by consumer demand and the availability of affordable smart phones and data packages, the United Nations' agency for Information and Communications Technologies (the ITU) puts Internet penetration at 55.1% of the world's population, as of 2018. More significantly for the shipping industry, DNVGL has also recently asserted that "by 2020, most classed vessels will be broadband capable." This finally does away with the greatest impediment to shipping's digital development. More uniform access to Internet on the move can now level the playing field for suppliers, authorities and service providers across the entire maritime industry.

With reliable Internet access on a global basis, purpose built, all-encompassing software solutions designed specifically for the shipping industry are now available to service providers of any size and can be tailored to suit the specific needs of each business. The switch to a cloud-based solution is relatively simple and can incorporate all the legacy data and information from the older system. Solutions such as Softship.SAPAS, designed specifically for agents, are accessible from any location using a web-enabled device, and can provide the integrated, automated features that we enjoy outside our workaday lives. It is through these integrated, automated systems and applications for managing administrative tasks that shipping can truly digitise and develop into an altogether more efficient operation.

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