

Spare a thought for the port agent



Often overlooked, port agents are the small army of people with an encyclopaedic knowledge of their local ports and the surrounding hinterland. They provide the glue that binds the ship with the port and they deliver the vital services required to make a port call both efficient workable.

According to FONASBA, the association for port agents, more than 130 different port-related tasks are regularly undertaken by agents — and this doesn't include the actions involved in planning a call, or those required to be followed-up once the ships has departed. As a maritime 'fixer', they're called upon to book the berth, arrange cargo operations, facilitate crew changes, supply victuals plus the many other activities required by a modern ship in port. The wide and complex variety of tasks demand an agent to maintain relationships with a great many parties and gather, store, collate and regurgitate huge amounts 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 re-bill their clients before cashflow dries up. On top of all this, agents are constantly on the lookout for new business and must produce comprehensive 'offer' documents for owners to consider.

And because their vital role is often taken for granted, this sector has largely been left to fend for itself when it comes to

developing technology to streamline their working day. Other, higher profile sectors are swamped with technology options — carriers, port authorities, cargo interests to name just a few are well supplied with software houses seeking to make their operations more efficient.

IGNORED NO LONGER

So why has the port agent been ignored? The answer is probably because the agency sector is highly fragmented. A handful of large, regional or global companies dominate this space but the majority of activities are carried out by small agencies serving just a few — or even a single — port. Often, they operate on very thin margins and so are thought to be too insignificant to bother with.

But that's not just short-sighted, it also shows that software houses are missing an important trick. Because agents must juggle significant amounts of information, maintain relationships with a variety of partners and outstations, and they often conduct their business whilst on the move, a technical solution is ripe for development.

CLOUD TECHNOLOGY

Most smaller agencies are running their businesses from a variety of unconnected spreadsheets, databases and even hard-

copy notebooks. Softship — one of the world's largest software houses operating in the maritime space — has recently launched Softship.SAPAS (Softship's Advanced Port Agency Solution), a web-based tool optimized for PCs, tablets and smartphones. It uses cloud technology ensuring all data is stored securely but available through any internet connection — perfect for those regularly on the move.

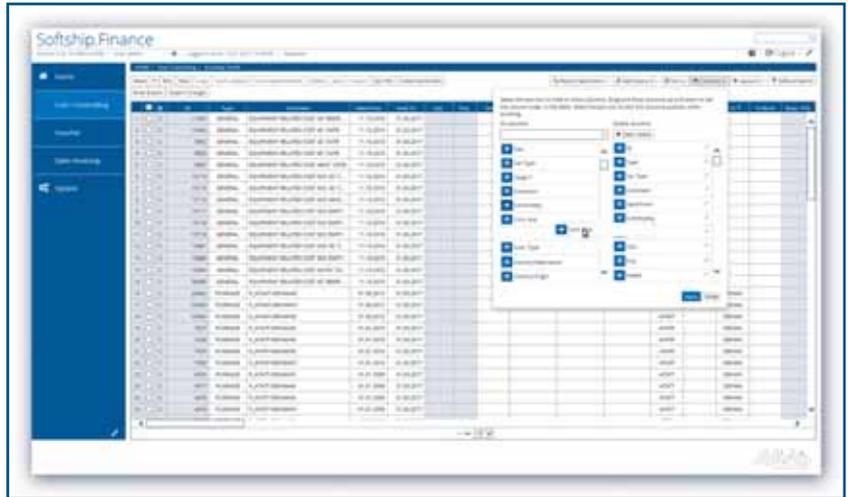
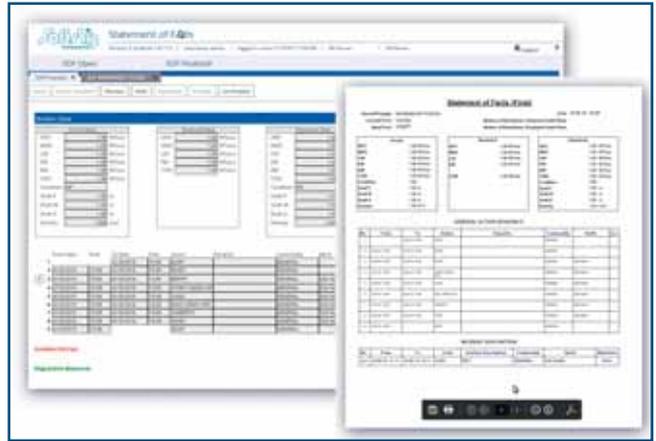
Softship.SAPAS does away with the paper and spreadsheets and, importantly, eliminates the re-keying and constant transferring of information from one medium to another. It operates from a core database that is flexible and which contains pre-loaded data (such as location information) alongside an agent's proprietary information that is re-used throughout the system.

Port tariffs form a large part of the cost of a port call but can be extremely complex. Sometimes they are applied as a lump sum and sometimes as an amount per DWT, GRT, NRT, or a more complicated calculation. Softship.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.

WINNING AND SERVICING NEW BUSINESS

Typically, an agent will be competing for new business whilst working on existing accounts. Owners require the production of comprehensive 'offers' from an agent to give a clear estimate of the likely cost of the port call. This is a time-consuming activity but can be streamlined by re-using information already stored. Softship.SAPAS will take owner, charterer, vessel and port information and marry it with cost items such as pilotage, berthing and towage to generate an 'offer'.

Currencies can be automatically converted and aligned with an owner's requirements and tariffs imported. Once complete, the "offer" is then generated by an inbuilt report writer which allows the agent to create a customized and professional looking document to send to the client. Templates can be



created and re-used.

The heart of the system is its port call facility — this is where Softship.SAPAS manages the range of activities required when the ship is in port. This includes actions relating to the vessel itself, crew, suppliers, port authorities, customers and more. If required, a Statement of Facts is generated and emailed to the client, and can be used by the agent to ensure all activities are completed on time — reminders and priorities can be set.

KEEPING TRACK OF COSTS

Given the complexity of operations in port and tight operating margins, the careful control of accounts is critical to the success of every ship agency business. As such, a core feature of Softship.SAPAS is the handling of all disbursement payments, allowing agents to maintain complete oversight of payments and accounts received, with notifications and warnings to help them keep track. Once all final costs are known after the successful completion of a port call, the system will generate a final disbursement account and automatically attach all supplier invoices. When complete, the agent will 'lock' the account and create a final report for the client.

Mindful of the tough economic environment currently facing agents, Softship.SAPAS is offered on a 'pay-as-you-go' basis requiring zero upfront investment. Similarly, it is open to as many agents needed within a single company, for no additional fee.

Long overdue but no longer ignored, the port agency sector is now able to reap the many benefits delivered by modern IT systems and software. It's important to protect and nurture this vital link in the maritime supply chain as without our army of agents, ships and ports would not enjoy the same easy relationship they have today.



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