



Login

Register for a free trial

Sign up



Search

Menu

Port agents come in from the cold

Tue 08 Mar 2016 by Lars Fischer



Port agencies are probably one of the last outposts of the maritime world to embrace modern technology. Although spreadsheets and emails are commonplace, so are handwritten workbooks and post-it notes. Intelligent software solutions linked to the cloud and coupled with mobile technology platforms have yet to make an entrance, but it seems that change is on the way.

The port agent is in a peculiar position. They are the link between ship and shore and often used as 'Mr fix-it' by the vessel, owner, port or charterer. They are called upon to book the berth, arrange cargo operations, clear customs documentation, facilitate crew changes, ensure victuals are loaded plus a whole host of other activities that a modern ship needs in port. Because their tentacles reach into many areas, they are required to maintain relationships with a great many agencies 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 bill their clients before cashflow dries up. Some large agency networks have developed bespoke software and communications solutions to manage this information, but the vast majority of port agents – and there are some 10,000 companies across the world – are just too small to make this investment.

Maritime software expert, Softship, has made its name by supplying liner operators and agents with off-the-shelf software solutions that manage and streamline their administrative and back-office processes. Adopted by more than 120 companies, their software delivers a more effective and cheaper alternative to the bespoke solutions many large carriers are supporting. Transferring this experience into the port agent sector is a logical step, hence Softship's new creation – Softship Advanced Port Agency Solution (SAPAS).

Agents are often on the move, particularly the smaller companies whose representatives are either travelling between ports or visiting ships. This means that any solution developed to help them work more efficiently must be easily accessible and portable. SAPAS is web-based and optimised for PCs, tablets and smartphones. It uses cloud technology ensuring all data is stored securely but available through any internet connection.

SAPAS is cleverly designed to store and look up all relevant information. This does away with the paper and spreadsheets and, importantly, eliminates the rekeying and constant transferring of information from one medium to another. The 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 per tonne, per teu, per metre length or some other measure. It is important to capture all this data and reuse it accurately.

Agents are continually asked to quote for the likely cost for a ship's port call. This is a time-consuming process that doesn't automatically translate into a fee. SAPAS will take data already input to calculate an accurate quote – or offer – and present it in a bespoke report format that can be quickly emailed to the potential customer. If accepted, the data used in the offer is then translated into a working port call. SAPAS captures all activities and associated costs to create a statement of facts and eventually a disbursement account. It creates tailored task lists and monitors progress to ensure the agent's performance is on track for each vessel they are currently working.

Maintaining and collating this information on a single platform simplifies and streamlines the agent's daily tasks and delivers a more accurate and professional service to the customer. Modern, mobile technology is now widely available and its acceptance by the agency sector is long overdue.

Lars Fischer is managing director of Softship Data Processing in Singapore