

Making the remote office a reality

The remote office at sea has been a hot topic since the advent of maritime broadband – for shipping companies Helikon Shipping, Yasa Shipmanagement and Trading, NSC Schiffahrts and Briese Schiffahrts, introducing new onboard applications has allowed them to bring this concept a little closer to reality

The concept of the 'remote office' traditionally depended for its success on the quality of connectivity. When bandwidth was poor and connections slow, the idea remained interesting in theory but sometimes inconvenient in practice.

Transpose that to shipping and the problem is multiplied many times. The cost and complexity of satellite communications for many years kept vessels out of touch, except in very reduced circumstances.

There were other problems too. Even as the capability of backbone communications began to move towards broadband, many shipowners were still struggling with fundamental problems – access and data delivery, latency and traceability, the lack of useful applications. The idea of being able to make use of remote office functions was very far away from the minds of many owners and managers.

However, these were problems that shipowners like Helikon Shipping, Yasa Shipmanagement and Trading, NSC Schiffahrts and Briese Schiffahrts were all determined to solve, turning to satcom services provider Telaurus to help find new ways to improve office access to their vessels.

Working with their provider allowed the shipping companies to play an important role in the creation of the applications that would be used onboard, giving them direct access to the developers – a process which was hugely beneficial to all involved, as Trevor Whitworth, senior vice president of sales and marketing, Telaurus, explains.

"What does the remote office onboard ship need to function efficiently? We think it is about communication, applications and support, but we also realise that our customers are best placed to answer that question," he said.

"We understood very quickly that despite the potential bells and whistles, the advantages of greater bandwidth had still to be subject to some fundamental principles. These users demand and deserve reliable connectivity, easy-to-use software, dependable voice and consistent data of the highest quality at the lowest cost."

The system that Telaurus was to provide to its shipping company partners was based on its se@COMM software application, which enables users to communicate via e-mail, fax, telex and SMS, as well as enabling controlled web browsing.

The application also includes communications management features such as real-time message delivery and pre-pricing by the kilobit, so the ship can see how much messages will cost to transmit

before it sends them, controlling the communication spend.

Helikon Shipping

One of the greatest benefits that Helikon Shipping noticed after introducing the new system was an immediate impact on its ability to communicate in real time with its fleet of seven handymax bulk carriers.

"It's very common for a product to come out that the manufacturer declares is a game changer that will revolutionise the way a vessel works. Telaurus is one of the few occasions where it really is transformative," said Michael Papaioannou, Helikon.

"The simple fact is that any e-mail that you send to the ship is forced through the ship's terminal. It sits there waiting for the ship to access it with a message that it has arrived. Gone is the requirement to batch messages or advise that the office will be communicating at specific times."

"It changes the whole way you operate with the ship to know that when you send the message you get near-real time delivery, sometimes in a matter of minutes. It basically means you can communicate with the ship pretty much like you are e-mailing any other counterpart. For companies that don't use this type of system it's down to how often the vessel connects with the server, so the rhythm at which that company works will be different."

This level of 'always on' access may still

only be in its early stages of use via Inmarsat FleetBroadband, but Mr Papaioannou believes that, for ships yet to make the jump, this kind of certainty in transmission of information "is a proper tactical advantage".

Operational requirements

The use of communications technology will differ between the various companies applying the systems, of course, depending on their own particular way of doing business.

In the case of Yasa Shipmanagement and Trading, which operates 15 bulk carriers equipped with Telaurus systems, the company had specific needs for its fleet management operations when deciding on new communications applications, according to Emrah Irem, Yasa.

"We wanted to send and receive ISM forms to and from the vessel, (and) Telaurus was able to create a way for us to send the forms and import them into our own shore-based system," he explains.

For NSC Schiffahrts, which operates a mixed fleet of 52 vessels all with se@COMM installed, the owners would always look first for cost and reliability, but with the understanding that flexibility is vital to maintain.

"Se@COMM is a simple system which is easy for the crew and the captain to work with, and also it gives us the possibility to use tools which are non-standard," said Patrick Schulz-Hentschel, of

the NSC Schiffahrts IT department.

"We have a private system which we use to send schedule updates from vessel to the shore which was created by our developers. The ship creates the file which is imported automatically through Telaurus into our database. It's just a small thing but it's very important for us."

Holger Boerchers of Briese Schiffahrts recalls a similar experience of working directly with the application providers to develop solutions to his company's specific needs, when Briese last year asked Telaurus to create some software to add to the se@COMM system to optimise images for transmission via e-mail.

"With cameras able to shoot 8 or 10 megapixels, the image is hard to optimise by compression alone, so we talked to Telaurus who implemented a special function to decrease the resolution directly in the e-mail itself," he explains.

As Mr Boerchers notes, Briese's decision to move solely to Telaurus was made after he had been satisfied that the quality of support his fleet of 97 vessels would receive would meet his company's high standards.

"A real advantage was that the people providing the support had a very high level of knowledge and when we had problems, there were very fast reactions," he said.

"With our previous provider we could be waiting two or three days for a solution. With Telaurus it was minutes or



Holger Boerchers, Briese Schiffahrts (right), introduced new applications to optimise satcom connections to the company's fleet of 97 vessels

hours. That was one of factors behind the decision to move our fleet."

Remote office

The use of these new applications has dramatically changed the way that these shipping companies are able to do business. In the opinion of Mr Papaioannou of Helikon Shipping, the newfound ability to deliver high quality support direct to the vessel is itself one of the aspects of the system which really allow it to operate as an independent remote office.

"The difference for us is the dedicated support e-mail. I can't speak about the competition but if you have a technical problem the Telaurus response is very fast," he said.

"Telaurus encourages the captains to phone or e-mail direct with the support staff. As a result our captains have confidence and they often don't contact us anymore. If they have a problem they will go straight through to Telaurus."

Having this remote support means that the shore office has a little less to do, and removes the problem of relaying information by creating a direct link from the source to the solution.

When these capabilities are added to the technologies for crew calling, anti-virus software, SMS and fax services, tracking, forms and data management, Wi-Fi and GSM connectivity now available onboard ship, operation seems a lot less remote - just like a regular office in fact.

Next generation

Telaurus is now working on the next phase of its 'remote office at sea' concept through the development of its se@REMOTE system, which the company says has been driven entirely by customer feedback, either from IT departments which have had issues accessing onboard PCs, or from IT users onboard the ships themselves.

"Until now, the IT engineer has usually had to be present on the ship because the majority of tasks will require their expertise and knowledge," said Mr Whitworth. "With that comes travel and accommodation expenses and time out of the office."

"Se@REMOTE gives the IT department access to onboard systems remotely without the need for travel or intervention from the crew, saving time and money."

To do this, Telaurus has extended its web-based management tool, SMT, to include a facility which enables users to connect to the network and see a list of all the available IP devices. Then they simply click on the device to gain access to it.

After accessing the remote device the user can change configurations, update operating systems, install applications or

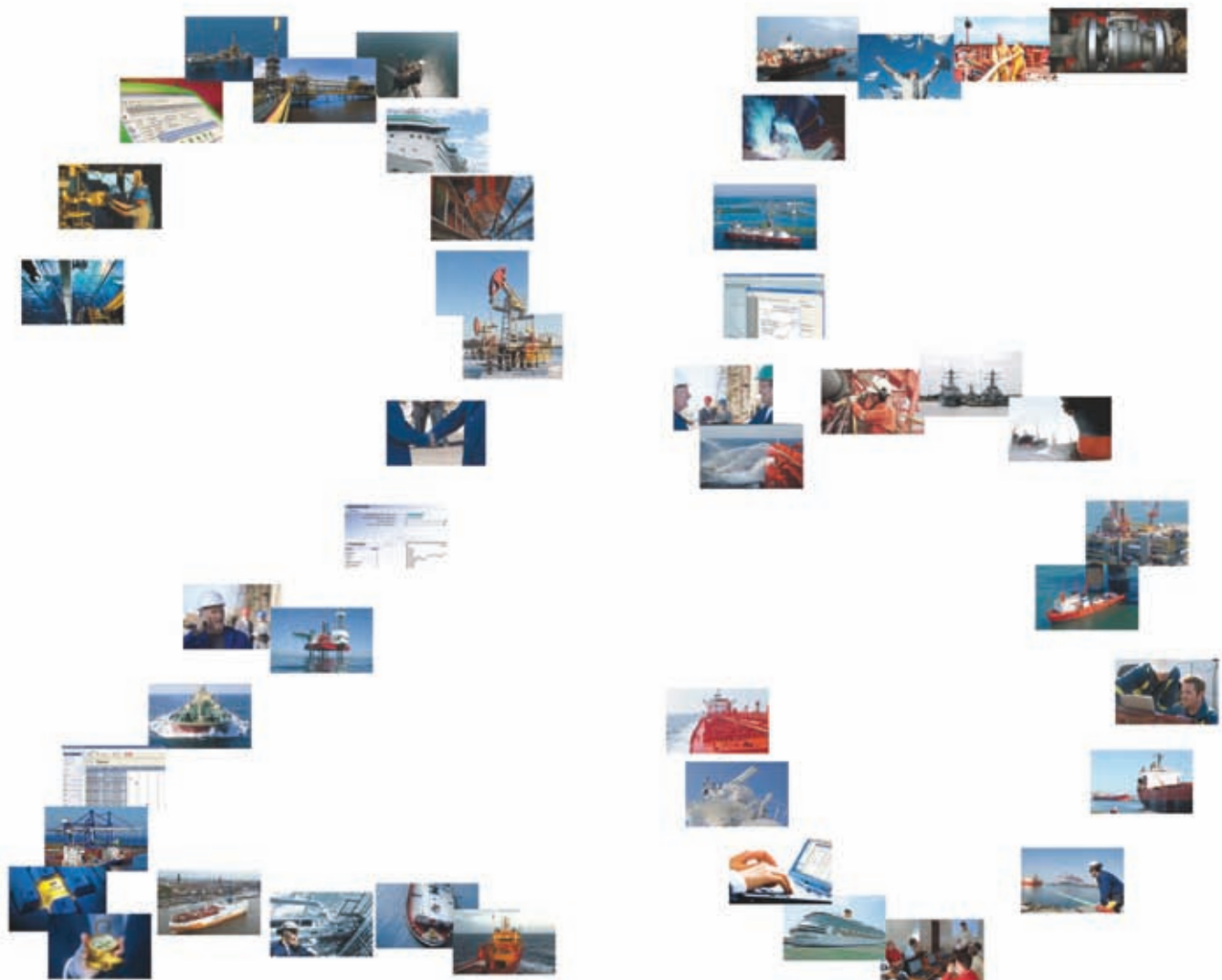
make repairs - all the IT maintenance tasks that an engineer would normally do in person, but with the difference that they can do it globally, from any location.

"For small items, the costs are almost negligible but for bigger jobs, the difference in working this way is that se@COMM will show the engineer how much the work is costing him while he is

doing it," said Mr Whitworth.

"Because se@COMM prices data transfer by the volume sent or received rather than by the time spent connected, the engineer can have thinking time too. Se@REMOTE works over any Inmarsat FleetBroadband or Iridium OpenPort terminals, bringing the remote office even nearer to shore."

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