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Quenching the thirst for data has become essential for ship owners who want to recruit and retain crew at a time when there is a serious shortage of qualified officers.

A growing number of seafarers see onboard Wi-Fi connectivity as a 'must-have' in order to use their smartphones, tablets and laptops, a huge study has revealed.

The Crew Communications 2012 Survey, commissioned by global satellite communications company Astrium Services and supported by consultants Stark Moore McMillan, asked 960 Filipino seafarers – 12% officers and the remainder general crew - what their requirements were and what was actually available.

Findings were generally positive with over two thirds saying they now use some form of communication service, most or all of the time when at sea, while almost all crew can make voice calls using a vessel's satcoms system, at least occasionally.

The survey also found a rise in popularity of seafarers using their own device showing that owners investing in vessel-wide broadband connectivity and corresponding Wi-Fi connections to provide free or low cost internet access would experience better crew recruitment and retention.

"The object of the survey was to establish a clear picture of current crew communication requirements, the level of access to communications, what crew paid for these services and how they paid for them," explained Tilmann Michalke, Senior Product Manager Crew Communications, Astrium Services.

"Many shipping companies face staff retention issues and communication services

can represent an attractive incentive to crew members."

The survey whitepaper states that in just five years, between 2005 and 2010, the shortage of qualified officers grew from a deficit of 10,000 to 13,000.

Reinhold Luppen, Director Solutions, and Patrick Decool, Director New Products at Astrium Services Business Communications say the relentless quest by consumers for always-on connectivity and mobility, and the ability of innovators to cater for these needs with user-friendly services, has led to a significant shift in terms of user behaviour and expectations.

"When it comes to smartphones and tablets, we only have to sit down in a café or in an airport departure lounge to realise how indispensable these have become in our everyday lives. The phenomenon known as 'consumerisation of IT' has since emerged as a direct result, essentially denoting the increasing use by consumers of personal technology and communications devices in a professional environment."

These changes, it seems, are happening at a fast pace and are set to continue. Analysts IDC conducted research into people who use a mobile device for professional reasons and found in Western Europe, the population of mobile workers is due to reach 129.5million this year. The largest increase will be in Asia-Pacific where 838.7million people are expected to use a mobile device by 2015.

"In the shipping community, it is estimated that 60 to 70% of crew use their own personal laptops while away at sea, and 30% have smartphones, with growth set to continue," said the report by Mr Luppen and Mr Decool.

"Current trends show that crew are likely to keep their laptops to store personal files, film and music, as well as use a smartphone or a tablet for phone calls, social media, games and multimedia, mirroring the trends among land-based consumers."

They say that while there are similarities between maritime and land-based consumers in the nature of adoption, the major difference is how IT managers deal with issues linked to the use of consumer devices onboard ship.

"What we're seeing, through the phenomenon of consumerisation of IT, is even stronger emphasis on the issues which have always existed when providing crew with access to private communications – notably budget, potentially disrupted business functions, and network security."

An important issue is keeping crew comms completely separate from business functions to avoid congestion of lines and potential 'corruption' of business-critical data.

"Certain satellite comms providers have developed new systems which enable IT managers to dedicate a local area network (LAN) to the crew members, and install a Wi-Fi connection to which they can establish an internet connection from their smartphones and tablets."

There is also more demand from crew members for bandwidth-hungry activities such as downloading and streaming and the big question for IT managers is how to fulfil communications requirement without blowing the budget. This is not only for personal use but for business use as well, as there is more demand for activities such as video conferencing.

One company, US-based Globecom Maritime, has brought out a new low

INSATIABLE DEMAND FOR DATA

By Samantha Giltrow

bandwidth application – Access Chat Plus – offering cost-effective live video chat onboard ship.

It provides users from the bridge to the mess, with a means to make video calls and chat live over the satellite using a fraction of the data, at a fraction of the cost of shore side applications.

Trevor Whitworth, Senior Vice President Sales and Marketing, said: “Demand for video conferencing and instant messaging has experienced rapid growth, but while land-based users have become accustomed to its convenience, shipboard staff need tools that are designed for the constraints of satellite communications.

“Voice and video conferencing applications use a great deal of bandwidth and that makes it very expensive for seafarers. We identified the need for a tool that gives ships the same functionality but keeps cost under control.”

Gregor Ross, Sales and Marketing Director Europe, said ship visits by Globecom Maritime staff had validated the demand from crew for the new service.

“It can start at the top of a gangway. As soon as the Watch know you are there to work on the communications system, they ask if they are getting video chat or instant messaging. The scuttlebutt will make its way around the ship so fast that everyone you come across will ask you the same question. The demand is almost insatiable. Now we can say we have something much better to offer.”

According to the Stark Moore Macmillan Communications 2012 Research Whitepaper, the highest levels of access to communications are provided to crews on car

carriers, but even then only 58% of respondents said they had always had access to communications. Those sectors with high data requirements generally provided the best level of onboard communications.

Levels of internet provision were very high in the offshore and cruise sectors but low in the bulk, general cargo and container sectors, as expected, and the service most often provided free of charge to seafarers was text only emails.

When asked their preferred method of access to non-voice crew communications, the resounding answer was by use of a laptop with a Wi-Fi connection.

The average total monthly spend on communications, both at sea and ashore, was \$114.62 but this figure varied according to the type of vessel, age and rank of respondent.

However, when asked to identify how much they spent on communications by

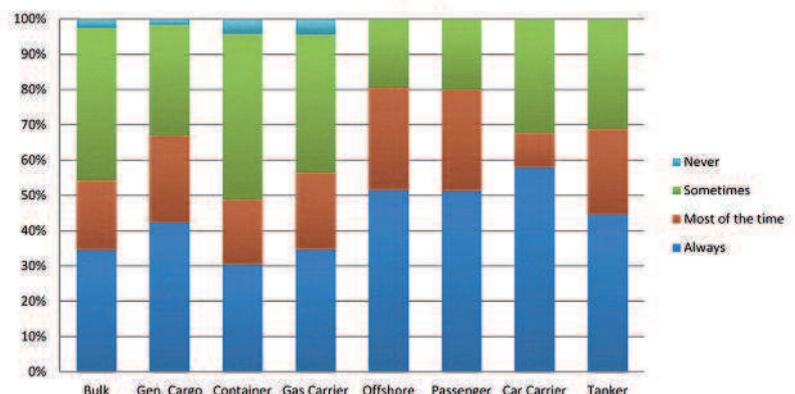
service, the actual spend at sea and in port/coastal waters was \$150 per month – higher than previously estimated. This represented approximately 17% of officers’ disposable income and 40% of ratings’ disposable income.

The survey revealed that most of crew expenditure is on voice communication, but this is higher among older age ranges, indicating that younger people are using other communications methods such as Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and social media instead.

Indeed, respondents were asked to identify the top five websites they would visit if they had access, and the social networking site Facebook was the most popular across all choices and first choice of almost half of all respondents.

However, Captain Kuba Szymanski, Secretary General of InterManager said he could not see all companies providing

Access to Communication Equipment at Sea



Charts from The Crew Communications 2012 Survey

seafarers with the means to access social media when they are scared to use it themselves, despite it offering huge benefits for business.

“As with many other industries, the shipping industry has many older senior executives. That means understanding of new technology, including social media, is not necessarily at the top of the priority list for these individuals and is actually very often feared by them – it is a fear of the unknown.”

He said many could be excused for their ignorance because of the speed in which technology had moved but those who tried to understand their shortcomings and were prepared to give social media a try would benefit most.

“They will quickly be able to see the pros and cons. I believe this is what is needed now,” said Capt Szymanski.

“When it comes to smartphones and tablets, we only have to sit down in a café or in an airport departure lounge to realise how indispensable these have become in our everyday lives”

Reinhold Lüpken, Director Solutions, and Patrick Decool, Director New Products at Astrium Services Business Communications

“I can see that most forward-thinking shipping companies have embarked on this task and are testing the water. I believe it would be silly to not at least acknowledge that the new generation prefer new ways of communication. I also believe that since the younger generation is quick with Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites, those companies who embrace new technology will create a tangible advantage.”

He said by using social media, companies could stand to reap a number of benefits including self-education, sharing information, flexibility and efficiency to name a few.

However, he said there was a big downside: “Knowledge is power and, especially for my generation, sharing this power is an alien idea. We worked so hard to get where we are, so why should we make it easier for the rest? I can see a lot of this attitude.”

In terms of provision for seafarers he said: “I don’t think shipping companies are doing enough. Only blue chip companies are trying. In fairness satellite communication is still very new (in the area of social media) and very expensive. There is no hardware available onboard either.

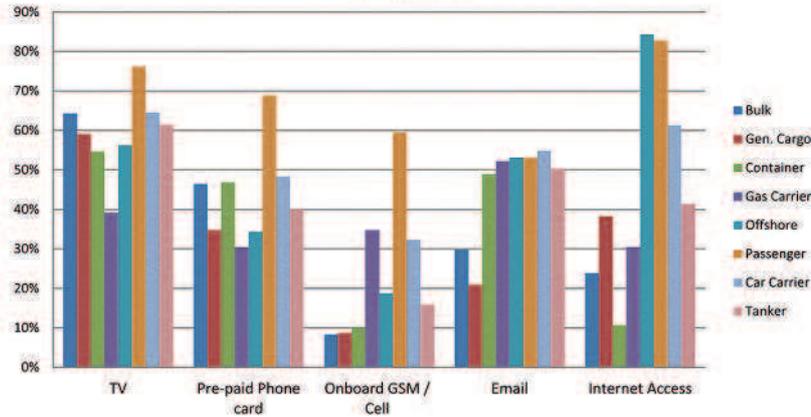
“It will take some time before it is widespread. Seafarers are using their own laptops at present and collect thousands of SIM cards, but that is only good when in sight of land...they have to be patient.”

Commenting further on the results of the survey, Mr Lüpken and Mr Decool of Astrium Services, said a major factor of the level of communications provided was the choice of satellite service, with flat-rate VSAT packages, starting at around \$2,000 per month, covering many vessels’ corporate and crew needs.

“Shipping companies who invest in VSAT for corporate or business purposes are now understanding the benefits of supplying crew communications with the same equipment, with priority on the ship’s business.

“Contrary to VSAT, mobile satellite services (MSS) offer a pricing scheme based on the amount of data consumed, so it is very important that the IT manager sets

Communications Services provided Onboard
(% by Sector)



limits and alerts for both business and crew in order to avoid receiving unexpectedly high data costs.”

They said another major issue for IT managers, when it came to crew, was additional, time-consuming administration: “Given the increasing use of personal devices at sea, the trendsetting satellite communications providers have developed software and solutions to enable crew to administrate private comms themselves, directly from their tablet computer or their smartphone. Once the separate LAN has

been set up, crew are free to create their own account and configure settings linked to the amount of data they wish to consume and the subsequent cost.”

They continued: “What is clear from these examples is that the phenomenon that is consumerisation of IT, or the increasing use of personal devices by crew onboard, need not present such a challenge for IT managers. Clearly it requires them to deal with a host of dramatically different cost, security and technical issues which previously were not part of their remit.”

However, recent developments have shown that the forward-thinking satcoms providers are stepping up to the challenge and working on solutions to help them tackle these head-on.

Astrium Services’ Head of Maritime Services, Tore Morten Olsen, said: “It’s clear to see that seafarers are keen to be able to communicate with friends and family when they are at sea, just as easily as they could at home. Offering this capability supports any operator’s crew welfare strategy.

“This new data will assist us in developing innovative new solutions that will directly meet future user requirements. Likewise, with a stronger understanding of what drives the user, we can support operators through the on-going development of our core connectivity services and value added services.”

Mr Lüppen and Mr Decool concluded by saying: “The thirst for data and related apps and platforms will continue to grow among shipping company staff as it will on land among the rest of the consumer population. With this as a backdrop, the best ships’ systems will be run by IT managers who simplify the management of satellite communications and, even better, place the responsibility for crew comms with the crew themselves.” ■