

How to get the best from an onboard broadband service

Shipowners need to make sure they install firewalls – and know how to avoid big bills

DESPITE a number of high-profile reports of shipowners installing fleet-wide broadband services, there remains a fear among managers about costs.

Telecoms service providers are releasing a stream of news about operators and owners installing the latest services, all claiming superb quality and best cost management – yet there remain stories of owners finding themselves surprised by huge monthly bills because the systems have not been installed properly.

While the higher-cost systems, such as Inmarsat's fleet broadband, remain as a dial-up service, there are some V-SAT systems that are offering always-on broadband.

Telaurus general manager Gregor Ross says these can produce a number of unpleasant surprises.

"What we are focused on – all the providers, in fact – is the provision of broadband," he says.

"The way I see it is that broadband promises so much for managers and crew, but for a number that have implemented it, it is not yet delivering as promised."

Mr Ross says there are two main reasons why broadband from some of the main providers is giving shipowners a nasty shock.

First there are the solution providers that have not upgraded their services and systems to take advantage of the capabilities of broadband. Some are still using dial-up technology that will select an automatic connection, look at a mail box or a hub ashore – whether a private one or in the office – and collect the mail.

This does not take advantage of the benefits of broadband, he says, which for many managers enables the ship to perform like a remote office.

His other criticism is about the lack of firewalls being provided.

"If you go down to PC World and buy a laptop, you will get common applications designed for an inexpensive broadband environment of about 10mb per second; therefore a Windows update will not be expensive – say \$10," he says.



Part of the problem is it is difficult for shipmanagers to know how much data is going to be sent or received over a broadband connection

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But on a shipboard system, \$10 may buy just one megabyte of data – a small photograph, perhaps.

Firewalls are there, Mr Ross suggests, not just to prevent malicious activity, but also to prevent high-volume downloads over an expensive satellite connection.

"I have seen computers talking away across FleetBroadband and Iridium Openport and the owners getting a huge bill.

"I saw an owner who said they had not connected up the computer fully – certainly they weren't using it, as they were awaiting the email software – but after the first month, the ship got a bill for \$45,000. All it was for was the laptop talking to the internet, as there was no firewall."

He admits this will lead to the connection being used as a dial-up – and thus the benefits of broadband will be lost.

There are horror stories, such as a Greek owner who trialled broadband, only to find the amount of traffic used on a vessel shot up from 10Mb for the month to 50Mb – yet there were no changes to the data and operational conditions of the ship.

The problem was the system was spending huge amounts of data just to keep the connection open because the settings were wrong.

Mr Ross may be a bit biased, hoping customers would opt for other systems, but the scare stories are real enough at least to merit shipowners

making sure they have installed all the checks and stops that can be installed to ensure broadband works as well as it should.

The benefit of an always-on connection is that necessary and important data can be transmitted as and when requested or demanded.

Service providers can define shipmanagers as one of two types: there are those who want the same for less cost – and those who will want to get a lot more usage for the same cost.

So if a customer is spending \$2,000 a month, when they move to broadband they want to add the ability to do virus updates, chart updates and other new things within the same bill.

The other customer – often the third-party shipmanager – will often move to broadband to cut the \$1,000 a month bill to \$500 a month.

Part of the problem is the shipmanagers rarely know their data requirements. It is difficult to know how much data is going to be sent or received over a broadband

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connection, as the master and crew – and often those in the shipmanager's office – are not computer wizards who regularly talk in megabytes and terrabytes.

Shipmanagers are being advised to take a 'belt and braces' approach to broadband.

The always-on connection has its uses, but is best used with a number of firewalls.

There should be a ship-based one to prevent unnecessary data being transferred over an expensive satellite link – and one at the service provider's land-based hub, which will help limit excessive transmissions to the ship, but also add as a security filter to prevent unwanted access.

V-SAT systems can have similar problems – and the development of automatic switching may create additional complications.

Many owners are looking to install both a more costly, but reliable Inmarsat or Iridium system, as well as the cheaper, but weather-sensitive V-SAT. Often this comes with automatic switching.

Owners have been asking service providers to give them the option of switching manually.

When the V-SAT service is available, for instance, crew calling and internet access may be available – but the ship may want to bar this when only the more expensive system is available. ■