**IT and the Maritime Industry**

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Information Technologies (IT) and the Maritime industry always had a love-hate relationship. Every person will admit that IT is needed to move the industry forward, yet (and naturally) people are reluctant to move to something new and… well… change. The irony is that the Maritime industry is one of the oldest industries in the world; this would suggest that they would be more “ready” to accept something new and something to move them to the next era. Unfortunately, people prefer to stick to what they know, even if that means that they might be left behind.

This is not to say that the industry as a whole rejects IT. Organisations like Digital Ship have done wonders in promoting the advantages of IT, even to the point of making the oh-so-scary unmanned vessel a realistic possibility. It would take a book to write about the advantages and disadvantages of IT in the Maritime Industry, so instead I will concentrate on 4 points: a) the probable reasons for the reluctance of use of IT, b) going green, c) “clean” business, and finally, d) efficiency and shipbrokers.

One of the first experiences I had when trying to train a Greek Captain on a newly installed crewing software at a large Greek ship-owning company, was the Captain asking me, or rather telling me: “I’ve been doing this longer than you’ve been alive; what makes you think your way is better!?” That took me by surprise, not because of the brash manner the Greek Captain used, but because… well, he had a good point! Shipping has been around far longer than IT, malware and email spoofing (when someone sits in the middle, intercepts your emails and sends them along, pretending to be you, while changing your banking details to his), and these companies have been very successful in doing what they do best. It is very difficult to change one’s nature and one’s habits, especially when they’ve proven to be working. It is not a coincidence that this reluctance is seen in companies where a lot of management positions are held by men who in other industries would have probably already retired. Having survived through World Wars and market crashes, one can understand why they would rather stick to what helped them survive. Most of the changes we see in the industry are adopted by the new management (often sons of the owners) who are more acceptant of technology and can better see the advantages IT can provide.

One of the biggest advantages that a good IT system can offer is a paperless office. “Going Green” has been a prime topic in the last 2 decades; when your local restaurant and coffee shop uses “biodegradable straws” as a selling point, you know the world has become more environmentally conscious. Granted that, compared to the sulphur emissions of a vessel, paper is the least of the environment’s problems, it doesn’t mean that the back-office can’t do its part. One of the biggest side-effects of a paperless office is the backup system. With all the malware and viruses infecting people’s emails and personal computers, a good backup system is imperative to ensure that the company’s history is safe and secure, and available to help the company grow. In the past, fire, mould or a rat could destroy documents that were stored “safely”. Now, with redundant backup systems, companies can be sure that their data will not be lost.

An unfortunate blemish of our industry is that a fair number of people still believe it to be “unclean” (to use a shipping BOL term). Even though there are many people and members of institutes, such as the ICS, whose “word is their bond”, there will always be people trying to take advantage of the inefficiencies and trust expected between professionals. A company that tends to “fiddle” with their documents does not want a system that produces fixed, standardised documents that are backed up, logged and keep an audit trail of changes made. Software has helped “clean up” shipping, by ensuring that jobs are done correctly, ethically and in a standardised manner.

The final topic I would like to touch on is efficiency; this is the topic that, probably, affects us Shipbrokers the most. I’m sure we’ve all imagined, at some point in our careers, what it would be like walking into Lloyd’s Coffee House in 1686 and writing your cargo or vessel on the blackboard, awaiting fixture. Even better, getting up to mark your job as fixed! But let’s be honest… how much business could we really do with the slow “transfer of information” at that time? I’m sure all newcomers to the industry have wondered why everyone is shouting in emails (for those of you that don’t know, typing in capitals in an email is considered shouting). Capitals, and all those abbreviations are a remnant of Telex. It is no coincidence that shipbrokers (and here I also include agents) were some of the first adopters of Telex, and some of the last to come off the technology; they needed information to flow as quickly as possible, and as cheap as possible. It is also this same reason that shipbrokers also adopted emails very quickly. Information is a shipbroker’s bread-and-butter, and a good software that provides this information as quickly and efficiently as possible is invaluable to a broker. E-Bills are seeing a lot of attention in the last few years for the exact same reason. Other than emails, AIS is probably the next most used IT feature in the Maritime Industry, from wanting to know where your vessel is in the world, or if it is soon calling a port (either to sell your services as an agent, or to arrange for an inspection).

The Maritime industry is very set in its ways. Even though most companies are prepared to look into improving their processes using software, they are not prepared to change the way they do business. This is why so many maritime software companies closed down after the dot-com boom (and bust) of the 2000’s. Those companies tried to change the industry without understanding what makes it tick, and this is why the companies that survived, or emerged thereafter, are companies that started as inhouse departments of ship-owning companies, or whose founders worked in shipping to begin with.

As I mentioned in the beginning, IT in the Maritime industry could fill a book (maybe more). But there is one thing that will resound from all pages, articles or books that you will read: IT is not a solution to your problem; it is a tool to get your job done. IT itself won’t grow your bottom line, but help you do what you do better!