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SPOTLIGHT ON SHIP MANAGEMENT


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Governments and
crew changes


Ship managers: Improvise, adapt and overcome

The pandemic has been a catalyst
to change for third-party managers
as remote communications and crew
well-being are brought to the fore


Photo: Bloomberg



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MANAGERS FACED THEIR TOUGHEST CHALLENGE IN CHANGING SHIPS' CREWS

Ship managers scrambled to cope with Covid-19 pandemic as a global lockdown blew up contingency plans

Paul Berrill
London

The crew-change crisis was the biggest challenge for ship managers in the last year, requiring hard work, ingenuity, organisation and understanding in large measures.

The industry had to learn lessons as it responded to the tests set by Covid-19.

Ship management bosses said the pandemic took centre stage in 2020 and if crew changes are no longer in crisis, they continue to be a major issue.

Seafarers' mental and physical welfare were catapulted to the forefront, not before time, and awareness of the stresses on shore-side staff were also highlighted as companies rushed to implement contingency plans that had not been designed with a pandemic in mind.

Global ship management groups saw what was happening

“We learned a lot as we walked through the different scenarios in different countries — Olav Nortun, Thome Group

in China in early 2020 and scrambled to implement emergency strategies as border restrictions were imposed first across Asia and then the world.

Managers' crewing teams worked non-stop to identify when and where crew changes were possible and to get permission from

national bodies and arrange flights, while ensuring Covid tests and quarantines were undertaken and personal protection equipment used.

Thome Group was undergoing its annual review of business contingency plans in mid-January last year, just as it was hearing about the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan.

Chief executive Olav Nortun said the group decided it needed a cen-

tral emergency response management team — and put it in place by the end of that month.

BUILDING CAPABILITY

The [contingency] plan had a lot of scenarios but when we started to look at it, we realised there was something missing,” Nortun said. “If that [lockdown] happens to us, do we have the capability?”

Despite his time in South Korea

during the SARS epidemic, Nortun said it soon became apparent that the company's existing plans were not sufficient to respond to a total lockdown, so Thome had to ensure people could work from home, which it had not previously sanctioned.

But even equipping staff with laptops, headsets and cameras was no longer simple, as getting computer components from China became difficult after borders closed.

Nortun said that as the virus spread, Thome's team was “constantly communicating what changes were needed to be able to operate.

“We learned a lot as we walked through the different scenarios in different countries”. That experience was shared by other managers.

No one could anticipate what was coming, said Wallem Ship-management managing director and interim chief executive John-Kaare Aune.

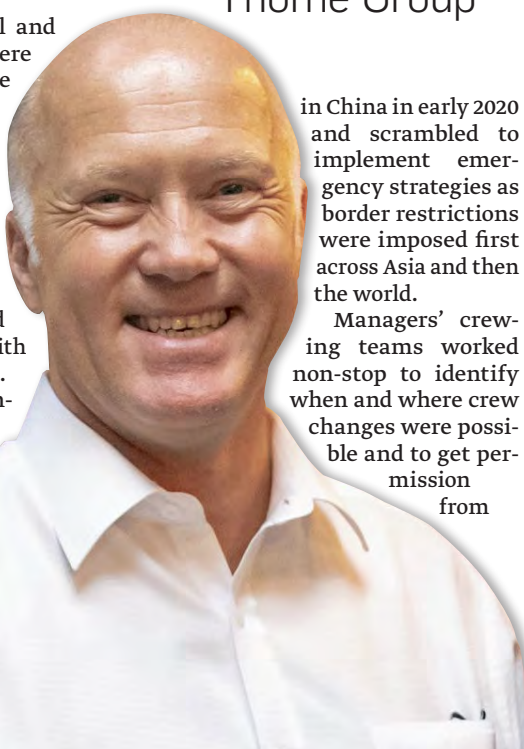
“The challenges around crew change rotation have been front and centre for shipping, and definitely for ship management for the past 12 months,” Anglo-Eastern



EMERGENCY RESPONSE:

Thome Group chief executive Olav Nortun

Photo: Thome Group



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CENTRE STAGE: Seafarers' mental and physical welfare was catapulted to the top of ship managers' priorities
Photo: Columbia Shipmanagement

BATTLE-HARDENED TEAMS TOOK SECOND WAVE IN THEIR STRIDE

Crew-change lessons have been learned at a cost, but opinions are divided on how hard the hit has been from subsequent lockdowns caused by new strains of the Covid-19 virus.

Most of the world's ports have been a challenge for seafarer rotations at some point over the last year, ship managers told TradeWinds.

Wallem Shipmanagement managing director and interim chief executive John-Kaare Aune pointed to big problems early on when India would not even let its own nationals return or travel out as it went into lockdown.

"Many governments would say they were open for crew changes but then were putting so many obstacles or hurdles in place that it was extremely difficult to get the permissions to organise them," he said.

Like many, he cited the difficulties caused by China refusing to allow foreign crews in and said the cost of repatriating Chinese crews was at times \$4,000 for flights that would normally cost between \$500 and \$600.

MUTATED STRAINS

It got easier, but the spread of new virus strains since December last year has meant many countries have reimposed strict entry requirements, making it again difficult to obtain visas and flights.

Columbia Shipmanagement said it had significantly reduced the number of seafarers stuck on ships, but the new strains had an immediate pullback.

But chief executive Mark O'Neil said a maturing response has meant many maritime hubs are now more likely to insist on testing and quarantining than stopping all movement.

"When we came to the second wave, we found the crewing departments were battle hardened and better able to take problems and pressures in their stride," O'Neil said. The group has incurred \$6m in extra costs so far, he reckoned.

Anglo-Eastern chief executive Bjorn Hojgaard said the development of crew change protocols had meant most companies found ways to get things done in many parts of the world. It was not back to normal, but it was at least possible.

BOTTLENECKS

"We are about the same place today and I have not seen a further tightening in recent weeks, albeit I would not be surprised if we saw some over the next three months," Hojgaard said.

He singled out Singapore as an example of how it can be done but cited China as a remaining bottleneck.

Thome Group chief executive Olav Nortun added: "We are still not out of it. It is not as hard as in the middle of last year but still significant, particularly with Malaysia and Indonesia being in lockdown and the Philippines preventing

Governments would say they were open for crew changes but then were putting so many obstacles in place

— John-Kaare Aune, Wallem

crew change for a number of nationalities."

Wilhelmsen Ship Management president and chief executive Carl Schou said the situation was improving.

"The biggest disappointment is that unilateral agreements between countries did not happen.

Most countries just shut their borders, end of discussion. Many still have closed borders," he said.

"We had

JOHN-KAARE AUNE: Wallem's new managing director of ship management

Photo: Wallem Group

vessels waiting in China for five months with coal. The crews were not allowed to go ashore, not even when they were sick," Schou added.

The cost for crew from the Philippines has risen by \$1,500 to \$2,000 per seafarer going to join a ship, he estimated.

Aune added: "I think it will continue to be more difficult for quite some time again, until we start seeing reductions in new cases."

Jonathan Boonzaier contributed to this story

We took the decision early on to try and do whatever it takes to get people relieved

— Bjorn Hojgaard, Anglo-Eastern

chief executive Bjorn Hojgaard said.

"We took the decision early on to try and do whatever it takes to get people relieved.

EASIER TO COPE

"In the beginning, it was very difficult because it was a hard lockdown with nobody moving across borders, but since May last year we have been more or less able to cope," Hojgaard said.

Aune reiterated the message that responding quickly and decisively was key.

"Unlike many companies we were clear that we wanted to keep doing crew changes where it was safe and possible.

"We were not one of the ones that thought putting a moratorium on crew changes for a couple of months would solve it."

Bigger groups had an advantage,

said Columbia Shipmanagement chief executive Mark O'Neil.

But even with a large crewing department and a Covid database that was updated hourly with the latest intelligence on what was and was not possible, its staff had to work 24/7 to cope.

"It would have been a very frightening period if we had not had that scale," O'Neil said.

At the worst stage of the pandemic, he said Columbia had fewer than 70 seafarers beyond their 12-month contracts, out of a pool of 14,000.

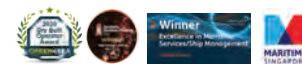
But O'Neil added: "Were we frustrated nine times out of 10 when we thought we had a rotation set up and the crew was ready to get off, and a port changed [its rules].

"Of course, that was frustrating for crew and staff alike, but then we had backup to reprocess where we could do it."

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PANDEMIC PROVES INDUSTRY IS A PEOPLE BUSINESS AT HEART

IN FOCUS: The crisis has cast a spotlight on how well shipping's workers are treated, particularly the 1.7m who go to sea
Photo: Bloomberg

The way in which ship managers have cared for crews and clients will likely define how well they come out of the coronavirus pandemic

Paul Berrill
London

The coronavirus pandemic has been a catalyst for change that was either coming or needed across the ship management industry in the way people are perceived and treated.

"It is not only the responsibility of the shipping industry to recognise seafarers for the essential job they are doing, but it is also the duty of governments worldwide to acknowledge seafarers' basic rights," said Ian Beveridge, chief executive of Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement and the Schulte Group.

"Failing to do so will keep affecting our ability to rotate crews on and off ships and constantly jeopardise the passage of essential goods to keep shelves stocked and economies running," he said.

Not only has the crew-change crisis shaken the shipping industry's role in world trade and

revealed a lack of influence among global governments, but it has cast a spotlight on how well its workers are treated, particularly the 1.7m who go to sea.

"The single biggest differentiator between companies that have managed the pandemic well and will come out of it well, and those who haven't and won't, will be [their ability] to carry people through and beyond," said Columbia Shipmanagement chief executive Mark O'Neil.

Engaging with crew was in the past "left to the coalface" of marine and technical superintendents, but O'Neil said he now does a weekly 20-minute video with all crew and staff and each director calls 10 vessels a week.

Columbia brought in mental health help systems and a wifi access. "Generally, our crew morale is higher than it's ever been because we now better identify with them, communicate with them, provide for their welfare.



IAN BEVERIDGE: Schulte Group chief executive
Photo: Ian Lewis

Prior to Covid-19, crew were talking about being an invisible workforce. How sad is that?" said O'Neil.

Anglo-Eastern said moves such as quarantining crew in hotels, chartering flights and putting a pool of people up as a buffer against future ship calls have helped maintain morale.

"This year has been excessively difficult for seafarers. You go on board ships not knowing whether you will be relieved in accordance with your contract terms, you have limited access to shore leave and if you get sick it may be difficult to get to a doctor. And add to that the stress of worrying about family members at home being exposed to Covid-19," said chief executive Bjorn Hojgaard.

The company has also provided free internet services for crew members to contact loved ones, and access to professionals who can help with physical and mental well-being.

Last year, Schulte launched a new version of its seafarer portal app to improve communication between crew members and shore staff. Beveridge is among many calling for crews to be granted key worker status and given priority access to Covid-19 vaccines.

Thome Group said the designation of seafarers as key workers needs to become a reality.

"Sovereign nations need to ensure they implement the necessary regulatory changes required for it to be effective," said chief executive Olav Nortun.

"We know that the healthcare systems may come under pressure in areas with high infection rates, but seafarers as key workers need to be prioritised.

"The industry must work on setting up hubs for the vaccination of seafarers," he added.

Anglo-Eastern's Hojgaard said: "We all appreciate that nation states have an obligation to keep the virus at bay but saying 'I welcome ships and cargoes into my port, but I don't accept crew change here' is a beggar-thy-neighbour policy that isn't befitting for any country."

Exmar Ship Management head of business development Maximilian Dietrich said: "We must face up

to the cold hard reality that, as an industry, shipping has failed to influence governments or push through crew-change solutions. We need to reflect on this and look at what changes need to be made."

Wilhelmsen Ship Management president and chief executive Carl Schou said many seafarers come from developing countries where there is no vaccine programme yet. "Most are young so it looks like they will be at the end of the queue. We have heard that the Philippines will set up a vaccine programme for seafarers, but only in late 2022."

Schou believes managers or owners might eventually be able to acquire vaccines but said it is difficult to administer a vaccine that requires two shots several weeks apart. "To be manageable, we would need a one-shot vaccine," he said.

In March, Russia did recognise seafarers as key workers and began giving them vaccinations.

Hamburg-based Danica Crewing Services had about 500 Russian seafarers among the 1,500 East European crew it deploys. Managing director Henrik Jensen said Danica crew were among the first to receive vaccinations in Saint Petersburg.

Even as a smaller crew manager, Jensen told TradeWinds it had been able to plan crew changes around circumstances. "So, when a ship came to a point which is reachable, then you relieve all the crew you can at that point, including maybe crew that still have one month of their contract to do."

Jensen, though, is less optimistic than some. "The IMO [International Maritime Organization] protocols are good, but I am afraid that next time it will be a different situation and, if it is in 25 years, everybody will have forgotten."

"But I hope the better crew welfare that has come out of this will not go away — that this is something we can take out of this," Jensen said.

Jonathan Boonzaier contributed to this article

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HEADWAY ON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES MUST BE MAINTAINED

Addressing crews' psychological and emotional well-being should be viewed as an investment, not a cost

Paul Berrill
London

Concern about seafarers' mental health has been significantly boosted by the pressures they have been under during the crew-change crisis, but there is still a long way to go.

Mental Health Support Services (MHSS), which provides support for shipping companies, reported this month that problems among seafarers are getting worse not better.

Crew on ships reported that anxiety was a growing issue, with burnout and depression also cited over the three months to the end of February, MHSS said.

Asian seafarers topped the list of nationalities most affected, according to masters' requests for counselling support.

MHSS provides services — one-to-one therapy, training and a confidential 24/7 hotline run by clinical psychologists — to about 5,000 ships.

Chief executive Christian Ayerst, a former shipping lawyer, said: "It is vital we don't just pay lip service to the term mental health.

"We must ensure it becomes a lasting conversation, even as we look ahead to vaccine hopes to push us out of this pandemic."

STRESS INCREASING

Clinical psychologist and MHSS managing director Charles Watkins, said mental health issues on ships are not new, but the stress on seafarers has increased with the crew-change crisis.

"Tending to emotional needs and health is just as important as physical health," Watkins told TradeWinds.

Seafarers' isolation can make it more difficult to recognise problems and in the past people tended to suffer privately, he said. But he added that there is now "more readiness among seafarers and management to change the environment".

After being stuck on board for long periods, seafarers may leave ships without telling management about their problems because they



MIND MATTERS:

MHSS managing director Charles Watkins believes mental health is as important as physical health. Below left, CEO Christian Ayerst

Photos: MHSS

It is vital we don't just pay lip service to the term mental health. We must ensure it becomes a lasting conversation — Christian Ayerst, MHSS

are frightened of being seen to be unfit, Watkins said.

"Mental health is a normal part of life. We all suffer, and it is nothing to be ashamed of," he added.

Recognition of harmful processes is necessary before they can be stopped through raising awareness and setting clear boundaries.

MHSS runs training courses on bullying designed to change harmful cultures and to help other people

step in to stop incidents where necessary.

MHSS aims to train seafarers to spot behaviours and be alert to personality types and leadership styles to prevent systematic issues.

During the pandemic, seafarers have struggled with additional issues such as being unable to transfer wages to their families, quite apart from being stuck on vessels for extended periods with no

way home. In the past, they could leave a ship at an upcoming port.

Ayerst aims to challenge the idea that mental health is a cost centre, to make it an investment.

Watkins added that the goal is to give seafarers the tools and responsibility to help themselves so that "they don't need us".

"Creating a more caring and compassionate environment is better and more productive for everyone," he said.

Crew-change crisis also put toll on shore staff

Seafarers were not the only ones to suffer during the crew-change crisis — onshore crewing staff also worked long hours with constant stress, frustration and pressure.

"One of the biggest fallacies of this pandemic is to think that there are only stresses and strains on board," Columbia Shipmanagement chief executive Mark O'Neil said.

"It is so frustrating and mentally draining to go through all the arrangements for a crew change and then have them fall down at the last hurdle and have aggravated crew screaming down the phone that you are not doing enough."

Mental Health Support Services clinical psychologist Charles Watkins said it is important to acknowledge the extra work shore staff are having to do to get crews off ships.

There is a mental toll from feelings of failure for crewing department staff when arrangements are not possible to see through due to no fault of their own, he said, adding that training can help redefine definitions of success.

Extra calls were made by crewing departments, fleet managers and directors to discuss how to cope with port calls in addition to regular day-to-day calls between superintendents and ships, and well-being services were introduced alongside upgraded online training systems.

Crewing departments also contacted families to keep them up to date with situations, and ship managers collaborated to share the cost of arranging charter flights for crew changes as well as chartering planes.



SUCCESS: Seafarers returning home

Photo: Danica Crewing Services

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New ways of working are opening up

Paul Berrill and
Jonathan Boonzaier

Last year was challenging for ship managers but they can see light at the end of the tunnel amid the ways the business is changing.

Wilhelmsen Ship Management president and CEO Carl Schou said the pipeline of new customers tapered out in the middle of 2020 as the normally lengthy sales process of getting to know clients was stymied.

"Getting new business is difficult because we can't meet and greet new customers," he said.

But Wilhelmsen did complete the acquisition of Ahrenkiel Ship Management in 2020 and has started its integration, which Schou said was a major undertaking in the middle of a pandemic.

Anglo-Eastern chief executive Bjorn Hojgaard said the year demonstrated how managers can equip shipowners with the information to deal more productively with charterers. "Ship managers are moving away from a transactional [approach of] managing assets to a much more partnership role," he said.

Columbia Shipmanagement chief executive Mark O'Neil told TradeWinds: "I didn't want 2020 to be defined by Covid-19 because we had a lot of projects and joint ventures in process."

The group managed to set up Saudi and Greek offices and concluded an Italian set up with Premuda during the pandemic.

Thome Group CEO Olav Nortun said he is not yet sure managers are ready to take on all the lessons, but more new approaches should be expected.

"Ship management is a logistics exercise. We bring people, stores, spares on board a platform that moves. Are we going to allow so many people aboard? Is there anything we haven't thought about?"

FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT FOR SHIPOWNER PARTNERSHIPS

Industry body Intermanager is looking to convince owners who do not use managers that maybe they should

Paul Berrill
London

Ship management industry organisation Intermanager is looking for ways to convince vessel owners who do not use third-party managers that life could be better if they did.

Intermanager president Mark O'Neil, the chief executive of Columbia Shipmanagement, believes the resilience shown by managers during the Covid-19 crisis is proof that the future is bright for what he prefers to term "second-party" managers.

"If you think that some 30% of the world fleet is managed by third-party managers, then there is everything to gain in persuading the other 70% that: 'You have seen what we have done over the last year, don't you think that life would have been a lot easier for you if you had been with us?'"

"There will always be crises," O'Neil told TradeWinds.

"That said, the sector has to focus more on quality rather than driving down the price of the service to the extent it becomes very cut-throat," he added.

O'Neil said Intermanager is looking into ways to create an inclusive industry standard, which is aspirational but achievable for individual companies. "The focus is quality service at a fair price. If we do that, I think our clients will buy into that and the overall quality of service will rise across the industry."

But he added that he thinks "the



MARK O'NEIL:
The Intermanager president says the organisation is looking at ways to set a standard for ship managers

Photo: Columbia

"You have seen what we have done over the last year, don't you think that life would have been a lot easier for you if you had been with us?"

— Mark O'Neil

concept of a third-party manager is an anachronism".

"I don't think there is any logic that a ship manager can't manage a vessel to at least the same standard as an owner/operator. There is no reason why they should try less, be less interested or have less resources.

"Quite the reverse. There is every logic why a manager can

potentially manage better if they are able to bring economies of scale, technologies, investment that perhaps the small owner/operator cannot," he explained.

The third-party tag suggests a divestment of responsibility or accountability that O'Neil does not like.

"We have to bring the industry much closer to the client and talk

about second-party management, more about partnership, joint ventures and collaboration," he said.

But what would an Intermanager standard look like, given the industry has previously adopted key performance indicators (KPIs) and benchmarking but still only attracts a third of the world's fleet?

O'Neil said he does not want to pre-empt what the standard will be as Intermanager is just starting the process of working it out.

"We will look at what that standard looks and feels like. The worst thing we could do, would be to divide the sector into the big versus the small, the haves versus the have-nots. This has to be inclusive, achievable and realistic.

"But by the same token, we have to be quite ruthless if there are operators that simply don't come up to the minimum standards. Just as RightShip [the bulk sector, this can be a standard that clients benefit from," he said.

RAISING THE BAR

Intermanager does not want to revive KPIs as they suggest a pass or fail approach, but there will be performance criteria built in that works for the majority, O'Neil said.

The organisation hopes to have a "living standard that can develop with the industry as we all learn and adapt" ready by the middle of 2021, he added.

Collaboration could be between competing companies to provide joint services rather than wasteful differentiation. Sharing information would also be needed, as both can help in "raising the bar of our collective performance".

O'Neil said: "No one benefits if a particular ship manager is held out for poor standards or malpractice. We should get to a point where second-party ship management partnership becomes a no-brainer."

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COLLABORATION IS THE ANSWER TO ZERO-CARBON INNOVATION

Ship managers are looking to partner owners on alternative fuels and propulsion systems to operate greener vessels



ANGLO-EASTERN:
Chief executive Bjorn Hojgaard sees evolution through innovation on the longer-term horizon
Photo: Marine Money

Paul Berrill
London

If Covid-19 and the crew-change crisis have been the most pressing challenges for ship managers, then decarbonisation is arguably the greater, longer-term issue they will have to grapple with.

Anglo-Eastern envisages decarbonisation as being part of a growing trend towards strategic partnerships between managers and owners. An ammonia-fuelled new-castlemax it has been involved in the design of could hit the water in the next three or four years.

Chief executive Bjorn Hojgaard said: "In the short term, it is about seeing if we can improve efficiency with the existing equipment. It's about being better at managing voyages."

The International Maritime Organization's upcoming index assessing the efficiency of existing vessels — the Energy Efficiency Existing Ship Index — and the tailoring of solutions for operational efficiency is an area where ship managers can play a role, he said.

"On a longer horizon it is about being involved with our shipowner partners on innovating new ships, engines and fuels," Hojgaard added.

Anglo-Eastern also has a small passengership in Europe burning hydrogen as fuel on a test basis, and Hojgaard said: "We have even partnered with a company like Core-Power, which is developing molten salt nuclear reactors."

"That is perhaps a bit further into the future, but we have been working on space requirements and design for such equipment in engine rooms."

Wilhelmsen Ship Management is responding to the accelerating focus on alternative fuels with a two-pronged reorganisation.

"One leg will focus specifically on futuristic opportunities such as decarbonisation, IMO 2030/2050 and autonomous vessels," said president and chief executive Carl Schou. "We are also establishing a consultancy service to advise owners who are interested in new fuels, especially hydrogen."

The Wilhelmsen Group is involved in three hydrogen projects: as fuel, cargo and bunkering. "This is at group level due to costing and funding but will gradually be transferred across to ship management."

Schou added that the manager will also be involved in the operational side of whatever the wider group does in the offshore wind sectors.

Thome Group is another that is working on what can be done with the existing fleet, and then with owners on how they will operate with future fuels and technologies such as LNG, methanol, hydrogen, fuel cells or batteries.

CLEAN FUEL PATHWAYS

Chief executive Olav Nortun said it has a small group working with owners on LNG and methanol, which are likely to be the first alternative fuels.

"We are not going to be a technology leader, but will be applying, managing and operating it so we need to have an understanding," Nortun said.

However, Thome believes the basics of alternative fuels do not involve revolutionary change, unlike fuel cells and batteries that will bring a raft of novel challenges and eventually require employing people with new skills.

Nortun cited a battery development project that has been running for 15 years.

"The biggest challenges for any technology on a ship is the hostile environment — corrosion, vibration, temperature, up and down. It takes time to gain enough knowledge and that is the journey we are all part of," Nortun added.

Wallem Shipmanagement managing director and interim chief executive John-Kaare Aune said managers can utilise their ability to collect data, but will also need to invest in decarbonisation to provide advice to shipowners.

"It is about being able to use all this data, to pull out the value, to see where you are going to get the most for your dollars investing in the maintenance, the training, the

It's about being better at managing voyages

— Bjorn Hojgaard

different green initiatives to improve efficiency."

Wallem is working with one owner on an LNG dual-fuel ship, the first it has done, and is discussing evaluation of alternatives.

"There will be significantly more developments on propulsion than navigation in the next 10 to 15, 20 years," Aune said, referring to the recent digital development of bridge systems.

East European crewing specialist Danica Crewing Services believes that, as the fleet will not change overnight, it will be able to follow technological developments

that will require seafarers to gain new skills.

Managing director Henrik Jensen said it is not a problem now, but crew shortages could return in the future.

"Alternative propulsion systems will require more diversified and specialist training, and seafarers will be harder to replace," he said.

The opportunity for Danica, ship managers and seafarers is that they will become higher value assets to owners as vessels become more specialised, Jensen said. This means all three can play a more important role for smaller ship-owners.

Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement is another to have established a decarbonisation team, with dedicated experts examining potential clean fuel pathways, propulsion and storage technologies that are likely to become available soon on both Schulte-owned and managed vessels.

"Concurrently, the team is looking for new shipping opportunities,

developed from the introduction of the green hydrogen economy, which may suit the wide maritime solutions expertise that they hold within the group," Schulte Group chief executive Ian Beveridge said.

As a manager of its own chartered-out containerships, Seaspan Ship Management said research into the best solutions is a role managers can really help owners with.

Chief operating officer Torsten Pedersen said Seaspan is looking to be at the forefront of fuel efficiency as a fleet owner. Although LNG is the only currently viable alternative fuel, he questioned how long that would continue to be the case?

"Seaspan is looking for retrofit solutions for whichever alternative fuel emerges — ammonia, hydrogen or methanol — because of the number of ships it needs to ensure have a full 25-year lifespan," Pedersen said.

Jonathan Boonzaier contributed to this story

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Remote surveys and training need cheaper satellite connectivity

Greater connectivity between crews and shore staff is emerging as a major benefit for ship managers, but there are still barriers.

Remote inspections, audits, surveys and online training are all being developed, but bandwidth is still an issue.

One of the benefits is that virtual inspections can be done at sea as opposed to during port calls, which is the most hectic and stressful time for crews, said Thome Group.

"If we move forward with remote inspections and assistance, we can do much better with problem solving. So when we get a service engineer he is much clearer what he needs to do, and what spare part he needs to bring," said chief executive Olav Nortun.

Thome is working with classification society DNV on a protocol for internal audits, and how to take existing technologies to the next levels.

Anglo-Eastern chief executive Bjorn Hojgaard said communication with ships remains very slow and expensive due to low bandwidth connections.

"But in the next two to three years, I think that is going to change. Low earth orbiting satellite networks are going to change connectivity across the globe, whether you are on a ship or a mountain.

"I think it's going to be a game-changer when you see 100 megabits per second connectivity for \$100 per month. It will change the way we interact between ship and shore. Ships will be as connected as any other office," Hojgaard said.



WELL-SERVED: Columbia had invested \$1.5m in its Performance Optimisation Control Room before the pandemic
Photo: Columbia

VIRUS BOOSTS TECHNOLOGY AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Pandemic would have hit harder without digital technology — and remote services are here to stay despite demand for traditional human touch

Paul Berrill
London

Silver lining and catalyst are two words that ship managers repeatedly use to describe how technology has helped them through the pandemic and crew-change crisis, and accelerated change.

In just one aspect — training — a survey by crewing specialist Danica Crewing Services revealed that nearly one-third of all seafarers said they had received online training this year — up from 4% in 2019.

Columbia Shipmanagement chief executive Mark O'Neil said Covid-19 had radically changed the service provided by managers.

"We weren't able to get boots on deck, and check what our crews were doing or the physical condition of our vessels," said the head of the biggest international tanker manager.

"We had to rewrite the whole book and look at the whole concept of remote surveys and using technology."

Columbia had invested \$1.5m in a vessel performance control room before the pandemic.

"By golly it has served us well. Had we not, this pandemic would have hit us much, much harder," O'Neil said.

Wilhelmsen Ship Management is responding to the rapid changes with a two-pronged reorganisation that takes in digitalisation and decarbonisation.

"The traditional ship management business is being restructured. We need a new structure focusing on technology and digital integration so that we can get more out of it," president and chief executive Carl Schou said.

Wilhelmsen is employing new people, including a vice president for technical, and establishing a



HENRIK JENSEN: Managing director at Danica Crewing
Photo: Danica

new vessel-performance team, he added.

Anglo-Eastern chief executive Bjorn Hojgaard said: "One of the silver linings of this pandemic has been the use of video conferencing tools, webinars, meetings and remote inspections, which was something we had only scratched the surface of before."

In the past 12 months, he said the company had done more than 20,000 virtual meetings — many of them with crew at sea or at home.

O'Neil added: "All of this is not going to suddenly revert back.

"We have learnt so much, and it is a case of picking and choosing what we previously did and building it into what we do now rather than going back to what we previously did and picking what has come out of Covid.

"It's been a huge catalyst for change, but we were on that road anyway," he said.

But the question of the mix between technology and human intervention is still open.

Wallem Shipmanagement managing director and interim chief executive John-Kaare Aune said: "We all see it [technology] as a positive bonus, but it is not going to replace sending people

on board and attending in person.

"It's a very good add-on," he said, but, "it's extremely important to get people on the ships, to not just observe everything from a camera and to get feedback from the crews.

Thome Group said technology eventually enabled it to perform regular remote audits, inspections and vessel visits, and it has used Microsoft Teams to communicate with vessels. It believes remote inspection and audits are here to stay.

Chief executive Olav Nortun said: "I don't think it will be back to the old days. There will be a mix. Is there much more to learn? Yes, there is.

"We have learned that leaving crew alone and no people on board for inspection is not good. We want this human touch to be part of it," he said.

However, Nortun said the past year had started something that will not stop, and it is likely crews will not be visited as often as before while technology is used more.

Wilhelmsen, which has an autonomous vessel control centre in Oslo, said working from home caught it by surprise, but it is working well.

"It shows that people can adapt. Things that were thought to be totally impossible to do, such as remote surveys and port state control inspections, have now become the norm," Schou said.

Hojgaard added that operational technology can be hooked up to ships to support decision making, but it will still require more heavy investment.

However, savings are possible. Danica managing director Henrik Jensen was among those saying online training has cut travel and accommodation costs significantly, and crew like being trained at home as they can spend more time with their families.

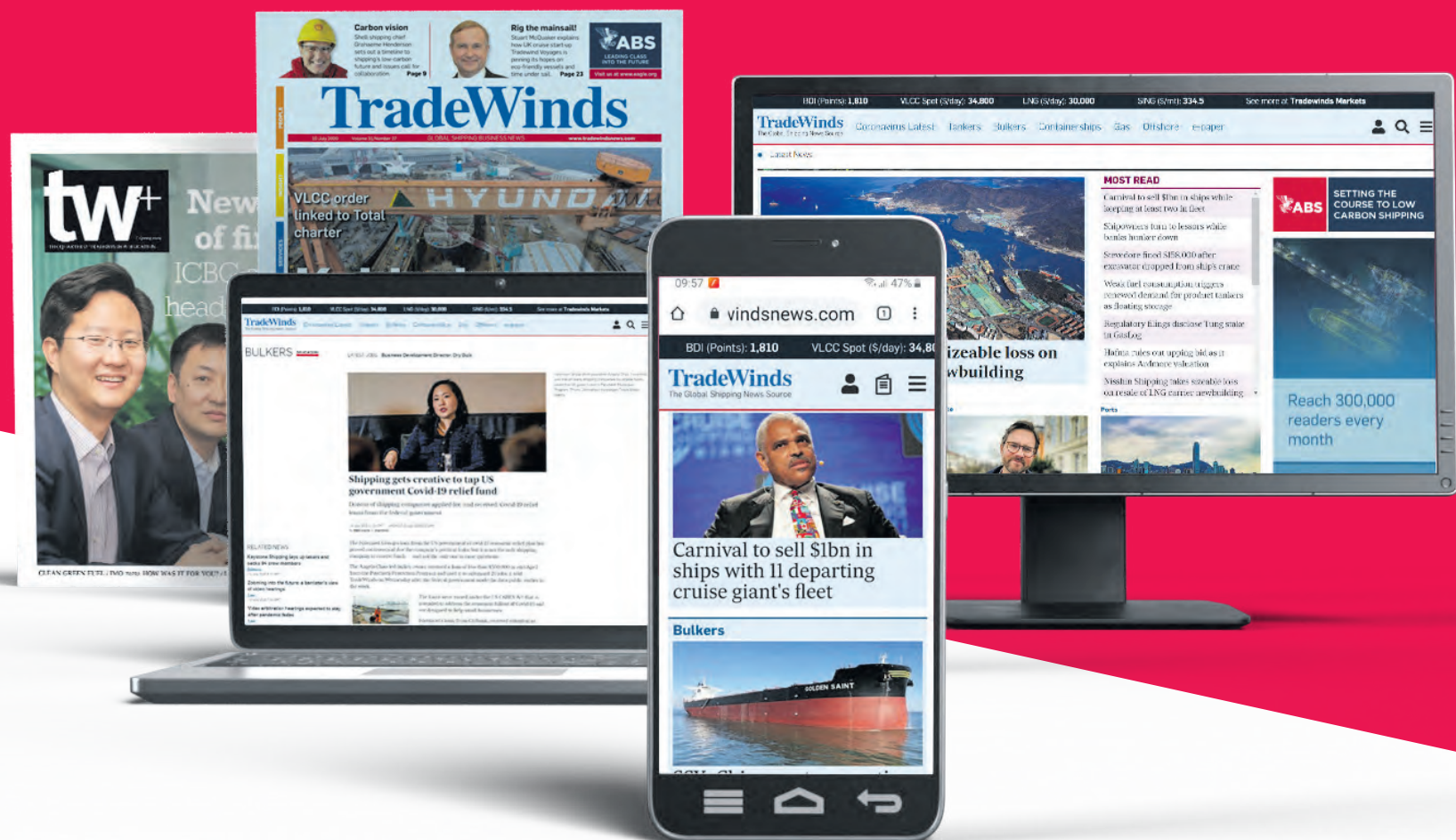
Jonathan Boonzaier contributed to this story

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