



The clogging mists of the global financial crisis are beginning to seep into every corner of the shipping industry with catastrophic consequences. But what is the effect of the credit crunch on Maritime Communications? Is the need for improved crew communications onboard ship to prevent a further drain of the seagoing resource enough to ward off a downturn or is internet and email onboard ship seen as a luxury too far in today's cost-cutting climate?

We asked seven senior marine communications industry executives and experts their views and the results were surprising. Chaired by *SMI* Editorial Director **Sean Moloney**, the round table participants included **Piers Cunningham**, Head of Maritime Business at Inmarsat; **Wouter Deknopper**, Iridium's Director for Europe, Middle East and Asia; **Gregor G. Ross**, Sales & Marketing Director – Europe at Telaar Communications; **Asad Salameh**, President of World-Link Communications; **Ian Canning**, VP Marketing and Product Management at Stratos; **David Hess**, Managing Director at CSC; and **Ian Hicks**, VP of Operations at Bluefire Wireless.

Round Table Discussion

If any of our readers have comments to make on the issues under discussion or the panellists' replies then please email them to editorial@shipmanagementinternational.com and we will include them in future issues.

Sean Moloney

The shipping industry has undergone something of a financial meltdown in reaction to what has been described as the worst financial crisis in its history. How is this impacting on the maritime communications market and how is it influencing operating strategies moving forward?

Piers Cunningham

It is fair to say that communication is directly affected by world economic trade. The driver of communications for us is the number of seafarers at sea at any one time and the number of vessels physically trading. We've seen that there are specific sectors of the shipping industry that have been more affected than others and, in general, they seem to be affected by an element of idle vessels as opposed to vessels in lay up. The net result of this is that you have less vessels trading although in terms of what we are currently seeing, I would suggest it is still too early days to say for sure, what the degree of effect that will have. Certainly if we look at our run rate of terminals active and being activated on the network, it doesn't match up with the gloom and doom you read in the press. That is not to say going forward, that we won't see an adjustment of that. Currently, the indications are that the communications element does not seem to be affected as severely as maybe one would think.

Sean Moloney

Is that because there is such a small percentage of the global fleet currently embracing new maritime communications?

Piers Cunningham

It is fair to say a lot is due to ships going idle rather than to lay-up. When they are laid up and mothballed, then you have an indicative

reduction in the world fleet, the seafarers come ashore and the vessel no longer serves ours or anyone else's network. At the moment, we have a number of vessels hanging around at anchor awaiting instructions and they still have crew onboard. While communications may decrease at an operational level, there is still a healthy flow of traffic from these vessels because people are still onboard. So it is still early days but it would be unrealistic to say that no one around this table would be unaffected by the economic climate: it just remains to be seen how the nature of it manifests itself.

Asad Salameh

What we have seen so far is that the newbuilding programmes have been greatly affected but I agree with Piers that we have not yet seen a drop in the traffic. The traffic remains almost at levels reached in 2008 so there hasn't been a great drop in the traffic. It is still early days to see what the drop off will be and we are all bracing ourselves for it. We know it is coming. We know that the newbuilding programmes have been scaled down and we know that a lot of the owners in our markets have delayed taking over their newbuildings or even cancelled some that were not advanced as far as their financing was concerned.

Piers Cunningham

It is fair to say that there is an interesting trend in the mix of terminal variance out there. One of the things you will see in times of economic depression or hardship, is you will try and go into a repair mode rather than a mass fleet swap out. The first sign as Asad has alluded to, is the suspension of a high capital intensive project for mass communications retrofit and there will probably be a more likely holding mode where

“the problem is there is a fear of the new technology in certain parts of the shipping industry: they don't fully understand it”

people will sweat the asset they hold and go into a repair or retrofit only in the event of a complete failure of the system.

Ian Canning

I would fully agree with that. But, you could say that the trends of FleetBroadband have actually bucked that completely. FleetBroadband has been the fastest take-up service we have seen in the history of this market place and I am pleased that Stratos has passed the 1,000-terminal commission mark. Coming back to Piers' point, there will definitely be a slowdown in take-up of new technology. That puts an incumbent position on the industry to look at how we can support the ship owners in helping them through these times. That support can come in the form of solutions that help finance a package to upgrade or providing cost control mechanisms and support infrastructure around the technologies that allow customers to show real operational benefit to the organisation. That will be vital to the near term future of this industry. We are no different from anyone else. The current level of active users isn't decreasing and the traffic isn't decreasing but none of us know when that might change. It could change next week, next month or next year.

Sean Moloney

You also have the banks making decisions in the early part of this year as to whether they will support shipping. Are they going to allow shipping companies to continue to trade which will have a massive impact on the industry? How are you preparing yourselves for possible large scale bankruptcies?

Ian Canning

The need for shipping is not going to go away: there is still a fundamental requirement to move goods around the world and shipping is the most efficient way to do that. So while I do think we might see some operators go bankrupt, I also think we will see them being bought out of bankruptcy but with a different capital model. Bankruptcy, as Wouter from Iridium will agree, just changes a capital model completely and allows you to be profitable in a different dynamic. So it is risk and it is opportunity.

Wouter Deknopper

We have not been affected, so far, it is business as usual and we are not seeing any falls. We have been launching new services like Iridium

OpenPort™ and the New Iridium 9555 handheld and we see these being picked up in the marketplace. I do think that what might be affected are new procurement decisions by shipping companies so we will have to focus even more on CapEx and it will be up to our distribu-

tion partners to stress time after time, the operational benefits and savings of new technology. In these times, this will become important to talk about as well as having programmes to support the shipping companies by various leasing deals etc. where they can take new technology onboard without having to spend on a large scale.

Sean Moloney

Are you saying that your task is even harder because not only do you have to persuade ship owners to embrace higher levels of communication technology onboard ship but you now have to say we will help you with the cost aspects.

Wouter Deknopper

It's always a challenge but in the past we have done deals through Stratos and our other partners, if you have the minutes onboard the ship and they move the data it is like leasing a car, it is just a different concept but for us it doesn't put too much extra burden on us.

Ian Canning

It does put extra burdens into the industry because that capital has to come from somewhere and someone has to raise that finance. By no means is that a small feat in today's industry.

Asad Salameh

We have done a study on one of our leads and we have compared what they are paying with Fleet 77 and Satcom B versus what they would be paying with IP Technology – Fleet Broadband and the savings that can be achieved would pay for the equipment in less than a year. Even if we are talking about a large amount of capital expenditure, it can easily be built into the plan or the promotions.

Piers Cunningham

Although we are facing a different set of economic scenarios, in many ways the rate and nature of adoption is really not that dissimilar from when we moved from analogue to digital. The original driver then was cost reduction, it was not about increasing the capability or the ability to perform new activities initially. It rather came as part of the offering that in return for the cost reduction, greater capability was involved due to the adoption of this new technology. We are seeing the same now. On the bottom line of the podian race of operating the ship, communications is a very small but yet a high profile element and the reason for that is because without it you cannot operate your vessel which is why it holds that disproportionate position in the psyche of the operators. But one thing they will do is say I am spending this amount and want to either carry on spending that amount or even reduce it but by the same

“One of our fastest growing segments is machine to machine applications and we see a lot of high value containers are being tracked these days and most probably in the future there will also be regulations on container tracking”



token I want a piece of equipment that will stand the longevity test going forward. People will probably retrofit for reasons of costs savings or out of necessity. I don't think there will be a mass market of retrofit activity 'because I would like to have it'.

Ian Canning

If we consider the last time we sat around this table, the drivers in the industry were just so different. Crew retention was the number one driver in the industry and increasing spend to retain crew was an acceptable business model. But business models have changed and they are looking at how they can 'batten down the hatches', make do with what they have as best they can unless a compelling argument is put on the table. There are compelling arguments but the dynamics are very different.

Piers Cunningham

As an incumbent network provider, if you have a critical mass and a diversified installed base, the rate of uptake of the latest technology is not a 'do or die' situation, you do not have to get it out there in order to survive. Of course we want it for many reasons as our ship owners do but if the rate of adoption of a new variant, which we haven't seen today, slows down it is not the death knell. You have sufficient critical mass and diversified capability to weather the storm.

Gregor Ross

We haven't noticed any particular downturn; we have been expecting it and it hasn't actually arrived. Our new commissions are continuing at the rates we saw last year and our usage per installation is up. We have one respectable German customer who has just cancelled the installation of satellite TV. One of the issues we are seeing, certainly from the ship managers perspective, is an increasing focus on cost control and cash is tight. One of the issues we foresee are receivables taking longer: the owners are taking longer to pay the managers and they are taking longer to pay the suppliers. Something we have to be very aware of.

Piers Cunningham

Overall in terms of technology, Fleet Broadband is the most economic service we have ever launched into the market so as Ian was saying, there are cost control mechanisms and a whole raft of services that are on offer that you never had access to and we have different trends of activity as people might break from voice centric to data centric applications. Overall, the proposition for Fleet Broadband digital service compared to other deployable solutions is one of the most cost-effective inter-deployable services on the market in terms of potential OpEx and Capital Expenditure.

Ian Hicks

As far as Bluefire Wireless in concerned, we make personal communication solutions, low cost international call routing over the GSM network so with regard to the maritime piece we would be looking at crew rather than capital equipment. In answer to the decline in usage question, we are seeing usage holding up, if not increasing, as crew look to deploy cheaper personal communications solutions than say traditional GSM roaming charges. We are talking about when crew are in port or near a GSM network. Yes people are looking for value for money but I broadly agree with what everyone else is saying that there must come a point where people start to draw in their horns a little and save money. But, having said that, communications is quite resistant to the plight of the economy. One's personal communications needs are one of the last things to go.

David Hess

One of the bigger companies I read about recently was looking to evaluate its IT costs. The article indicated that by using VSAT communication services over \$100K of potential cost would be saved vs. the transport related costs for the IT folks to visit the vessel and solve problems onboard could be eliminated. The decision process is starting to shift away from just viewing the pure Telecoms costs as the driver. This I believe is a positive. We always felt there were stronger reasons than crew retention factors forcing the need for updated communications onboard.

Sean Moloney

Cost is the big issue with managers and owners keen to look at ways to attribute costs to those responsible such as the individual seafarer.

Ian Canning

That comment is exactly right; they are not just looking at costs they are looking at efficiency and if you can show a benefit in efficiency you can overcome any argument they may have. This is a good opportunity for us. Whether you can now use communication to reduce your maintenance costs and fuel costs, to be more efficient in your loading capacity or improve any other part of your operation, that is now being taken into account whereas never before did this hit the radar screen. We now have the CFO of the shipping companies taking a much closer interest that the chief superintendent or just the purchasing office.

Sean Moloney

Wouter, what can the industry do to satisfy the changing desire and need within the industry?

Wouter Deknopper

The MSS providers, and I am talking particularly about Iridium, are going through a paradigm change from time-based to volume-based. It is bringing this knowledge to the client that is often the challenge. The shipping community is starting to embrace this change as we show the benefits and cost savings.

Ian Canning

This financial shift is making shipping companies sit up and take note that if you have a credible and cohesive strategy around a turnkey solution it is a powerful message.

Piers Cunningham

One of the other inhibitors to the adoption of new technology is not purely the clever satellite box you pop onboard the vessel, it is all the entrenched applications that run off that vessel into the corporate network. If that is optimised for say scenarios such as the current dial up or low speed packet based technology and you then move into a state of the art IP 3G environment, that requires infrastructural change on the other side. Just replacing the technology has other incremental costs that have ramifications within the corporate IT function of that company so in today's climate that is also taken into consideration when they are looking at the role.

Gregor Ross

You are absolutely right and the problem is there is a fear of the new technology in certain parts of the shipping industry: they don't fully understand it and they hear horrible stories about open access and unwelcome billing and it is incumbent upon us to actually educate the customer and provide the solution, take away the fears and show them what the capabilities are without having to rake up their monthly billing.

Piers Cunningham

There are peaks and troughs in any economic cycle, when we conceptualise our current and future network, no one saw the current situation. But we are not here just to ride the next couple of years. There is no point producing something just to get through bad periods; of course during those periods the options are available to support what you currently have with a degree of longevity and there are other mechanisms in the market to adopt new technologies either on a fleet wide or per vessel basis for cost savings or optimisations of their communications. As to how we work with our partners, there is a fully meshed interaction both on the technological side and the commercial side to ensure the roll out of the service. Inmarsat launching a satellite service is just one element; you need your partners with the value added and the infrastructure to give the turnkey elements. It is removing the fear factor by giving control and value.

Sean Moloney

Do you think the situation will get worse once the bankruptcies start to happen. Will industry strategies need to be altered?

Asad Salameh

There will always be a need and demand for shipping so what we will see is a reduction in the number of ships required on the high seas but

whether the industry will vanish, I don't think so. So no matter how many ships will be there, shipping will be needed.

David Hess

Regarding the industry risk of bankruptcies, you may find that some of the capital burden such as the antennas we are trying to sell into the shipping companies could fall back on us. As a result, this could place strains on how fast and how many vessels can be deployed. Clearly, the demand is there. People are seeing the benefits of whichever communication tools they choose to implement. The pendulum has shifted and the opportunity to drive demand beyond giving them basic level communication tools has extended into developing elite crews, who are better trained and smarter than crews onboard competitive shipping company vessels. This would create a whole new approach which will initiate the need for more tools and structure around communication requirements.

Sean Moloney

What form will business growth take in the months moving forward? What areas are you going to be concentrating on – will you see some vessel sectors more enthusiastic than others in embracing change?



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Asad Salameh

We will see a continuation of retrofits, of new installations because the argument is very compelling. There are real savings that can be achieved so I don't think we will see that part diminishing and that will start with the leaders in the industry and the rest will follow. Technology might be new and present new challenges but the communications industry has the infrastructure to support all of these challenges. So in terms of where we are going, I don't think we will see a great decrease in the rate of new deployment. We may not see an increase in the deployment of satellite TV onboard because that is something that is 'nice to have' onboard. A Fleet Broadband or an Open Port is a requirement if you want to reduce your costs.

Ian Canning

The key driver here is what is going to happen at the core ship level. We have already seen ships that everyone thought had three or four years of life left being taken out of service. Currently we are seeing ships at anchor, waiting. As long as that is maintained I would agree. What we need to watch out for, is whether ships are being laid up because once this happens they are out of operation for at least 12 months. Many of the shipping companies are saying 'as long as I can break even I will continue operating'. The financial markets have changed but everyone's desires and needs and wants are still there.

“Many of the shipping companies are saying ‘as long as I can break even I will continue operating’. The financial markets have changed but everyone’s desires and needs and wants are still there”

Piers Cunningham

I personally think that we have been here before. In terms of the effects on shipping, if you look at the parameters around the downturn in tonnage, it has been reflected before. What hasn't been experienced before is the exterior economic climate and the whole liquidity and financing issues – the wider market. At the moment it is too early days to know which way it will go.

Wouter Deknopper

Beyond the traditional communication we see a lot of our partners using our network for special applications which is often fuelled by a number of evolutions such as new regulations in safety and security. We also see some of our partners heavily engaged in fuel optimisation – a service that 10 years back no one was focusing on. With the melting of the ice caps, we see a lot of focus on new applications like ice navigation where you use satellite images to choose the optimum routing. So whether it is or is not crisis time, there are opportunities. For Iridium, one of our fastest growing segments is machine to machine applications and we see a lot of high value containers are being tracked these days and most probably in the future there will also be regulations on container tracking so as long as you are diversified and your partners are creative, there will always be opportunities.

David Hess

The requirement to use banks will always be present in this capital intensive industry. If someone does go bankrupt, it doesn't mean those particular vessels will not go back into operation. A company operating at any level will have an operating budget and financial restructuring

could result in making it stronger. Everyone here today feels confident that there will be a communications element within the budget. Communication requirements are quickly becoming more sophisticated and there will be many opportunities to up-sell into new approaches even in extreme situations. Either way, in good times or bad there is a sizeable market opportunity. The market that exists today is in a near a green field state and is in dire need of being updated to the latest communication solutions to help achieve a new level of operational efficiency. We see these vessels as offices which are upgrading at an affordable speed based on today's economic pressures. Once we turn the corner towards recovery the market will escalate very quickly.

Piers Cunningham

The financial crisis is not an inhibitor to change; it will be the rate of adoption that will change. It will flex depending on the prevailing climate.

Ian Hicks

It seems to me that what we are all saying is that the capacity will remain there and it is being buffered. My concern on that is how bad the world economy gets. We have seen this huge meltdown in financial services and we are seeing that transfer to the real economy. I just think that China can't go from 13% to 4% growth and we don't feel it at some point. In terms of the crew situation, yes I do sense we are moving away from a demand situation to a supply situation.

Sean Moloney

But there is a view that China has just pressed the pause button.

Wouter Deknopper

It was known after the Olympics that China would be dropping a little and in the end shipping a cyclical business. China is also building up supply of its own premier materials in the country so there will be less need to bring cement from others parts of the world, for example. That was something we knew would happen because they will use their own energy, create their own power plants and import less oil and open coal plants, that was written in the stars that that was going to happen.

Piers Cunningham

It has always been possible to match through certain parameters world trade to world tonnage to utilisation of satellite communications and if you overlay the various parameters, you can get a realistic picture of what has been. You can only do this by trends because no one knows what will happen in the future. What is more challenging today is there are more parameters to take into consideration and more unstable parameters to take into that mix.

The speed and ferocity of change has been quite unprecedented. From our statistics, it is not being reflected in the adoption or activation of new terminals or decommissioning of old terminals. The trend is to still perform.



Ian Canning

None of us have a model for this particular crisis because none of us have seen it before. The 1929 depression only affected certain parts of the world. What you read in the papers and see in the statistics contradict each other because technology and efficiency go hand-in-hand. The communications element we provide is a core enabler to efficiency as long as you add all the bits around it that create costs controls, open up operational environments that make you more efficient, deliver cost benefits on fuel and deliver various other data sources that make you more efficient overall.

Sean Moloney

Is there a call for greater cooperation throughout the industry?

Ian Canning

Hugely. We recognise that Stratos can't do everything for everybody. And that is where partnerships are vital. We represent Inmarsat, Iridium and VSAT and we work with Telaurus and support their solutions because there are so many different requirements in the industry. Recognise what you do, and recognise what you don't do and do what you do, very well.

Gregor Ross

We see great pressure on all type of expenditure including capital expenditure. We can all stand up and make a compelling case for a return on investment over the next 12 months on new equipment but my feeling is that in certain parts of the market that won't even be listened to because money is so tight.

Piers Cunningham

This current market situation will mean different things to different sectors and they will all respond with varying degrees of activity depending on whether they are being directly affected.

**David Bettinger,
Chief Technology Officer, iDirect**

From our perspective at iDirect, we have not seen the slow down hurt the maritime communications market to a great extent. In fact, we've found that shipping companies are more willing to examine what they're paying for connectivity services and to consider the often significant cost savings associated with a flat-fee model. Also, growth has continued for us because it is more about connectivity, not just communications. Shipping companies may be spending money on connectivity, but they are realising operational savings in other areas of the business because of the always-on, high speed capabilities of VSAT.



"In times of financial crisis companies usually focus on what they can control. They become more efficient with their processes and work to keep their competitive edge. If improved connectivity provides more efficiency for their business, this translates into better communications, reliability and customer service to their customers. I do believe that crew welfare is an important issue, but I think the true benefit of high-speed connectivity goes far beyond just taking care of the crew. The vessel is becoming a remote office, so many of them are running corporate ERP systems and need constant connectivity. New applications also allow a resource on land to centrally manage duties that previously required someone on board to manage. As a result, productivity and efficiency are increasing because of high-bandwidth connectivity. Shipping companies are seeing a greater ROI with VSAT, while getting more predictable monthly costs because of the flat-rate pricing structures."



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Ian Canning

We will undoubtedly see some consolidation in this industry because the smaller owner/operator with four or five ships will be put under tremendous pressure and they don't have the longevity to sustain it.

Gregor Ross

Some of the biggest and best known shipping companies started in the slump times, buying up old ships on the way to the scrap yard and going on to build huge empires.

Ian Canning

That is what I am saying, we will see some of the smaller operators disappear into bankruptcy and some of those conglomerations and groups created by buying those assets out of bankruptcy and creating some much larger, broader and more financially stable organisations. Whether you may have a few individuals who have the capital to bring that together or you may have some groups that want to do that remains to be seen but it will force change in the industry.

David Hess

At times, mergers and acquisitions occur for survivability reasons. On the other hand, I believe it's a smart strategic move to consider mergers and acquisitions when the values reach a point where quality companies are worth half or a quarter of what they used to be. It is evident that consolidation will occur in these times. We are all looking for ways to distinguish ourselves with advantages in the market place. If you are a strong company, it's natural to acquire some added strength while still building organically. As a result, integration work is always challenging in M&A transactions. We feel some of the key benefits from any consolidation in shipping will result from our technology and communication networks on the vessels. One real factor that can separate companies from one another is how efficiently they operate. Achieving efficiency is a skill and real-time tools are well on their way to creating better key indicators for fleet management. Bandwidth demand will grow in parallel with the emergence of a new breed of shipping companies utilising technology to the fullest.

Sean Moloney

Do we think that coming out of this recession that the communications sector will be stronger as a result?

Gregor Ross

This part of the industry is still populated by a number of smaller operators and services providers with quite small market share. So I think we will also see consolidation within this industry and I don't believe that by the end of this year all the operators in the market now will still be in the market.

David Hess

In many ways I don't think we are much different than the airline industry – look at the trials and tribulations of expansion and contraction. Companies may disappear because they are over leveraged, but communications is a vital part of the required technology for an airline and has always been more critical because of the nature of being up in the air. Despite the evolution and food chain effect, technology is becoming a bigger part of the shipping industry and there are clear signs of acceptance through many of the shipping companies. Broadband telecom and the data solution open better doors to a higher level of communication. So, if some of these

Peter Martin, CEO of 7Ccell

"The modern shipping needs effective and reliable communication channels as part of the worldwide logistics network, independent from the general economic situation. Therefore, we expect a growing need of communication between ship and shore, to get the vessel closer integrated in these structures. Of course all investments in new technologies, especially new communication solutions are put on test at the moment. New solutions have to generate a financial benefit for the shipping industry, otherwise they will be rejected from the majority of the players in this field. The use of a WiFi cloud on board for internal and external communication as well as commercial applications with reasonable costs and a guaranteed quality of service is one of the bricks, which will bring the above named benefits, already in cases of a retrofit."



companies disappear, other niche companies will come back in their place fulfilling a need in the market place. No matter what changes occur, we hold our position of confidence, the demand for bandwidth will only increase.

Piers Cunningham

In economic times like this, there is an element of consolidation. I think from a network level, now is not a good time to have a niche area of activity because various sectors are being affected to varying degrees. Diversification gives you insulation against a downturn in one area. Also you need to look at longevity. In the good times we saw a proliferation of people moving into market spaces; this will be the acid test – the ability to weather the storm and to not be servicing high levels of debt and to require high capital investment to gain market access. I believe that for the inherent networks and providers, if you have diversification and you are built on solid ground and not leveraged up to the eyeballs then you should be able to weather the storm.

Asad Salameh

Diversification is going to be key but coming out of the recession, the way shipping does business will be totally different because now we have technology where there is no limit to what we are going to do regarding operational efficiencies. This change will be seen in the next year and a half and whether it is engine monitoring or environmental protection or crew welfare: all of these things will be supported by new technology that will be implemented as a more cost-effective way of running the ship.

Wouter Deknopper

As a network there are three things we need to do: we need to diversify. Also, for the distribution partners these are harsh times and those who are innovative will survive. The paradigm change from time-based to volume-based means access to internet onboard ships must be controlled. Also we need to target our business better. Where we want to target is where we believe we are good at: it is 70% of the market that doesn't need to move massive megabytes of information.

Ian Canning

It is incumbent on us as an industry to prove our efficiency model. Those operators and providers who can prove that what we do increases efficiencies for the customers we support, will come out of this stronger, with a better solution set and will be here for the longer term.

Sean Moloney

Gentlemen, thank you very much. ■