

When maritime software isn't enough

When shipmanagement company Andrew Weir Shipping needed a new document management system it turned to a number of maritime software companies for help - without success. Having instead installed a product designed for shore based organisations, Andrew Latter, ISM manager at Andrew Weir, told *Digital Ship* what was lacking in maritime software

UK-BASED ship management company Andrew Weir Shipping (AWS) recently embarked on a project to completely overhaul its document management system, and streamline the way in which vital information would be used both in the company's shore offices and on the vessels themselves.

However, after reviewing a number of maritime specific software products, the company found that its needs could not be adequately met by what they were offered, so it turned to terrestrial software providers for a solution.

The process began when AWS, which was using a maritime software product for all of its operations, realised that the portion of the system responsible for information flow wasn't performing quite as well as the company would like.

"Using the document management system [that was part of the maritime software package] meant that control was taken away from us, we couldn't operate as we did before it was introduced," explained Andrew Latter, ISM manager at AWS. "Documents used to have to go from the office to the engineers before they could be added to the system, which took time and money."

"This meant we weren't using our overall system to its full potential, and it wasn't easy to import documents

we needed."

The company decided to take stock of the exact requirements it had for its document management, list the problems that needed to be solved, and to try to find a product that would match with those needs.



Cost, flexibility, and freedom were some of the issues we had with maritime software - Andrew Latter, Andrew Weir Shipping

"We needed a system that we could control all of the codes and standards we are working with," said Mr Latter. "Before, we were supporting a manual system, then we'd do an audit and find things that were out of date. So we'd add an attachment to an e-mail with an update to the manual. But that might just get to the master's cabin and not be reproduced in all of the copies of the manual."

So the company decided to create a system whereby all necessary information could be centralised and then updated on the vessels, in an electronic format, to eliminate the possibility of having different versions of the same manual on board.

Beyond maritime software

AWS spoke to a number of maritime software vendors, but couldn't find something that worked in the way the company wanted. The net was widened to include soft-

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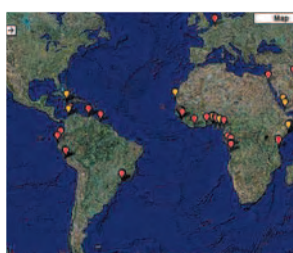
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ware designed for terrestrial companies, which led to a document management system from IdeaGen called Quality Workbench.

"With this system there are two database versions with all of the documents, a corporate one and a local one on each ship," Mr Latter told us.

When an update is made to one of the company manuals in the corporate database that information is collected periodically and then sent to the ship to be added to the local database. A full new issue of the particular document in question is made, as opposed to just adding updates or amendments to the existing document and the sentences within the text.

"The ships manage the local database themselves, and the system is updated by CD," Mr Latter explained. "At the moment we're still setting up the databases, so we're sending out CDs very regularly, but when we feel it's up and running we'll send update CDs (produced by the company IT manager) to the vessel on a quarterly basis."

"The CD updates have an automatic setup system, it's all completed with a couple of clicks. We're in a position with this to get up and running very quickly now."

"We don't have hard copies [of documents] any more, the crews look on the terminals for the latest information. You can print it if you want to use it, but you can't rely on the printed copies as having the latest version [of the information]."

"We got good feedback, and people found that they were printing off less e-mails and just using the terminal screens. Some of the younger guys going on to the ships, they like having new technology to

work with. Of course, some manuals will need a hard copy on board, but now that's mostly for training purposes."

Mr Latter also saw a benefit from having a single definitive copy of all information in a centralised source on the ship, where crews could be sure of the accuracy of what they were reading.

"All of the information is now pulled together in one place, before it was down

All printouts made from the new system have a note at the bottom warning the reader that what they are reading can't be presumed to be up-to-date, and that the computer database is the only source of the latest company procedures.

Quality Workbench also allows users to edit the documents in the local database if required, allowing them to fill information into forms, for example, but making it

though we don't encourage that," said Mr Latter. "And any issue that is raised, a full history of that is kept. It gives you a full history of who does what in the database, so everything's traceable."

Software issues

Flexibility in using the software was one of the key issues for AWS in deciding that this was the right package for its requirements, Mr Latter told us.

"Cost, flexibility, and the freedom to change the documents ourselves, these were some of the things we had problems with when looking at the maritime options," he said. "We looked at quite a lot of maritime specific systems, but found that this one was the best to fit with the way that we work. And IdeaGen have been very good to work with, they set-up training courses in our offices."

"Simplicity was key, they weren't trying to push us into one way of working like some of the other systems we looked at. This software is modular, and we've just licensed the modules that we needed to do what we wanted."

"And it can be used for all of our audits. For ballast water management, for example, we're putting it in place ahead of any new regulations being made, to be ready."

Mr Latter felt that this simplicity was important for the company to have complete control over its data. The software allows, for example, those onboard to quickly specify a certain type or category of information and check for updates relevant to their own position.

"You can search for all of the new documents after a certain date, which can help someone who's been on leave to check up on what might have been changed since he left," he said. "You can also narrow the search to a particular category, or department, and other options like that."

As the system creates a new version of the document each time there is even a minor change to text it would be extremely expensive and inefficient to try and manage updates on a daily basis by satellite with this software.

However, AWS feels that, for now and the foreseeable future, the quarterly CD set-up it has introduced can cover its requirements.

"To keep the cost within reason we had to keep the satcom out, but we might look at that as a way of working in the future," said Mr Latter.

"You can do the updates over the satcom system, [our current maritime software] system does satcom updates, for example. But when we looked at the IdeaGen system, when we looked at doing it over satcom it wasn't cost effective."

"We are changing things on a daily basis, of course, but it's not necessary to do that on board the vessels. And we can e-mail any more important things that can't wait to the ship. There are very few documents that the ships need to have straight away, maybe about half a dozen per quarter, off the top of my head."



Manuals aboard all of Andrew Weir's vessels are now housed on terminal servers, replicated from the database in the offices on shore.

to the discipline of those on board to make sure that they downloaded all of the new amendments and added them to every copy of the manuals that were on board," he said

"We gained by being able to take control of the manuals away from the ship, and the system now has the documents all in one place."

impossible to save any changes to the documents. You can fill out the form and save a new copy of that on the local computer, but if you try to save over the database file the system will revert to the originally hosted copy.

"The ships have a local database, and can issue a non-conformity as a last resort,



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