

Moving with the digital times

The pressure on shipping companies' budgets isn't going away. For crew travel companies, that ties in with an increasing shift to digital solutions. By **Felicity Landon**.



Data is increasingly important – and shipping companies realise it, says Pippa Ganderton, head of global account management, marine & energy, at ATPI.

'Shipping has been quite traditional in the way it has managed its processes for a very long time – and that included crew management processes,' she says. 'Probably crew managers have had to move faster, to create efficiencies that make them attractive to the companies that give them business.'

'But the overall ups and downs of shipping in recent years have now really raised awareness that efficiencies in terms of what technology can do are more and more important – and that means HR and crew managers can focus on other issues, such as duty of care. So, we see an evolving landscape in that respect and a lot more interest in technology.'

Being able to integrate clients' crewing systems and work more closely with them is really key, says Ganderton. ATPI has



recently created a 'digital booking flow' for one client. 'We are able to access the travel requirements within the client's system. As we feed options into their system, they are able to work on these and decide which options they want to take. They have all the visibility and we are not reliant on pushing emails to and fro, or waiting for emails to come through. It is more efficient from a time and manpower perspective.'

The value of data goes so much further. ATPI has developed its MI (market intelligence) tools to make them far more interactive for clients, with a web-based system providing much more than simple static reports.

'Clients can access this system for themselves – they don't have to wait for us to push data back to them but they have a subset of reports and data,' says Ganderton. 'For example, they can have a dashboard overview of the spend for all of their vessels. That can then be broken down into fleets or vessels in various countries; they can go deeper to view data on different vessels, average fares, top travel routes, top travellers, etc.'

That can help with budgeting, she explains – ATPI works with clients to compare spends and identify reasons for differences, whether it is one ship routinely booking earlier than another, or a ship with different nationalities of crew.

Ganderton is certain that the digital shift will continue. 'I deal with a lot of the energy and marine market. Even when the upturn really comes back, it is never going to be what it was. The focus on data and access and visibility that had to be enabled as a result of the downturn has also educated companies to manage their budgets better and to be more efficient in their processes.'

Ed Berrevoets, md of VCK Travel, is cautious about the outlook for the industry in 2019. 'Although everyone was talking about a booming economy, we say to the contrary – and we see a downturn already,' he says. 'Fewer people are travelling, to a serious degree. Big shipping companies have had to cut their budgets – and that includes travel budgets.'

He also highlights the continuing drive for closer communication with clients, although he says the automation of processes is a much higher priority in Western Europe, with its high labour costs, than in the Far East/Asia.

Among other developments VCK is watching is a changing air fare landscape. 'It used to be a big thing that there was a difference in the fare depending on where you actually bought



the ticket,' says Berrevoets. 'More and more airlines are changing that situation, so that it doesn't matter where you buy the ticket, but the actual origin and destination determine the fare.'

More transparency, then? 'Absolutely,' he says. 'Some shipping companies might have been cherry picking to get the cheapest but overall it creates a better level playing field, and we appreciate that.'

However, air fares are not the whole

picture, he emphasises. 'In 2018, US\$92bn was made by airlines on ancillary fees only. That is a massive amount of money and it is increasing by \$10bn a year. The big message is – don't look at the air fare alone. It might even be zero but you are paying for airline baggage fees, check-in fees, meals, etc. That is something we will have to keep a close eye on. But it does mean we will continue to play a role of importance for the customer.'

All travel companies are watching the shift by airlines towards NDC (new distribution

Crew travel companies can help their clients analyse and manage the costs of getting crew to and from their ships



Paul Cronje

capability), which enables individuals to bypass the GDS (general distribution system) used by travel companies and organisations, to book direct with the airline.

'NDC is here – it is in its infancy but the smaller airlines seem to be getting to grips with it more quickly because they have smaller networks,' says Paul Cronje, director at Clyde Travel Management.

This will dramatically change the ways in which travel companies can access fares, he says: 'We are used to accessing fares through GDS, so we pretty much all had the same fares. But when we start to introduce different layers of how to access these fares through the NDC capability, and more of us work directly with the airlines, that gives the airlines the opportunity to have different fares in the market.'

A more open market also presents challenges in terms of data security. The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), introduced in 2018, has had clear ramifications for the industry and all crew travel companies have had to look closely at the security of personal data.

The safety of travellers' personal details is paramount, says Cronje. 'GDPR is European, of course – but this is also an issue with Far East and American clients. That has its challenges because we as agents have to handle that data and we have to pass it on sometimes, otherwise we can't do our job. We need to watch this; there is the question of where data is stored and where the servers are, and there is much more complexity.'

When working with GDS, data is well protected and encrypted, he points out. 'But the big change for us is the openness of customers to source all ways of travelling, i.e. not sticking to scheduled airlines. For that, you have to go into websites, and the data is not encrypted.' ●

MCTC: Seafarers are what they eat

Diet is an essential part of seafarers' wellbeing and healthy lifestyle at sea, and this depends on having a proficient and well-trained chef aboard.

That's why Cyprus-based Marine Catering Training Consultancy (MCTC) feels there is a need in the industry for specialised advice from a company like itself.

MCTC's md, Christian Ioannou, explains why shipping is lagging behind others in culinary expertise: 'The lack of education and catering training has been a factor and also there seems to be confusion between certified and qualified.'



Christian Ioannou

There is the additional consideration of switching supplies. MCTC recommends that convenience foods are removed as far as possible from ships' kitchens and replaced by more raw/fresh foods, which Ioannou says can lead to potential cost savings of 20%.

The company has therefore developed courses for chefs looking to further their skills in catering that have been specifically developed from ILO regulations for ships cooks, also embodying HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) standards.

It is also launching a platform for gallery maintenance that will allow cooks to plan meals and instantly see the nutritional value of each meal, as well as allowing them to order supplies.