

The risks and rewards of seafaring in the digital age

It is impossible to ignore how much the proliferation of the internet and social media has changed the way people interact and communicate. Seafarers are not immune to these changes. How has the introduction of internet on board ships changed the social cohesion between seafarers?



Yves Vandeborn
Director of Loss Prevention
T +65 6506 2852
E yves.vandeborn@ctplc.com

In just 25 years, the number of internet users has grown from a few million to more than four billion – over half the total population. Advances in satellite communications mean that the proportion is even higher on ships, with 75% of the world's seafarers now online.

When you set sail back in the 1990s, keeping in touch with family and friends usually meant a brief but expensive long-distance telephone call from port every few weeks or receiving a stack of 'snailmail' once a month. Socialising on board was not just limited to a drink with other crewmembers in the bar before dinner, but also included a video or ping-pong match afterwards. Not to forget about karaoke!

But with on-board wi-fi, you can now stay in constant contact with your loved ones, sharing every moment of each other's lives. You can also watch television and download new books, music, films and games without leaving your cabin.

Importance of connectivity

Certainly, seafarers like connected ships. According to Futureonautics' [Crew Connectivity 2018 Survey Report](#), internet access strongly influences the decision of 92% of seafarers on where to work. Most (95%) see connectivity as having a positive effect on on-board safety too.

The Mission to Seafarers' latest [Seafarers' Happiness Index](#) (Q1 2018) confirms that being in contact with their family while at sea makes seafarers happier than anything else. They scored it 7.12 out of 10, 7% higher than for the last quarter.

However, in terms of importance, seafarers rank internet provision just fifth out of six services provided by shipowners. Pay, benefits, training and food are all considered more important, with only entertainment less so.

Effect on social interaction

On the down side, over half (53%) of seafarers now believe that increased connectivity has led to a decline in social interaction with their fellow crewmembers. Indeed, happiness from interaction with other crew has fallen 13% over the last quarter to 7.08 out of 10.

The Mission to Seafarers is quick to point out that correlation is not the same as causation; 'With ever smaller crew numbers, with single occupancy cabins and the fact that ships do not always have a bar anymore to serve as the hub of activity, then it is perhaps too easy to think that online access is the reason for people retreating into isolation.'

Cultural differences, gender and racial discrimination, and increased separation of shipboard work areas are cited as more obvious barriers to interaction.

Opportunities for shipowners

There is no doubt from a shipowner's perspective that the opportunities offered by increased connectivity are many – and go well beyond the original aim of improving crew communications.

Shore-staff can become far more involved with the operation of permanently connected ships, from real-time monitoring of engine and machinery performance to visual feeds of mooring and loading. They are also one step closer to unmanned ships.

In the meantime, maintaining the health and welfare of the dwindling population on each ship remains vital. Any concerns about the negative impact of connectivity on mental well-being need addressing as a matter of urgency.

Ideas for improvement

One suggestion that surfaced in the Futureonautics report is reviving the idea of the 'internet cafe'. Restricting online access to communal areas (and possibly certain times of day) would create a link between communicating with home and communicating with colleagues.

It would definitely help prevent seafarers being constantly distracted by their mobile devices while working, particularly if there is an ongoing problem back home. It would also mean good and bad news can be immediately shared and discussed, rather than bottled up or forgotten.



It should be clear that access to personal devices to check emails or social media apps or communicate with family/friends should be prohibited on the bridge, engine room, cargo control room or other sensitive areas where the crew's attention should be 100% focused on the job.

Communal internet areas could also be fitted out with bigger, higher-quality screens, which are still more enjoyable to watch than those on hand-held devices. Online entertainment such as live sports coverage, new movies or multi-player video games can then be enjoyed as a group activity.

Last but not least, consideration could be given to controlled provision of low-strength alcoholic drinks (together with non-alcoholic equivalents) in communal internet areas as a further incentive for crewmembers to emerge from the isolation of their cabins.



Cyber resilience

Just under half (46%) of seafarers say they have sailed on a vessel that has been compromised by a cyber attack¹. This is a threat that will only grow as connectivity increases.

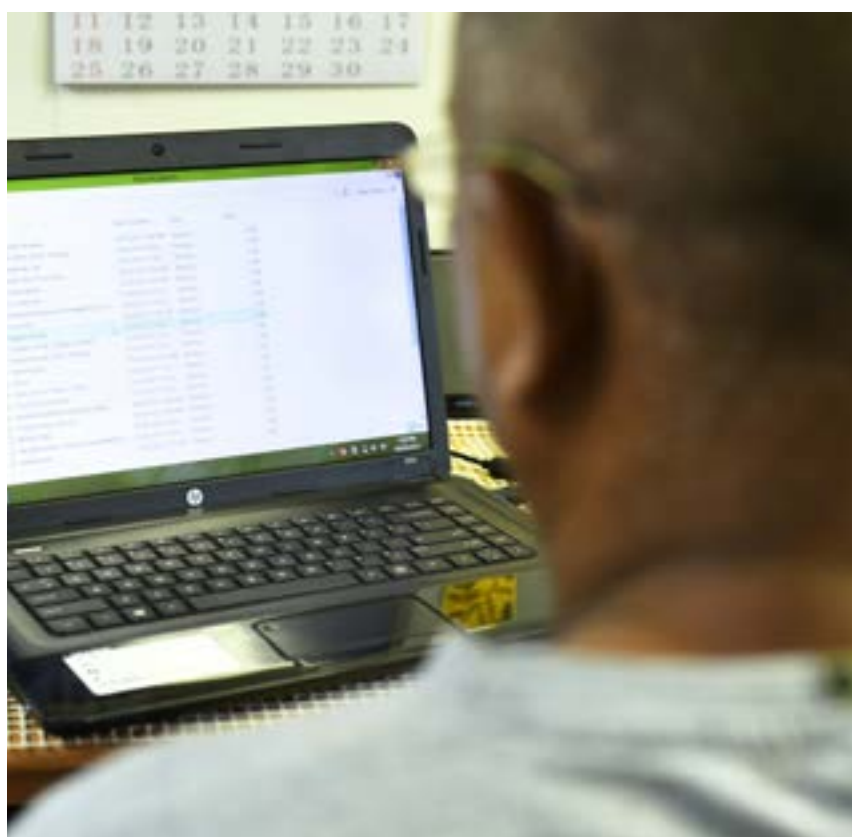
It is essential for cyber security and resilience to be embedded in all shipboard operations, systems and training, with full advantage taken of free industry initiatives such as 'Be Cyber Aware at Sea'.

Conclusion

The world is only just beginning to experience the transformative and disruptive effects of the digital age. Far bigger changes are just around the corner, which for the shipping sector could mean fully autonomous vessels that can do everything for themselves.

These transitions will not be painless – each new technology will require an adjustment to how we do things. For example, on-board connectivity makes seafarers much happier but appears to undermine social cohesion. This might be fixed by using technology to control where and when online access is available and to bring seafarers together.

As Futureonautics head, K D Adamson, points out, 'the real value of technology comes when you deploy it intelligently'.



¹ Futureonautics, *Crew Connectivity 2018 Survey Report*