



# Why the crew change crisis can only be solved collectively

Joining hands with some of the biggest ports and key shipping transit points in the world, the industry itself can come together to ensure every seafarer and port worker gets vaccinated. And in real quick time.

**"One year later and another Day of the Seafarer is here and very little has changed."** -  
Rajesh Unni - Founder and CEO, Synergy Marine Group

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It is rare to see shipping hit the CNN news. Earlier this month I was saddened and surprised to read an article about a captain on my CNN app. Captain Angelo Capurro, 61, from La Spezia Italy, took command of his ship in the last week of March this year before being struck down by Covid-19. Six days later he passed away on board. Country after country refused to allow the repatriation of his mortal remains home. Unable to find help in Asia despite repeated pleas the owners diverted the vessel, which was not equipped to store a corpse, to Italy. Finally, his ship, the "Ital Libera", arrived in the southern port of Tarantoon June 14 – almost two months after his death. The cobbler's kids have no shoes.

My surprise at reading about Captain Capurro on CNN was not because his case was a one-off – it was not. My surprise was entirely because a story about the plight of seafarers was deemed newsworthy outside of the trade press.

During this pandemic, there have been many deaths at sea, and many have not even been related to Covid. But repatriation of remains and, indeed, even sourcing emergency medical help for seafarers has become almost impossible.

In the time since the pandemic outbreak over a year ago, the shipping logistics chain has hardly stopped. In spite of the many challenges of changing restrictions on travel, lockdowns, test protocols, covid outbreaks on ships and ports, countries completely closed for travel in or out, ships have continued operating. They kept the supply chain running and ensuring goods across the globe reach consumer's home whether or not the sailor carrying it reached home. An ITF estimate put more than 300,000 seafarers having extended their working periods on board due delay in connection of their relief.

Compare this to the story in Australia when port workers were quarantined at the port of Darwin. This was not because they came across an outbreak there or came in contact with Covid-infected people, but simply because they might have touched some surfaces on a container ship while unloading its cargo. Port operations were brought to a halt and stevedores were detained prompting a legal case against the state government by Australia's maritime union and a Darwin stevedoring company.

On the 2020 iteration of Day of the Seafarer just a few months after the real impact of the Covid outbreak was becoming apparent, we thought we had overcome the pandemic challenges as an industry. Immediately on the covid outbreak, like deer in headlights, we froze all crew changes but kept the ships running for two months. Every shipping company and airline was in the same state. Nobody moves but ships and seafarers continue doing what they do. By June 2020, through the crew-change protocols, we had figured out a relatively reliable test for Covid and a quarantine protocol. With these tools, we all felt that the only thing lacking was the political will of world leaders who we needed to take action to ease the barriers to crew movements so seafarers could keep global trade moving.

One year later and another Day of the Seafarer is here and very little has changed. Many of the same barriers are still in place. We did not know there were more waves of Covid to come. We did not know seafarers would remain without shore leave throughout their contracts on board. We did not know even providing medical attention for seafarers at ports would be the momentous challenge it has become.

In many ways operations have become even more complicated. One test before joining ships has become three. Quarantine at home port has become quarantine at both ends. Air travel continues to remain a challenge. Port options that allow crew to join vessels are few and far between. Now we have what should be a game changing tool – vaccines. But people expect to have vaccinated seafarers when their home countries do not have sufficient vaccines.

We are again looking up to the political leaders for their understanding and appreciation of the importance of shipping and seafarers, and their political will to prioritise vaccinating seafarers apart from easing the barriers. The IMO, ICAO, WTO and other world organisations have done their best to impress upon the world the importance of seafarers and air crew by pronouncing them as key workers. A welcome move. Unfortunately, not much in the way of tangible actions followed from governments in recognition of this designation. Where does this leave us?

Astronaut Russell after apollo9 space mission said, “You look down from there and you can’t imagine how many borders and boundaries you cross, again and again and again, and you don’t even see them.” That’s a Paradigm shift. Being used to seeing countries on maps and globes with borders, the world looks so different. You start seeing the world as one. One humanity. One earth.

When people feel anxious and insecure, they tend to close down. The pandemic made nations withdraw the bridges and close the castle gates. Our serious challenges do not come from borders, planes and ships. That includes Covid pandemic and climate change. They affect us beyond boundaries. They affect us collectively and can only be solved collectively. Once we start seeing this as a universal problem, our solutions will address this universally, in a wider sense.

The ease of vaccination across the US ports is a prime example of this. While writing this, the Synergy fleet had more than 75 ships with vaccinated crew. That is about 20% of our fleet. Other countries may not be able to do it the way US has done and not all ships can call US just to get crew vaccinated.

But we as an industry are big. Annual Shipping trade in 2019 was valued at about 14 trillion dollars. Joining hands with some of the biggest ports and key shipping transit points in the world, the industry itself can come together to ensure every seafarer and port worker gets vaccinated. And in real quick time.

Fluid conditions require continual course correction. The pandemic waves require us to change the way we have been doing things. We need to change faster than the Covid variants. We cannot keep waiting for the regulations to change. We need to be in a more

collaborative mode. We need that Paradigm shift. Shipping is one world and seafarer is one kind. The cobbler's kid have no shoes but sure they can make a pair.