

Covid-19: good for digitalisation, tough on crew



By **Mette Kronholm Frände**, Communications Manager and Editor at BIMCO

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Singapore-based ship manager Synergy Marine Group believes the Covid-19 pandemic is accelerating the digitalisation agenda in the shipping industry by forcing players to adapt to new realities and develop creative solutions. It has also highlighted that far greater attention must be paid to crew welfare and that a solution to crew change is urgently needed.

The unpredictability of Covid-19, national lockdowns and deadly localised outbreaks has ramped up stress levels across society. For crew on board ships, the weight of uncertainty is immense. Ensuring the welfare and wellness of seafarers marooned in remote places, away from families and loved ones, has been the top priority for ship managers during 2020, according to founder and Chief Executive Officer of Synergy, Captain Rajesh Unni.

“Even for us, working in offices or from home, there is so much uncertainty. Imagine what it must be like for somebody on board and remote, sometimes completely out of the loop about what is happening back home. It is easy for anxiety to build. As ship managers, it is our job to alleviate those mental strains in every way we can,” says Unni.

“I think the professionalism of seafarers under these trying circumstances has really shone through during this terrible pandemic.”



Captain Rajesh Unni,
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Crew change is urgent

Seafarer stresses have been magnified by Covid-19 lockdowns that have left tens of thousands stranded at sea on their vessels, unable to disembark and return home to their families because of the travel and immigration restrictions in place across much of the world.

“We understand that the outbreak has made everybody in society adapt to new ‘normals’, but we cannot normalise the mistreatment of the seafarers on whom society depends. We know Covid-19 is not going away in the short term and seafarer welfare cannot be ignored. We need to find a way to enable crew changes,” says Unni.

Synergy has worked hard to establish safe corridors to facilitate changeovers, he says, but even with everyone in shipping recognising the urgent need for a solution, finding one is proving to be a challenge, and getting political support from outside the sector has been difficult.

“In these extraordinary times, as a ship manager, now is the time that you use all the tools in the relationship box that you have built over the years and translate that to the people on board, staying in close contact to maintain their spirits,” he says.

Post-Covid-19 ship management

Even as the pandemic rages, however, Unni believes ship managers must prepare for the challenges ahead. With new regulations constantly coming into force – and more in the pipeline – the ongoing training of seafarers is critical and a responsibility for all.

“There are so many new technologies and regulations being introduced. Covid-19 does not have a deadline, but when we get to a more normalised situation, we must get on with the job of building the right competencies in the crew,” he says.

“In the future, crew will need a very different skill set and ship managers must prepare them to make the right decisions on board so they can troubleshoot. If you really care for your crew, you invest in them. When you hire people, you choose to take on that responsibility. Do that, and you will have excellent results. In the years to come, I think training seafarers on a constant basis will be critical to meeting the ever-changing challenges of ship management.”

Digitalisation has finally become reality

According to Unni, the virus outbreak will also accelerate shipping’s understanding and acceptance of all things digital. While there has already been a big drop in the amount of cash being used worldwide, with more transactions being processed digitally, something similar is happening at sea.

“I think you can look at society in general and you can see that people are now aware that germs can be exchanged on paper. Nobody wants to handle paper at ports, and nobody needs to,” he says

“This can all happen digitally and then be shared with regulators and other stakeholders. It is more efficient to exchange data digitally and now it is clear that it is also safer. As a result, I think the Covid-19 will speed the adoption of technology and the digitalisation of shipping. There will be a lot of learning and necessary self-reflection in the aftermath of all this and, as an industry, I think eventually that will be beneficial. I believe there will be a renewed embrace of innovation,” he says.

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