

Who is Capt Rajesh Unni? Everything you need to know

December 16, 2020



Capt Rajesh Unni at a global maritime forum

He is one of the most influential people in global shipping and a most vocal supporter of decarbonisation of shipping.

When Lloyd's List named Captain Rajesh Unni in the venerable maritime publication's list of 100 most influential people in global shipping for 2020, it capped a remarkable run for the former ship master-turned-shipping entrepreneur in one of the most tumultuous years for international shipping marked by the crew change crisis triggered by the pandemic and the global drive towards decarbonisation of shipping.

Captain Unni, as he is referred to in the industry, played a significant role in collectively finding solutions to the crew change crisis by calling on governments and United Nations agencies to avert a 'ticking time bomb' at sea.

He is also a most vocal supporter of decarbonising global shipping. He says the time to act is now: "We can't wait until punitive actions and regulations force our collective hand".

His passion for shipping and to make it a much better place for future generations were sown during his long career at sea, commanding tankers, before returning ashore to serve in senior executive ship management roles in Hong Kong and Singapore.

In 2006, he launched his vessel ownership and management company. Now, with its diverse fleet totalling nearly 400 vessels including some of the industry's most sophisticated designs, Synergy Group is hailed as a ship management partner of choice for some of the world's leading owners.

Driven by a firm conviction that shipping must rapidly evolve from analogue to digital, Captain Unni founded Alpha Ori Technologies (AOT) together with few partners like BW and Nissen Kaiun in 2017.

Alpha Ori Technologies (AOT) is a B2B Technology company operating in IoT (Internet of Things), ShipERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) and BigDATA science.

"We use cutting edge technologies to solve real-world issues for every stakeholder in the logistics value chain - Ship Owners, Ship Managers, Ship Operators, Port Management, Surveyors, Ship Registries, P&I Clubs and Shipbuilders. Currently, SMARTShip and other patented technology are deployed on over 100 ships, and other 150-plus ships are under implementation," Captain Unni told BusinessLine.

Decarbonisation

Decarbonisation of shipping is closest to his heart.

"The challenge for shipping and for ship managers now, next year and in the future, is that end consumers, politicians, charterers, shippers and employees are demanding a reduction in carbon and other harmful emissions. And they are right to do so," he says.

Unni makes it abundantly clear that shipping will have to decarbonise supply chains and the industry has no choice but to "understand and even embrace it".

The reduction in maritime emissions is regulated already by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and various regional regulators. "But those bars are moving ever upwards. We need to assume that in future, the standards we are targeting now will be stricter and plan accordingly. Shipping should future-proof," he observed.

Synergy works with like-minded clients as a technical thought partner, helping them reach sustainability goals. "I believe that managing this inevitable transformation to

a decarbonised world requires collaboration – not only with clients, but also with competitors and third parties with a proactive mindset. In a sense, we see decarbonisation as a huge opportunity. So, we’re investing a lot of resources and time to ensure we can help lead this,” he says.

Shipping, according to Unni, already has tools which can help reduce emissions. “For example, we can digitise vessel and fleet operations for efficiency gains. We can use carbon capture technology, which is something we are currently researching in collaboration with academic partners in the US. Innovations such as solid sails can also help reduce fuel burn and could soon be fitted to new vessels and old”.

Long-term plans

Shipping also needs a long-term plan. Inevitably, that means a shift to more sustainable fuels and improved ship designs to reduce emissions over the life cycle of the ship.

“This is a shift that will be tremendously expensive for shipping – we will need a global fleet of new vessels and support infrastructure such as fuel storage, supply and new terminals. This will not happen overnight, but we need to be planning for it now,” he quipped.

Captain Unni sits on the boards of the North of England P&I Association and the Asia-Pacific Advisory Committee for major ship classification societies and is a Governor at the Indian Institute of Management, Tiruchirappalli. He is also on the board of the Gandhigram Rural Institute and a university in Tamil Nadu which forms part of Mahatma Gandhi’s progressive vision for provincial children’s education.

Unni confesses that he enjoys “team-building”.

“In ship management, if you build a team ethic and culture successfully, you can compete. That’s the Synergy story. Our onshore personnel, crews and core values have enabled us to provide a service that resonates with customers,” he said.

Clients want a smart ship manager and business partner. In the modern maritime world, this means fully and comprehensively embracing the latest technology and customer service standards and understanding the current and future challenges - whether it is Covid or piracy, Brexit or mental health.

“Synergy realized many years ago that digitalisation would drive customer service requirements. I think the coronavirus crisis is accelerating digital adoption,” he said.

“At its essence, shipping is a facilitator of global trade which delivers economic growth that benefits all of society. So, this is a job that gives me great satisfaction,” he signs off.