



Pressing the accelerator on digitalisation

16

‘The shipping industry is so conservative.’ We often hear that claim, especially in connection with digitalisation. Unfair generalisation? Some are clearly more advanced than others! Felicity Landon talks to IMPA member MESPAS

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the industry’s move away from paperwork and towards the digitalisation of processes, electronic documentation and remote working.

A joint report produced by the World Bank’s transport global practice and the World Ports Sustainability Program (WPSP) of the International Association of Ports and Harbors, *Accelerating Digitalization: Critical Actions to Strengthen the Resilience of the Maritime Supply Chain*, focuses mainly on ports, but its implications are far broader.

Boutheina Guerhazi, digital development director at the World Bank, says in her foreword to the report: “The digital revolution has emerged in the past decade as one of the main drivers of change



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in the port and maritime sector, promoting a high level of integration between devices, agents and activities. Together with the increased connectivity between ports, it has created a new ecosystem in the industry – one where being on the outside presents a significant disadvantage for ports and countries.”

For an early adopter of new tech, we can turn to IMPA member MESPAS, whose advanced e-trading platform enables ships, ship managers and suppliers to place and receive offers, orders and invoices digitally, while its technical ship management software enables users to run ships safely and efficiently, delivering better performance and cutting both costs and emissions. The only company in the maritime industry whose software products are provided via a cloud-based platform with centralised smart data, Zurich-based MESPAS was founded in 2004 by two maritime engineers.

“Back then the internet was getting popular and computers more important – they felt it was time for more digitalisation, so decided to set up their own IT company for the maritime sector,” says MESPAS sales and marketing director Dominic Seiler. “We have grown a lot since then; more than 1,250 ships and 22,000 suppliers are now working with MESPAS.

MESPAS started out as a maintenance software solution combined with a procurement software solution, he explains. “The founders wanted to have a platform that brought buyers and vendors together. The technical maintenance section is still our core area and we attach the same importance to our online marketplace.”

Digitalisation is moving forward but harmonisation is what makes it work, i.e. when everyone speaks the same ‘language’. A vital part of the MESPAS tech is a central database which Dominic likens to an e-banking system where there is one platform with one software but in

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Sales and Marketing Director
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your account the data is just yours – no one else sees it. “Similarly, individual users do not need to install our software – all our customers are working on our platform, they don’t need to maintain their own servers and no one else can see their account.”

This model has enabled the development of a unique ‘library’ of data and documents for machinery, maintenance and spare parts. Maintained and updated by former marine engineers, the library is accessible to all customers.

“This central approach saves an enormous amount of time, bearing in mind that there are probably 20,000 parts on one ship,” says Dominic. “For example, if a ship is regularly changing a component in a pump, they can select the correct part through the software and immediately get access to all the maintenance and modules. We call it ‘smart data’ because if we have a particular spare part in our database, everybody involved – crew, ship manager or supplier – can be confident that they are talking about exactly the same part.”

He draws the contrast with the ‘old way’ ... somebody writes an email asking for a part; the next person has to type that request into the system and perhaps makes a mistake; there are queries, potential misunderstandings and a whole lot of clerical work involved.

MESPAS’s newest development is its Free Procurement module, software which is offered free to interested ship managers. “Why is it free? Because we want to accelerate digitalisation in the shipping industry,” explains Dominic. “We want to have everybody working with the structured set of data we have. It makes it easier for suppliers, who all receive their orders in the same structure.”

Traditionally, procurement in shipping involves a lot of processes, with the buyer asking for quotes, the supplier sending quotes, and most often the buyer picking the cheapest of five offers.

“This procurement system makes it easier for buyers to

generate their request for quotes but also reduces the steps of the suppliers,” he explains. “This is a neutral platform with the prices behind a ‘wall’ but still competitive and cost-effective.”

MESPAS has also been developing its software to take into account the new regulations requiring vessels to carry an Inventory of Hazardous Materials on board. A record must be kept of any items that are hazardous or dangerous for



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the environment – for example, any items containing asbestos – so that when a ship reaches the end of its life, the scrapyard will know what toxic materials are coming its way. In the meantime, Port State Control can ask to see this list whenever a vessel calls into port.

“When you have a ship that has been in service for 20 years, it is difficult to generate this list with all these items. That is where MESPAS comes in,” says Dominic. “By linking

to our procurement process, we can identify all the items that have been ordered which should be on the list. When a ship manager asks a supplier for an item, the system will highlight that it is an IHM item.”

The founders of MESPAS still work for the company and are still driven by the ambition to digitalise the maritime industry.

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with unclear orders; but the main reason for digitalisation is to make it easier for everybody,” says Dominic.

“Shipping is not as efficient or at the same stage as other industries when it comes to new technology. What we should never forget is that in a normal industry you have your factory in one place and maybe another factory elsewhere, so it is easy to get a software system established. But ships move and they don’t always have internet access! The big challenge is to bring the

data to the ship and also to synchronise so that the systems in the office and on board are up to date.

“Our customers are technically savvy. They know what they are talking about and they know about the technologies and benefits. We usually speak to companies that are interested in implementing ERP software. But, as I said, there are very particular challenges when involving ships on the move.”

The shift to electronic forms rather than paper can deliver real value, he says. "The office needs to have information from the ship; already having and sharing documents with the ship in real time is a big advantage for the industry. That is just the beginning. It is also the software and processes that support people, making their daily work more efficient. It is the same with those asking for supplies: with MESPAS you have price indications in real time.

"Another new feature we are working on will provide a marketplace similar to Amazon, in that purchasers will have immediate insight to the prices suppliers are offering, and will be able to take the best offer straightaway, rather than asking for five quotes and waiting for offers. That is a good example of the way in which digitalisation can save a lot of time – including for the suppliers because there will be less effort in offering their products."

And finally – how many of us find a recipe or instructions online, then press 'print' (or even write notes) before taking a piece of paper to the kitchen or shed. The alternative, of course, is taking the information with you on mobile phone or tablet.

It's the same for engineers carrying out maintenance work on board. "It should not be that the software is only on one computer so they have to write things down on a piece of paper and take it to the engine room. The engineer should have all the information in their hands, so that the software gives him the instructions and they can directly type in any problems."

MESPAS already offers a mobile phone app and now, in direct response to customer feedback, it is developing a tablet maintenance app linked into its systems. That will allow engineers to take the tablet with them, take pictures, keep the office informed and get advice while they work."

As Dominic says: "Digitalisation should be used to support people, not to make more work."

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