



Small in stature,
globally
respected

Abacus Ship Management, of Hong Kong, has been foremost in managing ship crews through the worst of the pandemic, requiring depths of resolve, resources and patience, yet ensuring time-critical cargoes still get to port. “Declaring seafarers as key workers would be a start and tremendously alleviate an already complex and pressured scene,” intimated Managing Director Rajan Gupta in an interview with Inside Marine’s Andy Probert.



Seamen have endured some of the toughest times witnessed in a generation as Covid-19 struck at the very heart of shipping operations globally. Countries and ports turned their backs on vessels, closed borders and left vessels in limbo at sea. Yet they still expected their cargoes to be delivered.

This 'push-and-pull' contradiction not only caused concern for crews who have been stuck on their vessels for months, but the knock-on effects have been immeasurable: missing families, mental health concerns, pressure mounting on onshore-based managers battling the impossible and clients waiting for their goods. A vicious circle if there ever was one.

Rajan Gupta, Managing Director of Abacus Ship Management, is not a lone voice in suggesting that countries should declare seafarers as key workers – alongside those on the Covid frontline – to help alleviate bottlenecks in the shipping industry.

"There is no collective effort to get seafarers recognised as key workers, and instead we have been left trying to cope with the circumstances we find ourselves in," he said.

"Crew changes have been difficult, and the industry faces many challenges. In a direct appeal to decision-makers globally,

they should consider this matter as one of high priority as a lot of co-ordinated effort is still required."

He recounted how planning has revolved around special port stops for crews, particularly into the Philippines, having experienced the problems of airlines being grounded, countries closing their borders and hotels shutting during the pandemic.

Working to maintain smooth operations

Mr Gupta is at pains to point out that Abacus has been working furiously in the background to ensure its crews remain a high priority in any planning decisions while providing a seamless operation at sea for clients.

"Planning ahead, and the ability to preempt problems, enable us to enjoy good proactive relations with clients and ship staff alike," he asserted. However, the unpredictability of Covid and its rippling effects across industry are still prevalent.

Abacus draws its seafarers from staff pools provided by long-term agency partners, Southfield Agencies in Manila, Philippines, and AG Maritime, India, to oversee 13 bulk carriers.

The company was founded in 2010 to provide safe and cost-effective ship



management services to in-house and third-party ship owners. Initially created as a joint venture, Abacus came under full ownership of French-based ship owner, Louis Dreyfus Armateurs, in 2019.

Abacus specialises in the management of dry cargo Handymax, Supramax and Capesize bulk carriers. The 13-strong fleet, varying between 39,000-180,000 DWT, is owned by Louis Dreyfus Armateurs and partners.

Latterly, vessels have been shipping worldwide with cargoes including logs, iron ore, coal, cement, salt, copper concentrates, steel coils and grains.

Abacus has a branch in Manila, headed up by Captain Antonio Cimarra, who leads an operations department consisting of experienced deck and engine officers, electricians, and IT staff.

Mr Gupta emphasised: "Our on-shore personnel across Hong Kong, the Philippines and India have many decades of experience in the marine industry. Our aim is delivering


a transparent and personalised ship management service that achieves safe and efficient shipping operations.

Digital step forward

In providing services of the highest quality and effectiveness, Abacus recently installed MESPAS maritime software to its entire fleet. The MESPAS platform integrates its processes from ship to shore to the supplier. The database contains technical details of millions of pieces of machinery required on a ship, and the unique dataset was mapped to all vessels in the Abacus fleet. Hence, each vessel received ship-specific data to start working immediately.

Mr Gupta praised MESPAS' speed of implementation and unique data management solution: "On a single platform, we can have information for maintenance, QHSE, operations and procurement among all our vessels and offices. Our teams know exactly which tasks need carrying out on our ships and are always up to date." ▽





MESPAS

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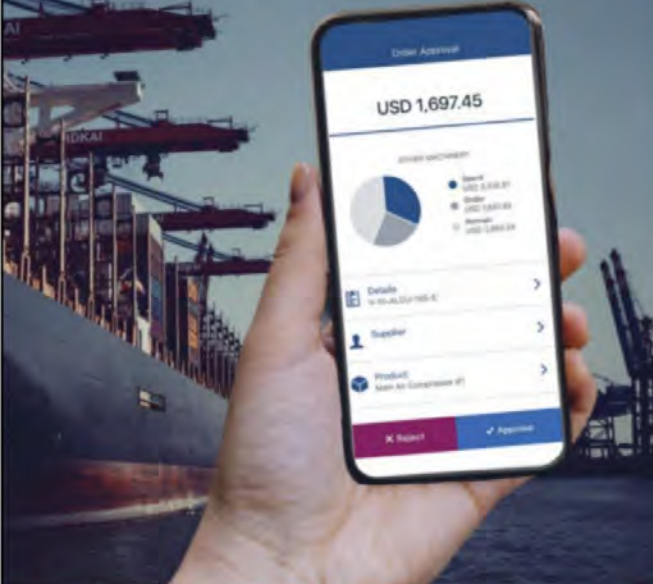
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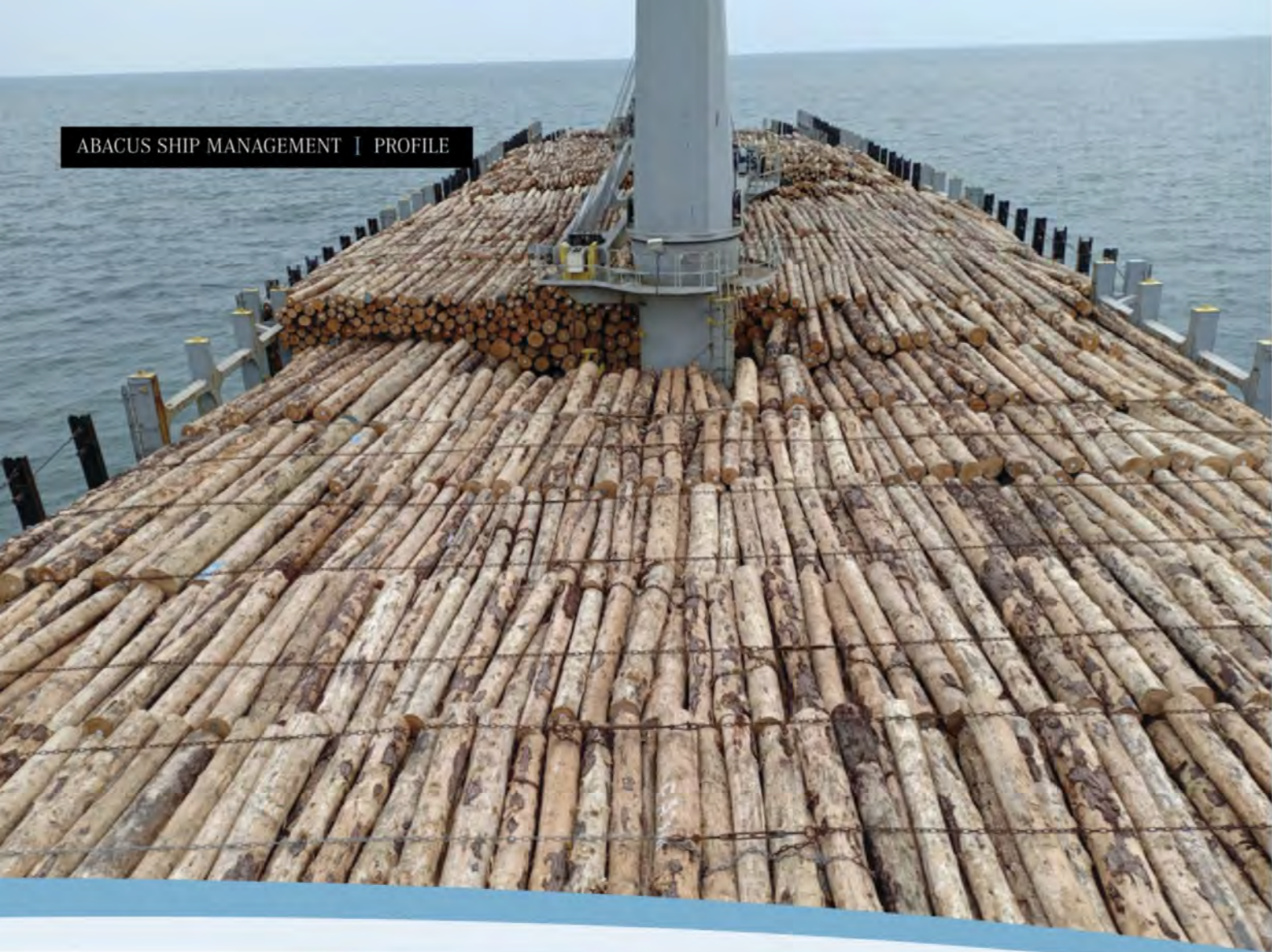
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Abacus was also extremely active in planning and implementing activities, in liaison with owners, operators and charterers to meet the 2020 deadline for sulphur cap regulations.

In seeking to meet December 2020's implementation of Inventory of Hazardous Materials Certification for each vessel, Abacus' management moved swiftly to achieve this for the fleet months ahead of schedule.

However, the pressure to handle crew changes effectively have been concentrating the minds of many at Abacus throughout the year as Covid has impacted globally.

"We have been successfully carrying out the change of crews despite the difficult times, flight disruptions and countries closing their borders," Mr Gupta pointed out. "Fortunately none of our vessels have stopped trading. Some have even diverted to Manila through very good planning and execution of the crew changes.

"Due to domestic travel restrictions in the Philippines as a result of the pandemic, many of our senior staff were unable to

report back. We took this opportunity to promote several staff in-house, enabling them to rotate and continue to offer service delivery onboard."

He added: "The industry is having to learn and adapt to the new reality of new ways of working, communicating virtually and grasping technological advances. Covid has highlighted the importance of the digital march in the sector."

Advantage as a small operator

Other industry challenges remain, such as variously current trade sanctions, depressed global economics, new environmental regulations, cyber-security and data theft, as well as the lack of criteria and regulation around the new low sulphur fuel grades.

"But the biggest challenge remains the crew changes, and if the pandemic continues, it will take a lot of time and resources," reiterated Mr Gupta. "Everyone wants the cargo, but not the crew changes.

"They should be considered as key workers, that would give more flexibility to countries in giving them visas, even

isolation exemptions and so on. If Covid-19 extends for another six to nine months, cost impact on the budget will be significant."

Going forward, Mr Gupta sees many advantages and potentials for small, specialised ship managers like Abacus.

"With many new regulations, requirements and crew change challenges, it's becoming difficult and expensive for small ship owners to manage vessels themselves, whereas we can provide cost effective solutions," he said.

"As we are small, we are very flexible and willing to customise operations to clients' demands. With our limited overheads, we can provide cost-effective ship management, and our approach is always to maintain prompt, close communication, transparency and trust with clients."

He concluded: "Most of all, our philosophy is that we want to manage ships from new delivery until they go to scrap. When this happens, our staff treat the vessels as their own, and all actions are taken to protect the asset value of the vessel over the long-term." ■