

Getting 'IT'

Wireless data transfer improves ship-to-shore information flow.

BY BRUCE BULS, TECHNICAL EDITOR

A few years ago, at a Coast Guard-sponsored Y2K conference, I encountered a new term: IT (eye tee). Speaker after speaker kept referring to "IT" as in "Y2K isn't just an IT problem."

My problem was that I didn't know what IT was. I didn't get IT.

Finally, I whispered to the person sitting next to me, "This is probably a stupid question, but what is IT?"

Her answer—and she was very gracious about it—was "information technology."

You can wrap up a lot in a term as large and vague as information technology, but essentially it's all about data and computers. When the bar codes on your groceries are scanned at the supermarket and the connected computer in the back office monitors how much of what is being sold, that's IT. When you get a computer-generated earnings statement from your employer with updated totals for pay, taxes, 401(k) and vacation time, that too is IT in action.

In the world of workboats, the IT metamorphosis means more computers in the wheelhouse that are wirelessly networked with the home office. What was once handwritten into logs, reports or requisitions by the captain, mate or engineer and then hand delivered, transcribed by voice or faxed is increasingly being input directly into an onboard PC. Once inside the computer, the data is automatically transmitted back to the home office where the information is incorporated directly into databases, spreadsheets or other forms.

As Chuck Drobny Jr., chief operating officer of Boatracs, puts it, "We see the boat as being another office down the hall." Vessels are being wired, wirelessly.

Drobny's San Diego-based company, which offers both communications and information management software systems, doesn't usually refer to its products as "IT." (They and competitor Globe Wireless both insist on calling them "solutions.") Even so, the services and software of both are another part of

the information technology explosion that is changing the way business is done everywhere.

NEW SYSTEM FOR SEABULK

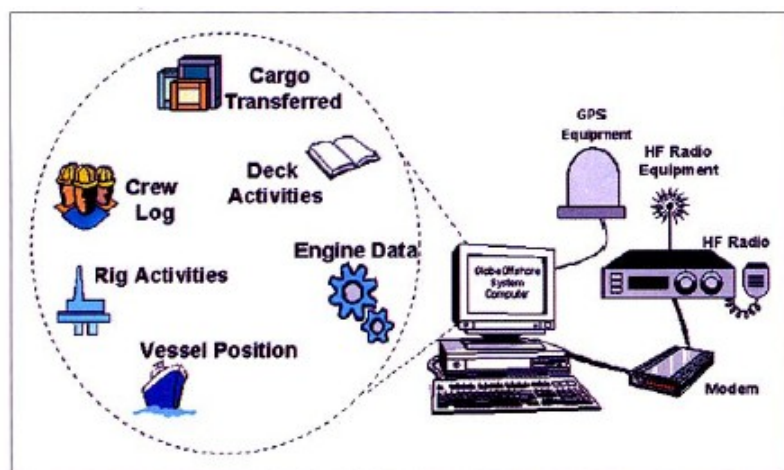
Boatracs recently announced an agreement to develop a new integrated information management system for Seabulk Offshore Ltd.'s Gulf of Mexico workboat fleet. The system will allow a boat's crew to enter data directly into a PC-based database on the vessel, which will be transmitted via satellite once a day—or as needed—to Seabulk's shoreside office computers in Lafayette, La. Data will include daily master's logs, crew changes, fuel and lube oil consumption, and accident reports. Information about the vessel's location at selected intervals will also be included.

By adding the new software, Ken Helms, Seabulk's operations manager in the Gulf, says, "Our company is now migrating from basic communication and positioning into a seamless information system between our vessels and our offices."

You may be at sea, but your data is back at the home office. Or it better be.

Seabulk's system, when ready, will be tailored especially for them. "It's a new application," says Drobny, "but one for which we rely heavily on our corporate experience in building applications that did similar kinds of things for other companies in the industry."

"I'm inclined not to think that there's a



Fleet information management systems can transmit data on everything from crew changes to fuel and lube oil consumption to information about vessel location.

piece of software where one size fits all," he says. "I know that everybody puts crew on boats and takes them off. Everybody has safety reports. Everybody has fuel they account for and everybody has vessel logs they construct. But I've never seen two companies that do those things in exactly the same way."

Boatracs communications—whether e-mail messages or complete vessel activity reports—are transmitted via satellite. In the U.S., Boatracs utilizes Qualcomm's OmniTRACS® satellite system, which includes two geosynchronous satellites that relay messages and other information and provide location tracking. The OmniTRACS system is used on over 200,000 commercial trucks in the U.S. as well as vessels with Boatracs systems.