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Home: Invest in Simplifying Your SMS



The ISM Code provides an international standard for the safe management and operation of ships. Since its introduction over twenty years ago, its effectiveness in making shipping safer has been proven. The safety management system (SMS) is an integral part of this, so should we focus our efforts on making this more user-friendly?

Why should we worry about user-friendliness? Consider driving a car from A to B. In a typical journey you will likely pass many road signs, all of which provide valuable information to help keep you and others safe. What do you notice about these signs? They are clear, concise and don't need pages of text to explain the rule. This means anyone, regardless of their language, culture or mindset should be better able to understand what is required.

Losing focus

In contrast, a vessel's safety management manuals could very well contain half a million words and be set out in a complex structure.

How did this happen? One explanation is that after an incident or the introduction of a new regulation, additional procedures and new text is often added without any thought to how it aligns with existing content. Also, additions may be made without removing old or contradictory content. Or the author includes detailed and prescriptive guidance, sacrificing clarity and conciseness.

This should be borne in mind when considering that a common finding in investigations following an incident is that someone "didn't follow procedures". The question must be asked "*why?*". Were procedures not followed because they were unclear, contradictory, or too difficult to find?

A mammoth task

A ship's SMS may have been initially written many years ago and undergone regular updates over a long period of time with contributions by different people, all in different styles. In effect, The SMS becomes a bloated mishmash of content. It's potentially a mammoth task to review and re-write the safety management

manuals and something which DPA's and HSEQ staff may not have the time or experience to do.

The value of safety

The UK Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seafarers states that a safety management system and its associated documentation should contain clear and concise policies, procedures, and safety rules. Most seafarers would welcome improvements to the SMS for their vessel; not only will it positively impact safe working practices on board, it sends a message that the company's senior management cares about safety.



Applying change to break the cycle of complexity

Why do some companies simplify and improve their SMS whilst others continue adding complexity? Most companies recognise the importance of a simpler SMS, but not so many are taking the next step and making the change.

We spoke to Terje Lovoy, the founder of the Lovoy Corporation which specializes in reducing large volumes of complex text into a clear and usable format. We asked Terje to summarise the methods they use and what challenges they commonly see.

Simplifying Safety Management Systems - the Lovoy Method

"Our techniques do not require new software or equipment. We train people how to use the tools they already own to present the information in the clearest manner without losing valuable content."

"The biggest problem is the SMS structure. Before the writers start 'washing' the text, we make them look at the bigger picture. We help them re-structure the SMS to be more operational, practical and at the same time better comply with codes

and guidance.”

“We mitigate the risk of writers trying to simplify their SMS by over-simplifying or using fragmented text which may be shorter but no easier to understand.”



Investment in simplification

Lovoy explains that telling a DPA or HSEQ Manager to simplify their SMS is like preaching to the converted. They understand the problem and the potential for improvements all too well.

The primary challenge is presenting the case for change to the company’s senior management. Some present a strong case by explaining the work involved to simplify in the important areas. There may be concerns on the resources required to effect change, but perhaps this should be viewed as an investment for several vessels over many years and not just a one-off purchase.

At North we see the importance of tackling this head on. Anything which makes systems and procedures easier for the crew to understand and comply with will have a positive impact on safety.

Find out more

See our Safety Management 2.0 loss prevention initiative [here](#).

Terje Lovoy explains more about simplifying safety management system in our earlier article which can be read [here](#).

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