

Over 300 owners and charterers join forces to speed up crew changes and vaccinations

Neptune Declaration brings together likes of Maersk, Cosco, John Fredriksen, BP and Trafigura to increase pressure on governments to act on seafarer welfare during the pandemic

Gary Dixon
London

Shipowners, charterers and other shipping stakeholders have launched a new concerted effort to protect seafarers from Covid-19 and make crew changes easier as lockdowns bite.

A coalition of 314 companies and organisations have signed up to the Neptune Declaration on Seafarer Wellbeing and Crew Change.

Shipowners and operators involved include big names such as AP Moller-Maersk, John Fredriksen's shipping empire, CMA CGM, Mediterranean Shipping Co, Hapag-Lloyd, NYK Line and Louis Dreyfus Co.

Charterers include Anglo American, Shell, BP, Dow, Vitol, Rio Tinto, Vale and Unilever.

Banks and shipbuilders are also on board, with the likes of ING, Citi and Mitsubishi Shipbuilding on the list.

Belgian tanker owner Euronav revealed it had signed up earlier this month.

The key aims are to:

- Recognise seafarers as key workers and give them priority access to Covid-19 vaccines;
- Establish and implement gold-

standard health protocols based on existing best practice;

■ Increase collaboration between ship operators and charterers to facilitate crew changes;

■ Ensure airline connectivity between key maritime hubs for seafarers.

The Neptune signatories called the Covid-19 crew-change crisis "unprecedented".

The issue is still far from resolved, despite significant efforts by international organisations, governments, industry associations, labour unions, NGOs and individual companies.

In December, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution on international cooperation to address the issue.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL STRAIN

"Fatigue after extended periods at sea has significant consequences on the physical and mental well-being of seafarers," a statement from the declaration's partners said.

"It also increases the risk of maritime incidents and environmental disasters, and poses a wider threat to the integrity of global supply chains, which depend on safe and reliable maritime transport."

The declaration was set up by a task force led by Jeremy Nixon,

chief executive of boxship line Ocean Network Express, and Graham Westgarth, chairman of ship manager V.Group.

This steering committee featured charterer Cargill and owners Dorian LPG, GasLog and AM Nomikos & Son, plus crew agency Philippine Transmarine Carriers.

Also on the committee were ship manager Synergy Group, the Global Maritime Forum, the International Chamber of Shipping, the International Maritime Employers' Council, the International Transport Workers' Federation, the Sustainable Shipping Initiative and the World Economic Forum.

The partners believe authorities are still perceiving seafarers as a Covid-19 risk, which has limited the possibilities of crew changes.

"We believe that the most effective way of addressing the crew-change challenge, and building a more resilient maritime logistics chain, is by working together across the value chain with industry stakeholders, organisations and with governments to implement solutions that work in practice," they said.

The stakeholders have committed to take action themselves, while calling on relevant government bodies to join the efforts.

They want to see a standardised



MAIN DRIVERS: Ocean Network Express chief executive Jeremy Nixon (right) was a co-chair of the Neptune Declaration steering committee alongside V.Group chairman Graham Westgarth (above)
Photos: Global Maritime Forum and Ian Lewis

format for health passes that contain tamper-proof information about vaccination and testing status to facilitate crew changes.

Owners and charterers should share information and collaborate to ensure minimal delays and costs.

Shipowners have been asked to provide charterers with as much notice as possible of changes,

while charterers should make "all reasonable efforts" to accommodate the switch-overs, including route deviations.

The declaration also stipulates that no charter contracts should contain clauses preventing necessary crew changes from being carried out.

It calls on the aviation industry to work with shipping to ensure



MARK O'NEIL: Columbia Shipmanagement CEO
Photo: Columbia Shipmanagement

O'NEIL SAYS WORSENING GLOBAL CREW-CHANGE SITUATION

The crew changeover situation is deteriorating again as Covid-19 lockdowns increase — and it could remain a problem for shipping into 2022.

This is according to Mark O'Neil, chief executive of Columbia Shipmanagement and president of Intermanager, who told TradeWinds that crew are already willingly extending contracts as restrictions increase worldwide.

By December last year, Columbia had managed to reduce the number of its crew members overdue a change to 60 out of 15,000 people.

But O'Neil said this number has crept up again to 65 and is only set

to worsen. "The situation has got worse in our abilities to rotate, there's no doubt about it," he said.

"Just before Christmas, before the mutations, we were getting to a really good position where one could achieve rotations to an acceptable level.

MUTATION DIFFICULTIES

"But now, with the variants and the understandable restrictions of the various jurisdictions, it's become again much more difficult.

"I see this issue extending throughout this year and into next."

Seafarers are agreeing to contract extensions of a couple of months to help the company

through this difficult period, O'Neil said.

"We've committed huge resources both financial and personnel-wise to this whole crew rotation situation," he said.

"Crewing departments are working flat out 24/7."

Apart from the crew on board, he insisted the most stress is seen within those crewing departments.

"When you spend days and days and days arranging a rotation and then for some reason the regulations change and you can't do it, and you then have to deal with the fall-out on board the vessels, it's massively stressful," O'Neil said.

He believes Columbia was doing very well before the latest lockdowns were imposed — but still not well enough.

O'Neil said the company has tried to change the narrative around the crisis.

CHANGING THE FOCUS

"Instead of focusing on the overdue rotation, we focus much more on dealing with the situation presented, looking after our crew, identifying with the crew, giving benefits like wifi and mental-health support through Mental Health Support Solutions, which has been a godsend for land and sea personnel," he said.



COALITION OF THE WILLING: SHIPPING USES STRENGTH TO SOLVE THE CREW CRISIS

The first seeds of the Neptune Declaration on Seafarer Wellbeing and Crew Change were planted at a virtual gathering of shipping executives in September 2020.

The Global Maritime Forum's annual event saw Ocean Network Express (ONE) chief executive Jeremy Nixon and V.Group chairman Graham Westgarth take part in a separate discussion group on the crew-change crisis that had seen 400,000 seafarers stranded due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Nixon told TradeWinds: "The situation was pretty serious at that stage."

He added that what was surprising was that quite a lot of chief executives were coalescing around this virtual group.

"We got great people on board," Nixon said.

"A coalition of the willing — owners, operators, charterers, crew agencies, unions."

Nixon added that "all these beautiful statements" were being made at the United Nations level, but at the actual level of tactical action, the industry was "hitting a lot of stickiness".

"We sat and said, 'How do we make this better?'" Nixon said.

Westgarth added that such efforts can sometimes break down at the tactical level.

"At the very high level, people get it, but it needs to funnel down," he said.

Nixon said crew changes were still seen as risky, with no clear process as to how the switches should be done to minimise the risk.

TW CREW CRISIS NUMBERS

Seafarer population: 1.65m
Officers: 774,000
Ratings: 873,500
Biggest crew providers: China, Philippines, Indonesia, Russia and Ukraine
Rotations per month usually: 100,000
Crew stranded on ships at height of pandemic: 400,000
Number unable to board: 400,000

Westgarth added that everyone put aside their own agendas, and the main topic of discussion became the solving of a humanitarian crisis.

"It was very heartening to be a part of," he said.

The idea was to make the process much more straightforward and de-risk it.

The declaration has been built around the Singapore/Philippines-devised STAR Protocols, including a 14-day quarantine and testing of crews before a changeover.

"If you don't do it right upstream, you get a lot of problems," Nixon told TradeWinds.

"We've had hundreds of Filipino crew coming into Australia over the last six to eight weeks, without one problem."

"We need the power and strength of all these big companies to say this is important, to say if we don't do this we're going to run out of crew and the industry is going to get a bad reputation."

that airlift capacity is established between major crew-changing hubs and seafaring nations.

CRISIS AT SEA

"We are witnessing a humanitarian crisis at sea," Nixon said.

"Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, seafarers have kept the world supplied with food, energy and other vital goods, with no line

of sight of when to go home to their families."

Nixon said crews had become hostages of the situation, unable to disembark from their ships: "Yet, we can put an end to the crew-change crisis without any risk to the general public health."

Westgarth said seafarers are playing a significant role in the global race to halt the pandemic by

providing critical medical supplies, particularly in developing economies.

"They are crucial to millions of people's well-being," he said. "We call on our peers, government bodies and other stakeholders to join us in our efforts to ensure that the rights and well-being of the front-line workers of global supply chains are respected."

COULD LAST WELL INTO 2022

"We can't change the unchangeable, we've all got to knuckle down and deal with it. We have to get through this."

The company stresses to crew members that it is doing everything it can financially and physically to help them.

"With trust you can get through pretty much everything, albeit suffering," O'Neil said.

O'Neil has been having conversations with the International Maritime Organization in his role as Intermanager president, urging the United Nations body to keep the pressure on all governments and international bodies.

"With the majority of seafarers coming from the Philippines and the unlikelihood of the Philippines getting a vaccine in sufficient numbers until maybe the middle of 2022, where does that leave our seafarers?" he asked.

UK URGED TO ACT

O'Neil told TradeWinds that he has also written to Liz Truss, the UK secretary of state for international trade, to urge that the Global Britain agency take the "bold step" of rolling out the vaccine developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca to seafarers.

He has not heard back yet.



CREW PROTECTION: UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson carries doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine for distribution. Mark O'Neil wants the government to roll out the vaccine to seafarers

Photo: Scanpix