ECDIS Process

The Safety of Navigation subcommittee of the IMO's Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) arrived at a consensus at their meeting last July (NAV'54) on a mandatory carriage for ECDIS equipment for ocean-going ships. This agreement with proposed new regulations will be submitted to the Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) for approval at its 85th session in November-December 2008. A scaled implementation period of July 2012–2018 has been suggested. This seems a rather lengthy process, but I will not be surprised if the paper chart for primary navigation on these bridges will have become obsolete well before the deadlines. Ship owners will not wait until the last moment as they will likely prefer a gradual change-over to ensure bridge working procedures are in place before deadlines. Another factor is that ship owners also have to attract the scarce commodity of trained deck officers.

For the mandatory back-up however, which requires either paper chart or dual-ECDIS, things may be different. A 'print-on-board' scenario (A0-printers are not expensive anymore) can be explored as a possibility, as 'paper not hampered by failing technology always works'. Therefore, training in the good old practice of navigating on paper is also necessary, as is training for the safe operation of ECDIS.

It may seem to have been a lengthy process (about 30 years) to come to a mature and mandatory system. However, it took the same length of time for echosounder equipment to become mandatory, which is also the same time taken for the International Chart concept to be realised. We should keep this in mind when talking about the new buzzword: eNavigation.

Boards of inquiries on shipping accidents regularly report on the lack of discipline in the look-out task on the ship's bridge. I am informed that the front window of a jet fighter is used to present important information to the pilot. Why not, therefore, investigate the possibility of certain ECDIS data on the bridge window? Could this lead/attract the mariner's eye to the outside world instead of being completely focused on computer screens?

The requirement for ECDIS, which needs coverage by ENCs, places a heavy responsibility on hydrographic offices to have their ENCs ready and released. Despite the great progress made recently, ENC coverage is not yet adequate for world-wide navigation. The electronic chart, which has made relative navigation a neglected practise, has highlighted that many areas need resurveying: a long-term and costly investment for coastal states. We should not be surprised if states have to be reminded by IMO of their SOLAS responsibilities, to ensure that appropriate surveys and charts of their waters are carried out (providing opportunities for the private industry).

The International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), which prepare and publish international standards for electrical, electronic and related technologies, made a decision in July relevant to our industry. The IEC have approved the NMEA 2000 Standard (see web reference) as a means of connecting marine navigation and radio communications equipment aboard all classes of vessels. Hopefully, this will improve the take-up of the NMEA 2000 standard – also around for quite some time.

Enjoy your read.