The Future with Autonomous Ships

Unmanned vessels are already a reality and will play a larger role in future, delegates to The Nautical Institute’s latest seminar were told. More than seventy people attended London Branch’s two-day event in Bristol ‘Autonomous ships; what does the future hold?’, where a wide range of speakers from class, regulatory authorities, developers and operators outlined what might be in prospect for the industry.

“Automated ships are here today, already, in all sorts of shapes and sizes, used for science, for research, for defence and in the oil and gas industry, among other things,” said James Fanshawe, chair of the UK’s Maritime Autonomous Systems (MAS) regulatory working group, in his keynote address. As vessel sizes increase, they will have to be integrated into a well-established maritime world with many complexities in place, he warned.

Outcomes

Over two days of high level presentations and animated discussion, some of the most important points to come out included:

- Autonomous ships are not a thing of the future; in many sectors small autonomous vessels are already a reality for both subsea and surface work.
- The move towards fully automated vessels is likely to be driven by insurance and the increasing public demand that no accident is acceptable. However, while it reduces risk in some areas, including keeping seafarers out of harm’s way, it may increase it in others.
- Interaction between manned and unmanned vessels is likely to be a major point of risk.
- Existing conventions and regulations will need to be updated to take the existence of autonomous vessels into account, including Colregs, SOLAS and national regulations
- While autonomous merchant vessels are unlikely to be a reality for many years yet, onboard systems are increasingly becoming automated, which demands a new set of skills and aptitudes from seafarers.

While it will be many years yet before fully unmanned merchant ships become a reality the seminar delegates concluded it is vital that the industry starts thinking about the implications of the potential change at an early stage. This ensures that the training, skills and knowledge are in place to maintain the safety and profitability of the industry.

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