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Pole position

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Adrian Ashley of Bibby Ship Management examines how to take advantage of the latest dynamic positioning technological developments.

Industry demand for dynamic positioning (DP) expertise and competence remains consistently high

across a range of new and traditional maritime sectors. Companies are increasingly aware of the benefits of top quality DP systems and the emergence of substantial orders from sectors such as marine scientific research, in addition to deepwater drilling or accommodation vessels, portents well for the future of this key maritime discipline.

As demand for new DP systems continues to grow, so will the requirement for highly skilled operators who have received the most up-to-date training. Dynamic positioning training forms a vital part of any seafarer's preparation if they wish to work in the complex world of offshore maritime operations.

Alongside growing interest from ship owners, DP operators themselves are gaining an elevated awareness of their own importance within the maritime industry, together with an appreciation of the uniqueness of their skills.

In June 2009, the industry witnessed the launch of the International Dynamic Positioning Operators Association, the first ever specialised body for DPOs that aims to enhance their professional interests and provide a representative voice to the maritime industry. This increased focus upon career development and professional standards will serve to help dynamic positioning gain increased recognition among the wider offshore industry.

For current training, modern simulator technology allows companies to place a DP operator on the bridge of an offshore vessel anywhere in the world whilst they are actually sat in the controlled environment of a training centre. The current range of simulators is the most advanced that the industry has ever known and they provide an unparalleled level of realism and training.

For example, the current range of Kongsberg simulators, such as the ones that Bibby Ship Management uses in its Mumbai and Ukraine training centres, provide one of the closest approximations to handling a vessel in real life that can be found. The technology relating to DP operations has significantly matured, with a few further step changes on the horizon, particularly relating to how it is operated at sea.



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This is clearly good news for both vessel operators and operating personnel, who have invested in numerous rounds of training to make sure that DP operators are abreast of every new development. However, a vessel operator's work does not end there. The requirement from operators for the demonstration of workplace competence continues to ensure the importance and measurement in the delivery of safe, efficient performance in the most challenging of conditions.

For ship owners and operators in the offshore industry it is vitally important to be aware of the limitations of classroom and simulator-based learning, and to ensure that they provide the correct on-the-job training in parallel. One of the main points we have identified when speaking to crew members working in such environments is the degree of specialisation required to be an effective, professional operator.

Diving support vessels, remote operated vehicles and pipelayers all require differing sets of skills in order to be controlled to a safe standard. Whilst simulators can help in developing these skills, ultimately such knowledge can only be imparted and retained by practice in an operational environment. While it is clear that all seafarers acquire knowledge and experience in their careers, employers should seriously consider how that continued professional development is measured and monitored.

There is a range of tools now available on the market that allow real-time training and development monitoring in the most challenging environments. Traditionally, in the sparse confines of an offshore vessel, where use of space and resources must be maximised, completing volumes of paperwork and log books for training purposes often falls secondary to the work in hand. However, competency assurance software, such as CASys, can be delivered on a whole range of platforms to allow employers to track a mariner's progress wherever they may be located. This software also allows officers or ratings to have more information about their career development.

Operators should give further consideration to regularly assessing their staff to provide an independent way of corroborating progress made in the course of their duties. Whilst the Nautical Institute accredits the vast majority of training centres, the requirement for a formal assessment on the delegates' performance varies from centre to centre. Our own training centres do have a robust competence assessment as part of our programmes however we realise that this is not always possible for other training providers. Similarly, the competence frameworks suggested by industry combodies do not cover the specific requirements of certain vessel types and their operations. The onus therefore falls on operators not to rely purely on qualifications alone and where possible develop their own specific competence assessment processes for all those involved in the vessels operations. A quality crew manager and training provider will be able to advise and assist in the development and completion of these assessments.

We can see in the current DP market that technology can assist in achieving such development. However, the training and honing of the skills of the people operating systems should be the focus for operators looking to continually raise and improve their standards. Continued professional development is a key procedure in any quality human resources and training regime and the current set of software tools on the market can assist companies to put that into practice.

Bibby Ship Management

Adrian Ashley is training development manager at Bibby Ship Management, a true one-stop-shop service company providing full ship and technical management, crewing and manning solutions. The company has a global presence and is part of the Bibby Line Group, which has 200 years of marine heritage.

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