INTERVIEW WITH FRANK COLES
TRANSAS CEO
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Ship Efficiency Review
In September 2015, maritime technology company Transas announced that it had appointed Frank Coles, the former president of Inmarsat Maritime and CEO of Globe Wireless, as its new CEO.

In the past 25 years Transas has grown from its conception by a small group of professional seafarers, engineers and enthusiasts of maritime computing technologies, into one of the leading maritime technology companies in the world.

From being one of the first companies to offer electronic chart systems and pioneering the development of maritime training simulators, it has built on this platform of digital innovation to offer a wide portfolio of technology products and solutions for maritime safety and navigation.

Now, with the industry sitting at the cusp of new era of maritime operations where the boundaries between the ship and the shore are becoming ever more blurred, Transas is probably one a few companies that can actually deliver the technology and solutions needed for the new, integrated maritime infrastructure.

This means that Coles, within his new CEO role, is essentially in a unique position to shape the future direction of shipping operations.

Ship Efficiency Review was first in line to put Coles under the spotlight, the mission being to ascertain how he will catalyse the delivery of this future direction and what we should expect from Transas under his navigation.

The Man At The Helm Of Transas

Upon speaking to Coles, it is quickly evident why Transas felt that he was the man for the job.

For some, given his deep history in the satellite communications sector, the news that Coles had taken the helm at a maritime technology solutions company might have been surprising.

However, upon examining Coles’ career history to date, it is evident that his resume spans across an impressive range of roles from time at sea to shore based operations through to a career as a maritime lawyer.

In more recent years, his roles at Globe Wireless and Inmarsat have seen him at the forefront of the technology revolution in maritime bringing the industry’s connectivity capability to where it is today.

“I feel like I’ve spent my career preparing for this moment with the roles that I did,” said Coles. This was clearly a governing factor for Transas luring him away from his other passion of scuba diving.

Also, Transas is a company that he has always held tremendous respect for, he says. Having watched the company from afar since a friend joined it some 17 years ago and seeing it grow as a trendsetter and a visionary for the market over the years.

His experience at the ‘sharp end of operations’, in his words, is something that Coles intends to use to great effect during his tenure as Transas CEO and he is humbled to now be in the position of being able to positively impact and transform safety, navigation and operations within the industry.

Coles also considers his career circle to be satisfactorily complete thanks to the alignment of the work that he undertook mapping out the maritime plans for Inmarsat’s Global Xpress network, one of the new generation of connectivity networks for global shipping industry with the power of Transas’ digital based solutions and mission to provide an integrated ecosystem for the maritime industry.
A Man On A Mission To Lead The Industry

Transas are perhaps best known for their work in the field of e-navigation and have been involved in numerous EU and government-funded projects that have sought to define e-navigation and safety aspects within the industry.

This company, however, has never been one to wait for the industry to set the pace, rather the opposite in fact. They have a strong heritage as being industry trailblazers. In Coles’ words they have “created annexes for standards before the standards were even defined,” and this is something Coles wants to take one step further by evolving Transas into a role of being a leader of the entire industry.

In his own words, he stated that Transas will be “stepping up to shake things up” in the market, leading the industry on how training should and could happen whilst uniting stakeholders along the way. His approach being, “It’s not enough just to talk about it, we’ve got to walk the walk now in the industry.”

And this man is not going to stand still and wait around for everyone to come along and say their piece before action is taken, that’s for sure.

Crew Training Is Central

For many years Coles has spoken out on the importance of the crew and crew training, stating on many occasions that the crew sit at the core of any successful maritime operation.

He believes that whilst it’s all very well and good talking about faster communications, better connectivity and increased analytical power, if a shipping company doesn’t have adequately trained people to operate the tools then this will in fact be the greatest hindrance.

His standpoint on crew training is strong, his preferred mantra being “competence not certification” For Coles, preparing the crew for the future of maritime operation is imperative and cannot be actioned via a set of tick lists and certificates, the only way forward is to drill down real competence via adequate training exercises and exposure to simulations that tests mariners.

However vocal Coles is around changing the way that the industry approaches crew training, he does harbour great appreciation for the dedication of some ship owners and ship operators to training. This is exemplified, he says, by the great number of training simulators that Transas has sold to date and also the industry’s interest in Transas’ global SIM user conferences for which they have hundreds of industry players in attendance for each and every one.

Creating A Maritime Ecosystem

The new Transas mission statement that Coles has created is unequivocal on the fact that they will be working to integrate all elements of the maritime industry and all systems into one information environment. The word ecosystem was used heavily by Coles, proving that this is a core mission for him within his new CEO role.

For Transas, a harmonised ecosystem represents not just the products that have been created separately for bridge, safety, navigation and operations all operating as separate entities, but rather them come together as one complete, integrated system.

Coles explained that historically the industry has seen multiple vendors making offers to ship owners.

For example, communications airtime and hardware from one, navigation equipment from another, engine equipment elsewhere. But with the technology and information demands now required, these elements now need to come together as one solution.

The solution, however, is not complete without the means to use the information. Coles feels that Transas is in a great place to provide both the infrastructure but also the tools for the decision making, whether in safety, navigation and operations and training.

For this to happen, Coles and Transas will be creating an ecosystem to enable a ship owner or operator to share collected data between his ship and operations so he can make sensible decisions for the safety, the operation and the navigation of the ship. Then that same data and information can be shared, where necessary and agreed, with external parties such as traffic control, regulators and environmental protection forces, for example.

This harmonised ecosystem that Transas will seek to create will be of modular formation so that a ship owner or operator can build up the bricks as they need them. For Coles the crux of this ecosystem development is to put information around navigation and operations in place where people can extract it easily to make better decisions.

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Educating The Industry

In Coles' opinion, in order for more ship owners to invest in software products and services, technology companies need to stop trying to hard sell their software products and instead switch to trying to solve ship owner and operator problems and educating potential customers.

This rule also applies to Transas, says Coles, and the approach that he will drive forward. Coles affirmed that Transas will be changing to selling services and solutions rather than selling simply hardware, software and products.

He reflected upon a remark made by a ship operator delegate at a Smart Operations seminar in Hong Kong last year that drove home the dire need for the industry to be educated and be supported to transform. This ship operator stood up and said to Coles who was on the speaker podium at the time, “we know we need to change, we just need someone to show us how to do it.”

This is a comment that Coles says has stayed with him and a responsibility he does not carry lightly.

He is determined to pursue the education path in his CEO role at Transas and create regular opportunities for the industry to gather, discuss their issues together and also understand the power of the technology through experiencing it first-hand.

By working with the industry in this way, Coles intends develop this ecosystem that really does equip the industry and its crew for the future.

Selling The Savings

Coles is also refreshingly honest about problems that exist in the relationship between vendors and suppliers, believing that inherent mistrust is a major factor that is negatively impacting the maritime technology sector and uptake of the solutions. He acknowledges, however, the responsibility that technology companies need to take in having created this relationship of mistrust.

From the vendor side he also stated that there is a perception of “you’re going to try turn my price down as far as possible” and that is not a healthy relationship, in his view, to facilitating the investment in the development of a solution that makes sense to the industry.

He described the reality of scepticism in the market. “I’ve always said ship owners primarily buy for one of two reasons, they are forced to by regulation or they think they can save money, and we haven’t yet, as a software solutions environment, found the complete solution to showing ship owners how technology saves them money. Ship owners and operators may be very sceptical, but actually they are sceptical because we probably haven’t done a good enough job of selling the savings.”