

Efficiency through automation

VTM has gone a step further at one Norwegian port, helping it automate new facilities. **Scott Berman** talks to the port and the systems provider

When the Port of Risavika, near Stavanger on Norway's west coast, forged ahead with its major development programme – including new container and ro-ro terminals plus a state-of-the-art logistics centre – a goal was set for IT solutions too. The aim was to achieve peak efficiency through automation.

In fact, according to Risavika's director of operations and logistics, Kurt Ommundsen, the core ambition in terms of those solutions is for Risavika "to be the most cost-efficient harbor in Norway", and to plan, run and continuously add value in co-operation with customers and business partners.

Risavika called in Seamless, of Kristiansand, Norway, to provide part of the port's IT solution for its container and ro-ro terminals. It is a vendor-independent SaaS (Software as a Service) application called PortTools.

PortTools builds upon traditional vessel traffic management (VTM) systems by focusing on security and logistics, integrating networks and providing more

automation. The intention is to boost efficiency across terminals and the supply chain.

Seamless explained that PortTools helps freight forwarders, haulage companies, stevedores, agents, vessels and port security staff with the efficient exchange of standardised, co-ordinated information through various applications by XML and/or a web portal. The application, or parts of it, is being used in the Norwegian ports of Bergen, Trondheim and Kristiansand, among others.

Seamless CEO Olav Madland described an example of the application's place in Risavika's system. Sea-Cargo uses the PortTools application to exchange information with agents, terminals and the port itself. The shipping line's back-end system, Softship, ties into PortTools, which in turn uses XML interfaces with other applications such as Hogia for terminal services, Portwin for berth services and Visma for financial control applications.

Leaving the technical jargon to one side, Seamless



Risavika's nerve centre brings all the players together

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said that PortTools “talks to customers’ applications”. The bottom line for busy professionals in ports is that the system helps them handle certain key tasks with better communication, control and efficiency and with fewer mistakes, as Madland put it.

For example, the services and applications that Risavika put together with the help of PortTools enable personnel to, among other things, book berths electronically, report estimated time of arrival, document port calls, perform security-related functions, and order various terminal and port services by XML or a web portal.

In Madland’s view, exchanging information electronically and collaborating logistics messages:

- Provides accurate, real-time information about the status of both parties
- Avoids confusion that can result from differing interpretations of messages
- Standardises any related practices to help keep costs down.

Safety and security are also among the priorities – for example, the software is also equipped to help port professionals comply with the requirements of the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS), such as access control and monitoring. This approach streamlines practices that until now have tended to involve a succession of manual processes, such as keying in lorry access card data.

The system also helps in the unloading and loading of vessels, and the provision of services for vessels such as power, water and waste removal.

The portal can be used for inputting billing details or it can be integrated with other applications to perform that function. When integrated with other systems, the portal can also be used to order pilots and other third-party services within the port such as container transport, Madland explained.

PortTools differs from other network integration systems, such as Soget’s AP+ (Ademar Protis), said Madland, because such systems are engineered for the largest ports, necessarily incurring levels of complexity and expense that may not be needed elsewhere.

Controlled from its logistics centre, Risavika’s system has garnered positive feedback from port customers, business partners and employees, according to Ommundsen. Employees, including veterans used to working with other systems, have been very enthusiastic, he said.

Ports prepare for the changeover to electronic information exchange in different ways. In one scenario, vendor representatives and key port personnel, such as harbor masters and managers of logistics centres,

work together (perhaps guided by a steering committee) to design a system to meet the port’s needs.

In the case of Seamless, that process can take anywhere from one day to two weeks, depending on what is needed, Madland said. Sometimes ports themselves work with various vendors to assemble and install the applications they want; sometimes that task will be entrusted to Seamless. A staff member from Seamless then visits the port and provides a few hours of on-site training, which may be extended to shipping line executives and agents so they can train their own employees. After that, support for end customers is by email or telephone, he added.

The modular architecture of PortTools means that the cost of an installation can vary significantly. A basic, starting cost for a portal itself is about Nkr60,000 (€7,160), plus about Nkr5,000 (€600) for a monthly service fee, said Madland. Customers decide on the number of functions they need and build them up accordingly. The Port of Bergen, for example, started with the product’s web portal and ISPS application, and is building it up from there – service ordering and loading and unloading interfaces may be added in due course.

Ommundsen said that work is moving forward quickly at Risavika and said of the facility’s overall IT system: “So far, so good, but we still have a long way to go. We have, after all, implemented our ERP [Enterprise Resource Planning], harbor administration and logistics system within a three-month period. It must be a world record!”

Ommundsen gives a real example from a busy and important day at Risavika. It was 1 November, when the new facility’s first ship arrived for unloading. On hand, among others, were two veteran tugmaster drivers. Receiving ships on the first day at a brand-new facility and with a new application might result in a somewhat fraught situation.

But here, it was thumbs up: Ommundsen reported that the tugmaster drivers particularly liked having a task list appear on their equipment’s PC screen, instead of having to handle papers. The data flowed across applications through portals to those drivers’ screens and are automatically available as needed later on, Madland explained. “That was a good moment for me because I saw this was actually working, that people understood it instantly,” Ommundsen said.

For busy ports and their customers, efficiency is the key; indeed, it is essential. That’s the goal of ports working towards automation. **PH**