

Interview with Synergy's Rajesh Unni

Captain Rajesh Unni, CEO and founder of Synergy Group, told Tanker Operator about his company's experiences with COVID-19, support for seafarer mental health, digitalisation, decarbonisation and challenges for 2021

Captain Rajesh Unni, CEO and founder of Synergy Group, talked to Tanker Operator about his company's experiences with COVID-19, support for seafarer mental health and welfare, digitalisation, decarbonisation and where he sees the biggest challenges for 2021.

This article is based on Captain Unni's replies to our questions.

Synergy has 360 vessels in its fleet as of March 2021, including over 160 tankers, also bulk carriers, 20,000TEU container ships and LNG-FSU conversions.

The 160 tankers include VLGCs, LNG tankers, VLCCs, chemical tankers and smaller oil tankers such as Suezmax, Aframax, LR2, LR1 and MRs.

COVID

The COVID crisis has affected everyone in shipping and continues to do so.

It has been – and still is to varying degrees – a humanitarian crisis, an operational crisis and a mental health crisis.

How have we coped? We have done our utmost for seafarers and ship owners, but it has been a year of juggling constantly changing local and national rules and dynamics from day to day and port to port.

Things have now settled down somewhat, meaning we are able to make more crew changes than we could six months ago, and we have vaccines being rolled out and that is helping.

Synergy Group is a founding member of the Global Maritime Forum's taskforce that led to

the Neptune Declaration and this is also now bringing more pressure to bear to improve things. But, of course, we need more progress. The situation is still a long way from perfect.

It is seafarers who have borne the real brunt of COVID and shipping must ensure this can never happen again.

We need to have a voice with governments, and we need recognition that seafarers are key workers.

We need to speak up more about shipping's importance to global trade but also to global wellbeing.

This has been clear in the response to the pandemic. The raw materials, the energy, the consumer goods, the PPE, the vaccines, the medicines and the food that people rely on have



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been delivered by ships without interruption throughout this crisis.

This pandemic is not a black swan event. We should plan for the next one now so we can avoid repeating our mistakes.

Seafarer mental health

I think it is clear in any profession that if you take away the basics of human dignity and the means of maintaining personal morale that you're not going to get a better, or safer, working environment.

Imagine what impact the last year has had on seafarers and their mental health, with so many confined to ships for so long despite all our best efforts.

Synergy's seafarers have been fantastic throughout and Synergy has maintained safety levels. But is forcing people to stay onboard ships in a confined and often hazardous environment a good way to ensure the safest possible industry? Of course not.

Seafarer wellness has to be a priority. It was something we were looking at long before we'd heard of COVID.

iCALL is the helpline we established in 2018. It is professionally staffed by counsellors 24/7 and available to all in shipping in multiple languages. It certainly has seen heavy use these past 12 months.

More generally I think shipping as an industry should look to the rest of society and see that we have a lot to learn about how we approach the mental health and wellness of our employees.

We will be placing a lot of emphasis on leadership throughout the organisation in 2021. To ensure our operational resilience is shock proof and our staff have everything they need to ensure their physical and mental wellbeing.

OCIMF human factors

We welcome the [human factors] initiative by OCIMF in bringing such a detailed approach to the human aspects of maritime activities.

Despite considerable improvements in systems approaches, the fundamental attribution error, where an individual's behaviour is overemphasized for failures, is still prevalent in shipping.

We are engaging with human factors specialists in multiple areas and we are confident that appreciable changes will be evident in the short, medium and long term in full alignment with the intent of OCIMF.

Digital technology

Covid has most definitely accelerated digital adoption.

I think that whatever the profession, we've all seen that technology can improve productivity and efficiency when applied correctly.

We plan that more of our fleet will be fitted with [Synergy subsidiary company] Alpha Ori's



Captain Rajesh Unni, CEO and founder of Synergy Group

SMARTShip Internet of Things platform, which reduces GHG emissions in accordance with IMO targets and provides all stakeholders with live transparency via thousands of data points.

We have now installed SMARTShip on over 100 ships with another 150 in the pipeline. A lot of interest has come during lockdowns when people have been inspired to look at the world in new ways.

This includes the Saudi Arabian national carrier Bahri. We've signed a strategic partnership agreement with the ship management division of the company which includes the installation of Alpha Ori's SMARTShip digital platform across a substantial part of the Bahri fleet.

We expect more uptake this year.

Decarbonisation

I think it is clear we all need to play our part in meeting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

The IMO has been very clear about how we as an industry can play our part in reducing emissions and we fully agree with those aims and will be pursuing them with vigour.

Eventually this means using alternative fuels, but in the here and now there is a lot we can do to cut emissions.

More efficient ship management is something we specialise in, so stricter rules are not problematic.

This is one reason why we are digitalizing to make vessel and fleet operational efficiency and fuel-saving gains through SMARTShip.

We are also studying and implementing a range of ship design and operational steps to save energy, because saving energy is the first step to cutting emissions.

This is the concept of the NegaWatt. Not using energy is the easiest means of cutting emissions.

More immediately, we are looking at the IMO's Energy Efficiency Existing Ship Index

(EEXI) and Carbon Intensity Indicator (CII) which represents the next step in IMO's initial GHG strategy.

The age of parts of the tanker fleet means that, in many cases, vessels may struggle to meet the required EEXI and CII criteria. So we are exploring currently with classification societies, owners and other stakeholders how we can best help them comply in time for the rules entering into force.

We see ourselves as a technical thought partner to our customers and we see decarbonization as a joint responsibility. We're investing a lot of resources to ensure we can help lead this inevitable transformation of shipping.

Biggest challenges for 2021

The burden of the coronavirus pandemic was felt most heavily by those on the front line providing healthcare and essential services, including seafarers.

But Covid fatigue spared nobody. In 2021 we need to really focus on our people.

So, I think for any shipping CEO looking at challenges this year [2021] addressing that fatigue element and the mental strains of working from home and lockdowns has to be at the forefront of your mind.

We have found new ways of operating safely and technology has played a big part in how we have all coped, but I think this will prove to be only the start of the journey.

How we work will never quite be the same again so addressing what this means for our organisation as a whole will be a top priority.

Ensuring the wellness of all our personnel – and especially our crew – after such a torrid year will be the priority.

We will also be placing a lot of emphasis on leadership throughout the organisation in 2021 to ensure our operational resilience is shock proof.

Covid has also highlighted that collaboration – with customers and competitors – produces better results.

For example, the alliance which we formed with an array of shipping companies to push for crew change solutions last year showcased that collaboration between CEOs can yield immediate benefits.

So in 2021 Synergy will pursue more collaboration with those that share our progressive core values. Not only in relation to the crew change crisis, but also in addressing other emerging issues in ways that unlock multi-stakeholder benefits.

The major strategic takeaway from 2020 is that, more than ever, it is clear a successful business must have a coherent long-term plan but remain flexible enough to adapt to short-term challenges.

Predicting events such as pandemics is impossible, but you can strategize in a way that minimises risk and maximises resilience.