

It's Sailing Time... But Where's the Crew?

a report by

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To the casual observer, the cruise industry runs like a well-oiled machine, with gleaming ships full of happy guests sailing in and out of ports like clockwork. The travelling public barely gives a thought to the processes taking place to make that happen. From the loading of provisions and fresh water supplies through the calculation of fuel to the communication with port authorities, pilot and local officials, there are hundreds of behind-the-scenes processes occurring 24 hours a day, which usually combine to give the appearance of an effortless, flawless operation.

One area requiring extreme precision and organisation that is all but unknown to the guests is the movement of crew members, ensuring that the right people are in the right place at the right time to join their designated ship. Most take for granted the fact that their waiter, cabin attendant and bartender will be waiting for them – without a thought to the processes that have occurred to make that happen.

Apollo Ship Chandlers, Inc., has more than 30 years of experience of moving crew around the world and currently manages around 5,000 active maritime employees, each making an average of three one-way trips each year between home and ship – a total of approximately 15,000 journeys, or over 75 million miles of flying. The planning behind this is mind-boggling.

With between 10 and 20 vessels actively being serviced at any given time, trading from home ports around the world and crew members originating from over 70 countries, the logistics of getting crew members to the right port at the right time are challenging. Not only do the crew members need to be in the designated port to board their ship at the appointed time, but they also need to be in possession of the correct documentation.

All crew members undergo a physical examination before employment, to ensure their fitness. All crew who are not US citizens or residents are required to obtain a seaman's visa if their ship will visit or sail from any US ports; and, depending on

their nationality, they may also need a visa for the country in which they will join the ship, if it is elsewhere than the US.

The process begins with the candidates being interviewed by one of Apollo's recruiting managers and the successful candidates are presented with a letter of employment from the specific marine division that will be hiring them. A new crew member then proceeds to the US embassy with the letter and makes an appointment to obtain a seaman's visa.

To assist in the processes of hiring and joining, Apollo has a network of recruiting agents around the world, who act as the intermediary in communications between the company and the crew members.

The scheduling process is perhaps the most challenging of all, since crew who are joining the ships must arrive in time to relieve those leaving (or 'signing off') the same ships. Depending on the position, the new arrivals may join the same day the out-going crew leave (most experienced crew fall into this category) or, in the case of management, they will need to arrive in time for a scheduled hand-over period, prior to assuming full responsibility for the position. Newly hired crew may initially join a training vessel before continuing to their permanent assignment.

Apollo employs three scheduling managers and a team of scheduling co-ordinators to ensure the process is as smooth and trouble-free as possible. Planning the movement of all 5,000 crew members up to 12 months ahead is an extremely meticulous process, requiring precision and skill.

Having scheduled a crew member for a particular ship and joining date, a travel request is automatically produced and electronically communicated to Apollo's Amadeus platform, which automatically books seats in the lowest available booking class. Many crew members live in remote locations, in countries with limited air service and complex itineraries are sometimes required to get the employee to the required joining



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port. Apollo's co-ordinators are well versed in this kind of travel planning and are able to creatively construct travel schedules, bearing in mind convenience and cost control. An automated system ensures that the company is receiving the lowest possible air fare in each case. Travel requests for crew leaving the ships on holiday are handled similarly, with tickets being booked to their home destinations to coincide with their replacements joining the ships. Weather delays, airline strikes or other situations can create major havoc in the smooth movement of the crew.

Technology plays a major and ever-growing part in the entire process of recruiting and scheduling, becoming more high-tech every year. Apollo, following development by the company's team of software experts, is currently implementing a state-of-the-art, groundbreaking system. A strong crew management system is used for all scheduling and travel needs, with many functions becoming automated – requiring only supervision by the scheduling team, rather than time-consuming data entry.

A new Internet-based system connects Apollo's worldwide team of recruiting agents with the Miami headquarters. The basic details of a new recruit are entered into the system by the recruiting managers, who log into the system remotely while they are on the road. The agents are subsequently able to access the record, complete the required information and, in an industry-leading feature, are also able to print the all-important letter of employment locally, thereby avoiding the need for it to be produced in Miami and couriered to the agent's office. The cost savings in this advancement alone are considerable.

Even more revolutionary is the provision of access to the system by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service, both at embassies and ports of entry in the US. Access at the embassies permits officers to confirm the validity of letters of employment via the Internet at any time, even when it is 3am in Miami and Apollo's offices are closed. Likewise, access to the system at airports in the US allows officers to quickly verify that the crew member is expected and is arriving in the right city on the right date.

Most guests will never realise the work that takes place behind the scenes to ensure that the necessary crew is on the ship waiting for them, nor should they have to think about such things. For Apollo Ship Chandlers, however, it is a major part of the operation and, while things normally run smoothly, the entire team takes a collective sigh of relief at the end of each ship turnaround when the ship pulls out of port with its full complement of crew. ■