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August 2008

The MARITIME EXECUTIVE

INTELLIGENCE CAPITAL FINANCIAL SERVICES

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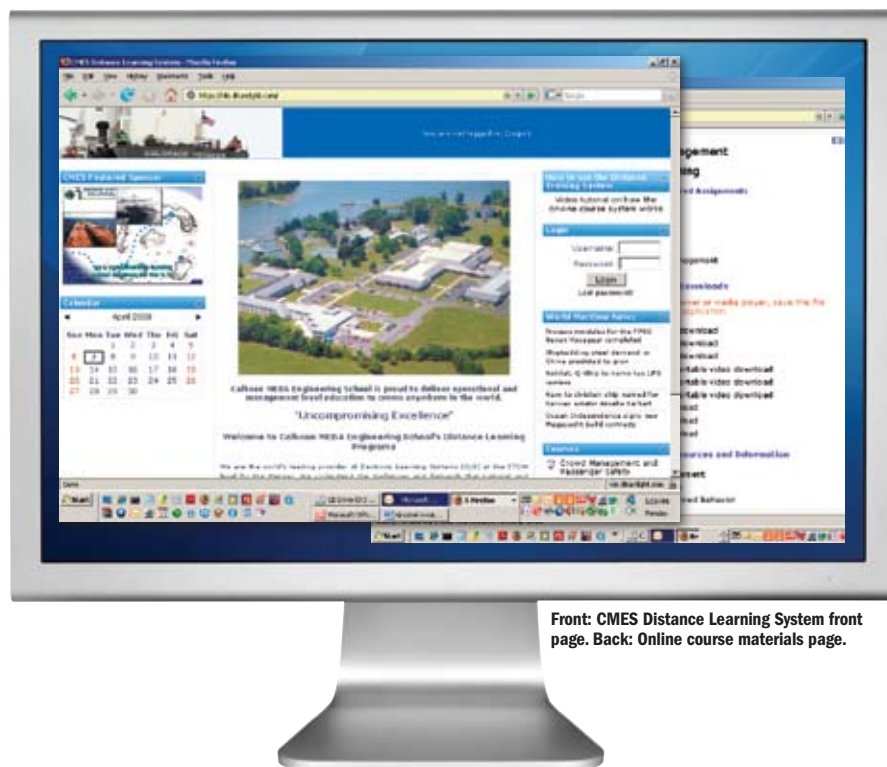
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By Joseph Keefe

CMES: Online, Long Distance - And Leading the Way

IT SHOULDN'T BE SURPRISING that an internationally certified (DNV) Maritime Simulator and Training Center is the recognized leader in distance learning for professional mariners. It also shouldn't be surprising that this same school has developed the only online distance learning system for STCW applications that has been approved by the United States Coast Guard. The fact that this Distance Learning Management System (patents applied for) isn't considered by its inventors to be a panacea for most maritime training applications shouldn't necessarily raise your eyebrows either. What all of this could eventually mean to the world of professional maritime training, however, just might. And it should.

Ideas and Requirements

Somewhere in the heartland of America, an American kid with access to decent bandwidth is playing sophisticated, interactive video games with someone in Europe. The scope of what can be accomplished online or through a computer is no longer a difficult thing

for most people to comprehend. That type of technology can and is applied to learning. Only recently, however, did the practice begin to impact the world of regulated, mandated STCW and U.S. Coast Guard requirements. Chuck Eser, Manager of Academic Affairs for the Calhoon M.E.B.A. Engineering School (CMES), says, "This isn't rocket science. Other industries have adopted distance learning standards – but it is new for the maritime industry and the Coast Guard." In the case of the all-new CMES Distance Learning Management System, he might be understating the case just a tad bit.

In early April, I became one of the first industry professionals to take the Crowd Management course through this Coast Guard-approved distance learning environment invented by CMES. A couple of weeks later, I traveled to Easton, MD to take the final examination. Coincidentally, and much earlier in October of 2007, I also visited the United States Coast Guard's new National Maritime Center in Kearneysville, WV. The three events have a lot to do with one another,

because as one organization begins to ramp up its automated processes for mariners, another – for totally different reasons altogether – has already shown them the way out of the woods.

The trustees and directors of this well-respected school had a simpler mission: Create convenience for mariners and member companies and save money in airfare and travel expenses. Because distance learning applications were already in use at CMES, the educators there knew of its power and utility. The concept had been tested over time, on non-Coast Guard-required but nevertheless important courses from the standpoint of member companies. With that baseline in place, a CMES project team, led by Captain Dan Noonan, began the process of building a robust and verifiable training tool intended to withstand the regulatory requirements for STCW applications. Ten months later, the United States Coast Guard approved the first online distance learning management system.

The very first course to be packaged

in this innovative distance learning environment is the CMES online Crowd Management program. Because it was (a) short - four hours, and (b) one with real market appeal to existing cruise lines, the choice was an easy one. Cruise lines, some with a fair bit of turnover in their unusually large crews, needed a way to train a lot of people to a required standard, quickly and without incurring huge travel expenses. As it turns out, CMES had the perfect answer. Getting that product to market was just a little bit harder.

Standardizing Delivery, Verifying Participants, Protecting Privacy – And a Host of Other Things Too...

From the outside looking in, the one-year period in which CMES got the job done to the satisfaction of the Coast Guard and DNV might seem very short. But Dan Noonan told his CMES colleagues, “I think I can take this school into the 21st century.” And, remarkably, the Coast Guard gave approval to the concept just three months after receiving the full package and vetting the course through actual online learning sessions (and other methods). During that period, the Coast Guard determined that, among other things, the new learning system provided:

- Validation of the privacy of the individual taking the course;
- Verification that the instructor is who he says he is and that he is there (with biometrics);
- A backed-up system supported by redundant servers and IT on call at all times;

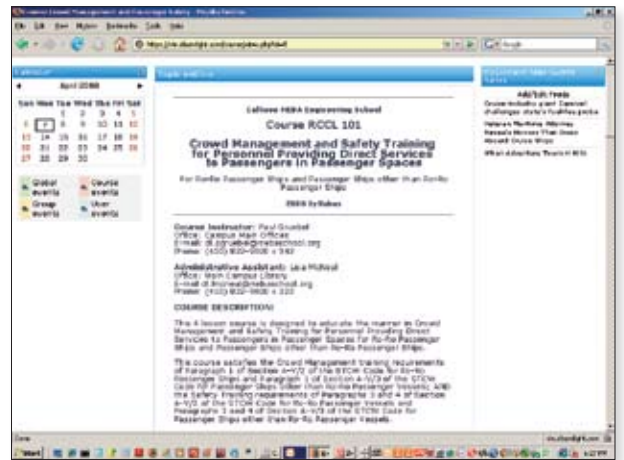
- All actions logged (opening and closing a form/leaving a lecture, etc.); and
- Electronic routing/signatures and a completely paperless system.

The first meeting with the Coast Guard took place early in 2008 at their Martinsburg location. The CMES Distance Learning Manual was delivered

at that meeting and provided a description of the individual systems and, more importantly, how those systems interact with one another. That three-hour meeting, with a skeptical Coast Guard team attending, eventually yielded fruit. Initially, the National Maritime Center veters had no requirements but plenty of reservations. In the end, they embraced the concept fully. Says Chuck Eser, “They could see how CMES was delivering and testing and verifying. I think they were waiting for something like this.” Eser also says, “We also had our “t”s crossed and our “i”s dotted when we went to see them.”

Quality of Delivery: Just as Important as Certifying the Course

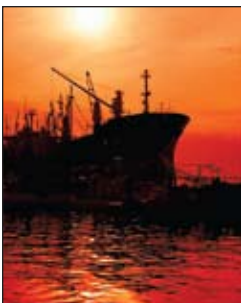
CMES delivers as many as 45 courses to its students, each one as important as the next. As the distance learning concept was being developed, the old ISO 9000 analogy was very much in play when dealing with the Coast Guard and its DNV certifying body: “Say what you



Crowd Management online course front page.

mean, mean what you say, and prove it.” Probably more important to the CMES team was that, as revolutionary as the distance learning concept was, it still had to be as good as and in fact better than “brick and mortar” methods. Check Eser adds, “A lot of things are different, but some things are very much the same. Delivery of consistent course content, vetting instructors, verifiable privacy for students – all of these things need to be as robust as the traditional ‘brick and mortar school house.’ Then you need a process for continuous improvement.”

The CMES Distance Learning approach allows for a self-paced environment in which the student interacts with the USCG instructor at his or her own speed, which avoids wasting the time of 22 other people in the class who are also proceeding at their own particular rhythm. And yet the system and course are DNV-audited. A CMES Distance Learning Manual lays out how the processes will be carried out. Course development, of course, also requires submittals to the NMC. Dan Noonan told



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Crowd Management online video lecture.

MarEx, “You’ve got to develop interesting course material that conveys knowledge but doesn’t bore people to death. You’ve heard of ‘Death by PowerPoint?’ We wanted to avoid that at all costs, both here at the school and online. So the goal, from the start, was to get the students engaged and not to give a mind-numbing instructional experience.”

Noonan says that this is not the first time they’ve used these new technologies. When he did submittals for his Advanced Meteorology course, he used the technology on the student side of the equation – very similar to the lecture part of the online Crowd Management course. “To my enjoyment – and not necessarily my complete surprise – the course was engaging.” The key, says Noonan, is to provide a ten-minute segment of “exchange of information” that is engaging, visually and intellectually, and use that as an instructor, and then go back over things to say, for example, “Okay, do you remember what was taught to you?” In this way, students get a fuller understanding of what the material is.

Defining the Learning Management System: The CMES Way

CMES had to get the Distance Learning Management System approved before any course could go into that curriculum. But what is a learning management system? According to Chuck Eser, a learning management system is software that automates the training event and the administration, launches the learning content, tracks the learner’s content and

sequences the learning content. The CMES suite of functions (a) delivers the course, (b) manages the content and (c) manages interaction with the system and does the performance assessment. All of this, backed by a robust Biometric Instructor Identification, was successfully demonstrated to the U.S. Coast Guard to internationally recognized standards.

Within the Distance Learning System, CMES will observe a strict 12:1 student-to-teacher ratio. And the verification of that metric is robust. Coast Guard auditors will have unlimited privileges to come and go online as they please, monitoring courses, instructors and students at any time. This audit function exceeds that which they would normally be afforded during “brick and mortar” classes – and is a lot cheaper. The only thing that cannot be done online is the final examination. Fortunately, there are independent testing organizations – Prometrics, for example (3,700 locations around the country), who give proctored final exams. Of course, the student can also come to CMES or any STCW assessment center in person.

In Actual Practice

In April, I took the CMES online Crowd Management course. Sitting in my office, I completed the four modules, lectures and associated quizzes in about three hours and 45 minutes. This included time for a couple of coffee breaks and a quick telephone call between lectures. I am told that this coincided nicely with the “brick and mortar” method of teaching. But when the instructor popped up on my screen a couple of times to let me know I was doing “okay” or to ask me for my input on a particular area of “crowd management control,” the experience was (at first) a little disconcerting. But like a chat session or “IM” string with a purpose, this aspect of the course eventually gave a real human feel to the process.

I found the lectures to be engaging

and interesting, even though some of the terminology and lesson content was clearly intended for a lower level, perhaps unlicensed mariner. Eventually, in mid-April, I traveled to Easton, MD and took the final examination, proctored by none other than Dan Noonan, the father of this cutting-edge teaching tool. We conducted the final interview after he presented me with my first-ever STCW certificate.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Chuck Eser readily admits, “Someone else could have skinned this cat a different way.” And what if the Coast Guard had said no? He paused briefly before answering, “We would’ve been disappointed, but we would’ve also said, fine – it still supports what we are doing here at the school.” He also says that the online distance learning tool is not for all courses. While teaching a student about pollution and giving examples of why that is important would be a good target for this tool, subjects involving knowledge and motor skills might not be. Teaching how to pull the head on the engine without having that engine nearby would not be the best idea. Dan Noonan adds, “Courses need to be screened very carefully. You need to ask, ‘Can you accomplish all of the objectives?’ Maybe not. And for a lot of what we do here, the answer is no.”

As the CMES team looks ahead, they can see promising areas of application for their Learning Management System. One such area might be ARPA courses and related simulation areas, but Chuck Eser cautions, “That will require a teaming effort in the future between manufacturers and the schools.” In the end, the Learning Management System will not be a panacea for everything. Having said that, it’s all the more remarkable that a “hands-on” type of engineering program – like CMES, for example – ultimately decided to pioneer it.

What’s Next?

Without a doubt, the CMES team would like to grow the program to support a much larger student body. But if a giant cruise line decided to sign up 600

people at once, the capacity does not yet exist to handle that volume of students. Maintaining the Coast Guard-mandated teacher-to-student ratio would be one of the problems. An IT professional must be on call at all times when the course is up and running. And finding instructors is difficult. Only Masters with experience on a passenger ship can teach the Crowd Management course, for example, and they are in decidedly short supply here in the United States. On the other hand, the instructor can be anywhere and this creates yet another economy of scale, because as long as the instructor logs in biometrically, he is in compliance with the protocol. Finally, a student has three days to complete the Crowd Management course, so the instructor will always have to be available. As Chuck Eser says, "Be careful what you wish for – you just might get it."

In the future, an auditing group such as DNV might want to base its standards of maritime-based learning on a particular protocol. And since CMES is the

first to come out of the gate with a Coast Guard-approved system, whatever comes later arguably will be at least partly based on what came first. In the end, the effort took foresight – and guts. Dan Noonan explains, "We bought the servers, software, and spent the tens of thousands of dollars in outlay to put it together. There was tremendous risk involved with that: Including salaries, before the first test course was put out, the outlay was certainly more than \$100,000, with no guarantee that the Coast Guard approvals could be obtained." Eventually, on the platform that more than 70 students used to complete another "proficiency" course over the space of four months, the Crowd Management course became the first Coast Guard-approved, long-distance online STCW offering.

Imitation: The Sincerest Form of Flattery

No doubt any number of other schools will be looking to duplicate the CMES online training effort. And some will

eventually succeed. But perhaps no outfit is looking harder at the proven concept than the Coast Guard itself. In October of 2007, NMC Commanding Officer Captain David Stalfort told MarEx that his goal was to eventually make the bulk of the mariner certification and renewal process "a paperless process which would allow for e-filing of documents." Just a few months later, the CMES team probably gave them new hope that it could be accomplished.

As the new NMC in West Virginia ramps up and continues to absorb one local Regional Exam Center (REC) after another, Dan Noonan's labor of love may well have made that process – however indirectly – just a little easier. Back in Easton, the brain trust is back at it again, packaging old courses in new and exciting ways and, in the process, making things just a little easier and more accessible for students and customer companies. Without a doubt, the world of maritime training and education will never be the same. **MarEx**

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