International Chamber of Shipping
Shaping the Future of Shipping

Leadership Insights

Insights from the global leadership community

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Finding common ground in a changing world

Johnathan Astbury, CEO – Transport and Mobility International at Magellan, explores what decades of transformation in rail can tell us about the future of shipping, and the lessons maritime can draw from its journey.

Bridging rail strategies to solve shipping's biggest hurdles

ICS *Leadership Insights* sat down with Johnathan Astbury, Chief Executive Officer – Transport and Mobility – International at Magellan, to explore what maritime leadership can learn from the rail sector. From cross-industry collaboration and AI integration, to navigating decarbonisation and regulatory uncertainty, Astbury shares key strategies for moving the sector forward.

Q Shipping and rail are both trying to knit together fragmented, multi-operator networks into something that feels seamless to the end customer. What lessons from rail's push toward unified multi-modal ticketing do you think translate to how shipping and logistics coordinate across carriers, ports and freight forwarders?

A The first thing I'd highlight is the need for a neutral orchestrating layer, because in rail the ticketing standard sits above the commercial operators rather than inside any one of them. Until the data backbone is genuinely neutral, "seamless" is likely to remain a word used on conference panels rather than something customers actually experience.

The second lesson is about what sits above competition. In rail, that role is played by safety, which overrides commercial interest and forces a level playing field. Shipping doesn't appear to have a single equivalent, but from where I sit, decarbonisation, cyber resilience, and supply-chain transparency look as though they're beginning to function in a similar way, because these are pressures no individual carrier, port, or flag state can resolve on its own, and they may quietly do for shipping what safety has done for rail.

The third lesson is the honest one, which is that rail's progress has been slower and more uneven than the outside world tends to assume. Fares reform, ticketing platforms, delay-repay interoperability — each took years of imperfect compromise, so if there's one thing worth passing across the fence it's not that rail got it right, but that rail kept moving while alignment was still incomplete, and waiting on a perfect standard agreed by all is how you end up with none at all.

Q You've argued AI's real value in transport is still ahead of us, past the hype. Where in day-to-day operations - scheduling, resource optimisation, customer experience - are you actually seeing it move the needle today, and where is it still overpromised?

A Rail, like most transport industries, has been crying out for data standardisation across retail, operations, and infrastructure, and AI has been useful in building systems that can translate and transfer data between formats and functions that were never designed to speak to each other.

A related area where we're seeing real value is in re-platforming legacy systems. AI has proved useful in helping us interpret, document and migrate those codebases without the risk of losing the operational knowledge embedded in them, which is knowledge that often only exists in the code itself because the people who wrote it have long since retired.

We've also been experimenting with AI in augmented rostering, which is the process of assigning crew to trains, and it's a good example of where the real value of AI often gets missed. The other area where we're seeing genuine value is in bridging knowledge gaps. Rail is a world of acronyms and conventions that can feel impenetrable to anyone outside it, and AI has been useful in helping us engage stakeholders at the right level.

Where I'd be more cautious is anywhere AI is being sold as a replacement for operational judgement. Scheduling and resource optimisation are the obvious examples, because on paper they look like problems AI should solve outright, but in practice the models are only as good as the assumptions they're built on, and transport networks are full of edge cases, human factors, and local knowledge that doesn't sit neatly in a training environment.

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Q Geopolitical and regulatory exposure has a major impact for both rail and shipping. How is that uncertainty changing the way you plan investment and technology roadmaps today versus in the past?

A In UK rail we've faced more structural change in the last three years than in the previous 15, with Great British Railways in prospect, the shifting role of the Department for Transport, franchise-to-contract reforms and open-access debates all in play at the same time, and the direction of travel is still not fully settled. From the outside looking in, shipping seems to be dealing with its own version of the same pattern, whether that's the pace of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) decarbonisation, the extension of the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) into maritime, sanctions regimes, or the routing consequences of the Red Sea.

That kind of volatility changes how anyone in transport has to plan. In a stable environment you optimise for the expected case, because the expected case is broadly what happens. In an unstable one you pay a premium to keep options open, which means modular architectures rather than monolithic ones, shorter contract terms with extension rights rather than long lock-ins, and a preference for systems you can reconfigure without ripping out foundations. It's more expensive on paper than the optimised version, but the optimised version has a habit of being wrong by year three, at which point the real cost shows up.

This is why we increasingly design systems around adaptability rather than fixed assumptions. Technology should help operators respond to changing policy, regulation and market conditions, not become another constraint.

Q Decarbonisation is a live pressure across every transport mode. Beyond the direct emissions question, you've talked about digital tools helping customers and operators cut their footprint indirectly, through efficiency. How do you make the business case for that kind of "invisible" sustainability gain to clients and regulators?

A Digital tools that fix bad routes, cut idle time, or fill empty vehicles save carbon but they cut fuel bills instantly and therefore cost. When you show a client that being green means spending less on diesel or electricity today, sustainability stops looking like an expensive virtue signal and starts looking like a smarter bottom line.

For regulators, it comes down to proof. You can't just promise you're doing better - you need the math to back it up. Digital tools automatically track real-time fuel, load, and battery use, giving operators clean, undeniable proof of their lower footprint. Turning messy operations into clear data makes compliance painless and gives companies a huge edge when bidding on public contracts.

That's where digital platforms have an important role. We increasingly see our job as helping customers make operational improvements measurable, whether that's reducing emissions, improving asset utilisation or demonstrating compliance.

Q Bringing MeTS's 40 years in UK rail into a newly merged, pan-European group is as much a cultural integration as a technical one. What's your approach to keeping the culture of accountability and open communication you've championed intact through a merger of this size?

A Integrating 40 years of local heritage into a massive pan-European entity is always a high-stakes balancing act. One thing we've learned through successive acquisitions is that culture isn't preserved through organisation charts. It's preserved by protecting local expertise, keeping decision making close to customers and giving people ownership.

As we join a broader European group, the goal isn't to wrap our teams in layers of corporate padding, but to give them clear ownership over their local operations. We maintain accountability by keeping authority close to the frontline, ensuring the engineers and managers who know the UK network best still have the autonomy to make call-outs and own the outcomes.

Why shipping's next 39,100 officers are already onboard

With global fleet expansion deepening the officer shortfall, converting experienced ratings into certified operational leaders offers a structured and cost-effective route to long-term crewing stability.

The BIMCO/ICS Seafarer Workforce Report 2026 highlights a growing structural imbalance in global crewing. Driven by post-pandemic recovery and fleet expansion, demand for STCW-certified seafarers has increased by 35% over the past five years, outpacing earlier forecasts. The global merchant fleet now relies on an estimated 2.57 million seafarers operating 85,148 vessels.

While the industry maintains a surplus of 56,890 STCW-certified ratings, it faces an immediate shortfall of 39,100 officers. Without sustained investment in training and recruitment, the report projects this gap could reach 113,735 by 2030.

Expanding cadet intake alone will not be enough. Increasingly, ship managers are focusing on developing experienced ratings into officers through structured career pathways supported by digital assessment, targeted training and mentoring.

Identifying future officers through data

Historically, progression from rating to officer has relied on complex administrative processes and subjective onboard assessments. Today, digital crew analytics enable ship managers to identify high-potential candidates using objective measures of competence, safety performance and operational capability. However, industry leaders caution against viewing the ratings surplus as a straightforward solution to the officer shortage.

Maneesh Pradhan, Chief Operating Officer and Global Head of Crewing, Synergy Marine Group, stresses that converting talent requires careful evaluation: "There is considerable potential, but the figures should not be read as a simple numerical offset. A surplus of ratings cannot be converted directly into a supply of officers.

"Progression still requires approved education and training, qualifying sea service, certification, assessment, and demonstrated competence under STCW. Experienced ratings bring a strong operational foundation, however an officer must also exercise judgement under pressure. We therefore look beyond technical proficiency and length of service to safety behaviour, reliability, learning agility, initiative, leadership potential, and the willingness to accept accountability."

Synergy supports this approach through its digital Skill Map. Pradhan explains: "[It] consolidates certification, training records, sea service, rank experience, and operational performance, giving crewing, training, and fleet leadership teams a fuller picture of an individual's development and potential readiness for progression. It is a decision-support and development-planning tool, not an automated basis for promotion."

Developing officers safely

The report also points to improving training capacity. The global ratio of officer cadets to qualified officers has improved to 1:3.8, down from 1:4.8 in 2021 and 1:7.6 in 2015, increasing the availability of onboard training opportunities. Ratings progressing to officer roles also bring practical experience in vessel operations, seamanship and onboard safety.

Structured mentoring and simulation are central to ensuring that experience translates into safe leadership. As Pradhan says: "We treat the transition as a controlled increase in responsibility, not a single promotion event. Preparing someone for a chemical tanker, gas carrier, or dual-fuel vessel is not the same as preparing them for a conventional bulk carrier. Simulation is particularly valuable because it allows candidates to practise technical tasks, communication, and decision-making in realistic conditions without exposing the vessel or crew to operational risk."

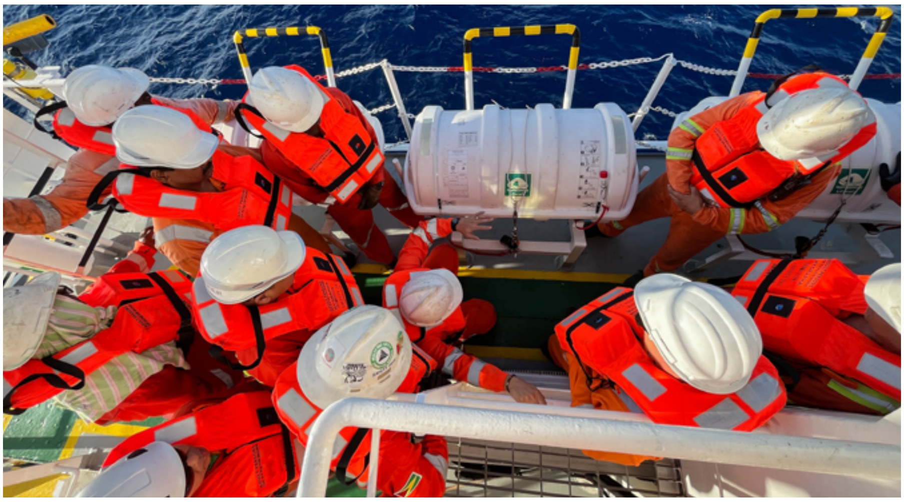
Synergy reinforces this through its Marine Advanced Simulation and Training (MAST) facility, established as a joint venture with Mitsui O.S.K. Lines (MOL), where candidates are assessed in realistic operational scenarios before progressing into officer roles.

A similar approach has been adopted by Anglo-Eastern. Vinay Singh, Group Managing Director, Marine HR, Anglo-Eastern, says the company's Knowledge, Skills and Behaviour (KSB) Framework and Career Care Programme, launched in 2024, ensures candidates are assessed beyond certification alone. Singh says: "Obtaining an officer's certificate is only one milestone in the process. Once a rating qualifies as an officer, they are required to undergo the same structured assessment and selection process as any other officer candidate joining the Anglo-Eastern fleet." Singh added candidates complete a two-to-three week training and simulator assessment block prior to promotion. Newly qualified officers are then assigned to sail with experienced Masters and senior officers who provide guidance, mentoring, and practical support during the critical transition period.

This structured approach helps ensure that promotion reflects operational readiness rather than certification alone, while giving newly qualified officers the support needed to build confidence and leadership at sea.

Training for a new generation of ships

The workforce challenge coincides with rapid technological change across the global fleet. The rollout of dual-fuel propulsion and alternative fuels, including methanol, ammonia, and LNG, is raising the level of technical competence required across both deck and engineering departments. As a result, leading ship managers increasingly view training and retention as strategic investments that support safety, operational resilience and long-term asset protection.



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STCW certification provides the foundation of generic knowledge and competence, but ship- and role-specific operational readiness requires further company-led familiarisation and training, particularly as new technologies and alternative fuels enter the fleet. ICS has advocated this distinction throughout the ongoing comprehensive review of the STCW Convention. For alternative fuels specifically, the Maritime Just Transition Task Force (MJTTF) has also developed Guidelines for Developing Familiarisation Programmes for Alternative Fuels, providing a framework to help companies prepare seafarers for the specific fuels and technologies they will encounter onboard.

Pradhan argues that STCW certification must be complemented by continuous professional development: "STCW certification remains the essential foundation, but it cannot by itself anticipate every vessel-specific challenge created by new fuels, automation, and integrated digital systems. The industry should apply to competence development the same discipline, continuity, and long-term perspective that it applies to investment in physical assets. An advanced vessel is not made safe simply because the technology has been installed. Its safety and performance ultimately depend on the competence, judgement, and confidence of the people entrusted with operating it."

Singh shares that view, pointing to the company's investment in specialist training infrastructure: "We agree that recruitment and training are not administrative overheads, but a form of CapEx required to safely operate the increasingly complex ships coming into service. Our own investments on training, including the world's first LNG/ammonia bunkering training skid at AEMA, an expanded ME-GI training facility with Everllence at AEMTC Mumbai, and more than 3,000 seafarers trained on dual-fuel operations as of mid-2025, reflect that view in practice."

Building a long-term workforce pipeline

The greatest challenge is balancing training with day-to-day operational requirements. Releasing experienced ratings for courses, examinations, and supervised sea service requires long-term workforce planning to maintain safe vessel manning while building the next generation of officers.

As Singh concludes: "If the industry as a whole is to convert the ratings surplus into the officers we will need, this triangle of infrastructure, investment, and internal management will need to become standard practice. That shift is beyond the reach of any single company. It will take owners, managers, training providers, industry organisations, and governments of labour-supplying nations pulling in the same direction, each shouldering their share of the responsibility."

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ICS in Action

A round-up of ICS news and activities over the last month

Joint industry action on no tolls in Hormuz

On Monday 3 August 2026, a joint open letter was sent to the United Nations Secretary General, His Excellency António Guterres, and International Maritime Organization Secretary General, His Excellency Arsenio Dominguez, in relation to no compulsory tolls or charges being introduced in the Strait of Hormuz.

Eight maritime associations (ASA, BIMCO, CLIA, European Shipowners | ECSA, INTERCARGO, INTERTANKO, ICS, and WSC) have co-signed the letter reiterating our concerns regarding the potential imposition of tolls or service fees in the Strait of Hormuz.

As the International Maritime Organization has highlighted repeatedly, since the beginning of the conflict seafarers have been operating in an environment of heightened uncertainty, with some sustaining injuries and tragically losing their lives while carrying out their work at sea. The safety of seafarers who make global trade possible should be non-negotiable. So too must be freedom of navigation. The ability of merchant ships to navigate international waterways safely, predictably and without unnecessary impediment is fundamental to resilient supply chains, economic stability and energy security.

The organisations stand ready to work with the International Maritime Organization and the wider United Nations to ensure that long-established legal principles governing international straits, that are protected under international law, most notably through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), are not weakened or altered.

To read the full joint open letter, please click here.

ICS Shaping the Future of Shipping Summit Outcomes 2026

Following our annual Shaping the Future of Shipping Summit in Rome, Italy, on the 23 June 2026, ICS has released its Summit outcomes document summarising the key themes discussed. These include freedom of navigation being the cornerstone of global trade, protecting seafarers during geopolitical conflicts, resilience requires adaptability and cooperation, shifting away from traditional methods towards partnership models, and promoting the economic value of shipping.

To read more about these topics, please see the full Summit outcomes, here.

Efficient and Quiet Technologies for Ships Webinar

On 3 July 2026, ICS hosted a webinar on Efficient and Quiet Technologies for Ships. The webinar had a specific focus on optimising propellers to improve energy efficiency and reduce underwater radiated noise, explaining how "cavitation" has a detrimental effect on marine wildlife.

You can watch the recording back on our YouTube Channel or read the full write up of the discussion on our website.

ICS releases the Shipping and the Environment: A Guide to Environmental Compliance, Sixth Edition

The International Chamber of Shipping updates the past editions of the 'Shipping and the Environment: A Guide to Environmental Compliance' to this newest publication.

This edition reflects the latest industry environmental developments, including: the latest environmental regulations, with key differences highlighted between international, national and regional regulations, as well as updates specific to US requirements, emerging technologies and operational practices as examples of environmental improvements that can be delivered at sea and ashore, and future regulatory developments on control of invasive aquatic species, MARPOL Annex IV, and other areas likely to affect future operations.

To find out more, and place your order, please visit here.

International Chamber of Shipping

ICS is the principal international trade association for merchant shipowners and operators, representing all sectors and trades and over 80% of the world merchant fleet.

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