

Loss Prevention Circular KISHPNI-LP-07-2020
(Navigation Assessment; Requirements & Knowhow)

► **Why do we need navigation assessments?**

Navigation-based accidents now account for 38% of maritime casualties, according to the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA). Nearly all these accidents occur on ships with International Safety Management (ISM) Code-compliant safety management systems (SMS) and involve deck officers certified competent according to STCW.

Clearly there is a gap between ISM/STCW aspirations and reality. There are various reasons for this but a key issue is deck officers having insufficient experience, which means they can lack the knowledge and confidence to do things properly. Navigation risk assessments for many years witnessed a lot of non-SMS-compliant behaviour at all levels in the bridge team.

Interestingly, when hazardous behavior has been observed in inexperienced junior deck officers, it has frequently occurred with the silent approval of senior deck officers present on the bridge. Examples include:

- ❖ Failure to do routine instrument checks
- ❖ Poor record-keeping
- ❖ Over-reliance on a single navigation aid
- ❖ Failure to cross-check ARPA data
- ❖ Failure to use visual safety techniques
- ❖ Allowing manpower levels to drop to unsafe levels during berthing
- ❖ Failure to challenge pilots during pilotage
- ❖ Relying on auto-pilot in confined waters.

An independent and highly experienced navigation assessor will be able to spot these issues and others to offer invaluable mentoring and advice to all members of the bridge team, Master included. This includes encouraging senior deck officers to be more proactive in sharing the benefit of their experience and knowledge with juniors.

A navigation assessment is not just about what happens onboard! Assessors are looking at the complete spectrum, starting with the regulations and **company policies** that are designed to make going to sea safer right through to observing what the officers on-board are doing and how well they are doing it.



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► What goes on during a navigation assessment?

The ideal navigation assessment takes place over the course of a voyage, starting and finishing in port. This allows the assessor to watch preparations for sea, sailing with a pilot onboard, carrying out close navigation in a river or estuary, coastal navigation, ocean navigation and then the entry back into port again. To observe everything that happens, although the navigating officer does receive the lion's share of attention.

Essentially, all you're going to see is somebody from outside the ship arrive on the bridge and then remain present in the background. It is not the type of assessment that comes with a formal interview. Rather, the assessor will observe what goes on, and only very occasionally at the end of the watch will they come and ask questions. There is no need to do anything at all differently to how you would usually do it – the whole point is to observe how things are usually conducted on board ship.

► Who should carry out a navigation assessment?

The person who does the navigation assessment should have either held command themselves, or have been an ex-master-pilot, so they can understand in-depth the things that go through a Master's mind. After all, it's the Master who is driving the navigation of the ship as a whole. The assessor needs to be understanding in an empathetic way – and they need to be able to work with and help the captain as much as the junior officers.

► What sort of things are you looking for?

- ✓ Are the regulations clear and understood?
- ✓ Are the company's procedures clear and easy to follow, and are they fit for purpose?
- ✓ Are crew members following these procedures – and if not, why not?

Assessors can help the navigating officer a great deal by identifying differences between what the procedures technically require, and what they are actually meant to do in practice. New technology in particular has brought about a whole series of challenges, which are not helped by grafting old methods onto new models.

For example, companies often issue very strict procedures to safeguard position fixing, but get it completely wrong. An ECDIS screen is relatively small compared to a paper chart, so it is essential that we keep it clean of unnecessary text and data. That means ECDIS must be used in a dynamic way, and responsibility shifts to each officer understanding what they are looking at, and what settings are enabled and disabled, rather than having all settings switched on all the time. The assessor can feed this type of issue back to the company and get those procedures changed for the better.

As well as feeding observations back to the company, an assessor can talk to officers and help them develop their own skills. Some of the traditional ideas still hold true – such as using leading marks and visual references when coming in to a port – but they may not have been included in standard training. Another strong point of the assessment process is that it gives people the opportunity to ask questions and check their own understanding of how things work. Because the assessors are, or have been captains or ex-master-pilots themselves, an assessment gives the captain of the vessel the chance to speak in private to a fellow captain. It offers a valuable opportunity to ask questions that they might have been unable to ask before, and maybe solve a doubt or two in so doing.

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► Why should the bridge team take an active part in the assessment process?

The ship may not have had a major incident and therefore seem successful in terms of safety but, in reality the safety systems may never have been properly tested. A navigation assessment will almost inevitably identify weaknesses that need to be addressed for safety and for everyone else onboard.

It is important to note that navigation assessors are not out to 'get' anyone. The Nautical Institute says assessors should, 'approach the task in a way that doesn't demotivate people and maintains morale,' and, 'encourage crews to be truthful ...confident there will be no disciplinary action resulting from the process.'

OCIMF adds that assessors should, 'make sure that the bridge team does not feel threatened or targeted,' and, 'reassure personnel that the aim of the assessment is to drive continuous improvement, including the effective interaction of the bridge team members.'

The key is to allow the assessor to see things for what they are, including the negative aspects. Only then will you, your fellow seafarers and the shore team get meaningful, practical feedback on what needs to be improved and how. As OCIMF says, 'Both good and weaker behaviours should be communicated to the team. Any gaps or weak behaviours should be discussed in an open manner. The emphasis should be on coaching, rather than embarrassing or criticising any bridge team members.'

► How assessments will help?

The assessor's feedback will provide invaluable continuing professional development advice. As well as offering an independent confirmation of the areas of competence, it will also identify possible knowledge or skills gaps. This in turn will provide a clear roadmap for future training and career development.

As with every profession, deck officers should always be open to further learning and evaluation of their performance. In particular, one should not hesitate to ask navigation assessors for immediate feedback on the very performance or skills, as well as being truthful and honest in responses.

In summary, deck officers at all levels should not feel nervous about the prospect of a navigation assessment. They should welcome the rare opportunity to have an independent expert onboard who is trying to help them improve what they do, make the job less stressful and the ship a safer place to be.

While there has been some variable quality in how assessments have been conducted in the past, there are now not one but two sets of industry best-practice guidelines.

The Nautical Institute led the way with its 96-page guide in 2016 and this was followed by OCIMF 76-page version in 2018.

The two guides are broadly similar in their advice:

1. Gale H, Navigation Assessments: A guide to best practice, The Nautical Institute, 2018.

2. OCIMF, A Guide to Best Practice for Navigation Assessments and Audits, 2018, Available at: <https://www.ocimf.org/media/105826/A-Guide-to-Best-Practice- or Navigational-Assessments-and-Audits.pdf>.

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