Home at Sea

by Fitzwilliam Scott

Ship supply has always been about ensuring the right products reach a vessel at the right time. But behind every order, delivery, and purchasing decision are the people who ultimately rely on those supplies, often while spending several months living and working thousands of miles from home. For seafarers, the things that make a difference to daily life can be surprisingly ordinary, from good food and familiar ingredients to clean drinking water and reliable access to essential supplies.

The details may get little attention when everything is working as it should, yet together they have a considerable influence on the on-board experience and, at a time when recruitment and retention remain major concerns for shipping, that experience is becoming increasingly difficult to overlook.

Salary, leave arrangements, and career prospects will naturally remain important considerations for seafarers, but so too is the environment in which they are being asked to spend a substantial part of their lives. This is the thinking behind AVS Global Ship Supply's Home at Sea campaign, which considers how food, provisioning, training, technology, and well-being can work together to make life on board better.

"The industry rightly places enormous emphasis on the safe and efficient operation of vessels, but we also need to think about what those ships are like as places to live," says Doğukan Şimşek, General Manager at AVS Global Ship Supply. "For seafarers, the vessel is not simply a workplace. For months at a time, it is also their home."

Logistics of taste

Food is perhaps the most obvious example of how decisions made ashore can influence everyday life at sea, because meals do much more than provide nutrition. They break up the working day, give crew members an opportunity to spend time together, and, for someone who has been away from their family and country for several months, a familiar dish or ingredient can provide a welcome connection with home.

However, ship catering is rarely straightforward – especially when a single vessel carries crew from multiple countries, each with distinct tastes, dietary needs, and expectations. Cooks have to accommodate those differences while working with set stores, managing portions, maintaining nutritional balance, and keeping waste under control, which means that the quality and suitability of the provisions reaching the galley are especially critical.

AVS Global Ship Supply uses what it calls a 'Port to Plate' approach, leveraging local supply networks where practical – rather than assuming every product needs to pass through a lengthy international supply chain. A vessel calling near Amalfi, for example, might receive locally grown lemons instead of produce that has travelled considerably further to reach the same port, an approach that can provide access to fresh ingredients and greater variety while also supporting producers in the communities surrounding ports.

The ingredients themselves are, of course, only part of the equation, because ship cooks still have to turn whatever ingredients are available into meals that suit the people on board and effectively use provisions throughout the voyage. Through EKOL Maritime Training Center and its Learning Management System, AVS Global Ship Supply provides training in areas including menu planning, food safety, provisioning, and portion management, helping the catering personnel develop the practical skills needed to manage those competing demands.

Good planning can also help crews make better use of what is already aboard, reducing unnecessary purchasing and food waste without compromising the quality or variety of meals, and demonstrating how crew welfare, cost control, and environmental objectives can often support rather than compete with one another.

The shopping list

There is another side to provisioning that crews will rarely see, as shore-side purchasing teams can be responsible for thousands of products across multiple vessels and ports, while also dealing with schedules that can change at short notice. An ETA moves, a port call changes, or an unexpected requirement emerges, and the purchasing plan has to move with it, making access to accurate and useful information particularly valuable. This is where AVS+, AVS Global Ship Supply's new digital customer portal, fits into the wider Home at Sea approach, bringing supply, catering, and contract information together so that onshore teams can gain a clearer picture of what is happening across their vessels.

Managers can use AVS+ to establish catering policies covering areas such as dietary requirements, drink allowances, bonded stores, and festive meals – and then apply those policies to the appropriate vessels, with contract information managed centrally and searched by ship or IMO number. More importantly, procurement teams do not have to approach every new order as an isolated transaction, because when preparing a new one they can review previous purchases, supply frequencies,





Photos: AVS Global Ship Supply

and port histories. Knowing what a vessel normally orders, how regularly certain products are required, and what has been supplied in a particular port gives the purchasing team a much stronger baseline when deciding what is likely to be needed next.

Historical purchasing and invoice data can also show which products were bought, where they were supplied and at what price, allowing organisations managing multiple vessels to identify purchasing patterns that might otherwise be difficult to spot when information is spread across separate records or systems. This can support more accurate forecasting and tighter cost control, also helping address the perennial challenge of getting quantities right, since over-ordering can result in unnecessary expenditure and spoilage while under-ordering can leave a vessel short and create a need for expensive last-minute purchases. Previous ordering information cannot remove the need for judgement, particularly when crew numbers, voyage patterns, or requirements change, but it can give procurement teams a more informed basis on which to make those decisions.

A pinch of digitalisation

For the crew themselves, much of this activity remains invisible, and a seafarer sitting down to dinner is unlikely to be concerned about which digital platform was used to order the ingredients or how the procurement team analysed previous purchasing patterns. What matters on board is that there is enough food, that meals are varied and suitable for the people eating them, and that essential requirements have been anticipated instead of becoming a problem halfway through a voyage.

This is where the relationship between digitalisation and crew welfare becomes more intriguing. Technology in shipping is often discussed in the context of vessel performance, automation, emissions, or operational efficiency, even though some of its most useful effects can be far less dramatic. If better purchasing data means fewer shortages, consistent catering, reduced waste, and smarter budgeting, then digitalisation already shapes crew experiences – even when the seafarers never see the technology behind it.

The same principle applies to the relationship between ship and shore, as a meal served at sea may ultimately result from decisions involving a procurement team, a local supplier, a logistics provider, a port agent, and a catering team aboard. When those different parts of the chain work together, the result can appear effortless to the person sitting at the table, but if one part fails, the consequences can quickly become apparent. Home at Sea takes this broader view by looking at catering, provisioning, tech, training, and well-being as connected elements rather than separate activities, recognising that decisions made far from the vessel can ultimately shape the everyday on-board experience.

A vessel can never replace home, but…

Better provisioning cannot, of course, remove all the challenges associated with a career at sea, whether that is the time spent away from one's closest, demanding work schedules, or the inevitable isolation that comes with life on board. It can, however, contribute to a better living environment and help ensure that some of the everyday pressures of being away from home are not made harder by avoidable problems with food, supplies, or support.

"We cannot remove the distance from home that comes with a career at sea," says Şimşek, "but what we can do is ask ourselves how we make that time better. Are people eating well? Do they feel supported? Are we giving the people responsible for their welfare the right tools and training? Those questions should be part of how we think about the future of our industry."

Those questions have particular relevance for an industry concerned about where its next generation of seafarers will come from and how it will persuade experienced people to remain at sea. While no single welfare initiative or improvement in provisioning will solve that challenge, paying greater attention to the quality of on-board daily life should form part of the wider conversation about making maritime careers sustainable and attractive over the longer term.

AVS Global Ship Supply has spent over 40 years in ship supply, but Home at Sea reflects how expectations of suppliers are changing as shipowners and managers look not only for reliable deliveries but also for greater visibility, better cost control, less waste, and more consistent support for the seafarers. Bringing together physical supply, catering management, training, and digital tools such as AVS+ is one way of responding to those changing expectations, while recognising that operational efficiency and crew welfare do not need to sit on opposite sides of the conversation.

A vessel can never replace home, but when seafarers are spending months of their lives out in the open sea, the quality of the food they eat, the reliability of the supplies they depend upon, and the thought that goes into meeting their daily needs all matter. This is why improving life at sea can sometimes begin much further back in the supply chain than we might imagine. ■

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