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## Inmarsat man quits to join mobile start-up

Johnson to join Dublin firm developing cheaper and more convenient cellphone service for mariners, writes Neville Smith - Friday 18 May 2007

Inmarsat's director of maritime and aeronautical services Robert Johnson has resigned to take charge at a Dublin start-up focused on providing mobile phone services to mariners.

Long the champion of Inmarsat's own crew calling initiatives, Mr Johnson joins Blue Ocean Wireless as chief executive next Monday, having helped bring the business to Inmarsat and establish the company as a distribution partner.

Blue Ocean Wireless uses patented technology developed by Altobridge to allow deepsea cellphone users to route calls and text via satellite for a fixed cost with the use of a dedicated SIM card.

This is cheaper than using GSM roaming services and allows crews the privacy and convenience often absent from use of ships' below-decks equipment.

Lloyd's List understands contracts are near completion with hardware manufacturer Japan Radio Co and Inmarsat's main distribution partner Stratos Global, with SIM cards to be supplied by Philippines company Smart, with which Inmarsat forged a partnership last year through its joint venture with handheld satellite phone company AceS.

Though Stratos will launch the service, its distribution agreement will ultimately not be exclusive since the offering depends on seafarers being able to make calls regardless of the ship's service provider.

Smart has signalled its intention to buy a one-third equity stake in the business. Shipboard installation will be handled through V.Ships' SeaCom subsidiary in Southampton.

Mr Johnson said Blue Ocean Wireless, which is capitalised to \$10m, had "proven technology and aspirations but lacked a marketeer with connections to the maritime business".

A master mariner with 13 years at sea on Shell tankers, he led the maritime and more recently aeronautical team at Inmarsat for nine years after roles at Racal-Decca Marine.

Pointing to the synergy between Smart and the 40% of seafarers who hail from the Philippines, he said: "GSM is the way to go. Owners are willing to spend on crew retention where two years ago they were not so sure."

Using mobile phones in crew areas below decks does not compromise intrinsic safety requirements, and Mr Johnson said the price and convenience of GSM had the potential to overcome all objections to crew calling using conventional satellite links.

Using Inmarsat's super quiet time promotions, costs range between 85¢ and \$1.20 a minute but Blue Ocean promises a flat \$1.25 at any time with the added incentive of privacy using equipment in parallel to the ship's main communications gear.

"Eight out of 10 crew have a mobile phone on board and a pocketful of SIM cards for whatever part of the world they are in, so the need is there," he added. "Inmarsat is happy because the service means incremental revenue and not churn,"

Piers Cunningham assumes interim responsibility for maritime business at Inmarsat ahead of a full-time replacement for Mr Johnson.