

Who can be a DPO?

Dynamic positioning is one technology that is fast-developing and expanding its influence in Asia. This article - part of the dynamic positioning feature we are running in conjunction with Asia's first dynamic positioning conference which will be organized by PetroMin in June 2011 - will explain the ways in which one can become a DP operator as well as dispelling some of the associated myths.

With the first Asian Dynamic Positioning (DP) Conference rapidly approaching we thought it time to revisit the rules and realities of actually becoming a Dynamic Positioning Operator (DPO).

Type the words dynamic positioning into Google, and around 4 million page options appear, now add "operators" to your query and miraculously the range diminishes to around 200,000. All well and good, but what does it mean? Well it suggests that while there is a wealth of information out there about the mechanics and equipment used for DP and position referencing, but rather less is known (or written) about the people who operate the kit, and who bring it all together, the people actually trained to use and safely operate the equipment, the DPOs.

When there is a shortage of information, there is a natural tendency for gaps in knowledge to develop, and rumour and hearsay are left to fill the void; and of course the fewer the facts, the stronger the opinion. This is why we are actively supporting the Asian DP Conference - the strength of the speakers, the topics being covered and the energy behind the event means that information and intelligence can be brought to bear as never before.

There is clearly confusion about the DPO job, position and role. Rumours abound, and those who are susceptible to a good tale quite fancy a high earning role at sea - they hear what they want hear and take it as an invitation to pitch up and do DP. The most frequently held views seem to have it that even the ships cook can be DPO or that IT "geeks" make perfect DPOs, based simply on an understanding of computers and communications.

Put very simply the question is, "who can become a DPO"? Is an understanding of the ship and its performance still more important today than understanding the computer chip and its processes? Unfortunately the world of DP has become something of the new "snake oil", with rumours, myths, lies and half truths in circulation. Here we will try to counter some, while explaining the background to others, hopefully arriving at something approaching the real state of play. As is the norm with shipping, simple answers to seemingly straightforward questions are seldom found.

According to IMCA's careers guide, "I want to be a...DPO", DPOs will typically start out as watchkeeping deck officers. However, they stress that "given appropriate supervision, other appropriate personnel can aspire to the position". They state that, "Senior DPOs are always watchkeeping officers".

The phrasing "aspire to the position" is a strange one, and open to interpretation, also it does little to clarify the situation. As a starting point, therefore, we shall try and base our views on the industry recognised DP qualification, the Nautical Institute (NI) Dynamic Positioning Operators certificate.

The NI DP training scheme is split into phases, taking in both onboard and shore-based training. Trainee DPO's following the scheme attend accredited training centres (there are currently around 62 worldwide), and then spend blocks of time onboard (hopefully actually on the DP desk), working through the tasks set out in the NI log-book, they are then assessed by their Master and deemed as suitable or not for certification. A full breakdown of the course, the phases of study and

the requirements for Limited and Unlimited certificates on the varying classes of DP vessels (Class 1, 2 or 3) can be found at www.nautinst.org.

It is the question of who can embark on the NI scheme which has been the genesis of many of the rumours doing the rounds today. So here we go...at the moment anyone can sign up and attend the Phase1 Induction (Basic) course. Yes, anyone can currently sign up and arrive at their nearest DP training centre to start the course and go through the 5 days in the classroom.

This is about to change as the Nautical Institute, as the DP certifying authority, has announced major changes and revision of their qualification procedures for DPO certification that will become effective January 1, 2012. New trainees will then be required to hold at least an "Officer in Charge of Navigational Watch" (OICNW) or "Officer in Charge of Engine Watch" (OICEW) level licence (200 ton Mate or above or DDE or above) to apply for DPO. Over the past decade the instances of non-mariners accessing the training have dwindled, especially as many training centres provide "Introduction to DP" courses for shore staff.

The effects of this change won't be felt immediately because anyone who is in training for DPO prior to January 1, 2012 can still complete the process without holding a license. While the Nautical Institute policy isn't clear on what constitutes "in training," it could certainly be expected to include anyone who has attended an Induction course. The policy does clearly state that existing DPOs will not be affected, so anyone who is currently certified but doesn't hold a license will retain their DPO authority. A change which will impact drilling companies who are grooming industrial personnel without CG licenses for DPO certification.

Any companies who have plans for advancing their personnel to DPO certification should keep the January 1, 2012 effective date of these changes in mind. Individuals who have prior service on DP vessels should try to complete their training and apply before that date to keep from losing their time. Personnel without licenses who want to obtain DPO certification should complete at least the Induction course prior to the end of the year so they can be considered "in-training." So it is important

to be aware that the clock is ticking for those who are not covered by the new NI ruling.

This should of course eventually raise the quality of new trainees into the system. Indeed, there have long been problems in ensuring a steady and consistent flow of quality personnel into the DPO pool. The main stumbling block for many is the prerequisite to serve on a vessel with a classed DP system. For those trainees sent to the DP course by an employer and who are guaranteed a place onboard, then this is fine. For others it can be the start of the problems.

For those who have funded themselves, even for experienced mariners, it can be very hard (read, next to impossible) to get the necessary 30 days sea-time. There are many seafarers out in the market today, all desperate to qualify as DPO, but they can't get past this hurdle. There is currently no formal system of placing them, they may well have invested their own money to begin their training, but progress thereafter is effectively blocked.

We at the International DP Operators Association (IDPOA) are working to bridge the gap between these DP trainees and the owners/operators that may be able to provide the "Phase2" 30 days sea-time. Our "Placement Pool" project is in its infancy, but in partnership and with the close assistance of the Nautical Institute's DP Training Executive Group (DP-TEG), we are pursuing an online database of trainees and available positions. This scheme should ensure that trainees get a place onboard, and that ultimately we are able to provide the future supply of talent that the DP sector needs.

With the current downturn, and the fact that planning is perhaps not shipping's strongest suit, we regrettably faced indifference and apathy from shipowners and trade associations. However, we are currently in talks with stakeholders to make progress and roll out a system capable of mitigating this perceived weakness in the DP certification system. While it has proven nearly impossible to get universal industry buy-in for such a concept, we have now been able to drive interest in geographic hot-spots – where Government requirements specify that vessels operating in territorial limits have to have "home nationals"

onboard. There is also an increasing interest in DP within new sectors, such as Super Yacht and Cruise vessels and as such demand for DP experienced (if not necessarily qualified), personnel is on the increase outside the usual industry sectors. See www.dpoperators.org for progress on this and other professional DP projects.

Experienced, qualified, driven, seafarers are investing in their own career but are unfortunately struggling to get sea-time. It is sad to report, but for many after reams of letters, hundreds of printed resumes and pleading emails they are probably going to return to their old career path and give up on the DP dream.

For those who get the sea-time, then fine – they do 30 days and then head off to college once for more the Simulator (Advanced) course – before the need for yet more sea-time (6 months this time), and a signature from the Master stating their suitability for the role as DPO.

For those employed and sponsored by a company through the NI DPO certification scheme, then all is fairly standard and barring any glaring errors in the logbook (and many people do make errors), then the certificate will eventually be despatched. If, however, it is something being pursued by an individual out of a desire to progress or to switch career, then it really is not for the faint-hearted. As more mariners emerge from colleges all over the world, then the likelihood of success is narrowing constantly.

That would be a very neat end to the story, were it not for the fact that the NI DPO Certificate is not a mandatory requirement. So there are jobs working on DP, which do not actually require the operative to hold a DP certificate.

Perhaps this is where we will see the IT geeks excel? The problems with most myths is that there is almost always some distant link to truth – and there are some sectors of the DP world in which those who do not possess deck officer certificates of competency (CoC) have indeed been dropped into the hot-seat, and have worked the DP desk, many of them to good effect. The practice was prevalent in the Gulf of Mexico, more especially on MODU's.

These situations have launched a thousand false hopes and fears. In some countries, the grapevine is

so strong that the thought of cooks working as DPO's and earning more than traditional master mariners has caused genuine uproar. Indeed anecdotal evidence suggests that the moves to "legitimise" DP within STCW were prompted by the paranoia that senior seafarers could be "out earned" by those new to the industry.

These problems may in time be consigned to history, as DP training has now been brought into Part B of The Standards of Training, Certification & Watchkeeping (STCW) Convention as part of the 2010 Manila Conference. India had initially tried to get DP training and certification into Part A of the convention, which would have made it mandatory. In the end, however, they had to settle for a place within the recommended guidance to assist parties and those involved in implementing, applying or enforcing STCW Convention. Though given the sheer volume of upcoming DP equipped tonnage, it seems likely that DP training and certification will move into Part A at the next major review.

Slowly we can see that the issue of DP is moving not just into the mainstream consciousness, but will soon be taking centre stage as more (and more types of) vessels are equipped with DP. Add to this, the fact that oil majors are demanding ever more of their suppliers, then the requirement to have a qualified (and by that we mean NI DPO certificate holder) DPO at the desk is increasingly commonplace. The wriggle room is closing, and while in the past the DPO position was seen as somehow remote and outside the shipboard status quo, slowly the role is being subsumed into the normal onboard roles and responsibilities – and ship owners naturally want their personnel to provide them with the best value for money, or return on investment – as such, qualified officers in possession of both a valid CoC and NI DPO certificate are increasingly both the norm and the baseline standard.

While the amendments to the training scheme do finally recognise and bring marine engineers into the fold there are still questions. The scheme clearly states that they can qualify, but will they gain employment as DPO and the all important time on the desk?

As we have seen, yes they can sign up on the course, but a major issue affecting the use of deck versus engine, and whether they would ever be employed as DPO, is the antecedents of the operation itself. For my part I trained in cable laying. We had to know what the ship was doing to enable us to lay, recover, or hold onto cable. On the old ships we did this by frantically adjusting the engines or thrusters manually to try and get the desired effect. In short you had to know how to handle ships and know what was required of the vessel – this ran through everything we did as junior deck officers. On the new cable ships DP slowly began to emerge in the mid – nineties...but in that environment you still had to understand the “seamanship” behind the operation. Laying cables under the sea was/is a traditionally maritime pursuit, and one which benefits from marine knowledge on the bridge and deck, with engineering and electronic expertise ensuring the buttons do what they should.

DP has given some industries the opportunity to move from land to sea –in these areas, those such as drilling – there are very different attitudes and approach – so expertise is recognised, valued, used and rewarded differently. Some of the most knowledgeable DP people are those that understand how the systems work – but are these then best placed to be sitting at the desk? Or do we need to create a parallel qualification for engineers, and electrotechs? This would not simply consist of the more common manufacturer specific training, as we see today – but a general certificate which rewards and recognises their expertise at keeping the DP system working to its maximum ability.

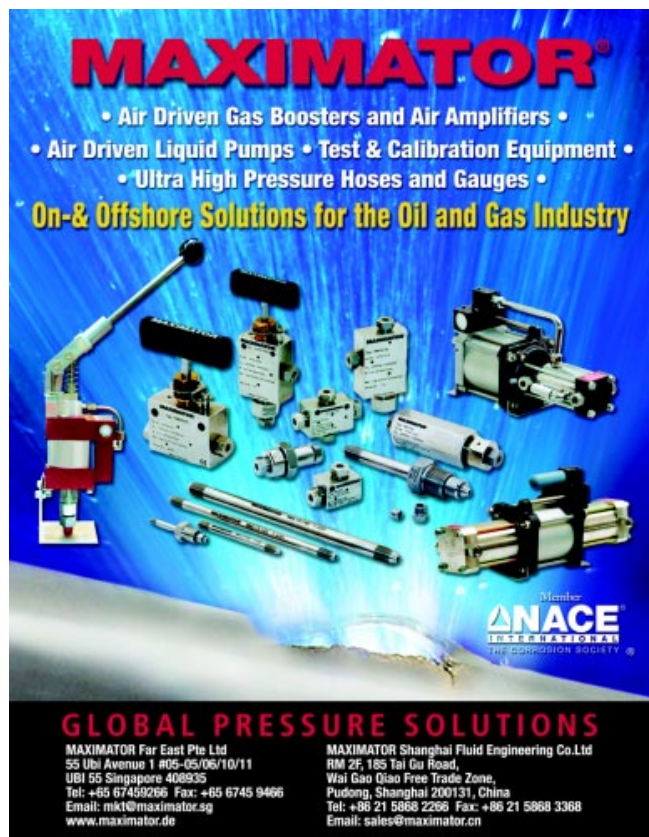
IDPOA has been contacted by a number of such specialist engineers, and we have embraced them into our membership – the link between systems, people and end results are important – and it’s vital therefore to have all the players on the same team. We constantly look to work with industry partners to innovate and bring new solutions to the world of DP.

The new NI requirements mean the issue of who can become a DPO will fizzle out. With the demands of customers, the reality of the jobs

market and an influx of skilled labour, the opportunities on the DP desk for those without marine experience will dwindle. The irony seems to be that the geeks shall now inherit the sea as well as the world. In fact as equipment onboard becomes ever more sophisticated and integrated the very best DPOs of tomorrow will have to be IT experts as well as seafarers. The future for those who have maritime and computer skills, is all but assured...but only for those who possess both. **PET**

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