

Pilot Transfer Arrangements – A Call to Action

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Appreciable industry engagement as well traction in pilot transfer mechanisms is evident. Despite that, the maritime industry is still witness to incidents as well as near-misses involving conventional pilot transfers continue to be reported across the globe.

The pilot transfer arrangement encompasses all parts of the system, i.e., the procedures, accommodation gangway, the pilot ladder itself, maintenance routines, certification requirements, transfer vessel suitability and competence of the transfer vessel personnel itself just to name a few. Whilst minimum standards for pilot transfer arrangements have been set by SOLAS V/23, the question remains whether these standards are complied with throughout the lifecycle of the pilot ladder or is it being used just as a reference to prove compliance.

The related IMO publications, *Resolution A.1045(27) – Pilot Transfer Arrangements, MSC.1/Circ.1428 – Pilot Transfer Arrangements – Required Arrangements for boarding of pilots, and ISO standard 799-1:2019 Ships and Marine Technology – Pilot ladders*, all have made an impact, drawn attention to the inherent risks and established mitigations. Mitigations that act on the identified threats. But the fact is that the threat remains, and a loose or weak link in the mitigation chain provides potential for the threat to be released and therein lies the actual risk.

The complexity of what might seem to be a simple task can be seen in the table below which highlights the various components that make up the system -

The Accommodation Gangway	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Construction, i.e., trap door type, standard of design with platform etc.• Condition, maintenance regime, structural strength, wires, handrails, rigging etc.
Ships Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accommodation ladder foundations• Securing Points, certification, condition• Operating platform and viewability
Vessel Onboard Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Competence assessment of ship staff• Maintenance regimes• Operational procedures and effectiveness, implementation of learnings, management of change.• Assurance protocols for onboard processes and effectiveness
Pilot Transfer Vessel Assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Suitability of vessel• Competence assessment of ship staff• Maintenance regimes• Operational procedures and effectiveness, implementation of learnings, management of change.• Assurance protocols for onboard processes and effectiveness

The branch in Western Australia held a technical presentation in the first half of 2024 and discussions that ensued made it apparent that there is an urgent need to think beyond the normative and accepted practices currently in place. This includes alternative approaches to the conventional ladder transfers, consequently applying the achievable highest level on the hierarchy of controls with a focus on Substitution or even Elimination. To explore this further, a workshop was held with major industry participants that included port operators, vessel operators, helicopter operators, oil majors to name a few. Outputs from this workshop is presented with further actions to progress and make a step change in the way pilots are transferred to and from merchant ships & pilot boats.