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DIGIMAR Webinar Summary

The DIGIMAR webinar held on 27 August 2026 brought together 113 participants from 30 different countries (Belgium, Belize, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Madagascar, Montenegro, Montenegro, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States), all maritime educators, researchers, VTS specialists, and maritime communication experts, to discuss the future of maritime communication in an increasingly digitalized, complex, and globally connected industry. Participants explored the project recommendations and challenges in Maritime English education, future technological developments, and the need for stronger international cooperation in communication standardization.

The webinar was scaffolded by presentations and discussions with experts in the maritime field:

- Alison Noble – Antwerp Maritime Academy, chair of the International Maritime Lecturers Association
- Johan Hartler – Swedish Shipowners Association, Maritime Competence Senior Policy Expert
- Monica Sundklev – IALA VTS Committee Chair
- Fredrik Forsman – Chalmers School of Maritime Studies, Lecturer of the Practice in Leadership Training for High-Risk Maritime/Military SAR Operations
- Violeta Jurkovič – Faculty of Maritime Studies, University of Ljubljana, Chair of Foreign Languages

Key Perspectives from the Expert Panel

Several additional themes emerged during the expert discussion.

Alison Noble (IMLA) highlighted the importance of developing practical mechanisms for assessing, approving, and implementing communication training materials. She stressed that educational resources should be engaging and attractive so that they can be effectively used both in maritime education and onboard training. Ideally, training should encourage learning without users necessarily perceiving it as formal instruction. Noble further emphasized the importance of reducing unnecessary communication and radio clutter, promoting polite and professional communication practices, and recognizing that communication competence depends not only on English-language skills but also on the operational environment and context in which communication takes place. She reiterated the need for harmonization and standardization of coded language used in safety-critical communication, suggested that automation and emerging technologies could provide support for communication processes and role clarification, and advocated consideration of a future revision of the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) together with improvements in the ways these are taught and implemented.

Fredrik Forsman (Chalmers University of Technology) focused on communication, misunderstanding, and human factors. He emphasized that effective communication is not merely about sending messages but about ensuring that meaning is understood as intended. Communication requires active listening and effort from all parties involved, and communicators should always assume that messages may be interpreted differently from what was originally intended. The social, cultural, and operational context significantly shapes interpretation and understanding. Forsman also highlighted the impact of

fatigue, motivation, stress, and differing priorities on communication and decision-making. In high-risk environments such as search and rescue (SAR) operations, clear responsibilities, focal points, and well-trained personnel are essential. He additionally stressed that social and psychological barriers may prevent individuals from speaking up when uncertain or afraid of being wrong, thereby interrupting the communication loop and potentially compromising safety. Communication training should therefore complement technical maritime training and address these human factors explicitly.

Johan Hartler (Swedish Shipowners' Association) emphasized that people remain the most important element onboard vessels, regardless of technological development. While digital systems and automation provide important support, they do not replace human competence and judgement. Hartler noted that understanding individual words does not necessarily guarantee understanding the intended meaning. He argued against relying solely on additional mandatory training requirements and instead advocated more flexible approaches to competence development that build upon existing skills and operational needs. He further stressed that shipowners should assume greater responsibility for competence development and training rather than placing responsibility exclusively on educational institutions. Looking toward the future, he highlighted the growing importance of digital communication competence in addition to traditional radiotelephony skills. Since much onboard communication is internal and operational, the challenge is not only learning SMCP but identifying and teaching the core communication competencies needed for safe maritime operations. Hartler also raised broader questions concerning international standard-setting, asking who should ultimately lead the development of future communication standards and emphasizing the importance of global cooperation in addressing these issues from both safety and industry perspectives.

Monica Sundklev (IALA) reiterated that the fundamental purpose of standardized maritime communication is to ensure that communications are simple, unambiguous, and efficient. Standardization can reduce misunderstandings, increase operational efficiency, strengthen communication training, and ultimately improve safety. She observed that not all maritime personnel receive sufficient communication training before going to sea and therefore raised important questions regarding minimum communication competence requirements. In her view, clearly defined phraseology and communication standards remain particularly valuable for new entrants to the maritime profession, providing them with practical tools that can support safe communication from the start of their careers.

Summary of Q&A session

A central discussion was initiated by the moderator's question to Alison Noble, IMLA Honorary Chair, regarding which DIGIMAR recommendation she considered most important. Noble identified the recommendation calling for differentiation between mandatory and recommended communication practices and the harmonization of basic communication documents. She noted that maritime communication is already governed by several established frameworks, including the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), IALA guidance, ITU documentation, and more recent initiatives such as DIGIMAR. While these systems share many similarities, differences remain in terminology, phraseology, and implementation. She therefore argued for a coordinated effort to harmonize and modernize existing standards rather than create new, competing systems.

This immediately led to questions concerning governance and implementation. Noble asked who should drive such a harmonization process and how any future standards could gain global legitimacy

and accreditation. Monica Sundklev, Chair of the IALA VTS Committee emphasized that the IMO would need to be centrally involved and noted that proposals concerning revision of the SMCP have already been submitted to the IMO. She also highlighted ongoing work within IALA, while stressing that both major maritime nations and individual IMO member states can and should be encouraged to contribute to advancing such initiatives. Noble agreed that broad international participation from organizations such as IMLA, IMEC, IMO, IALA, and ITU would be essential.

A recurring topic throughout both the panel discussion and audience contributions was the challenge of teaching maritime communication and SMCP. Educators reported that many cadets and students believe SMCP is rarely used onboard and therefore question its relevance. Participants from several countries confirmed that this is a widespread issue rather than a local one. Alison Noble and Johan Hartler, Maritime Competence Senior Policy Expert at Swedish Shipowners Association, argued that seafarers use far more SMCP than they often realize, particularly the terminology, procedures, and communicative conventions embedded in everyday operations. Noble suggested that educators should focus not only on teaching standard phrases but also on helping learners recognize authentic operational communication and understand the role that communication choices play in different contexts. Tools such as DIGIMAR (digimar.si) were highlighted as valuable resources for developing this awareness.

The discussion also reinforced the importance of linking communication training to operational practice. Participants stressed the value of simulator-based communication exercises and assessment and suggested closer cooperation between Maritime English teachers and simulator instructors. Such collaboration could ensure that communication competence is developed alongside technical and operational skills.

Fredrik Forsman Chalmers School of Maritime Studies, Lecturer of the Practice in Leadership Training for High-Risk Maritime/Military SAR Operations (and several other speakers) emphasized that maritime communication should not be understood solely as a technical matter of phraseology and procedures. Johan Hartler argued that communication is fundamentally a process aimed at creating shared understanding. Effective communication depends not only on standardization but also on common ground, trust, leadership, and psychological safety. In multinational maritime environments, operators may hesitate to ask for clarification out of concern for appearing incompetent, especially during radio communications. Under high-stress conditions, such as search and rescue operations, communication challenges become even more pronounced as cognitive capacity decreases, and the need for clarification increases. Participants therefore agreed that future communication training should address both technical competence and human factors that shape communication effectiveness.

The webinar also addressed the various transformation currently taking place within the maritime industry. As shipping moves towards a more sustainable future characterized by digitalization, alternative fuels, intelligent decision-support systems, and increasing levels of automation, communication requirements are evolving as well. Attention was given to the emergence of autonomous and semi-autonomous bridge watchkeeping systems. Participants discussed the need to prepare seafarers for communication not only with other humans but also with digital and automated systems, shore control centers, and increasingly complex operational environments. Despite

technological advances, the panel repeatedly emphasized that the human element remains central to maritime safety and decision-making.

These developments reinforced the importance of maintaining globally harmonized communication standards. Participants expressed concern that fragmented communication systems and competing terminology could undermine safety, especially as new technologies are introduced. Strong support was therefore expressed for retaining the internationally recognized SMCP framework while modernizing it by removing obsolete phrases and incorporating relevant developments from IALA, ITU, DIGIMAR, and other research initiatives. The goal should be evolution rather than replacement.

The discussion also highlighted several important regulatory developments. It was noted that, since becoming an intergovernmental organization in 2024, IALA should be referred to as the International Organization for Marine Aids to Navigation. It was further noted that terminology relating to Vessel Traffic Services has evolved, with "VTS Provider" replacing the former expression "VTS Authority" in current IMO documentation. Attention was also drawn to the need for updating references to recently revised IALA guidance and model courses.

Overall, the webinar concluded that future maritime communication depends on a combination of harmonized international standards, effective education and training, technological awareness, and an understanding of the social dimensions of communication. Participants agreed that the ongoing revision of the STCW Convention and Code presents an important opportunity to ensure that future seafarers are prepared for increasingly digitalized, automated, and technologically sophisticated maritime operations. Maintaining globally recognized IMO standards while integrating new communication needs was seen as essential for supporting safety, efficiency, and shared understanding in the maritime sector of the future.