

Tug operators enter the digital age

HELM software from Victoria company provides transition

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VANCOUVER— Steeped in tradition, the tugboat industry has seen generation follow generation into family businesses. And it has had a history of doing things the old-fashioned way.

But that's changing, according to Ron deBruyne, whose Victoria-based tech company EdocSystems Group is easing the transition into the digital era with programs like its HELM Marine Operations Software, which is almost universally used by tug operators on B.C.'s coast.

"Not just here, but all over North America, tug companies tend to be family-owned businesses that have been running for 100-plus years," said deBruyne, who started his company in 1997 after working as an accountant in the forestry industry and developing software there. "And they've always done their dispatch on paper."

Recently, said deBruyne, one of his executives was in Oregon visiting a 102-year-old tug company.

"The guy he was meeting with pulled out a dispatch sheet from 1952, and held it up beside the one from today. And they were identical."

But now, with older dispatchers retiring and being replaced by a younger generation, the companies are starting to look to software to solve their problems.

Among Edoc's clients are Harken Towing, Catherwood Towing, Seaspan, Riverside Towing and Smit Marine Canada.

"You've got to keep track of all the orders coming in from all your different customers. What you're trying to do is balance the work for the fleet for that day with all the different jobs that need to be done," said deBruyne. "It's sort of like a big mental chess game in your head."



Ron deBruyne's EdocSystems helps link forest and towboat companies.

Ward Perrin/CanWest

And that's where the HELM software comes in. It is so effective that all the major logging operations on the West Coast are now also connected to the software.

"All of the tug companies are on our system, as well as the major forest companies," said deBruyne. "What we did was we created a data-transfer service where, when the log transportation guy at a forest company goes into his systems and puts new orders on a boom, those automatically show up in the tug companies' systems and they dispatch their tugs."

Each time a boom is moved, that is recorded.

"The final step is when the tug company goes to send an invoice, it sends it electronically to the forest company. Then the forest company system automatically checks and verifies the invoice, and then it goes straight to accounts payable." After that, there's an electronic transfer straight back to the tug company.

"So there's no more data entry and that type of thing."

Edoc now has users in Hawaii, Alaska and down the coast, and is expanding to

the United States' eastern seaboard — with firms like Penn Maritime in Connecticut and Norfolk Tug in Virginia — and has hopes of landing European contracts as well.

"But we're taking the model we used along the West Coast here where we sewed up the market first, and we want to do the same thing in North America and then branch out from there," said deBruyne.

The firm also has forestry software that helps decide which areas are the most economical to log, as well as software to track log inventory.