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Technology Overload & The Private Boater

Last week, we talked about cell phones aboard boats and the issues thereto. But they are fantastic devices – and therein lies another issue. As the functionality of cell phones starts to rival computers (Did I say 'rival?' I should have said 'outpaces!'), we are right at the cusp of technology overload. This can't be good for safety at sea. Visit www.indyeastend.com to find last week's column.

US Coast Guard Advisory

On October 29, 2010, Rear Admiral Paul Zukunft, Assistant Commandant for Marine Safety, Security, and Stewardship issued a maritime advisory on the use of cell phones aboard. In part, Marine Safety Advisory 01-10 said, "The potential risk associated with improper use of cellular telephones and other devices in the marine environment while navigating or performing other vessel functions should be apparent to vessel owners and operators. Consequently, the Coast Guard strongly recommends vessel owners and operators to develop and implement effective operational policies outlining when the use of cellular telephones and other devices is appropriate or prohibited."

This is true across all jurisdictions -- land, sea and air. And cell phones can certainly be game-changers (good and bad) for the mariner. This situation has created a new class of problem: Distracted Operations.

Information Overload vs Expanded Awareness

Even in my own operational facility, CGAUX 251384, I have two "desk mounted" radios (USCG requirement for an operational facility), and a spare handheld radio for mobile operations. All three are mounted overhead.

In the "dashboard," there is a multi-function screen through which is filtered real time GPS information, AIS, radar (overlaid on top of each other in a layered, color-coded fashion) and a forward-looking-infrared camera in an adjacent window. I will admit this is right at the edge of my "comprehensibility." If a crewman is asking questions, or more important, passing information, while something critical is being presented either over the radio or on the screen, it is imperative to have the ability to parse information and/or the authority to delegate – and quickly.

Now, with that said, the resultant river of data can, in the right hands, provide a heightened "situational awareness" that adds up to a safer vessel. This is why I installed the gear. But the US Coast Guard's Marine Safety Advisory 01-10 is a wake-up call to mariners, this one included.

Head's Up

Let's think this through a bit. First, technology is neither a panacea nor a substitute for seamanship skills. Technology is there to make what was time-consuming (e.g., GPS charting versus pencil-and-parallel-rulers) easier and/or faster or to provide a quantum leap beyond human capabilities (e.g., radar.) But all these tools are not worth their weight as ballast if the skipper doesn't know which basic seamanship skills to employ with them.

Secondly, you have to get – and keep – your priorities straight. When the cell phone rings, why answer it while underway? There is voice mail, you know. And, it would be a simple procedure to implement within your family household that if there was something urgent, call twice – if the same number comes up twice, you know to answer it now. And give someone the helm while you do.

Third, when was the last time you took a boating safety class? There are plenty of good ones out there that can be taken right up to the level of an experienced skipper. No one knows what they don't know – and the advanced classes are full of fellow skippers. Not everything worth learning is in the manuals.

Passing time while accumulating the latest scuttlebutt is an ancient, honored, and useful maritime tradition . . . From long before there was anything even remotely called a cell phone.

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you “get in this thing...”