INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF PORTS AND HARBORS

PORT COMMUNICATIONS AWARD

PORT OF MONTREAL
FREE WI-FI FOR SEAFARERS PROJECT

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The Montreal Port Authority (MPA) has implemented a service that provides free Wi-Fi to seafarers whose ships are docked in the Port of Montreal. The initiative allows seafarers to easily and conveniently access the Internet and to connect with family and friends back home without having to go ashore.

The MPA provides a login identification and password to seafarers. They simply connect their laptop computers or other personal devices that support platforms using Wi-Fi to the wireless network that the MPA has created especially for them.

Ships today operate with fewer crew members and shorter turnaround times than in the past, which means many seafarers often do not have the opportunity to go ashore when their vessels are in port. This service allows seafarers to connect with loved ones 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year without having to leave their ships.

The MPA is proud to be a pioneer among port authorities offering free Wi-Fi to seafarers.

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INTRODUCTION

The Montreal Port Authority (MPA) is pleased to have the opportunity to demonstrate its excellence in communications by presenting to the International Association of Ports and Harbors an innovative project it has launched that directly benefits seafarers.

The MPA carefully planned and successfully implemented in December 2011 a service that provides free Wi-Fi – a wireless Internet connection – to seafarers whose ships are docked in the Port of Montreal.

This initiative allows seafarers, who are often away from their families and friends for extended periods of time, to easily and conveniently access the Internet and to connect with their loved ones without having to go ashore. Using a login identification and password supplied by the MPA, they simply connect their laptop computers (PC or Mac) or other personal devices that support platforms using Wi-Fi (Android, iPhone, iPad, etc.) to a wireless network that the Port has created specifically for seafarers.

Seafarers aboard vessel docked in the Port of Montreal use laptop computer and iPad to connect to wireless network provided by the Montreal Port Authority. Photo courtesy Patrice Caron, ITF

BACKGROUND

During a Port of Montreal Open House on October 1, 2011, Sylvie Vachon, the MPA's President and Chief Executive Officer, and Jean-Luc Bédard, Vice-President of Operations and Harbour Master, had a discussion with Patrice Caron, an inspector with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), regarding the possibility of the Port Authority establishing free Wi-Fi access for seafarers whose ships are in port. The ITF represents the interests of seafarers worldwide. Today, more than 600,000 seafarers are members of ITF-affiliated unions.

Previously, one option for seafarers to speak with family and friends was to go ashore, purchase a long-distance calling card and seek out a pay telephone to call home. But the procedure was costly, and pay telephones are becoming more and more difficult to find. Seafarers could also use their own cell phones to call home but, once again, this is an expensive proposition.

Another option for seafarers is to visit Mariners' House of Montreal where they can make telephone calls or connect to the Internet on computers located there. Mariners' House serves as a home away from home for some 13,000 to 14,000 seafarers annually when they are in Montreal. It operates two vans that pick up seafarers at their ships and bring them to the facility, which is located at the upstream end of the Port.

But ships today operate with fewer crew members and shorter turnaround times than in the past, which means many seafarers – especially chief officers who remain on board during unloading and loading procedures – often do not have the time to go ashore when their vessels are in port. These seafarers can sometimes go for weeks without speaking to their loved ones.

Ms. Vachon promised Mr. Caron that she would go back to her Information Technology Department to discuss the possibility of the MPA establishing free Wi-Fi access for seafarers.

IMPLEMENTATION

The MPA already had some 60 outdoor antennas throughout its territory, which extends from the Port's upstream end at Cité du Havre downstream some 40 kilometres to its facilities at Contrecoeur.

The MPA had installed the antennas for electronic navigation purposes. They provide wireless access to ships' pilots who guide commercial vessels safely into the Port of Montreal. MPA employees who work out on the Port, such as fire prevention officers, can also access the wireless network to perform their duties.

With the hardware already in place, why not create a wireless service dedicated specifically to seafarers, Ms. Vachon thought.

The MPA's Information Technology Department began work to set up a system that would provide free Wi-Fi access to seafarers while still ensuring the security of the Port's entire wireless network. Two months later, seafarers received a special Holiday gift from the MPA. On December 24, 2011, the MPA officially launched free Wi-Fi service for seafarers whose ships are docked in the Port of Montreal. Access is provided 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Connecting to the system is much like a guest connecting to a hotel's wireless network. Seafarers need a wireless-enabled laptop computer or personal device. From a ship's bridge, where the best reception is generally available, they tell their device to connect to the network called 'Port of Montreal.' On the welcome screen, they enter a login identification and password supplied by the MPA, and then click 'connect.' They are then connected to the Internet.

The Wi-Fi connection is for seafarers only. Every week, the MPA's Information Technology Department sends out a new login identification and password, valid for two weeks, to all of the agents representing shipping lines that call the Port. On a vessel's arrival, the agent informs the crew of the login identification and password.

BENEFITS

The wireless signal allows seafarers to send and receive emails and even Skype with family and friends back home. They can also stay connected through other social media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.

Among the advantages of the initiative are that seafarers who are unable to leave their ships are still able to communicate with people back home. They can also connect at any time of the day, which is important considering they might be trying to reach a time zone on the other side of the world.

Seafarers also have access to the Internet to research locations – from museums to specialty shops that provide the comforts of home – that they might want to visit if they do indeed have the opportunity to go ashore in Montreal.

Many seafarers have expressed their appreciation for the Wi-Fi service provided by the MPA. The system is easy to use and extremely convenient for all seafarers visiting Montreal.

An average of 24 connections are made on a daily basis. The peak number of connections made during one day stands at 55. But in reality, many more seafarers than that actually use the system when you consider that they share laptop computers and several of them access the network using the same connection. We are told that the vast majority of seafarers visiting the Port make use of the Wi-Fi system.
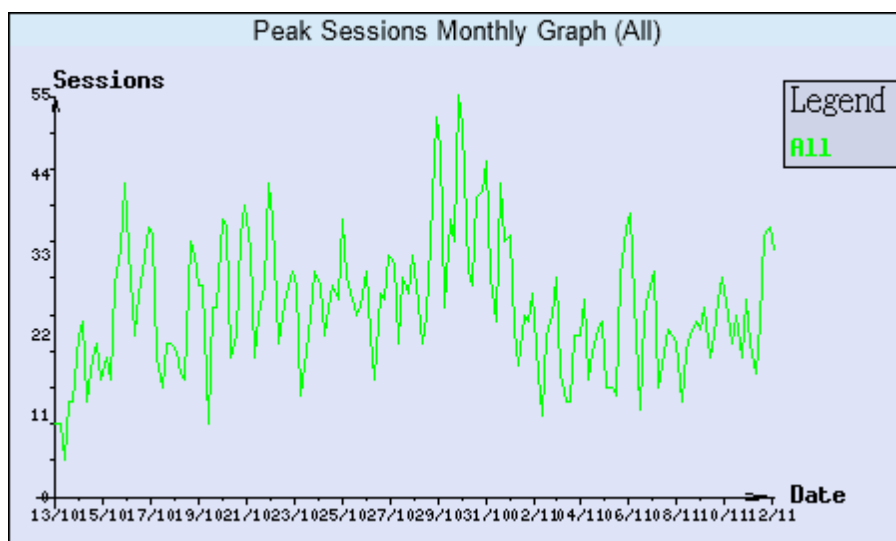
The MPA is working to further improve the wireless system for seafarers. The positioning of antennas, the location of structures and equipment on port berths, and

weather conditions can affect wireless connections. The MPA is fine-tuning signals for better reception. It is also working to improve connections for ships at anchor.

CONCLUSION

ITF general secretary David Cockroft says that ports should be working to provide wireless Internet connections for seafarers to use so that if they "cannot leave the ship while it is in port, they can contact their families cheaply or free."

"We need to find a new model of work with seafarers; a model that takes into account their reduced access to shore leave," he told the Apostleship of the Sea's 23rd international conference in the Vatican in November. "At the ITF, we believe that wireless Internet is a vital tool for the seafarers calling in port, or at anchorage, and we all need to be active in promoting shipboard communication so that seafarers are less isolated."

The MPA is proud to be a pioneer among port authorities providing free Wi-Fi to seafarers. The initiative is a small investment that provides a great benefit to so many people. We hope that other ports will come aboard and begin to provide this same service to seafarers.

Port of Montreal Wi-Fi for Seafarers
Key statistics

- Average number of daily connections: 24
- Peak number of connections in one day: 55 (the actual number of users is much greater than that when you consider that several seafarers access the network using the same connection).
- High-speed data transfer (bandwidth): 5 Mbps or megabits per second (more than 80 per cent of Canadian households have access to download speeds of 5 Mbps or higher).
- Authorization access: with a login identification and password provided by the MPA.
- Coverage: the Port of Montreal territory, from Cité du Havre at the upstream end of the Port downstream some 40 kilometres to Contrecoeur.
- Schedule: 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year (except for a monthly maintenance period of only a few minutes).
- Supported platforms: All platforms using Wi-Fi (PC, Mac, Android, iPhone, iPad, etc.)