

DPO masterclass

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What is a dynamic positioning officer (DPO)? Let's see. First you spent a week at a DP school. Then you went aboard a DP vessel for 30 days and had the master sign you off for familiarisation. Then you went back to school for a week, then spent 180 days aboard a DP vessel to be signed off again by the vessel's master or other competent crew member.

It sounds pretty simple and in many cases I believe it is. The school is simple enough if you have any experience on a computer, which nowadays most people do. The seetime may be a bit difficult, except for the shortage of seafarers; it's not as hard as it used to be.

Now you're done, you have completed the classroom requirements, logged your time and received your certificate. So off you go to the offshore oil field, man the DP console at a platform while cargo operations are underway and all is well.

Suddenly the system fails, the alarms are ringing, the vessel is surging toward the platform with a fuel or bulk hose attached, and the new DPO has not the first bit of experience in close quarter ship handling. This is a very real scenario and one which is bound to occur if it has not done so already...

DPO jobs

In the DPO's world, there are several types of positions on offer to the certified. There is the drill ship, the drilling rig, the cruise ship, the remotely operated vehicle (ROV) and the offshore supply vessel (OSV), for a start. Each of these is similar in some ways, but there are a few major differences that I would like to highlight.

A drill ship is a very sophisticated vessel, requiring a large and experienced bridge staff. The DP operator will generally

be in his/her own section of the vessel containing the DP console(s) and the operator may go the entire hitch making one or two moves. All the actual manoeuvring is completed on the bridge, and if there is any type of emergency, such as position loss, the DPO would contact the bridge where the master or officer in charge of navigational watch (OICNW) would take the necessary actions.

Like the drill ship, most ROV fitted or diving support vessels (DSV) are fitted with DP consoles in their own little world and all manoeuvring and navigation is conducted from the bridge.

Many cruise ships are now fitted with DP systems which are used instead of anchoring at destinations and for mooring alongside. Again, the DPO is at his/her console and if there is any kind of positioning problem, the master or OICNW would take over and take the necessary actions.

Many seafarers from the deep-sea fleet or cargo ships are coming to the offshore energy field because of its better pay and shorter contracts. I have seen many cases, where this adds to the lack of actual close-quarter ship-handling experience among the bridge teams, thus putting more pressure on masters of OSVs to be on the bridge during cargo operations and while transiting in and out of port. Many seafarers from the main fleet know their paperwork, such as correcting charts, basic navigation and safety equipment inspection, but have little or no experience in close quarter-manoeuvring.

In my opinion, the certification of DPOs which now only has two levels – limited or full – needs to include an endorsement system which would have several categories or endorsements. An example of this would be certification on a DSV, ROV or drill ship. Another would cover cruise ships and another OSVs. The requirements now in force for the first is adequate, but when it comes to the OSV, the candidate should be required to have a master's licence with proven experience aboard an offshore energy support vessel

or the like before qualifying for a DP credential which is endorsed for OSV.

I understand the pressures on companies these days looking for qualified seafarers to fill positions on their ships, but this is no excuse for setting up for a reactive review for DPO requirements.

In conclusion, many of us aboard OSVs would like to see proactive measures taken concerning this situation instead of reaction from incidents that may occur. Perhaps a change or addition to the certification system that is now in place?

May I suggest an endorsement type system such as exists in seafarer certification? In the DP world, whether the vessel is class 1, 2 or 3 in many ways does not matter. It is all the same system but with certain redundancy. The type of vessel that the DP system is installed on however makes more of a difference. If you are responsible for the actual control of the vessel if the DP system fails, as opposed to calling the bridge officers for them to takeover, in my opinion that is the real difference in the responsibility and qualification of the operator.

Various endorsements would include but not be limited to OSVs, DSVs, cruise vessels and drill ships, while others should be parameters set forth for the certification and not the actual class of vessel alone.

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