



- ▶ Getting your Crew Engaged with Safety in the Workboat Industry

# Introduction

Developing and maintaining a safety culture in the workboat industry is based on a business model comprised of three essential elements: people, process, and IT. Yet these elements don't reveal the whole story when it comes to designing or redesigning a safety culture. Recently, Ron DeBruyne, CEO of Helm Operations, and Gregg Cochlan, Managing Director Canada with the Pacific Institute, met to discuss some unique elements that provide a framework for creating a culture of safety within the workboat industry.

Culture is the definitive term for thinking about safety in this industry. The business safety culture encompasses the organization's need to maintain the safety of their employees, but also the safety of vessels and even the environment itself. Resources like processes that are complemented by IT solutions enable people to create a safety culture that ideally permeates each arena of activity and is fostered at every level of the business itself. Developing a focus on safety begins with people and ultimately rests with people; yet, safety, as the discussion will illustrate, is far more than the prescribed methodologies employees are meant to perform. It's about mindset and also organizational leadership.

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performance consultancy  
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In some cases, it's bound to be about organizational change too.

The development and growth of a safety culture ultimately has an underlying layer of human psychology coloring its design and implementation. By tapping into these human thought patterns, companies can begin to think about the type of culture they must build to enjoy a greater level of safety. In thinking about safety cultures, workboat businesses can begin their process of designing one for themselves, one that is a priority for the organization that is also able to compete with all other business priorities.

# Safety Begins with People.

While process and technology (IT) are the arms of the safety triangle, people are its base. According to Cochlan, there's even a sub-triangle involved that includes people, leadership, and the culture of the business. He stated that one way to look at safety is to view that initial triangle as the above-surface model and the sub-triangle as below the surface. Many companies will often tackle safety in terms of that surface model. They may change processes or provide new IT solutions to affect their level of safety. However, there are some strong reasons to consider that sub-triangle when trying to impact company safety.

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When companies view safety as an outcome, they will tend to look internally at their processes.

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DeBruyne reflected, *"We have a bias that is really under the surface that needs to be in balance with above-surface initiatives."* When companies view safety as an outcome, they will tend to look intently at their processes and try to support those processes with better IT solutions, which can enhance safety, but these measures aren't going deep enough to reach people at that sub-surface level. *"It's like looking at safety from the outside,"* stated DeBruyne, *"instead of looking within."*

By looking on the inside, the business begins to understand how it does things intrinsically. In this case, 'things' relates to attitudes and actions in the context of safety. When determining those intrinsic pieces under the surface, the company will discover the way people think about safety—or not, how leaders think about safety—or not, and how groups of people congregated into an environment that we can label a culture thinks about safety—or not.

# Motivations for Safety.

Uncovering the different motivations for safety can be helpful for creating safe methodologies. As Cochlan outlined, the clearest motivation is to protect oneself from injury or harm. Therefore, what companies set out to do is provide safe environments for people. Yet if we broaden this out to look at safe methodologies that protect not just people but the environment—and in the workboat industry it's not just the safety of an individual employee, it's about the safety of a vessel and safety practices in relationship with the environment—there are many compelling reasons to adopt safe practices. The workboat industry itself has compelled operators to develop safety platforms and companies, in order to continue operating, must adopt them. These practices are subject to investigation and companies that fail to demonstrate safe conduct face steep fines or worse.

## DID YOU KNOW?

**For every serious injury, there are 10 lost time accidents, 30 property damage incidents and 600 incidents with no visible injury or damage known as 'near misses'.**

# Must versus Want.

The underlying issue that often affects safety is a mindset that affects companies as well as individual employees. One of the things that happens is the motivation to be safe can sometimes place more emphasis on “I’ve got to do this” instead of “I want to do this.” Generally speaking, when people have an issue regarding safety as a ‘have-to,’ it becomes something they develop a tendency to resist or a tendency to try to take shortcuts and compromise. On the other hand, when it’s a ‘want-to’ issue, employee engagement tends to be high because they innately want to do something and have inwardly bought into the reasons that compel them to do it.

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Companies have to plumb the roots of how they think about safety or how they don’t.

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Again, this relates to that under-the-surface triangle again, but it’s extremely connected to people and the way people behave in the workplace. It involves people, leadership, and culture. These elements are connected to the human psyche and it gets to the heart of motivation and why safety matters. In this way, companies have to plumb the roots of how they think about safety or how they don’t. Is safety ‘have-to’ because agencies will come with strict inspections or a ‘want-to’ because each member of the group wants to contribute to the culture of safety? If people understand that safety is not imposed upon them but is intrinsically in their best interest, there’s less resistance and more willingness to want to perform prescribed safety measures.

# Transitioning to a Want-To Safety Culture.

The key to moving from a 'have-to' safety culture to a 'want-to' safety culture is compelling staff to view safety as in their best interest. As Cochlan stated, "It used to be that many companies resisted the idea of going green and now there are an abundant number of companies that have discovered there's actually a significant return on investment by going green. So organizations moved from a 'have-to' dynamic to a 'want-to' dynamic.

If you begin to total up the cost of being an unsafe organization and examine it closely, you'll come to a fairly quick conclusion that it's not a 'have-to' but a 'want-to.' The best part about this shift is that your approach to achieving an outcome when it's a 'want-to' has a higher probability of success than your approach to achieving an outcome when it's a 'have-to' situation. While leadership discussions on safety could focus on a number of motivations for developing a safety platform or, rather, safety culture, this 'have-to' versus 'want-to' dynamic gets to the underlying thought patterns and their associated behaviors of people.

In many ways, shifting to a 'want-to' scenario is, again, part of that sub-triangle. Yet, when people, leadership, and culture are part of the 'want-to' dynamic, the people-process-IT triangle is going to be enhanced as well. When the company wants to be safe and take the necessary measures to be safe, they are more likely going to be open to those measures that will make them safe (i.e. better processes and new technology solutions).

# Defining the New Context of Safety.

The development of a 'want-to' safety culture requires some definition of the term 'safety.' A business, according to Cochlan, has got to address the basic questions for itself: what is safety? How does the business define safety? Not surprisingly, many people think of safety in terms of individual safety, but part of the motivation in the workboat industry is compliance with environmental safety. The context of safety must be broad enough to encompass the individual's need for safety along with the vessel itself, the company, and the environment.

When defining the culture of safety, it's beneficial to see and assign value to it. As Cochlan remarked, *"There a function in your brain that's called the reticular activated system and it's there to be able to open up for things of value or to perceive a threat."* He elaborated that when you are stimulated by something such as a goal, your reticular activated system will open up to locate where the value or threats are. The goal of a safety culture and its methodologies is to, in many ways, open up people's reticular activated system to be aware of safety as a forefront issue—as a priority.

The defining factor of this new safety context, according to Cochlan, is a mindset shift and *"it costs less,"* as he stated *"whether you're the owner of the company, the manager of the company, or an employee of the company because the net affects everybody."* In this way, each of them understands that an oil spill, for instance, off the coast of someplace has a direct correlation to the resources, to the owners, to the environment, and to the ecosystem that they are involved in; in this case, it's the workboat industry. To reframe this in the context of those triangles, when companies employ people, process, and IT, they have the capacity to address safety above the surface. However, by addressing safety below the surface as well, they have the opportunity to create the mind-shift needed to enhance safety at its deepest levels and harness the positive motivation of people.

# Human Potential and Its Obstacles.

Another aspect of the conversation concerning the ‘have-to’ versus ‘want-to’ scenarios is the topic of normals. Cochlan pointed out that human beings have more potential than they are using. He stated, *“If we put this in the context of safety, we have a dramatically higher potential in providing safety on board or off board a vessel. If we have the potential, what gets in its way?”*

Cochlan revealed four elements that can pose obstacles to reaching our potential: our habits, our attitudes, our beliefs, and our expectations. Expectation can be a considerable obstacle as it relates to our expectation for normalcy. For instance, no one expects to have a catastrophic oil spill, but they do happen. The expectation to have a smooth voyage prejudices people from the possibility that a catastrophe may occur. People have an optimistic bias that it is unlikely that something catastrophic will happen to them and that fuels their sense of well being and creates a feeling of normalcy that may be difficult to see past.

# The Impact of Habits, Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations.

With the optimistic expectation that there is low probability of failure, people's habits can become tuned to this frequency. The expectation of normal becomes a habit. As Cochlan pointed out, *"People do have habits, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations and that actually equals their normal. Once you've formed a normal, most people on the planet regulate to that normal."* Moreover, when companies begin to view their triangle of people, leadership, and cultures, they'll find that leaders are tuned to their own sense of normal as well.

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Regulated by its normals, the culture is going to convey those habits, attitudes, beliefs and expectations as they approach safety.

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As groups of people work together, they actually form a group normal and a group normal constitutes their culture. The group culture is a combination of collective normals along with the influence of leadership and its own normal. As these elements combine, the result is a specific culture for a specific group of people. Regulated by its normals, the culture is, in various ways, is going to convey those habits, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations as they approach aspects of their job like safety.

# The Organization and Leadership Styles.

Leadership naturally conveys and sets a tone for the organization. Simplistically speaking, the style can fall into two categories: the ‘don’t mess up’ style and the ‘how can we be better’ style. Not surprisingly, people are repelled by some styles of leadership and attracted to others. The Newtonian style of leader, named for Isaac Newton, is that ‘don’t mess up’ type. It’s similar to a militaristic command and it’s also a controlling style.

The other type of style, instead, espouses the belief that we are all co-accountable and co-responsive. The Newtonian style, which often repels with its ‘don’t screw up’ mentality, creates a scenario of ‘have-to’ this or that. The co-accountable style, also known as the Whiteheadian style after Alfred North Whitehead, achieves greater

buy-in from all involved. Because there is greater ownership of responsibility, there is a more of an ‘I want to’ mentality in Whiteheadian organizations.

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Newtonian leaders who tell and talk at people can unwittingly create ‘have to’ scenarios.

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Newtonian leaders also have a tendency to tell and to talk at people as opposed to talking with others. Their commands tend to be “don’t do that” or “don’t do this.” Newtonian leaders also tend to rely upon a lot of ‘tell’ policies, procedures, practices, and fact technologies. From a neuroscience standpoint, however, the “don’t” commands elicited by the Newtonian leader stimulate part of the brain called the amygdala; the amygdala’s function is to fight or flight. Consequently, when the Newtonian leader tells someone or barks at someone “don’t,” that person has a biological instinct to fight it or run from it.

This scenario that runs on the 'have-to' system fosters a non-adaptive culture that can easily turn into what's defined a defensive culture. In contrast, the Whiteheadian leader, rather than ordering, asks, "*How could we do this more safely?*" The thought-provoking question actually stimulates the neural cortex whose function is for creativity and innovation. When you are creative and innovative, you tend to thrive more and participate in a 'want-to' platform that nurtures an adaptive culture which creates a constructive culture. Evidence suggests that organizations with a constructive culture and Whiteheadian leadership culture enjoy performance that is exponentially higher.

# Leadership and the Normals of Culture.

These two styles of leadership are also going to profoundly affect an organization's 'normals.' Employees and leaders will regulate to their normals as mentioned earlier, but each style faces change in a different way. It takes a long time to shift a normal since humans have a tendency to try to remain the same. People fight and resist change in most cases. Oddly enough, however, people don't tend to fight or resist change that they initiate, but they will balk at and fight change that's being thrust at them.

If one is speaking of the Newtonian leadership style, that type of leader forces change on people that they don't really want or appreciate. On the other hand, the Whiteheadian leader actually engages people in the process of change and in its innovation. This turns the scenario into a 'want-to' instead of a 'have to.' In such cases, the change goes much more smoothly for the Whiteheadian leader than the Newtonian.

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The power of normal is what sustains status quo. It's also what can maintain a conflict in Northern Ireland, for instance, for 200 years and ten generations. People hang on to their sense of normal until it's very nearly part of their identity. Normals can hold fast for a long time, so the power of normal creates a challenge for organizations. The challenge is to rebrand normal; in this case, the new normal must involve a primary

focus on safety. Perhaps it wasn't normal to think about safety as a priority a decade ago, but once it's pervasively facing the organization on a daily basis, it can become the new normal and the Whiteheadian organization is more apt to embrace it as such much more quickly than the Newtonian organization.

# Safety Perspectives in the Workboat Industry.

DeBruyne indicated that in spite of the age of the workboat and workboat industry, the focus on safety is surprisingly new. Many companies have, perhaps, begun to embrace safety as a primary focus for five—ten years at most. Some of the companies in the industry are roughly a hundred years old so the creation of new normals has definitely been a focus for many of these companies that had to tackle significant change.

According to Cochlan, the workboat industry has lagged behind when it comes to technology and process—two elements that can support a culture of safety. Consequently, it has also lagged behind in safety. Other industries have shot far ahead in these areas like the oil sector, for example. In terms of sophistication, this sector is ten or even twenty years ahead. The workboat industry can view the oil sector as a predictive model. As more family-run operations become consolidated into corporate entities, more change—particularly concerning issues like safety and technology—is on the horizon.

According to Cochlan, *“It’s just a matter of time until the workboat industry makes its quantum leap forward, particularly in safety.”* DeBruyne added that this leap forward is most definitely tied to the people piece of the people-process-IT triangle. He asserts that it is imperative to encourage people to ‘want to’ make safety an operational priority. *“Then the next piece of that process is identifying what are the right best practices and then enabling them. In this way, safety becomes that easy.”*

# Near Miss Reporting.

DeBruyne outlined an example of a best practice—near miss reporting, which is an important tool in preventing accidents. He stated, *“There was a model put together a number of years ago, most people in the safety industry have seen it, that for every 600 near misses that happen, where an accident could have happened but didn’t. For every 600, there ends up being 1 fatality. Within that same 600 there are something like 10 serious incidents and 50 minor incidents all within this triangle of where the base of the pyramid is.”*

Those 600 near incidents that occurred over time are actually warning factors that were ignored. Now, many companies are trying to implement near miss programs so that they can be proactive in looking for dangers and threats to safety.

Of course, part of the challenge is that the environment of the operation must enable the crew to report those near misses. For instance, if a deckhand is walking across the surface of a barge and there are covers on some of the barge openings, but they don’t fit particularly well. The deckhands may be trained to step over the covers

for this reason, but assume that a deckhand, for whatever reason, does step on one; the cover shifts and the deckhand nearly loses balance. The ideal outcome in this instance is that the deckhand reports this as a near miss. As DeBruyne stated: *“So he goes into the tug – and these processes actually exist. He’s got to go up two flights of stairs to get up to the wheelhouse, turn to a bookshelf, where he pulls a binder off the bookshelf. He flips to a tab in the binder and pulls out a blank copy of a Near Miss Report, then gets his pen and he starts to write. So he writes out a description, and when he’s all finished, he closes the binder, puts it back on the shelf. Now he’s got to go over to the scanner and put that document into*

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*a scanner, and then hopefully he knows enough about technology to figure out where that scanned document ended up on the PC. He attaches it to an email to send it into the office, so that somebody else can print it out and then transpose that into a spreadsheet where they can actually start tracking number of near misses.”*

In this scenario, if the office begins to accumulate reports about these questionable barge hatches, they might begin to think seriously about replacing them so they don't wind up with an incident where someone goes overboard.

This same deckhand may be out on deck a different day. In this instance he trips on a rope that was misplaced. Again, he considers filing another near miss report. However, he sees the wheelhouse two stories up and decides to file the report next time or, perhaps, later on. In this case, the environment doesn't enable safety as adequately as it could. This is where technology comes in because it can make filing that near miss report something that can be accomplished on the fly any time.

To look at these examples closer, just consider that the deckhand in the first example lived up to the safety training. He reported the near miss. In a culture where near miss reports are encouraged—not penalized—there is going to be greater tendency for employees to comply with these reports. If the deckhand assumed that the report would simply wind up buried in black hole's worth of reports or if the company had a history of ignoring such incidents, the deckhand might be far less likely to walk those flights and make the report.

This is why the culture of safety must be embraced at all levels of the company; it requires buy in from each level of the organization to truly work effectively.

# Safety Variables and Performance Ecosystem.

Thus far, much of the discussion has been based upon the company itself—and its own personal dynamics. Its people, leadership, and culture naturally impact the organization’s stance on issues like safety. Best practices, good processes, and reliable IT solutions can also impact safety for the better. Yet, in essence, these are all elements within the company. What about customers? Cochlan pointed out that there are also other factors and outside variables that can influence safety dramatically.

For instance, Cochlan asserted, *“Safety matters, but so does getting something delivered on time.”* On-time delivery, strict adherence to a schedule can sometimes trump safety. He elaborated: *“Safety is just an outcome that needs to be in balance with production, that needs to be in balance with product profitability or productivity.”* Safety, he maintains, can force you to be out of your equilibrium of other things that you do need to have. In this way, safety has always got to be put into the context of other equilibriums that a company is working with.

While process, technology, and people are essential to the safety mix, there are other variables as one can see. Simply stating that one customer needs immediate shipment or, perhaps, ten customers are overdue for delivery because of inclement weather. How far does the company push to fulfill these orders and at what point is safety compromised? Cochlan calls this dynamic the “performance ecosystem.” For one thing, performance is always shifting—it is not a stagnant element, so variables abound. While the culture, people, and leadership play their roles, this performance ecosystem is also part of the dynamic that is going to affect business concerns like safety.



To put this performance ecosystem in real-life terms, just consider that deckhand mentioned earlier and the two flights of stairs, the report book, the scanner—and all the steps needed to report that near miss. With the boat behind schedule and a myriad of tasks at hand, how likely is this deckhand to take the time out of his schedule to make that report? In this instance, he’s not supported by an easy process or technology that could simplify the reporting of such incidents. If the crew is being paid to get to their destination on time, they may cut corners—safety being one of them.

# Safety, Performance, and Personal Accountability.

*Cochlan asserted, “The argument that I would stand strongly on is that whether you’re in the workboat industry, or whether you’re in the NASA industry, or whether you’re a NHL hockey player, an NBA basketball player – the performance of your organization is singly dependent on a person, on people performance. There isn’t a circumstance that I can think of that if you’re doing something, you’re not dependent on an individual.”*

The deckhand we’ve been discussing not only has to be productive in term of his competencies and skills, but he also needs to be adherent, respectful, and responsive. Once we add in the element of safety—that has got to be his responsibility too.

On a basic level, the organization has got to get down to a spot where that individual is capable, competent, and willing to be acting in a safe way. Then translate that one individual to the group dynamic. It’s the same story—only multiplied by the members of the group. Even so, it comes down to individual behaviors, competencies, and skills that affect their performance. The question, of course, remains: what influences that? What stops the deckhand from filing that report or some other particular individual from acting safely? As Cochlan states, *“It’s the ecosystem—it’s the design, it’s the strategies, the structures, the processes, and the technology.”*

# Optimistic Bias versus Safety.

As one may see, the company equilibriums—on-time delivery and safety—can compete in terms of priorities. It's an aspect that leadership has to consider when thinking about their safety culture. When these priorities are out of equilibrium, it's normal for the worker to go to the profit side or the dollar side and through optimistic bias and its 'it won't happen to me' premise, this worker might risk the safety priority because he thinks he can get away with it. If he takes time out of his busy schedule, he is certain of the consequence—he'll be late. If he risks safety in this one instance, the consequence is uncertain; in fact, because of optimistic bias, he may imagine there could be no consequence.

The other side of the equation is time. When might there be a consequence? Will it be immediate or ten years down the road? The individual might also imagine the significance of the consequence; is it likely to be of little significance and how likely is it that the consequence will be a major one? As Cochlan stated, *"A simple way of describing this is that my motivation is calculation; I'm always calculating the certainty, the severity, and the significance of the timing of it"*. This is yet another factor impacting safety and in this case we're only talking about one individual. Magnify that by the crew and then by the crews of many boats.

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Due to an optimistic bias a worker may risk safety and imagine there are no consequences.

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# Changing the Organizational Culture.

Changing the safety culture of the workboat industry will take more than simply shifting that one deckhand from an “I have to” be safe to an “I want to” be a safe worker. It will require organizational changes as well as the influx of better processes and IT solutions. As DeBruyne stated, *“Organizational change does not happen overnight and it doesn’t just happen at the grassroots level. Organizational change has to happen at all levels from the top all the way to the bottom.”*

Furthermore, DeBruyne asserted that organizations will need to take a fundamentally different view on how they manage safety and where safety falls in terms of their priorities. Though many companies make bold or sweeping statements that safety is their number one priority, but is it really? How do they measure that and how do they really know? Cochlan added that one of the issues organizations need to think about when determining their safety culture is to define the term culture. Many companies talk about developing a customer culture, a goal-oriented culture, or a safety-oriented culture. There’s a sort of

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Many companies make bold sweeping statements that safety is their number one priority, but is it really?

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vagueness with the term; everyone understands that these elements are connected to culture, but the term continues to be used without a clear definition of what it is. When you don’t define, people are apt to predetermine what it is. This is why it’s essential to break that word down into its components: habits, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations. These are terms that can be discussed without ambiguity.

# Defining Safety as a Priority.

For companies in the workboat industry, quality matters, speed matters, reliability matters, the product matters, the production matters, and profitability matters. Somewhere safety must fit into this priority set. It needs to compete or it's apt to be sacrificed as soon as a customer asks if the company can step up its delivery. The moment the company agrees, it has to assess the impact. If they deliver faster, what is going to be sacrificed along the way? Safety can also be thought about like a goal of quality. This goal can have a positive consequence or a negative consequence. Yet employees must be alert to their own subconscious, as Cochlan asserted, or they may be apt to rush because they're used to rushing. Instead, safety must be a conscious goal. Ideally, safety will become so ingrained that the subconscious follows suit. This idea ties back into the concept of culture and each of its tenets.

# Conclusion.

Companies in the workboat industry are moving toward the creation of their own safety platforms. Many have and will approach safety in terms of policies, procedures, processes, and new IT solutions. While these elements are integral to a company's safety design, there are other aspects of safety that companies must examine to genuinely shift to a safer mode of operation.

The discussion looked at the elements of safety culture and how they contribute or detract from an organization's level of safety. Habits, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations are essentially the building blocks that form a company's culture. While organizations may consider elements like people, processes, and IT, they need to substantially examine the people part of this triangle as it is the foundation on which all else is built.

One of the most important aspects of safety culture design is examining whether employees 'have-to' perform safely or 'want-to' perform safely. A 'have-to' culture is not apt to be as successful as the 'want-to' culture. Companies that want to encourage a 'want-to' culture must examine their leadership style. If they are Newtonian, they're likely thrusting safety measures at employees and, consequently, stuck in the 'have-to' rut. Whiteheadian companies have a better chance of creating those 'want-to' cultures that are integral to a safety program.

As the discussion conveyed, the goal of safety must be designed as a quality outcome. Each individual must buy in to that goal in order to balance safety with other conflicting priorities like speed, for example. Moreover, while processes and IT are important aspects of a safety design, considering the individual components of a company's safety culture—employees' conscious and unconscious behaviors—all contribute to safety in fundamental ways. Examining these components allows the company to think about safety in its most basic terms and to create a culture where safety can permeate every level of the organization.

## About Helm Operations

Since 1999 Helm Operations (*formerly Edoc Systems Group*) has been developing operations software for the tug and barge and OSV industries. Helm CONNECT is the flagship product of Helm Operations. Whether it's managing safety and compliance, preventive maintenance work, billing, or jobs, Helm CONNECT gives you the information you need to do your job. It is the workboat industry's first app-based, web-based, workflow-based software system designed through user experience principles, which makes it intuitive for use by everyone in a workboat company, from the crew right down to the CEO.

Helm is used by some of the largest and most respected workboat companies in the world. Below are some of the customers we work with:



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