

Brokers are sobering up

The grog ration flag is flying a bit lower these days in the shipbroking sector. Companies increasingly apply rules against inappropriate behaviour



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Awash on a sea of alcohol: that must be the impression correspondents abroad got when looking at London shipbroking.

Things are today slowly changing, but in the 1970s and 1980s, after one of the larger shipbroking houses moved offices from the area of Victoria Station to premises far out of town, the brokers visited the local pub.

“Do you take credit cards?” was the first question.

“No, we don’t.”

“Well, you’d better start.”

The publican made the necessary arrangements with his bank and a happy relationship began. It’s quite an incentive, £2,000 (\$3,500) per week.

In the 1990s, one large London broker used to get through £86,000 (\$160,000) per year in just one local wine bar.

Tanker brokers seem to be wilder than their dry-cargo colleagues, while sales and purchase practitioners come somewhere in the middle.

But why London? Why are such excesses not as commonplace in other shipping centres?

The boss of a New York broking house, working on its tanker desk, tells *Fairplay* that New York used to be similar to London, but clients moved away from Manhattan, with only Hess and a couple of owners remaining in the city.

Opportunities for business lunches disappeared. “Occasionally, a couple of colleagues go out and have a hamburger and a couple of beers,” he tells *Fairplay*, “But even that is becoming behaviour that is frowned upon.”

Norway has the potential for wild behaviour, but in a culture where lunch normally consists of an open sandwich, the drive is not there.

Denmark is similar, although some visitors report that it is a two-tier market. The local Danish brokers do not generally misbehave. But a visitor can sometimes find himself being used as a catalyst.

The lunch sparked by such a visit can

be prolonged well into the afternoon, stretched into the evening and sometimes extended through to the early hours of the morning.

The working day in Paris, Genoa or Madrid is hardly disturbed by lunch breaks. In these centres, dinner is much more important.

In Latin countries the emphasis on dinner is a cultural thing. Perhaps in England it is also a cultural habit, but in a different direction.

In his book *The Last Grain Race*, travel writer Eric Newby describes the voyage he made in 1938 as a crew member aboard a Finnish-owned four-masted barque.

No drink please, we’re English

He writes that shipowners were wary of taking English crew because they drank too much – so much so that they preferred even Swedes and Finns!

In discussing the subject with brokers and principals in London, employers seem aware that a problem exists but have difficulties dealing with it.

The European Convention on Human Rights is the demon and the devil is in the small print. It is not what the convention says but what employers think it says.

There is a general impression in London that executives cannot randomly test employees for drug and alcohol abuse. Instead of tackling the problem head-on and offering help when needed, employers are usually confined to loose contract terms applying to inappropriate behaviour.

A convention that is designed to protect ordinary people is thus putting them off from seeking help.

Lunches of wine & roses Wasted

The senior director of a London broking house came back from lunch at about 1700 – and decided it would be amusing to spray a fire extinguisher over the entire tanker department. No one else thought so.

One London broker tells *Fairplay* that his company has a professional conduct policy. Other brokers try to control any excesses by enforcing strict mealtime policies. A large company insists that all its employees return to the office by 1600, a rather bizarre timetable for ‘lunch’.

An international shipowner tells *Fairplay* that his policy was that company representatives can have a drink or two during business lunches. More and they must phone the office and tell a manager that they will not be returning to the office that day.

There is no stigma attached to this behaviour so long as it is restricted to perhaps a couple of times a year, the owner assures. But if the employee returns to the office the worse for wear, he is fired.

There are improvements in London. But they are appearing slower than say, New York, mainly because charterers, owners and brokers have their offices within a relatively small area, and that is likely to continue. So opportunities remain for ‘long’ lunches.

Improvements are being driven by an unlikely sector. There is a younger breed of chartering worker, influenced by more modern values. One of these is that everything has an appropriate place in the circle of life.

Another emerging ethos is that charter negotiations are too important to be clouded by chemical impairment.

And a much more pleasant atmosphere exists in offices where individuals do not unfairly leave colleagues behind to cover for them.

It does seem that the 21st century is not likely to see the same disreputable behaviour in London that so marred the 20th. **F**

‘A couple of colleagues go out and have a hamburger and a couple of beers. But even that is becoming behaviour that is frowned upon’

Lunches of wine & roses Pictured

Some years ago, a member of the Norwegian Shipbrokers Association attended the group’s annual get-together.

On the way to the lavatory, he was distracted by a large oil painting and stopped in front of it. Some part of his brain must have told him that he had arrived at his destination.