

UNDERSTANDING AND EVALUATING EXPERTISE: A GUIDE FOR SHIPPING COMPANIES

INTRODUCTION

The current market for maritime security and anti-piracy has resulted in the creation of a cottage industry of self-proclaimed experts speaking on the subject of anti-piracy and selling maritime security and anti-piracy services. A review of some of these “experts” comments and the services being promoted suggests that the expertise espoused is a rarer trait than one would be led to believe. This paper is intended to provide information to allow prospective clients to separate the experts from those that claim expertise to capitalize on the current market for maritime security services. For brevity’s sake, this paper will use the generic term Maritime Security to refer to both anti-piracy and maritime security services.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

While knowledgeable on the subject, I do not consider myself an expert in maritime security. I am a payment security expert and probably have expertise in a number of other areas but have not achieved a level of experience or education that would allow me to call myself an expert by any means.

EXPERTISE DEFINED

To understand how to identify those with actual expertise from those who simply call themselves experts it is important to have a definition of the term ‘expert’. Webster’s dictionary provides the following definition for the noun ‘expert’:

Noun:

“...one with the special skill or knowledge representing mastery of a particular subject”

Within the context of maritime security, expert, as a noun would be applied as follows:

“Joe is an Expert in maritime security.”

Making this statement implies that Joe possesses a special skill or knowledge representing mastery of a particular subject. In this case, the subject is maritime security. The focus of this

statement should be the word “mastery”. This suggests that Joe possesses an intimate knowledge rather than a passing familiarity with the topic.

Webster’s dictionary provides the following definition for the adjective ‘expert’:

Adjective:

“...having, involving, or displaying special skill or knowledge derived from training or experience”

Within the context of maritime security the term expert, as an adjective, would be applied as follows:

“Joe’s expertise in maritime security is derived from his formal training and experience.”

Making this statement indicates that Joe has a special skill or knowledge derived from training or experience. Within this context, the key is “training or experience”. Without relevant or appropriate training or experience (or both, in most cases), it is difficult to see how a person could be defined as an ‘expert’.

Consider the example of a Doctor that has passed her medical boards. While the doctor may be a general practitioner and not considered an expert in neurosurgery, she would arguably be considered an expert in medicine relative to those who have not attended similar training or passed the medical boards. The doctor’s expertise is qualified by training (medical school) and experience (residency), as well as quantified by passing medical school boards. If a person were to sit at home and read anatomy and medical books they could certainly attain some level of medical knowledge but it is extremely difficult to see how a person such as the one described would be considered an ‘expert’ in medicine.

While it is not suggested that becoming an expert within the maritime security industry is similar to that of becoming a neurosurgeon, the complexity of the industry and the maritime security challenges should not be underestimated since valuable resources and human lives are at stake. The maritime security industry is complex and the ever-changing regulatory landscape coupled with the changes the pirates’ tactics increase the complexity. In his popular book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell references Neurologist Daniel Levetin who says:

“The emerging pictures from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert-in anything.”



There have recently been an influx of people and companies within the maritime security industry that espouse expertise with the objective of selling services to shipping companies. Alarming, many of the so-called experts have little, if any, practical experience with maritime security or the complexities of the operations required to successfully meet the needs of shipping clients. More than one company has been seen embellishing their record for the sake of landing clients. It should be noted that simply because a person is a former SEAL, Commando, or Special Forces, is in management, has worked in the marketing department or provided sales support for maritime security services, this experience alone does not make them an expert and certainly does not qualify them to manage the complexities of maritime security. In a similar vein, an analyst, or an executive from a shipping company should not be assumed to possess expertise because of their position alone.

THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE VS. PRACTICAL EXPERTISE

When discussing anti-piracy and maritime security, it is important to differentiate between theoretical knowledge and practical expertise.

Theoretical knowledge is possessed by those that have studied maritime security and related topics. These people may be able to demonstrate significant knowledge or understanding of the current issues, trends, and other aspects but have no real experience in implementation or operations surrounding the maritime security industry. This form of expertise has little, if any real value to companies that must protect their vessels from increasingly aggressive pirates.

Consider the example of a person that studies car mechanics from a book but has never actually turned a wrench or tuned an engine. Would this person possess the same level of expertise as a professional mechanic that spends 8 hours per day tuning race cars?

Practical expertise is obtained and possessed by those who have learned the nuances and specifics of maritime security through both education as well as practical experience. Practical experience allows people to operationalize maritime security and provide services based upon real world experiences. Practical expertise is invaluable to companies that must protect their vessels.

QUESTIONS TO IDENTIFY EXPERTISE

When speaking with someone or listening to someone who purports to have a high-degree of expertise in maritime security the following are five questions that should be asked. It should

be noted that these questions alone will not provide a guarantee of competence or expertise but should allow for a more informed decision.

1. *Where did the person or company obtain their relevant experience and knowledge?*

If the person has acquired their knowledge through speaking with other people or reading and self-study alone then their expertise can be questioned. This is not to suggest that they are not knowledgeable but it would be difficult to call their knowledge expertise. A person that has spent their career as an academic or analyst likely does not possess the experience necessary to support complex maritime security initiatives.

2. *How long has the person or company been employed or otherwise intimately involved in the Maritime Security industry?*

As discussed earlier, the maritime security industry is complex. Without at least 5 years or more experience in the industry specializing in security issues it is difficult to understand how a person could acquire sufficient experience to be considered an expert. Simply having experience as a Marine, Commando, or SEAL does not make one an expert on the operational aspects of maritime security. Additionally, a few transits through the Gulf of Aden does not make one an expert at managing complex operations.

3. *What is the person's maritime security experience and operational experience?*

At its core, maritime security is physical security. Not to discount the importance of armed guards on ships but lets be honest. Physical security is not terribly complex. The operational aspect of maritime security is much more complex. Understanding the licensing, regulations, weapons issues, embarkation, etc. is where the challenges mount for companies.

4. *Do the person have any 'real world' experience in maritime security and anti-piracy operations?*

Ivory-tower academics may possess significant theoretical knowledge but without practical experience in applying the theory it is difficult to understand how a person can be considered an expert. Maritime security is complex and can provide dangerous to crews and security personnel. Arrests in various parts of Africa and Asia in 2011 demonstrate this point. In simple terms, significant practical experience is required to attain a level of expertise necessary to provide consistent, efficient, maritime security services which comply with the applicable laws.

5. *Does the person or company possess operational and security knowledge beyond maritime security?*

While anti-piracy is important, there are currently numerous operational complexities which require broader experience and expertise to ensure client's needs are met. Shipping weapons, embarking security teams and meeting deadlines are all critical to meeting



shipping clients' needs. As we have seen in the past, small mistakes can result in serious consequences for the company and team.

Sound advice for any shipping company considering the services of a maritime security company would be to carefully vet the company and their services. Attempt to understand if they truly possesses the expertise they are espousing or are nothing more than a marketing machine selling a service that they don't yet have.