

From innovation to professionalisation: why offshore access needs a common standard

Motion-compensated gangways have become an established part of offshore operations, enabling millions of personnel transfers between vessels and offshore installations. In Europe, walk to work (W2W) operations have become so widespread that gangways, like cranes, are now critical cogs in the logistics of offshore operations.



As the offshore access sector matures, the question is no longer just whether the technology works, but how the industry ensures a common understanding of competence across an increasingly diverse global workforce. Like the equipment, gangway operators have never been more central to the operation. As the International Marine Contractors Association (IMCA) highlighted in its revised Guidelines for walk to work operations (IMCA M 254), greater consistency in operator competence and training remains an important industry priority.

As W2W has become more central to offshore operations, the gangway operators of today do far more than deploy machinery. They safeguard the wellbeing of personnel and, together with offshore project teams, play a critical role in determining whether offshore work can proceed safely and efficiently.

To understand the importance of operators and operator training, we spoke with members of Ampelmann's W2W Academy, the organisation responsible for training and assessing operators across the company's global rental fleet and systems sold to customers.

Growth and complexity

Since Ampelmann's early offshore work in 2007, W2W operations have grown rapidly in size, scope and complexity. W2W solutions are now routinely used across the global energy mix in a wide variety of contexts. The demands placed on them have multiplied.

Modern offshore projects are increasingly planned around consistent and reliable access. Maintenance campaigns, technician schedules, vessel utilisation and weather windows all assume that personnel can move safely and efficiently between vessel and asset. The gangway has become the critical interface between offshore personnel and the worksite itself. As a result, W2W systems are no longer simply supporting offshore operations. In many cases, they enable them.

As Rob Willemse, Manager of the W2W Academy and an operator himself, explains: 'In the early years of the industry, there was essentially one dominant product, our A-type, and operations were adapted to that system. Now, it's the opposite. Clients are saying, 'For our project this should work slightly differently.' Or 'We need this functionality configured differently.' As a result, small variations have emerged.'

This change is felt across multiple levels. Clients, technologies, environments and suppliers now differ far more than before. As W2W procedures have matured, expectations of the systems' technical performance have naturally risen, and the systems need to integrate smoothly into offshore operations. The number of gangway suppliers has grown, each bringing its own technology, methods and even safety philosophies. More technologies are being used in more markets, each with its own regulatory framework.

As Willemse notes, 'What I see is that offshore operations have become much larger and more complex. In the past, we became successful with a limited number of systems. Today there is far greater variety. There are electric systems, hydraulic systems, systems with or without integrated cranes, hexapod-based solutions, tower systems for service operation vessels (SOVs) and all kinds of possible modular configurations. As a result, the number of possible combinations has grown significantly and that matrix becomes more complex every year.'

Beyond the machine

This growing operational importance has elevated the role of the operator as well. While advances in automation, electro-hydraulics, composites and control systems have transformed gangway technology, the successful execution of an operation still depends on human judgement, communication and decision making.

As Willemse is keen to point out: 'We have carried out millions of transfers. The fact that they've become routine doesn't mean it's easy. It means that operators are incredibly good at what they do. That is sometimes forgotten. When something runs safely for years, people often assume it happens by itself. But that safety is precisely the result of well-trained professionals.'

Gangway operators do much more than 'press buttons'. Their role is multifaceted and complex. Operators are expected to ensure safe transfers, recognise risks, follow disciplined procedures, stop work when needed and find alternatives when conditions allow. They need to communicate clearly with onshore and offshore teams, perform checks and basic technical troubleshooting and advise on how to maximise safe workability.

Above all, they need practical judgement, taking full ownership during the transfer procedure while maintaining the composure to respond quickly and effectively in an emergency.

It is this broad set of competencies that helps operators keep people safe and offshore projects on schedule. And it is why Willemse and his team at the W2W Academy 'don't just teach operators what buttons they need to press. We teach them a profession. For me, gangway operators don't just operate a machine. They are professionals.'



Rob Willemse



Luna Coraij



Building a common standard

If operating a gangway is a profession, it is not yet one with a common standard, argues Luna Coraij, Project Manager at the W2W Academy. She points out: 'For many other offshore professions, like dynamic positioning officers (DPOs), remotely operated vehicle (ROV) pilots and crane operators, industry certifications exist, but there is no equivalent for gangway operators.

'At present, each gangway manufacturer develops its own training programme, with no commonly recognised quality benchmark or minimum industry requirement sitting behind it.'

This has created uncertainty around how competence is recognised and transferred across the industry. As Coraij explains: 'Training operators takes time and money, so our clients are asking us why someone with ten years of experience on one manufacturer's gangway needs to start from scratch on another one. Why can't they just enter at a certain level?

'But the problem is that if every gangway supplier uses its own training model and philosophy, it's very difficult to understand what a certificate is actually worth, or what someone is genuinely capable of.'

A standard would answer that question without removing the differences between technologies. Rather, it would identify the core competencies that all offshore access professionals share.

According to Coraij, 'There is a clear demand for this from both the industry and our clients to define the "driver's licence" of the gangway operator. As an industry, we need to go back to basics, asking what an operator actually needs and what basic skills that certificate should represent.'

'Ideally, there would be a generic basic course where everyone learns the same terminology, the same communication standards and the same offshore philosophy,' says Willemse. 'How do you work with a vessel? How do you work with a dynamic positioning operator? Which commands do you use? Which terms mean what? Those things are the same for all systems.'

Such a course would cover more than familiarity with one machine. It would teach operators to recognise risk, follow disciplined procedures, stop work and find solutions when conditions allow. Communication skills and safety drills would be part of that foundation. Above all, it would test practical judgement and composure under pressure. System-specific modules could then build on that core.

The benefits are practical. Human judgement, communication and decision making should remain the core competencies, helping operators achieve safe transfers, make the most of workable weather windows and use vessels efficiently. Coraij adds: 'An industry standard could provide a useful reference framework when incidents occur, giving companies and clients an agreed basis from which to assess competence, procedures and lessons learned.'

Today, offshore access has become a global operational discipline in its own right. As projects expand, technologies diversify and experienced operators move between companies and regions, training and competency frameworks must mature alongside the industry itself. The challenge is not simply developing skilled operators today, but ensuring that competence remains understandable, transferable and recognisable across an increasingly diverse industry.

'If we can create a shared language and a shared way of working, that comes with significant gains for the entire industry,' says Willemse. 'If everyone knows the same basic principles, that immediately saves days of training time, and with it thousands of euros. We need to teach people how a process works. They can then apply that process to different systems.

'But this has to be a joint effort, and the standard needs to be fit for purpose and supported by the industry. That ultimately makes the difference between something that is accepted and something that is ignored.'

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