

# staying relevant in changing times



Mr Punit Oza, Executive Director, Singapore Chamber of Maritime Arbitration, is embracing digitalisation to make the organisation more accessible, and make customisation of its offerings easier

## HOW IS SCMA DIFFERENT FROM OTHER ARBITRAL INSTITUTIONS?

The Singapore Chamber of Maritime Arbitration (SCMA) was founded as an independent arbitration centre in 2009 to advance and encourage maritime arbitration in Singapore, ensure quick resolution of maritime disputes through arbitration, and enhance the professional knowledge of maritime arbitrators.

These objectives define our functions, which are to provide commercially focused, independent, neutral and cost-effective arbitration solutions and expertise to the maritime community in Singapore and beyond.

SCMA is different from other maritime arbitral institutions in certain unique aspects. Firstly, its proximity to and the presence of a neutral but culturally sensitive, as well as a vibrant legal and commercial ecosystem in Singapore position SCMA as the preferred arbitration choice, especially for Asian companies.

Secondly, SCMA is the only arbitral institution that offers expedited and cost-effective specialist procedures for bunker claims and collision claims.

Finally, SCMA provides parties with a potential to blend other alternate dispute-resolution solutions, such as mediation through its Arb-Med-Arb clause, to achieve expeditious resolution.

## WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR SCMA'S NEXT PHASE OF GROWTH?

It's for SCMA to become the leading centre for maritime arbitration in Asia. SCMA and Singapore's dispute resolution offerings can add tremendous value to Asian businesses. Contractual and other disputes tend to slow down the momentum, and are a big drain on a company's resources. To fulfil SCMA's vision, we are working on five fronts:

First, to raise awareness about arbitration within the maritime and commercial communities. Our active usage of

## PERSONALITY

social media, especially LinkedIn, is a good example of this. We have seen close to 400% increase in followers in 2020 — from just over 335 to well over 1,700 today.

Second, to collaborate actively with Maritime Singapore and beyond to develop win-win solutions; for example, the formation of the SCMA Local Users' Council. It comprises 21 eminent members representing shipowners, ship charterers, ship brokers, underwriters, P&I Clubs, and offshore companies.

Third, to enhance the value propositions and offerings for our users and members. The SCMA monthly knowledge blast, a collation of interesting articles dealing with maritime and arbitration matters, updates members on these developments, encourages them to actively participate, and vaults the knowledge for future use.

Fourth, to revamp and strengthen the internal structures and bodies within SCMA to ensure continued and sustainable growth. The setting up of an appointments committee, which recommends arbitrator appointment candidates to the Chairman, is an example of this, and is unique to SCMA.

Finally, to improve service quality, speed, and efficiency through standardisation and digitalisation. Examples are digital signatures, e-certificates, standardised e-forms for storing feedback, as well as a membership and arbitrator panel database.

### WHAT PLANS — PARTICULARLY IN THE AREA OF DIGITALISATION — DO YOU HOPE TO ROLL OUT DURING YOUR TENURE?

I am passionate about digitalisation and data analytics. I was closely involved with the digital transformation of Klaveness Dry Bulk in my previous role at Torvald Klaveness; I am also one of the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore-Singapore Shipping Association Maritime Digitalisation Playbook Ambassadors.

So it's no surprise that SCMA has embraced digitalisation. We have created a QR code to raise awareness and ensure current and correct SCMA clauses are used in maritime contracts, and another to e-notify arbitrations to SCMA swiftly and easily.

We are always conforming to data protection regulations while collecting and using data and analytics to understand and service our clients and users' needs. Data analytics helps us customise our offerings to serve the needs of the industry better.

In 2020, we conducted our first fully electronic public consultation exercise, using Microsoft Forms and other platforms, to revise the SCMA rules. With the impact of COVID-19, digitalisation is the only way ahead.

We intend to upgrade our website to be more interactive and transactional for users to access our services and arbitration solutions in a user-friendly manner. There is a lot that digitalisation can do to simplify and amplify the

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efficiency of the process of arbitration, which will eventually provide users with cost- and time-effectiveness.

### WHAT TRENDS WILL IMPACT MARITIME ARBITRATION? HOW IS SCMA ADAPTING TO REMAIN RELEVANT?

COVID-19 has brought about big changes to most industries, and dispute resolution is no exception. Virtual arbitration hearings have become the norm. Even when physical hearings are possible, they are mostly conducted in a hybrid form, with virtual and physical aspects. SCMA's rules and procedures need to be adapted to reflect these changes. In October 2020, SCMA published its specimen directions for virtual and hybrid arbitration hearings — a user-friendly document that is practical and flexible.

Regardless of the mode of arbitration hearings, it is no doubt beneficial to use Singapore as a juridical seat together with SCMA's rules and resources, which are best suited and applicable to the dispute in question. Thus, keeping the rules updated and relevant, as well as offering a panel of qualified and experienced arbitrators with a deep cultural understanding, are going to be crucial to users.

SCMA is in the process of updating its rules to reflect the changed landscape; they are expected to be published in 2021. SCMA is also looking to tie up with the Singapore Institute of Arbitrators to offer a Maritime Arbitrator Accreditation Programme to rejuvenate and add to its panel of arbitrators to offer the widest choice of arbitrators to parties.

### HOW DOES YOUR PARTICULAR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND SUPPORT WHAT YOU DO IN SCMA?

I've spent over 25 years in commercial shipping, working for a variety of companies in Asia, including Precious Shipping in Bangkok, Noble Chartering in Hong Kong, and Klaveness Asia in Singapore. Being involved in commercial operations for four years has given me a solid foundation for my future chartering roles. I also obtained my Law degree from University of London in 2011.

So I feel privileged to have both the commercial and legal perspectives on maritime issues. This is extremely useful for my role in SCMA, as arbitration is as much about the commercial aspects as it is about legal ones. I am also leveraging my network and knowledge to ensure greater success for SCMA.