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Bimco thumbs up new agent/broker standard

Two-and-a half years after it was first launched, a professional-standards benchmark for ship agents and brokers has won the backing of the world's biggest shipowners' association.

Copenhagen-based Bimco has endorsed the "quality standard" drawn up by the Federation of National Associations of Shipbrokers and Agents (Fonasba) designed to fill the hole left by the ISO 9000 series of quality programmes that many brokers and agents undertook in the mid-1990s only to discard as too cumbersome and expensive to maintain.

The standard's key features include demonstrable financial probity, the obligation to maintain separate accounts for principals' funds, a commitment to staff training and robust procedures regarding membership if criteria are not met.

Bimco deputy secretary-general Soren Larsen said this week: "Bimco fully endorses this initiative as an important step in raising quality standards, generally as well as specifically, for the agents and brokers sector." He added: "In a regulatory environment with increasing focus on maritime safety and quality, and significant liability risks for shipowners and operators, it is important that the industry strives to self-regulate.

"The standard provides shipowners and operators with a degree of protection, sets minimum standards and ensures a coherent provision and application of services in this important segment." Fonasba president Tonny Paulsen says Bimco's support will add significantly to international awareness of the initiative.

On its launch, Fonasba's then president Mario Froio said it was "nothing short of astonishing" that anyone "whose only assets may be a mobile phone and a laptop computer" could set up as an agent or broker and take responsibility for vessels and cargoes worth many millions of dollars.

By Julian Bray London

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