Fifteen years ago, the dot.com revolution took the world by storm. Millions were going to be made overnight from online innovation. It didn’t quite happen that way — but some early struggling sites like Amazon are now fully fledged success stories, and there are plenty of new businesses that keep coming through, like Uber taxis and Airbnb holiday homes.

Many, like LevelSeas and ShipDesk, alienated many of their potential users, the brokers they thought they could cut out of the business. The chartering platform either failed to get off the ground or work any better than, or even as well as, the manual processes they sought to sweep away.

A former ShipDesk pioneer Peter Andersen is not alone in feeling there were “some good ideas in all the creative madness” that can still be utilised.

A timely one-day discussion held last week in London, Smart Solutions, gave a chance to debate where technological development has got us in shipping — and where it might go from here.

The day’s lack of standard protocols, so every transaction in the year 3,000 AD was still hampered by tonnage at the meeting, described how he was amazed when he joined the industry 10 years ago at how little drive there was for technological innovation.

“Things have changed since, he says, but Peter added: “I still ask why there is so little demand for integration and pulling things together in a way that is really functional.”

“The idea that you would have charter parties in all their various forms, and with all their different clauses, set up on a centralised, or your own, system, so that you could automatically generate them and tie confirmations to them would seem to me to be a basic idea,” Penn said.

A common response is: Yes but who will pay for systems to work together?

It is fair to say they might want to benefit commercially.

And so we are stuck with a situation where individual technology providers fight to persuade shipping companies that their systems work best, and the technology users prefer to hold onto their data — thinking it will give them an advantage over their rivals.

These dual approaches work against the creation of integrated information-sharing networks and mean that developments that appear to have obvious advantages, like electronic bookings, may be adopted despite the major efforts made to promote them.

A halfway house is suggested by Q88. It is pushing the idea that cloud computing allows online voyage management systems to be brought together on one screen for do-it-yourself process harmonisation. “The cloud is halfway to the dream of one application,” said research vice-president Richard Abrahams.

But Bacon argues that shipping industry organisations have been fixated with regulations rather than the more proscas business of business harmonisation.

Members of the Baltic Exchange have over the years shown they do not want to spend large amounts developing a chartering platform or freight derivatives trading system. But perhaps the exchange could play a greater role in finding ways to standardise charter party clauses, or maybe Bimco would like to reconceptualise its position.

The time seems ripe to make the next big step in joining up shipping’s Internet dots. It might even help the industry work a whole lot better than even the dot.com pioneers dreamed of.

For more on the need to standardise processes in shipping, go to www.needforstandardising.com

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Sales of the 26 June 2015 edition of TradeWinds, London, are available in e-form. For subscription details, contact sales@tradewindsnews.com.

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FOR Former ShipDesk Pioneer PETER ANDERSEN is not alone in feeling there were ‘some good ideas in all the creative madness’ that can still be utilised.

FOR WAVELENGTH

Standardisation may just be the catalyst that leads to innovation

Focus on better integration of business processes is an eminently sensible idea — all it requires is a bit of harmonisation, and that can’t be too difficult

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OPINION

[Image: the cover of the magazine with the headline "Wavelength: Standardisation may just be the catalyst that leads to innovation"]

[Image: a photo of a man named Jeremy Penn discussing the topic of standardisation in shipping]

[Image: a map showing the locations of various cities around the world]