

Y.CO Yacht Management With Alan Downs

Life after yachting with Alan Downs

[Y.CO](#) is a global leading company providing services in luxury yacht charter, sales, purchase, management, new build, and project coordination in the Superyacht industry. Founded by previous Superyacht Captains – Gary Wright and Charlie Birkett, Y.CO is now recognised as one of the most successful yachting companies in the world, with the intention to continue improving what they already do well.

In today's interview, we speak to an employee at the yachting firm – Alan Downs, the Head of [Y.CO](#) Yacht Management for the USA. Alan discusses with us his transition from his career path as a yachting professional, to working as head of yacht management.



Tell us a bit about yourself:

My name is Alan Downs, originally from Scotland, but currently residing in Fort Lauderdale. I have been in the maritime industry for 34 years now, with at least half of that time working on/with Superyachts. My current position is as Head of Yacht Management, USA for Y.CO, an organization I've been with for coming up to 14 years.

Prior to transferring to head up our Fort Lauderdale office, I previously spent 7 years in our Monaco office and have also been in the positions of DPA, and Technical Manager for Y.CO. Aside from the UK and US, I've lived in France, Spain, Peru, and Panama. It goes without saying, I have a constant travel itch!

My hobbies are:

- Sports
- Music
- Surfing
- Snowboarding
- Reading
- I also play the drums (or should say played as it's been a while).

Talk us through your time as yacht crew

I got my first job on a yacht in the south of France, around 1990 after day-working for about three months. It was certainly a lot easier to get first-time experience in those days! So, I was interviewed and subsequently joined a 60m Feadship in Cannes as a deckhand, and immediately left for Palma to the shipyard, and then to the Caribbean.

After about two years, I left and went to work on a friend's yacht as a bosun. From there, I worked through the ranks on

other yachts and for deliveries, etc. I worked on both charter and private yachts, managing to get involved in every aspect of the yacht's operations. This included day-to-day maintenance, dealing with guests/owners, and planning for yard periods.

I look back on my time as yacht crew with very fond memories, probably the best time of my youth. Luckily, I'm fortunate to have learned a great deal, travelled, and made lifelong friends out of my early years onboard.

How did you land a job with Y.CO?

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CX6dd7UNbYo/>

I had been working in Brighton for another yacht company as a Yacht Manager for a couple of years. However, the job was UK-based and I had always been looking for a move back to France. At the Cannes boat show one year I bumped into a very good friend of mine, who was then a broker for Y.CO and he introduced me to the directors: Charlie Birkett and Gary Wright. Their attitude to yachting, and to client relationships was so refreshing! We just clicked, and so when they offered me the job, it was a very easy decision. What a good decision it was. as Thirteen and half years down the line and I remain with the YCO team.

After yachting, did you have any other jobs?

When I left yachting, I went back to study at the Glasgow Nautical college and started an HND in Nautical Studies. Afterward, I did a few deliveries on yachts. Eventually, I ended up living in Peru and working for an English Captain who

oversaw a large fleet of mainly fishing vessels, and smaller commercial ships for a Lloyd's Syndicate of underwriters in London.

During that time, we dealt with large hull and machinery claims, inspections, and quite frankly a whole lot of cultural and safety challenges. So it was an enormous learning curve, but very valuable in terms of overall experience and decision making.

I then liaised with a marine survey company in Peru and later in Panama. So all in all, I spent 7 years heavily involved in technical operations. As well as risk surveys on ports and terminals. A very varied job with a lot of travel and again, valuable life and work experiences.

Y.C0 is renowned for its drive and passion as a company. What do you believe the 3 key components are to becoming a successful yacht manager?

At YC.0 we talk about yachting being more of a *lifestyle* than a job. And, I do feel that this is true. To become a successful yacht manager, you must be passionate about the industry first and foremost. It's not a 9-5 job, so it really helps if you love what you do. No two days are the same and you must prepare to be challenged on a regular basis.

- **Knowledge** – Listen and learn as much as you can about every part of the vessel's operation, how and where it was built, refit history, the owners' wishes/ dislikes, the crew dynamics, the budget, etc. It is very easy to speak to just one or two parts of the operation in a meeting, but both the owners and crew alike will

appreciate the time spent to discuss and debate all the other key elements that go into a successful vessel operation. As well as, showing interest in their vessel and crew will pay dividends.

- **Availability and visibility** – The yacht captains, yacht crew and yacht owners need to know you are part of their team. Whether that is just a simple check-in with stakeholders, or getting onboard to carry out an audit. It's a 24/7 business and the crew doesn't switch off, so why should we?
- **Identify where your role as yacht manager fits into the overall operation** – Know the role and the goals– we should never be micro-managers; the role of a yacht management company is to provide support and expertise in certain key areas to the Captain and crew. All while delivering to the owner the services that they are relying on Y.CO to provide. Never guess the answer to a question – do the research, and make industry contacts that are reliable, and can provide support to you at short notice.

What does your role as head of Y.CO Yacht Management USA require you to do?

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CViH0krIJ2e/>

My role as the head of Y.CO yacht management, USA is very varied. I am still managing several yachts with our Fort Lauderdale team here, but I am responsible for the US-managed fleet, with a team of 12 staff here. I am the executive lead for several *UHNW* clients, and so part of the role is maintaining those relationships with family offices and the owners themselves. Prospecting new clients, and managing the proposals is another key aspect of the job. And then to pitch Y.CO's services.

My main focal point is existing client relations and prospecting for growth business strategies. I am part of the decision-making team of the company and am heavily involved in the development of our teams both in Monaco, and Fort Lauderdale.

Are there any similarities between your career as yacht crew and your current position as Y.CO yacht management?

There are some similarities between my Y.CO yacht management role and my time spent on board. Going onboard yachts for visits, audits, and surveys – It just feels like going home to me. I'm very comfortable being onboard with crew, and I think it has helped me to integrate more easily with them.

We often travel at very short notice to pitch to clients or to try and resolve issues onboard, so it's something I am very used to...

"carry-on luggage only...the golden rule!"

In what ways do the skills you gained from your time onboard help you now?

Onboard life helped me to follow specific routines; Teamwork, resilience, and the ability to live and understand others. They all certainly help when working in a team environment, such as Y.CO.

Starting onboard as a junior deckhand, you have the opportunity of listening and learning from others, and I think it stood me in good stead in my career. I would say that I think I know my place and time to speak, but also when to sit back and absorb the conversation. When dealing with so many

different stakeholders and mind settings, that's definitely something that has been helpful.

What do you like best about your current job?

I enjoy multitasking and the varied aspect of my current job. We're often asked to solve complex issues, and so on any given day you could be speaking with the internal team, coastguard, flag state, shipyards, class societies, and then a crew member's mum... all in the same day!

Y.CO has a very strong company culture. It encourages creativity and empowers team members to think beyond what's standard in the industry. This is to find new and better ways to support our clients, captains, and crew. We work hard, but there's a lot of fun and laughter too. The fact that we cover every aspect of yachting too – from sales and new build to charter, means that there are always interesting conversations to be had. You'll often find yourself working on projects with other departments.

Have you got any advice for crew looking to leave yachting, who may be interested in following a similar career path to yours?

I think that there's a lot of crew who think they may like to try yacht management one day but are perhaps not too sure what the position entails. Our staff comes from all different types of backgrounds, some have come directly from working on yachts and others have never worked at sea at all previously.

I would recommend speaking to as many people as you can in the industry about their positions, and different facets of the industry before deciding on a specific role.

Can you define what you believe is the difference between an average and a great yacht management company?

Yachting is a fast-moving world and it's constantly evolving! So, I suppose staying agile and able to move with the times is an important part of it. Y.CO is 100% founder-owned and founder-led, which means that we're able to:

“Stay agile, make decisions quickly and hold personal, meaningful relationships with all of our Clients, ultimately providing a better service to them.”

Our co-founders and directors work as hard as anyone else in the business, which filters down through all our staff and defines how we work internally, and how we are perceived in the industry.

I think a lot of what defines the difference between an average and great yacht management company, is not just the experience of the Yacht Owner, but of the other end users. In this case, our Owners' teams, our Captains, and our crew. And I'd like to think that ours feel respected, motivated, and empowered; Rather than dictated to, or micromanaged.

I think if the relationship between the yacht management company and the captain and crew is strong, then it benefits the owner as everyone is working together to bring about positive changes on board.

Of course, to be able to build these relationships, you need to have the expertise on the team. We are fortunate to have a team who have experience working on board, within shipyards,

or who have specialist degrees in varied disciplines. We're a company that was born on board. Our co-founders were captains before they became yacht managers. So we try to apply this innate knowledge of on-board life to everything that we do.

- Employ enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff
- Answer all emails and phone calls as promptly as possible
- Don't guess or second guess, work with the *facts*.

For inquiries about Y.CO Yacht Management, contact Alan Down at – Ad@y.co

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