



On OSVs and other workboats, there are plenty of openings and not enough qualified mariners to fill them.

Joel Milton

Help Wanted

There's a severe shortage of mariners, from captains to deckhands.

BY DALE K. DUPONT, CORRESPONDENT

Help wanted signs are hanging everywhere.

Immediate openings abound for captains, mates, engineers, ABs and deckhands. Lures include competitive pay and full benefit packages, including 401(k) plans, health insurance and more.

"Everybody is hiring and everybody is short of personnel," said Rick Schwab, project manager for Delgado

Community College's Fire, Radar and Safety facility in New Orleans.

Halfway across the country, the sentiment is the same.

George Wittich, senior vice president, Weeks Marine, Cranford, N.J., said he's been in the industry more than two decades, "and this is the worst I've seen it. It's probably the number one issue facing the industry today."

Boats are tied up for lack of crews, not for lack of work.

There's no simple explanation or solution for the shortage. Some reasons for the labor shortfall include tougher training requirements — including the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) — increasingly sophisticated equipment, industry complacency, long lead times for license renewal, tough working conditions including offbeat work schedules, expansion due to rising oil prices, liability fears, and retirement of experienced workers.

CRISIS POINT?

In the last year and a half, the hawsepole has almost dried up," said Bruce Reed, vice president of operations for Seattle-based Foss Maritime. "Part of that we believe is the increased manning and licensing requirements."

David Freiboth is the national president of the nearly 4,000-member Inlandboatmen's Union. He also attributed the mariner shortage to the increased licensing requirements, but said there was another important factor.

"The industry has been shifting increasingly to non-union, so there's less and less economic encouragement for employers to keep wages and benefits up," he said. "People are just going other places. It's not worth it."

People aren't necessarily unhappy with the pay per se, it's crewing levels and benefits as well, said Freiboth, who's based in Seattle.

The practical response is to reduce the impact that licensing and training requirements have on prospective mariners.

STCW training, for example, comes out of the mariner's pocket. "It needs to be subsidized in some way," he said.

Other possible remedies include bonuses for current employees who bring in new hires, hiring away mariners from competitors, and searching for workers beyond the usual haunts. Few dispute the need for a well-trained workforce.

In one case, at the State University of New York Maritime College's October job fair, towing companies this time around are sponsoring a reception for students to get them interested in the business, said Capt. Eric Johansson, associate professor of marine transportation at the Fort Schuyler, N.Y., school.

"I see an aging workforce," he said. "It's getting difficult to get people to work in the industry now."

So, is it a crisis? "Absolutely," said Gregg Trunnell, director of the Pacific Maritime Institute, Seattle.

In a hawsepiper study he recently presented to the Ship Operators Cooperative Program, Trunnell noted that before 2003, moving up from ordinary seaman to master mariner required about \$1,700 and lifeboatman, radar and basic firefighting training.

Now, climbing that same career lad-

der costs around \$32,000 and has a whole raft of requirements to move from one rung to the next.

He has several ideas for easing the burden, including the use of distance learning as a way to reduce class time. If you can get a master's degree from home, why not a seaman's license?

Trunnell also suggests an alternative route to Mate 500 gross tons or Mate 1,600 gross tons certification such as a vocational program that includes one year of sea time with sponsoring companies.

Most of the big ships get officers from the maritime academies, who stay a while and then move on. They're usually not interested in working on tugs, he said, and "if they do get a job, they're not interested in working on deck, and good officers always come from the deck."

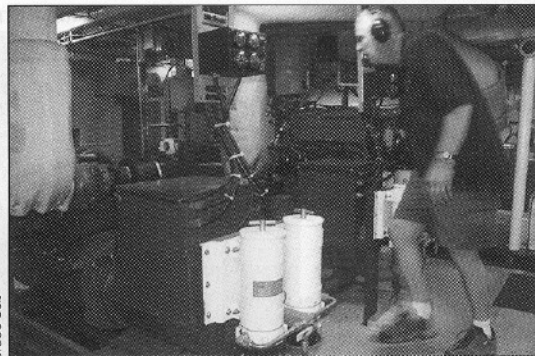
Bisso Towing Co. Inc. promotes from within. "If you don't have experience on the water, it doesn't do any good to have that piece of paper," said Scott Slatten, vice president of operations for the New Orleans-based tug company. "Fortunately, we don't have a lot of turnover. When we do some hiring, you have to look a lot harder nowadays. It's pretty slim pickings out there, especially with entry-level people."

He also has his eye on the future. "My average captain has been with me almost 20 years. Where I'm going to be 20 years from now, I don't know," Slatten said.

McAllister Towing relies largely on hawsepipers. "That itself is changing rapidly," said Buckley McAllister, vice president of the New York tug company. "The amount of resources we're putting into recruiting has increased."

His family business sends letters to a broad range of agencies to try to get people from outside the industry to consider it as a career.

What kind of response is McAllister getting? "We're able to keep the boats



There is a huge demand for engineers.

crewed," McAllister said.

SHRINKING POOL

In the next year and a half, Edison Chouest Offshore has more than a dozen new vessels scheduled to come on line. That means new positions are being created, "and very few new people are coming into the industry," said Devin Branch, human resources manager for the Galliano, La.-based offshore service vessel and tug operator.

"We just have to get creative in how we're attracting people," he said. "We've got to go to some of those non-maritime communities." He has also been in touch with the Louisiana Department of Labor to let them know that people laid off in other industries might want to work offshore.

Chouest is a sponsor of a local vocational program and is working with a community college on a training program designed for mariners. Branch also would consider visiting naval bases to tell sailors there are jobs where they can stay on the water.

In August, he attended the first meeting of a group of boat companies around Lafourche Parish, La., who are trying to tackle the problem.

Capt. A.J. "Buddy" Cantrelle Jr. of Kevin Gros Offshore LLC, Larose, La., set up the first of what he hopes will be quarterly meetings.

"The biggest issue we face in our industry today is the lack of qualified personnel. The pool for offshore oil and gas is bone dry," he said. "The days of waiting for these guys to walk in our

door are over.”

And, Cantrelle added, the situation “is not going to get better if we keep our head in the sand.”

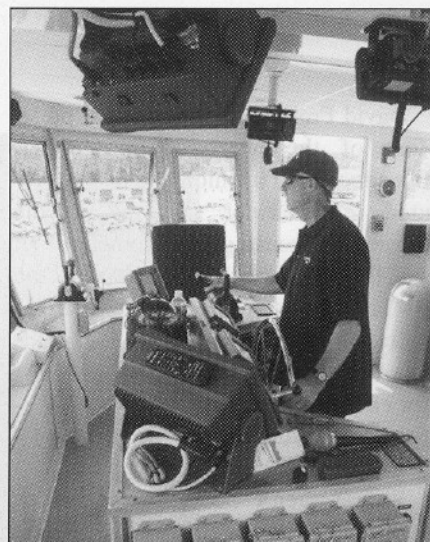
The industry hasn't done a good job of marketing to young people. So, company representatives will visit high schools and colleges “letting them know it's an attractive industry,” Cantrelle said. “It's not a job, it's a career.”

Ted Morley, vice president, operations, Marine Professional Training,

Fort Lauderdale, Fla., agreed. “We need to get the message out there that it's a good secure job with ample pay and time off,” he said.

Salaries vary, but in general, licensed mariners can make \$300 to \$500 a day and unlicensed from \$100 to \$300 a day. Depending on what part of the industry you're in, pay can range from \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year.

“Everyone wants to be a captain,” said Morley, who started out as an ordinary seaman and came ashore as a master



Bruce Bels

Captains can earn upwards of \$100,000.

after working on tankers, tugs, OSVs and other vessels. “Guys that are licensed are getting as much work as they want.”

The school has a free job posting board that's constantly full, he said. The biggest shortage is engineers.

At Seacor Holdings Inc., mariners have been with the company's tanker and towing divisions a long time, said vice president Tim McKeand. However, increased activity in the U.S. Gulf has upped the need for experienced workers on Seacor's offshore service vessels.

“The shortage is partly the result of the last industry down cycle when many seamen left the industry and have not returned,” he said.

What's more, McKeand said, “the need for more experienced personnel is a direct result of the industry's overall improved attitude toward safety and protection of the environment, as well as the entry of more sophisticated equipment into the fleet.” So the most difficult jobs to fill are at the senior officer level aboard the new, technologically advanced vessels.

To attract and retain mariners, McKeand said Seacor has begun an aggressive advertising campaign “to promote, not only our company, but also the industry.”

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Jack Porche wants to help.

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REPORT SAYS MORE MARINER SHORTAGES EXPECTED

In a report last year to the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, the Maritime Administration's Office of Sealift Support sounded a warning about the dwindling number of mariners.

"Today's mariner is required to undergo extensive specialized training to meet standards imposed by the IMO and employer's requirements due to the greatly increased complexity of operational tasks and equipment," the report said.

"In addition, it is becoming clear that retirements and the development of alternative employment opportunities are significant factors in further diminishing employment and training opportunities in the merchant mariner labor pool ..."

"MARAD believes the potential shortfall in the unlicensed mariner pool is reaching critical proportions, and the long-term outlook for sufficient licensed personnel is also of serious concern."
— Dale DuPort

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"What I've been getting from the boat companies we deal with is they're not happy with the number and quality of what they have out there," said Porche, program manager for the Louisiana Marine and Petroleum Institute at L.E. Fletcher Technical Community College in Houma, La.

The school is putting together a co-op program to prepare people for a marine career. He's working with an

industry steering committee and hopes to start classes by the first of the year.

In July, he asked the U.S. Department of Labor for a \$1.2 million grant to kick off the program. Porche hopes to get a response in October.

"What we'd be providing is a structured career path," he said. "They'd come out with some sort of credentials."

Berit Eriksson is working on solutions, too.

She knows the value of a well-trained crew. Bringing a tow through Alaska's Inside Passage and on rivers, "that's highly skilled work," said Eriksson, project director for the Pacific Coast Maritime Consortium, Seattle (<http://www.pacmarcon.org>). And mariners need considerable time and money to acquire those skills.

The consortium hopes to propose a federal maritime education loan program that would be similar to one for teachers who work at low-income schools. The Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program reduces debt from student loans based on the time spent teaching in certain school districts.

In the maritime version, loan forgiveness would be tied to sea

time as an incentive for mariners to work in the industry, Eriksson said.

Companies are trying new approaches as well.

"We recently introduced an employee referral program. An employee will be rewarded financially for steering people our way," said Leland Bosworth, human resources manager, Orion Marine Group, parent of King Fisher Marine Service, Port Lavaca, Texas, which is looking for a tug captain and dredging personnel. "It's one of the things we felt would help us attract qualified people," he said.

The need for workers has increased along with the number of projects. "It's a little tougher than a year or two ago because the economy is better," Bosworth said.

Vane Brothers Co. just hired a fleet recruiter, an experienced ex-Coastie who understands the ways of the water. "He's going to the service academies and to high schools and do serious recruiting," said Betsy Hughes, vice president of the Baltimore tug-and-barge company, which is building several new boats.

And Vane Brothers needs well-trained personnel. "In the wheelhouses of our vessels, the whole front panel is nothing but screens," she said. "There's no big wheel in the wheelhouse any more."

And because they move so much petroleum, "everything has to be quite secure, and our people have to know what they're doing."

But finding the right people will be hard. "There is a shortage of qualified mariners," Hughes said. "It seems that the industry doesn't attract the way it used to."
WB



Deckhands are needed in big numbers.