



Beyond the fleets

Challenges of recruiting, retaining naval architects and marine engineers

RICHARD A. MUELLER, *President/CEO, NETS Co., Inc.*

Recruiting and retaining qualified employees is a challenge that every company, regardless of industry or location, has had to deal with in the last few decades. Factor in a geographic area that is unique and yet incredibly diverse, add to that an industry as challenging and changing as the Great Lakes and you have a complex puzzle few business owners can solve and few business owners could foresee.

As the maritime industry around the world, especially here in North America, shrinks, and more high school and college students are attracted to other seemingly more glamorous fields of employment—like computer sciences, robotics and artificial intelligence—other “old school” technical fields like naval architecture and marine engineering have become less attractive.

Yet, a 2018 poll by the Pew Institute of graduating college seniors showed a very surprising result: Those students who graduated with degrees in naval architecture and marine engineering were not only fully employed, they made more money as a starting wage and gained access to a career path not equaled by any other college degree programs. Those of us in the industry were just as surprised as everyone else to find this out.

What is driving this, and why is this trend important to those of us who run maritime-related companies today?

Staffing for the future

Recruiting new employees into the maritime sector and retaining those who are already employed is a critical component for companies to survive. The call for experienced marine engineers and naval architects has increased significantly around the Great Lakes over these past few years. Published data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) indicates that this field will expand over 7 percent

within the next decade. It is vital that we bring in new talent as well as encourage the more experienced professionals to stay in the region.

But this is an increasingly difficult task for our industry and for small companies, including mine. Aggressive marketing and hiring by much larger, often multi-national companies, which can offer salaries, benefits and career opportunities smaller companies often cannot, captures the attention of many graduating students.

Our colleges and universities are simply not graduating enough students to fill the open slots in our industry. Combine this with the increased demand forecast by the BLS and our industry has a greater need to promote the maritime field to incoming engineering students. Aerospace, computer sciences, automotive and many other technical fields of study are cutting into our potential labor pool by attracting our young engineers away from naval architecture and marine engineering.

Growing experience

This looming labor shortage is not just centered on naval architects and marine engineers. In addition to land-based marine engineers, there is a significant need for seafaring engineers onboard the vessels.

The Great Lakes offers a unique opportunity to work on vintage steam vessels, as well as the modern large-scale diesel bulk carriers. Yet this contributes to the challenge: An engineer onboard an older vessel must not only have hands-on knowledge of a succession of machine upgrades and changes, but they must also be able to maintain present-day systems. Engineers with this type of experience take time to develop.

With the challenges of the current job market, both on land and at sea, the struggle to find and keep these experienced marine engineers is very competi-

tive—and with that comes increasing salaries. Some of the larger firms in major metropolitan areas can offer generous salaries and other fringe benefits, drawing talent away from smaller firms. But as the owner of one of those smaller

firms, it's important to look beyond salary levels and ask: “Why would an employee want to continue to work here?”

While competitive compensation levels can and do play a role, there are other factors in finding and retaining young naval architects, marine engineers and operating marine engineers that firms, both large and small, need to pay attention to:

- Company environment – corporate culture, work schedule and location
- Opportunities to keep up with new technology and software
- Ongoing support through mentoring and education
- Scheduling flexibility
- Growth opportunities and a clear career path

For companies to not only survive, but thrive, the future of hiring will necessitate companies attracting, developing and retaining quality, experienced marine engineers and naval architects to the Great Lakes region. As we consider the long term economic benefits of finding and keeping the best possible talent for our organizations, let's not lose sight of the fact that, in the end, it's not just about the people we're trying to hire, it's about making sure that our companies are worth working for. ■

Our colleges and universities are simply not graduating enough students to fill the open slots in our industry.