

Marine industry hunts for ways to hook skilled workers

By EVE SAMPLES
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STUART — A shortage of skilled tradesmen is hamstringing growth at some Treasure Coast marine businesses, and a group of industry leaders gathered Tuesday to learn strategies for doing something about it.

About one-third of the 50 attendees at a workshop sponsored by the Workforce Development Board of the Treasure Coast and the Ma-

rine Industries Association of the Treasure Coast Inc. said they have had a hard time filling recent job openings.

"Unfortunately, we've done a terrible job in the industry of growing new talent," said Scott Miser, chief operating officer for Wayne Huizenga Jr.'s Rybovich and Sons.

Rising housing costs and a lack of vocational training in schools have intensified the problem.

"Some businesses are moving

to North Carolina, let's face it," said John Kraczkowski, director of business services for the workforce development board.

Hank Stevens, a recruiter for Florida Detroit Diesel-Allison Inc., which has a facility in Fort Pierce, said he could immediately hire about 30 diesel-engine technicians — but he hasn't been able to find them.

The technicians typically need an associate's degree and can make

\$100,000 annually after a few years on the job.

"We're stymied in business growth because of not having enough techs," Stevens said.

Palm Beach Community College offers a training program for diesel-engine technicians, but Indian River Community College doesn't.

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Rybovich takes different tacks to hiring

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high school and college levels could ease the burden, Stevens said.

Kathie Schmidt of the St. Lucie County School District said she was working on a marine academy to help provide such training.

"We just put one together for the construction industry," she said.

Palm Beach County's marine leaders, who are facing the same shortage of employees, opened a maritime academy in Riviera Beach last month.

Vera Locke, the marine association's executive director, said skilled workers seeking higher pay tend to jump from job to job, which

isn't productive for the industry as a whole.

The workshop, held at IRCC's Chastain Campus in Stuart, also focused on making marine businesses aware of resources that already exist: the Corporate Community Training Institute at IRCC, the Florida Manufacturing Extension Partnership and the Space Alliance Technology Outreach Program, a service of NASA that helps businesses solve technological problems.

Not all of the attendees were unable to find workers, however.

Miser said Rybovich's five marinas are hiring about 15 to 20 people a month, adding that the company has had to think outside of the box to

keep up that pace.

The firm is using veteran job-placement programs and less-experienced workers to fill the positions.

"We're pretty progressive about it," Miser said. "We've resigned ourselves that we're not going to find the workers the traditional ways."

Other leaders also are looking to creative solutions. Kraczkowski encouraged marine businesses to consider training workers through the workforce development board's recently launched Florida Rebuilds program, which is designed to train workers in construction.

"This is something we could do right away," he said.

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