

Creative Hiring and Workforce Development in the Yacht Refit Industry

By Seth McGonigal

Yacht refit and repair is a technically demanding industry and one that many job seekers don't even realize exists. That makes building a deep and reliable talent pool an ongoing challenge. If you're struggling to develop your workforce, we encourage you to get creative with how you approach both hiring and training.

Recently, at Saunders Yachtworks, we faced this challenge head-on. With several high-value bids out that were dependent on meeting deadlines, our paint department needed to grow. To meet the demand, we diversified our approach and expanded the team by 30% using three different methods: we developed internal talent, recruited from our local community college, and hired untrained individuals, including some brought in through temporary labor services. Months later, we're proud to report that those new hires are still with us and contributing to our success.

Operating a full-service boatyard means navigating seasonal staffing cycles. In South Alabama, our team focuses on refits through fall and winter, then transitions to field service in spring and summer. This requires a high degree of flexibility, something that doesn't come naturally to many new hires. The key to onboarding successfully lies in how we support the staff we already have. For growth to happen, department leads must be empowered to train others, and that may mean rethinking their roles. In the paint department, for example, the lead technician has to spend more time on oversight, coaching, and communication. Management, in turn, must view these relationships as a continuous loop of support and feedback.

Internal development plays a vital role in workforce growth. We rely heavily on tools like in-person manufacturer trainings, online certifications, and targeted in-house instruction. When management identifies promising employees early, tailored development plans help build skills that meet each department's specific needs.

Hiring unskilled labor always carries risk. Training is expensive, and retention isn't guaranteed. But if your shop has built a foundation of mentorship and internal knowledge transfer, that risk becomes manageable. We've successfully recruited recent high school graduates who were ready to enter the workforce, and we've also relied on temp agencies to provide entry-level help. At first, we hesitated to invest in training temporary workers who might not stay. But we quickly realized the same risk exists with any new hire. The best solution: manage and train temporary workers with the same seriousness and support you would give a full-time employee. If they show promise and interest, they may just become full time with the company.

Attracting talent is the long game, and it starts with visibility. People need to know this industry exists and offers viable, rewarding careers. Whether it's attending local career fairs, building partnerships with community colleges, or getting involved with your local chamber of commerce, consistent outreach makes a difference. Our yard is actively involved with the Marine Industry Technology program at Coastal Alabama Community

College, and we participate in shaping the curriculum so students hear about our work as they consider a career in this field. Nationally, ABBRA's partnership with the New England Institute of Technology offers a similar opportunity for engagement.

Workforce development is a challenge across industries right now, but it's especially acute in the marine trades. High turnover and limited awareness mean that management must be more flexible, creative, and invested than ever. That investment starts with your internal leaders. Help them grow their own careers, then challenge them to bring the next generation along. Whether your new hire is a recent high school graduate, a temp worker, or a trade school grad, the training should be the same: structured, hands-on, and rooted in real opportunity.