

Desperately Seeking Apprenticeships

by Steve D'Antonio

Several years ago, President Obama said that we need to be preparing all high school students for college. I cringed. In that scenario, how will we produce the roofers, carpenters, auto mechanics, and, of course, boatbuilders our society needs? I wish he had said, "We need to make sure all high school students have career options, be they college or vocational school."

The sad fact is that high school vocational programs appear to be waning. Budgetary pressure and the allure of the digital-age illusion that every career can be carried out from behind a keyboard seem to be leading school systems and students down the wrong path, one that often brands "the trades" as somehow inferior to college. As many parents of college graduates now know all too well, a degree no longer guarantees the career or good-paying job that it did in previous generations. Solid vocational training, on the other hand, does; when was the last time you heard of a good plumber or electrician who couldn't find work?

With a few notable exceptions, standardized, rigorous training and education for boatbuilders does not exist, at least not in the United States. Indeed, there are seminars, workshops, manufacturer-sponsored classes, and weeklong ABYC-certification preparation sessions, as well as some very good marine-industry schools that offer college-semester-like programs. To take advantage of any of these, however, an existing technician or would-be marine-industry professional must be employed by a firm willing to invest in his or her training, often at significant expense, or be able to take a hiatus from work to attend one of the handful of schools scattered around the country, impractically located for most.

The result is that, without exaggeration, almost daily I encounter marine-industry personnel who suffer from a

profound lack of training in mechanical, electrical, and overall systems. Nor can they troubleshoot. It takes them an inordinately long time to identify problems, which are often misdiagnosed. Frequently, new installations don't work without two or three tries to get them right. All of which guarantees two results: unnecessarily high costs and exceptionally dissatisfied boat owners.

Case in point, while at a boat show a few years ago, I attended a demonstration of a new system being released by a marine-electrical-equipment manufacturer. Its capabilities were impressive, to be sure. The presenter waxed poetic about how it would offer greater satisfaction and enjoyment for the user. My press colleagues posed various technical questions, while I chose to be the fly in the ointment: "How will you train technicians to install and troubleshoot this new product, and how will you support it?" I asked. The answer? "We'll be able to identify and fix most problems via an Internet connection." Translation: "We've chosen to make little or no investment in training or education; we are just looking for short-term gain."

Recently I had a very different experience while on a project with a group of boatbuilders in Australia. On one occasion, I had questions about the installation of a shore-power transformer. I asked the project manager if I could speak with the electrician who had designed the switch gear and installed the unit. A few minutes later a young man who looked to be about 22 years old walked up to me. I thought there had been another breakdown in translation between my American English and that spoken by Australians; surely this must be a helper and not *the* electrician who had installed the transformer. I politely asked if he was the installer, and he confirmed that he was and answered all my questions in detail and with

noteworthy self-confidence. I couldn't help but be impressed.

Not coincidentally, he and many of the marine industry professionals I work with in Australia are graduates of the country's multi-year boatbuilding apprenticeship program. It involves upward of 2,000 hours of instruction, with both classroom and shop-floor apprenticeship training. And it shows. The level of competency, troubleshooting skills, and overall professionalism is very high, indeed, and worthy of emulation.

The Grow Boating campaign by the National Marine Manufacturers Association expends considerable resources in an attempt to market manufactured boats to the public; however, if the marine industry is to prosper, we need to simultaneously improve our ability to build, service, troubleshoot, and repair the boats we sell. We need to get it right *the first time*, and we need to consistently generate happy customers. The only way we will ever achieve those goals is via a unified and readily available education program that will attract the bright, ambitious young minds seeking a meaningful and fulfilling career. More importantly, we can't afford to wait for state and federal education funds. They're almost certainly not coming. We as an industry must take matters into our own hands if for no other reason than self-preservation.

We need an organized trade-apprenticeship program, and we need it now.

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About the Author: For many years a full-service yard manager, Steve now works with boat builders and owners and others in the industry as Steve D'Antonio Marine Consulting. He is an ABYC-certified Master Technician, and sits on that organization's Hull and Piping Project Technical Committee. He's also the technical editor of Professional BoatBuilder.