Plans for larger fleet prompt aggressive push for workers

Expanding the Navy fleet to 355 ships will require bipartisan support in Congress, about $102 billion each year for the foreseeable future and more people like Sharon Fraser of Newport News.

The jury is still out on Congress and the budget, but Fraser is doing her part.

The 24-year-old tried college and found it too expensive. Working as a shift manager at Taco Bell, she opted to ins welders. It worked.
"I actually wanted to challenge myself and learn something new that I've never learned before," she said. "It's fun. I like it."

The hundreds of small- to medium-sized businesses that support Navy ship construction could use more like her. In interviews with the Daily Press, company representatives from Hampton Roads to Texas talked about the challenge of finding welders, machinists, fitters and other workers in the skilled trades if business ramps up as expected.

As Fraser discovered, community colleges are helping to feed the pipeline.

The training program at TCC is a partnership with the Virginia Ship Repair Association that also includes Thomas Nelson Community College and Paul D. Camp Community College. It's a pre-hire program based on the needs of association members.

Classes started in January at a leased building in the Port Norfolk section of Portsmouth. Students attend the program for three weeks — sort of a welding boot camp — after which they can move into a job to continue their training.

So far, Newport News Shipbuilding has been the main beneficiary of the program, said Todd Estes, TCC's interim associate vice president for business and corporate solutions. He is bullish on the future of the effort, which is officially titled VSRA Pre-Hire Marine Skills Training Program.

"We build it like the workday," Estes said. "Attendance is emphasized — work ethic and the like. It is designed to mimic the training they would get in the yards. But through the pre-hire program, we can do a lot of that preparatory work upfront so it reduces the cost to the employer once they get hired."

It costs students $250, which is reimbursed after they graduate and are hired by a member of the ship repair association.

Vernon Sargent, a welding instructor, said very few people have dropped out. Being mechanically inclined is not a requirement for admission, as Fraser can attest.

"It depends on the person's attitude," said Sargent, who has been welding since 1974. "If they really want it, they can learn."

Demand is expected to be steady through the year, and the program hopes to expand beyond welding. Estes wants other companies to know about it.

"When you get all the people in the same room and say, 'OK, this is what I need; we can develop programs that do that,'" he said. "This is an example of that. Employers sometimes don't realize what options they have available to them."

**Educating the workforce**
Community colleges aren't the only breeding ground. Small businesses can see a payoff by reaching into high schools.

Global/SFC Valve of Somerset, Pa., gives twice-a-year presentations to area high schools in hopes of interesting the next generation of workers in manufacturing. The company has several high school students doing internship work, including 18-year-old Spencer Owens.

The son of a coal miner, Owens is setting up computer tablets with instructional material. The tablets are then distributed to workers.

"We are working on getting tablets out on the assembly floor so they don't have to use books," he said. "They have all their instructions right in front of them."

Reaction has been mixed among the company's 53 workers who make valves for Navy ships, plus components related to weapons elevators and equipment used in at-sea replenishment operations.

"Some people are trying to get used to (the tablets)," Owens said. "Sometimes people don't like change and they have to get used to things."

Company President Bob Kirst likes what he sees. An assembly floor stocked with computer tablets will appeal to the younger workers he wants to recruit. He's reached out to local high school teachers and parents. A more recent initiative brought eighth-grade students to the company.

He wants manufacturing to be "cool."

"What I've always thought — and I've told my own kids this — anything you're interested in, there is a slot for you in manufacturing," he said.

Past delays in federal funding have made it more difficult to plan when to hire, Kirst said. One good sign: His aging workforce is getting a big younger.

"A year or two ago, the average age was 50," he said. "Now the average age is 40-ish."

Like other members of the supplier base, he remains optimistic about recruiting enough skilled labor to meet any increased workload.

"There are shortages," he said. "But there are not insurmountable shortages."

**Recruiting push in Connecticut**

Small companies aren't the only ones pulling out all the stops to recruit workers.

Back in March, Newport News Shipbuilding rolled out a mobile training platform that showcases digital tools used in ship construction along with augmented reality, which overlays digital images on a real surface.
The primary purpose is training the workforce, but the company also plans to use it in schools and job fairs with an eye toward impressing the younger generation.

The Newport News yard, a division of Huntington Ingalls Industries, builds nuclear-powered submarines in partnership with General Dynamics Electric Boat of Groton, Conn. Even without a push for a 355-ship Navy, these yards are ramping up for a previously approved effort to replace the Navy's aging fleet of ballistic submarines.

Newport News is adding 3,000 workers this year as part of a cyclical upswing in business. Its workforce currently numbers around 20,000.

At Electric Boat, the workforce at the company's Connecticut and Rhode Island locations has grown steadily over several years. It recently surpassed 15,000. By 2030, the company hopes to have 18,000 employees.

The company has been planning its recruitment effort for several years.

"We have essentially doubled our hiring staff and worked to streamline the time it takes to bring a person into Electric Boat," said Maura Dunn, vice president of human resources and administration.

The company has worked with education departments in Connecticut and Rhode Island to develop programs that complement the kind of work going on at Electric Boat. It has also reached out to the unemployed, under-employed, veterans and career-changers, launching an adult learning program at a large vocational high school near the company.

"It's a much smaller area than Hampton Roads," said Dunn, who is from Virginia Beach, "but that doesn't mean we don't have the workforce. We just have to go get the workforce that is aligned with the skills we require here."

She said the industry could do a better job of selling the advantages of a career in manufacturing. The company has relaunched its apprenticeship program, which offers the chance to learn a trade and move into a job with no college loan debt.

Spreading the word means helping parents, teachers and guidance counselors "understand what is the value of high-tech manufacturing in a world of four-year degrees," she said.

**Can Trump help?**

Supporters of a larger Navy fleet have a friend in the Oval Office. President Donald Trump says he is committed to a 355-ship Navy and wants to boost defense spending.

But workforce training advocates reacted with concern when the president rolled out his so-called "skinny budget" earlier this year, a 50-plus page document that supported a stronger military but cut the Department of Labor by $2.5 billion and the Department of Education by $9 billion.
The document was short on detail, and the spending plan eventually adopted by Congress to close out 2017 didn't contain these cuts. Also, Trump has spoken of the need to increase apprenticeships, so a clearer picture of his priorities might emerge when he submits a full 2018 budget.

Katie Spiker, a policy analyst at the National Skills Coalition, said it is "especially critical to invest in education and training while the economy is good — this creates a pipeline of skilled workers who support the growth of businesses and our economy."

Kirst, the president of Global/SFC Valve, recalled being concerned about a proposed Trump cut to popular Community Development Block Grants, which can be used for workforce training.

He's all for a ramp-up in defense spending, "but we can't let go that (CDBG) money and expect businesses to survive," he said. "That's what helps train our people."

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This article is related to: Community Colleges, Donald Trump, Newport News Shipbuilding, Huntington Ingalls Industries