

Attracting, Training, and Retaining a Skilled and Ready Workforce to Support Maine's Seafood Economy

by Keri Kaczor and Anne Langston Noll

Maine's seafood economy—from harvesting, to transportation, logistics, marketing, biotechnology, and food service—has offered valuable employment and career opportunities for generations. Understanding the current workforce, future employer needs, training needs, and employee career aspirations, and how these needs align with training and career opportunities, is key to addressing the challenges of recruiting, training, and retaining a skilled and ready workforce. Several recent projects have enhanced our understanding of the dynamics and needs of Maine's seafood economy workforce, providing valuable insights to help guide strategies to support the existing seafood workforce, as well as the next generation, which we will summarize here.

BE NIMBLE

Estimates place the entire seafood economy's employment at approximately 34,125, with 12,052 in central industries (e.g., fisheries, processors) and 22,073 in peripheral industries (e.g., freight, food service). Collectively, the number of jobs is expected to grow by 9% in central industries, and 10.5% in peripheral industries adding 1,091 and 2,313 positions respectively, by the year 2033 (TPMA 2023). This projected growth represents diversification of Maine's seafood sector, and such diversification results in changing training needs. For example, the current aquaculture

workforce in Maine is just over 700 employees (GMRI 2020) and is projected to increase to 1000 direct employees, and over 2,000 in the total production, supply chain and downstream markets (Maine Sea Grant 2022). Similarly, job opportunities within Maine's seafood supply chain remain strong. Maine's workforce training and education institutions need to remain nimble to ensure that training offerings (a) meet the needs of an increasing range of employers, and (b) provide potential employees with relevant technical and life skills that are transferable across industries.

ADDRESS SKILL GAPS AND TRAINING NEEDS

Training programs should address identified gaps in training and connect people to existing training opportunities, some of which struggle with low enrollment. A recent project recommends offering training that allows versatile participation that is of short duration and aligned with seasonal fishing/aquaculture activities. Similarly, it is recommended that training programs provide tangible incentives for employees and employers, mentorship, emphasis on life skills and work ethic, and that training should be hands-on experiences taught by trusted individuals (e.g., other fishermen) (Maine Sea Grant 2022). Training should teach both skills relevant to industry and skills that are transferable across industries, and training programs

for entry-level and more advanced positions are equally necessary (TPMA 2023). Schedules should balance the need for hands-on experience with availability, or lack thereof, during the busy season. Training programs should provide growers and harvesters new opportunities for off-season employment, allowing them to work year-round. Finally, programs should ensure alignment with state and national occupational, workforce and learning standards.

ATTRACT NEW AND DIVERSE TALENT

In terms of gender, the current distribution of the entirety of Maine's seafood workforce reflects a more-or-less even split between male and female workers. Similarly, the labor force as a whole, while still overwhelmingly White, is more racially diverse than the overall state population (TPMA 2023). But this diversity is not uniform across all aspects of Maine's seafood workforce, and there are communities that remain underrepresented. For this reason, there is a need to develop recruitment, training, and funding opportunities that support diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., hold training where the underserved are comfortable to learn and employ instructors and select mentors from those communities) (Sea Grant 2020). By diversifying participants in Maine's seafood economy it is possible to drive innovation, and immigrants offer a wealth of expertise (McGuire 2021).

CONSIDER THE LARGER SOCIAL CULTURAL CONTEXT

Traditionally, Maine's economy has been highly seasonal with many jobs providing employment only for a

portion of the year. This employment seasonality has been especially true within Maine's seafood industry where production is dependent on natural seasonality. Employers are finding it important to provide year-round employment, rather than seasonal, to recruit and retain workers. There is also a need to develop tools and resources that counter the rhetoric that blue-collar jobs are less valuable or worthwhile than other careers. Supporting workforce retention by addressing quality of life issues (e.g., access to reliable childcare, affordable housing, access to the water) are also increasingly urgent. Finally, working on the water has also been physically and mentally demanding, but there are increasing needs for mental and physical health support for seafood workers (Maine Sea Grant 2022). Further, social science research shows that fishermen's physical and mental well-being hinges on the lack of financing and insurance, and that care gaps often lead to self-medication and substance abuse (Johnson et al. 2023; Ropeik 2023).

BRING MORE SEAFOOD EDUCATION INTO SCHOOLS

The benefits of agricultural education in the classroom have long been known; it reduces the divide between farm and table, enhances food security, increases awareness of agricultural careers, and helps to develop an informed consumer base and communities (Talbert et al. 2022). Seafood education often depends on the interest of individual teachers, with some educators embracing an integrated approach to incorporating marine and seafood education into their curricula. Developing career inspirations early and often (K-8), and ensuring that educators have the tools and resources to successfully teach, are integral to a

successful future workforce. In particular, introductory experiences are essential both to spark interest and to provide opportunities to explore the seafood industry as a viable career option (Maine Sea Grant 2022).

IMPROVE WORKFORCE DATA

Estimating the number of people in Maine who make their living in Maine's seafood economy is challenging. Methodologies rely on databases that collect data on salaried/payroll employees, providing an underrepresentation of the labor force. For example, Bureau of Labor Statistics does not include non-payroll employees (sole-proprietorships, owner-operators, 1099 contractors). Fortunately, estimates of the self-employed in these industries are available from sources such as LightCast™ (TPMA 2023). Developing clear, easily reproducible methodologies for estimating workforce, and transparent reporting is essential in order to develop meaningful and impactful workforce strategy.

Many entities support Maine's seafood workforce, and these recommendations will help secure a vibrant future for our seafood industry.

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