

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at COVE



Dr. Sherry Scully | Executive Director
COVE Workforce Initiative | January 2021

Marine Context

For nearly a decade the Canadian marine industry has been embarking on several new long-term projects and initiatives aimed at revitalizing the domestic industry, and establishing a leadership role in the emerging sustainable blue economy. Federal and regional investments into ocean research (i.e. Ocean Frontier Institute, Dalhousie University), commercialization of innovations (i.e. the Federally funded Ocean Supercluster), cultivation of ocean entrepreneurs (i.e. Centre for Ocean Ventures and Entrepreneurship, Innovacorp, Ignite Labs), and the ongoing NSS (National Shipbuilding Strategy) contract all present ideal runways for building workforce capacity across Canada's marine sectors.

The scope, scale, and terms of these projects will transform jobs into careers and will require such bulk recruitment as to allow for the rejuvenation of its conventional workforce to include a broader range of employee cohorts. While society as a whole has made substantial progress towards more diversity and tolerance in the workplace, the marine industry has lagged in efforts to stir-up its homogenous workforce. As the UN Decade of the Ocean unfolds before us, amidst a social climate where calls for equity, diversity and inclusion grow louder, there is mounting demand for the marine industry to update its hiring and recruitment practices and rejuvenate the industry with diverse talent.

Understanding the Challenge

At a recent COVE Salon, an evening of enlightened conversation among thought leaders, we hosted peers from the Black Business Initiative, Junior Achievement Nova Scotia, from IBM, the Nova Scotia Community College, the IMHOTEP Legacy Academy, and from Develop Nova Scotia. This was a (socially distanced) gathering of diverse people and thinkers, united by a common objective of making this burgeoning industry more accessible to those who have been under-represented for so long. Our present challenge has evolved from convincing employers about the social and economic merits of a diverse workforce, to drawing reluctant newcomers to an industry that for too long kept them out. This is a critical factor in the EDI equation that relates to both awareness and interest.

Indeed, after decades of conventional recruiting strategies that have not included a diversity mandate, or that privileged social familiarity over performance potential, non-traditional workers have been perhaps not surprisingly, reticent about venturing into the industry, or even worse, completely unaware of the industry. Similarly, histories of social deterrents like 'brotherhood' cultures, and the absence of proximal roles models within the industry have led underrepresented talent to pursue opportunities in industries that had evolved their thinking and practices much sooner.

Add to these challenges the ongoing socio-systemic hurdle of some under-represented cohorts not being socialized to consider STEM careers, and it becomes evident why diverse talent now tends to overlook the marine industry as an available option.

For under-represented workers, the historical low participation in the industry serves only to perpetuate this pattern. The absence of proximal role models not only restricts awareness of potentially curious job seekers, but it also eliminates the positive influence of in-house champions who could advocate for like-candidates, and who would signal the presence of a social network to support integration into the workforce. Now we are left with the hard and important work of changing minds and presenting more accessible points of entry into the industry.

Since its inception, in 2014, the COVE Workforce Initiative (formerly the Marine People Partnership) has held equity, diversity and Inclusion (EDI) as central to our mandate for workforce development in the national marine industry.

Engaging under-represented workers is a key objective of our research and program development, and our work is guided by objectives and success metrics that are emphatically EDI-oriented.

As an example, our COVE Internship program, which recruits for diversity in age, gender, race, culture and educational background, is designed to demonstrate that strategic hiring for diversity will have a positive impact on the industry by;

- growing diversity of the workforce;
- socializing employers to the benefits of a more diverse workforce;
- building networks and allies of under-represented workers within the industry;
- and, accelerating growth and innovation by introducing new entrants with diverse perspectives, education and experiences into an increasingly collaborative environment.



2020 cohort of interns for the Pilot Internship representing diverse backgrounds and education, from left to right: Emma Fudge, Silas Silva, Vijay Ayyannamahanty, Paul Guardia, Holly McLeod., James Morris, Alvaro Sevilaa, Ellis Keener, Joshua Awe, Katrina Tomas

At COVE, equity, diversity and inclusion feature prominently in our;

- research (e.g. our Student intentions and perceptions studies which aim to understand the attitudes and perceptions of the marine industry, of students representing all diversity cohorts),
- programming (e.g. our school-based programs that cater to under-represented groups),
- Ocean Institutes for educators across Canada that aim to elevate capacity for teaching ocean STEM among diverse teachers,
- teaching and learning resources (e.g. *Wave of the Future: Canada's Sustainable Blue Economy* which profiled several youth, industry and project members from diverse groups, and which endeavored to highlight accessible pathways into the industry).

Indeed, EDI is not a stand-alone objective, it is woven into every practice and project at COVE.

As people recognize the promise of our sustainable blue economy, and they witness the shift from rhetoric to practice in diversity commitments, and as relatable role models are woven into the fabric of our workforce, there will be a shift to greater optimism and confidence in the promise that anyone can participate in this industry. But this will take time and careful recruiting and selection and support of SMEs to optimize successes, and it will take noisy celebration to announce and applaud community successes.

And already there is much to celebrate. Inspiring initiatives like Ocean Allies, led by Pisces RPM, and the Blue Futures Program, led by Students on Ice, are committed to providing access to networks, raising awareness and engaging newcomers to the blue economy. Other important initiatives, like Irving Shipbuilding's Pathways to Shipbuilding program, introduce and train cohorts of underrepresented people for essential roles in the industry, providing at once training and a social network to support their success. It is by the steady progression, and by the audacious leaps of change stimulated by programs like these that COVE is partnering with,



Youth from Tuktoyaktuk pose at their youth centre as they discuss ocean careers with our Manager of learning programs, Anna Naylor.



Students from the Youth Innovation Tour pose at COVE after their marine turbine workshop, a partnership with the Nova Scotia Black Business Initiative and IMHOTEP Dalhousie

that we begin to observe an update in the composition of Canada's 'traditional' marine workforce.

Casting our gaze to the future with an optimistic eye, we see more young girls and women, visible minorities, and Indigenous youth developing and maintaining both an interest in STEM-oriented marine careers, and a belief in their capacity to participate. We will see a marine industry comprised of teams with more diversity, and more equal representation by women. We will see progressive recruitment and promotion practices that have become normalized, supported by evolved organizational or industry cultures, where fair and strategic succession has ignited the natural pull of more diverse talent upward in the org chart, and the disciplines of a more heterogeneous workforce becomes standard practice. COVE is working to lead and exemplify this ideal, with ongoing efforts aimed at understanding how to institutionalize an evolved approach to recruitment, retention and promotion to make marine careers more appealing and accessible to future generations of all people.