



- Table of Contents
- Executive Perspective
- Features
 - SPE President's Summit
 - Workforce
 - Open Innovation
- HR Perspective
- Interview
- The Long View
- Archives

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HR PERSPECTIVE**Bridging the Age Gap****By Cathy Young**Consultant
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As the more skilled engineering and other professionals in the oil and gas industry approach retirement, the call is going out to develop strategies to keep them engaged in flexible work arrangements and to re-recruit individuals who left the industry in previous years. The plan is to invite them back as an expert resource to assist in the recruitment, training, and mentoring of young professionals, upon whose recruitment and retention the successful future of the industry depends.

If there is one thing the industry agrees upon it is the need to extensively recruit both graduate and experienced hires. In addition, companies are also implementing training and development programs that will fast track new recruits into fully operational employees.

The transfer of knowledge and skills from the experienced generation to new college graduates requires organizational commitment, strong development and coaching programs, and sophisticated training capabilities. However, theory is one thing and practice another. In a recent study highlighting industry resource constraints, Booz Allen Hamilton notes that, "With little slack in the system, senior employees are driven to deliver through to retirement, with ever less time to transfer their knowledge. ... As overstretched companies are forced to do more with less, on-the-job training, mentoring, and coaching have virtually become a thing of the past. ... Managers explained the challenge of giving staff development the appropriate time and attention when 'permanently in operational crisis mode.'" This is hardly the kind of environment conducive to empowering Generation Y and fast tracking their development to operational autonomy.

Our objective is to broaden the pool of resources by targeting individuals who left the industry and might not have considered opportunities for returning.

Cathy Clonts, whose online portal AlumniInTouch.com hosts a number of oil and gas industry alumni communities, sees an opportunity for retired and former industry professionals to play a continuing role in the oil and gas industry. "In our communities, we have several hundred individuals who have indicated their interest in training new recruits, coaching and mentoring, doing technical work, and sharing knowledge," she said. "There exists a ready and easily contactable pool of seasoned industry professionals who are willing to support the hiring and retaining of young talent and support their entry into the industry." Members of the service indicate their availability for short-term and permanent opportunities in consulting and project work, training, mentoring, and interim management. "Our objective is to broaden the pool of resources by targeting individuals who left the industry and might not have considered opportunities for returning. This includes individuals who took a career break for family reasons, individuals who left the industry in downturns or following acquisitions, and those who took early retirement. Many individuals are financially secure, but as they are in their early 50s, they find they want the intellectual stimulation offered by returning to the industry," Clonts said.

Those with critical knowledge and skills are a precious resource deserving of investment and consideration post-departure. Evidence suggests that critical industry knowledge stays current even up to 10 years after leaving the industry, which leaves one giant pool of talent from which to draw.

Joe Ross, a former project manager, said he used personal contacts to fill key short-term roles while resourcing projects but found this a cumbersome process. He believes companies increasingly use portals that list company alumni. "This additional powerful recruitment channel for good staff will enable earlier or more certain project completions, and of better quality," he said.

Long-time SPE member Shaun Hoolahan exemplifies the newly defined retiree. "Before making the decision to retire myself, I conducted a survey of former associates to determine how leaving the industry had affected their lives. Based on their responses, retirement is like a three-legged stool comprised of being financially ready, physically ready, and psychologically ready. Without all three legs, the stool will topple," he said. "For many people, it appeared the third leg was missing, and as a result, they have since re-entered the workforce as either full- or part-time employees or consultants. Rather than waiting for the stool to topple, I decided to form my own consultancy business straight away." As a consultant, Hoolahan travels from home about a third of the year teaching subsurface engineering to new recruits. "Apart from my wife having to be a single parent when I am traveling, the flexibility of being a consultant provides the perfect work/life balance for me," he said. "I thoroughly enjoy sharing my experience and imparting my knowledge to the next generation."

A Different Approach

To support the training and development of new hires, companies have instituted several programs for graduate and experienced hires. But whether it is the sheer numbers or the differing psyches of the generations, it appears these programs are not all hitting the spot. Attrition rates for young hires are more than double that of experienced hires, as high as 20-30%. Clearly, something more is needed.

Tina Berger, President of Obsidian Technical Communications, a petrochemical consulting company, believes members of Generation Y are very different from the exiting baby boomers. She believes new technology can play a bigger part in training younger professionals, who accept instant messaging and audio and video content as an integral part of life. Most will have experienced online learning in some form while at college, and the path is open for company Web-based training that blends audio, video, and animation in an interactive and appealing format. It is important for companies to realize that these differing training methods are no longer considered inferior. Sometimes, a short animation of a drilling-tool function can be a quicker and more efficient way to share information than a lecturer with a stick of chalk and a board.

While mentors and their recipients were traditionally at the same site, online technology has the potential to transform these relationships. With webcams, Skype, laptops, and palm pilots, communication has never been easier, and distance is not a barrier to relationship development. Technology advancement enables shorter periods away from the job and tailored training programs. It also affords regular contact with a mentor who may live in a different time zone. The mentor provides a clear path to industry knowledge and skills development as well as the one-on-one relationship craved by young

professionals.

All these elements are critical in bringing down the unacceptably high attrition rates that are currently undermining the industry's best recruitment efforts.

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The Importance of Mentoring

In the struggle to hire and retain staff, the concept of mentoring itself is being considered more broadly, co-location aside. A mentoring relationship can be a single, long-term relationship; peer to peer across different disciplines; or it may be a series of short-term relationships. Even "speed" mentoring can be useful.

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"Upon joining BP, I was formally assigned a mentor and this was very helpful," said SPE member Meriem Mokrani. "I found the role of a mentor in my development so useful that I have since asked a number of people to be my mentors as I determined areas where their support, experiences, and network would support my professional growth.

"I define the criteria of a good mentor as inspirational, available, open-minded, and well-networked. Also, a good mentor is someone I feel comfortable talking to confidentially," Mokrani said. "I have always had very positive responses from individuals whom I have asked to be my mentors. These roles do not have to be long term, and I encourage others to take the initiative to approach someone whom they identify as able to positively impact their learning and performance and ask them to serve as a mentor.

"Conversely, I mentored a summer intern, and when he joined BP full-time, he asked me to be his mentor and we have continued our relationship. I also informally mentor several young professionals. Being a mentor allows me to grow, as it makes me reflect on how to deal with diverse issues and challenges and adopt different perspectives to give good career advice."

But what of intergenerational conflict? The old not understanding the young is as much a part of human experience as breathing. If retirees and employees who are near retirement are to play a greater role in mentoring, knowledge exchange, and training of the incoming workforce, then respect for the experienced generation and understanding the needs and drivers of the younger people entering the industry are essential to the process.

Looking at another industry, perhaps the oil and gas industry can learn another tactic. Procter and Gamble was among the first to institute "reverse mentoring," in which senior managers sought mentors from within the junior ranks of the organization. The idea being that those in their 40s, 50s, and beyond are no longer in touch with the future in the same way that the 20-somethings are. The younger generation has a much stronger link to the technology of the future together with fresh eyes and open minds. Engaging in reverse mentoring offers an opportunity to gain technical expertise and a different perspective. Reverse mentoring for career industry professionals by newer recruits, on a peer-to-peer basis, might extend their desire to remain in the workforce. It would certainly help to foster respect and understanding on both sides of the generation gap.

Innovative recruiting, flexible work opportunities, and mentoring programs clearly have roles to play in meeting future business needs. Creative use of these opportunities may well provide the edge to effectively prepare incoming engineering and oil and gas recruits for the realities of the industry, meet their training needs, cut attrition rates, and contribute to greater workplace equity through intergenerational understanding.



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