

Bridging the knowledge gap

Cathy Clonts, president of CRJC International, explains how new communication technology and online networking communities are helping corporations access the expert resources of retirees and former employees to assist in recruiting, training and mentoring the next generation.



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Every geologist knows the effect that expansion and contraction has on rocks. The pattern of expansion and contraction in the upstream oil industry over the last generation has had a similar effect on the skilled workforce, creating ruptures and gaps that are becoming more visible as a large wave of experienced geologists, engineers and other professionals within the industry approach retirement. In response, companies are not only heavily recruiting experienced hires, but also attempting to fast-track younger professionals through training and development programs. Estimates suggest it takes six to nine years to develop an autonomous geologist. Companies are looking for ways to accelerate that learning curve and bring new hires to the point where they can assume the reins from the retiring generation. Yet the demands of an industry operating at full capacity leave little room for the mentoring and coaching that can support this transfer of knowledge. In a recent article by management consultants Booz Allen Hamilton, the authors note: '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.'

To tackle this problem, some companies have adapted a classic self-

defence approach: turn the attacker's strength to your advantage. If the heart of the issue is that valued expertise has left the organization, these organizations reason, why not tap into that reservoir of knowledge in creative ways? Their solution: inviting retirees and former employees back as expert resources to assist in recruiting, training and mentoring the next generation. And in many cases this process is being facilitated by a surprising tool: online social networking communities of former employees, or alumni.

Oil and gas online networking

The online portal AlumniInTouch.com hosts a number of oil and gas industry former employee networking communities for companies including Chevron, Baker Hughes, Shell, Santos and ARCO/Vastar. Another site, Connexpro.org, is an umbrella oil and gas online networking community. These communities enable individuals to indicate their interest in training new recruits, coaching and mentoring, doing technical work and sharing knowledge. 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.

Participants and employers find the networking communities an excellent way to connect for job networking. Individual members indicate their availability for short term and permanent opportunities in consulting and project work, training, mentoring and interim management. Employers, who typically sponsor the sites, can search the database of available participants or post opportunities on the website. The 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 find they want the intellectual stimulation offered by returning to the industry. Retiree-turned-consultant



Shaun Hoolahan exemplifies this trend. 'Before making the decision to retire myself, I conducted a survey of former associates to determine how leaving the industry had affected their lives,' he says. 'Based on their responses, retirement is like a three-legged stool comprised of being (1) financially ready, (2) physically ready and (3), psychologically ready. Without all three legs, the stool will topple. For many people it appeared the third leg was missing and as a result they have since re-entered the workforce as either full/part time employees or consultants. Rather than waiting for the stool to topple, I decided to form my own consultancy business straight away.' Shaun now travels away from home about a third of the year teaching subsurface engineering to new recruits. 'The flexibility of being a consultant provides the perfect work life balance for me,' he adds. 'I thoroughly enjoy sharing my experience and imparting my knowledge to the next generation.' Evidence indicates that critical industry knowledge stays current even up to 10 years after leaving the industry, which makes it extremely practical for employers to tap this base of talent.



Joe Ross, former project manager with Shell and currently consulting to a small international company.

One company using the Alumni-InTouch portal to host its network of former employees turned to this resource to assist in processing more than 600,000 applications received in a recruitment drive. More than 100 former employees participated in this extensive screening exercise, from home, and at a time and pace which suited them. With their assistance, the company narrowed the field and eventually hired nearly 6,000 graduates and professionals.

The concept of tapping former colleagues is not new. Joe Ross, formerly a



Meriem Mokrani, BP (middle) with colleagues and fellow mentors Catherine Witt (left) and Stela Rufino.

project manager with Shell and currently consulting to a small international company, recalls using personal contacts to fill key short-term roles while resourcing projects. The difference now is the ease and focus that networks such as alumni portals bring to the process. 'This additional powerful recruitment channel for good staff will enable earlier or more certain project completions, and of better quality,' says Ross.

Online training and mentoring

The importance of former industry professionals to training and industry development cannot be understated. Schlumberger chairman and CEO Andrew Gould remarked in his presentation to the fifteenth annual Middle East Oil Show and Conference in Bahrain in March 2007: 'In the last two years, in answer to extraordinary industry growth, we have recruited 6,000 engineers in 80 countries from 122 universities. Hiring 6,000 people in 12 months is one thing, training them is another.'

Linked to training is the challenge of retaining new hires. Attrition rates for young hires are more than double that of experienced hires – figures of 20 to 30% attrition are being cited. Tina Berger, president of Obsidian Technical Communications, a pet-

rochemical consulting company, has a wealth of interesting observations on recruitment, retention and training of younger workers in the petrochemical industry – and how very different they are from the exiting baby boomers. In her blog she recently described how new technology can play a bigger part. The incoming generation (Gen Y) accepts online tuition, new technology, instant messaging, audio and video content as an integral part of life. Most will have experienced online learning in some form while at college and they are open to web-based training that blends audio, video, animation and interactivity in an engaging format.

Similarly, while mentors and their recipients were traditionally co-located, online technology has the potential to transform these relationships. With webcam, Skype, laptops and smart phones, distance is no barrier to relationship development. Technology affords regular contact with a mentor whether or not they share the same working hours as the recipient. The mentor provides a clear path to industry knowledge and skills development as well as the one-on-one relationship craved by the Gen Ys. All these elements can contribute to bringing down attrition rates.

Co-location aside, the concept of mentoring itself is being reinvented more broadly as another way of bridging the knowledge gap. A mentoring relationship may be a single long term one, peer-to-peer across different disciplines, or a series of short-term relationships. 'Upon joining BP, I was formally assigned a mentor and this was very helpful,' notes reservoir engineer Meriem Mokrani, who currently works in BP's Angola Business Unit. '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.'

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 older generation and understanding of the needs and drivers of the younger people entering the industry are essential to the process. Jennifer Nocerino of the Geological Society of America describes how the society's mentoring program addresses this concern: 'We try to cover a broad range of genders, ethnicities, age and disciplines with our mentors. Often the retired mentors can be some of the most interesting because they have worked in so many different jobs and have a wide range of experience to talk to the students about.'

Innovative recruiting, flexible work opportunities, and mentoring programs clearly have a role to play in meeting future business needs. New social networking communities are a creative way to tap these opportunities and provide the edge to effectively prepare incoming engineering and oil and gas recruits for the realities of the industry, meet their training and development needs, cut down on attrition rates



and contribute to greater workplace equity through intergenerational understanding.

Cathy Clonts formed Alumni Web Services in 1999 as an online networking forum to help keep former ARCO employees connected after BP acquired the company. The online network grew to 800 members in just 30 days. Today, her firm CRJC International offers networking tools that serve the needs of corporate alumni and help to meet employers' needs for experienced talent. For more information, visit www.crjci.com