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## HR Perspective

### Capitalizing on the Talents of Retirees

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The big crew change, which has been looming over the oil industry for years, is now upon us. The average age of offshore workers in the North Sea and North America is over 50. Cutbacks in recruitment, lack of active retention policies, early retirement, and streamlining measures all have played a part in causing chronic personnel shortages. The challenge now is, who will replace today's workforce?

In a bid to reverse international trends of reduced numbers of students opting to study science and engineering, some companies are adopting initiatives designed to attract students and increase the potential employee pool. These initiatives include sponsoring educational material, providing training modules and trainers to visit schools and colleges, encouraging existing staff to volunteer in schools, and developing mentoring schemes all designed to lift the profile of the industry. All of those innovations will have a long-term benefit on the future job market, but they alone will not help the industry meet the current worker shortfall.

Enter flexible working terms and former employees into the equation. Individuals who in their early fifties accepted early retirement packages are now being rerecruited into the energy industry. Many companies believe this is a successful way to fill the technical gap. Some early retirees are bored with golf and travel and are willing to return to part- or full-time employment. Companies are offering lucrative incentives for both contract and permanent employment to lure individuals back. Employers are also actively recruiting recent retirees from other companies. Whether returning for the money or the mental stimulation, a pool of experienced talent is available and willing to bridge the big-crew-change knowledge gap.

#### MORE FAMILY-FRIENDLY

Some former employees who took time off from the industry to raise a family are finding that energy-based employment opportunities are now much more flexible and family-friendly. Returning employees are able to negotiate part-time, temporary, consultant, or contract terms according to their skill sets and company needs.

Delaying retirement is another strategy some companies and employees are pursuing. According to a survey carried out by careerbuilder.com, 20% of employers plan to provide incentives so their own employees either delay retirement or return after retirement in some capacity. All of this leaves many senior employees sitting pretty and in a position to make some smart choices about their late-career options.

By rehiring retirees, organizations can avoid shortfalls in expertise, provide continuity, and support high-growth areas. For the retiree, it provides the ability to continue working in an area they are familiar with and enjoy, but in a more flexible way. Some former employees do opt to return full-time, while many others are taking advantage of short-term consulting opportunities or other flexible arrangements.

Naturally, there are many benefits to rehiring former employees as they have a good mix of talent, knowledge, and in-depth understanding of the industry. But the benefits definitely cut both ways, as these examples illustrate:

- » Although Mike Thomas left full-time work in 2004 to run a boatyard in Cornwall in the United Kingdom, he still acts as a project mentor within the energy industry. He develops projects during peak demand times and spends a few weeks per quarter with a project team. He is also available by telephone/email should the firms need further advice.
- » Robert Markway works in the United States as a consultant, developing and implementing improvement strategies for health, safety, and environment operations and surface-engineering business-control documents. He chooses to provide this service during the hurricane season, leaving himself free to sail with his wife for the other 6 months of the year in kinder weather.
- » Retiree Ian Plesse is now working in the Attraction and Recruitment Department at his old company. He draws on his previous human resources experience and knowledge of the industry to recruit by screening résumés and interviewing potential candidates.

A number of retirees are acting as long-distance mentors, assisting with the fast-tracking of younger recruits to more-senior positions. A recent article in the *Journal for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development* reported that long-distance participants "may even work harder at their mentoring relationships to compensate for a lack of proximity." For a geographically diverse industry such as energy, this is a key finding. Mentoring represents another way for current and former industry employees to interact for mutual benefit and an enriching personal experience.

Clearly, many retirees and employees nearing retirement are interested in playing an ongoing role in the future of the energy industry. The challenge is identifying these highly qualified and motivated candidates. One vital area for information capture is the formal exit interview for staff leaving the company. This is a normal procedure for employees leaving to take up employment elsewhere, but canvassing their desire to be considered for future employment opportunities should play a more central part in this interview. It is also essential that a formal exit interview be conducted with staff upon retirement, which, for many companies, is not current policy. The interview can sow the seeds of interest for a future return to employment, establish the retiree's main interests, and determine the terms on which the retiree might wish to return, such as in a full-time, part-time, contract, or mentoring capacity. Employees in the age bracket in which retirement is under active consideration should be able to register interest in more-flexible working arrangements as an alternative to formal retirement and should be introduced to the online networking community where contract work is promoted.

#### NETWORKING COMMUNITIES

The development of databases that incorporate information on former employees and their preferred terms of continued involvement with the industry is critical to the process. Online networking communities, such as Connexpro.org, post short-term contract opportunities for both current and former industry professionals. And firms such as Shell, Baker Hughes, Santos, and others maintain online interactive networking communities for former employees through Alumni In Touch. Such websites enable information sharing and post opportunities for future work, as well as help former employees retain their interest in the industry. Former employees are able to register their employment availability in

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