

The Future Lies in Our Hands

a report by

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The hunt to find and tap new oil and gas reserves continues as the worldwide appetite for energy increases. The UK-based industry skills and training body the Offshore Petroleum Industry Training Organization (OPITO) is at the forefront of the campaign to address the skills shortage threatening this multibillion-dollar business. Skill shortages, more than any other factor, will dictate the life span of the North Sea. If we do not have the skills to maintain its infrastructure and assets, the future development of the UK Continental Shelf (UKCS) will be threatened. With a finite pool of resources for employers to choose from, larger operators and contractors are being forced to attract less qualified and experienced people with salary and benefits packages. However, this unsustainable approach has little effect on the real problem, and will see employers continuing to report shortages.

Economic studies have warned that the skills deficit is leading to project delays and higher costs for companies, with the long-term future of the industry at risk if the recruitment problems cannot be ironed out. In the last year in Aberdeen, Europe's oil capital, about 80% of energy firms have been trying to recruit but cannot find the right staff, partly because many have gone to work overseas. OPITO's role has shifted in the past 18 months. Gone are the days when we were simply viewed as the standards police. Our remit now is about providing real and rapid solutions to the problem of skills shortages; however, this requires co-operation from the industry.

In October 2005, the UK's Industry Leadership Team commissioned OPITO to explore the North Sea industry's 'pinch points', discover their impact and propose solutions to combat them. The initial information-gathering process resulted in over 200 companies – along with all the major trade associations – providing specific and confidential information that highlighted consistent and repeated messages. A theme emerged that all the reported pinch points were exacerbated by the difficulties of bringing people into the industry, such as when recruitment drives are not delivering as expected, the experienced labour pool is shrinking and industry behaviour is not adapting to the shortage, at the same time as companies are still seeking highly experienced labour. From this information, OPITO defined a number of

areas that needed immediate action, and the Accelerate programme was born. This saw the creation of the unique www.oilandgas4u.com website, which opens up the oil and gas industry to anyone with transferable skills, regardless of background, location, previous experience or aspirations, by providing information on the industry and its career opportunities. Potential employees can test their knowledge and skills using a computer-based 'taster test' to match them up to particular jobs in the industry.

Another computer-based resource is Accelerate Check-In, a skills-testing tool that enables employers to check the existing knowledge of individuals quickly and effectively. The software package is commercially available and widely used by individual companies. Skills tests are carried out in OPITO-approved centres around the country, with the skills profiles and the questions supporting them being developed through the collaboration of employers, producing benchmark skills profiles for the oil and gas industry.

Accelerate New Start training programmes address immediate shortages by accelerating the flow of trained personnel to employers by increasing the numbers training in OPITO-approved centres. Co-operation between contracting and operating companies resulted in agreements about industry practice for introducing and managing trainees in the workplace. The Accelerate Transfer programme places skilled technicians from different backgrounds into the industry's core crews of maintenance, instrumentation, process and electrical. It provides tailored training and development to close any gaps in technical competence and enables individuals to build on and develop existing experience. Therefore, employers may provide targeted training that meets the needs of business and individuals.

Also being implemented are an industry trainee scaffolders programme, a review of Green Hand training for rig floormen and a research project into the needs of employers and supply chain capacity for the development of qualified subsurface and subsea engineers. Further projects expected are specific shortage 'hot spots', as reported by the industry. The latest initiative, which aims to create a clearer gateway for attracting new talent to the sector, is a new advertising campaign to raise awareness of the available career opportunities in the 16–25-year-old age group.

'Go Explore' refers young people to the online information portal www.oilandgas4u.com, which has been completely re-vamped. The website allows prospective young employees to explore recruitment opportunities offshore and find out about the pay and rewards, training and safety schemes and the practical aspects of living and working offshore. It also allows users to take a computer-based test to see how their skills and experience match up with the industry, with the option of being directed straight to recruiting companies. The skills test



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can be used to fill vacancies ranging from electrical or mechanical technicians, instrument and control technicians, helideck personnel, riggers and process operators through to deck hands, painters, scaffolders and pipefitters.

Meanwhile, the highly successful oil and gas industry Upstream Modern Apprenticeship scheme, managed by OPITO in partnership with the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (ECITB), has seen hundreds of fresh trainees take their talent and skills into the workforce in the six years since its inception. Part of what makes the industry Master of Arts scheme different is that the company funds and manages people all the way through their apprenticeship, which makes it very popular with applicants.

The scheme's retention rate stands at 91%, which is far above the UK national average of approximately 55%. A massive 96% of apprentices receive their qualification within the three-and-a-half-year time limit and, with applications for placements oversubscribed 12–14 times every year, there is no doubt that the apprenticeship scheme should be considered something special. However, while all this work is being carried out to recruit and then train those coming into the sector, it is clear that the main element of future success will be the level of communication and support from employers. Through PILOT and the Industry Leadership Team (ILT), the industry has demonstrated its commitment at the highest levels to addressing the skills shortages. This must be followed through by senior and middle management in companies across the supply chain. We need industry buy-in to deliver results.

The high levels of global oil and gas activity mean that both skills and equipment are in short supply. While you can be assured that the plant and equipment supply chain will be using every tool at its disposal to meet demand, we do not see the same use of the pan-industry solutions developed to alleviate the effects of the skills problem. There is not enough investment going on at the bottom end of the industry. Without resources going in where they are needed – at a grassroots level – things will not change. There is no point complaining about shortages when employers are not willing to stand shoulder-to-shoulder to address it.

OPITO encourages raising the profile of the offshore industry in the employment market, including a focus on cross-training personnel from other industries who may already have many of the skills necessary for offshore work. The organisation also believes that it is important to establish relationships with schools, colleges and universities to promote science and engineering as interesting courses leading to challenging and worthwhile careers. Our aim is to build a network of enablers within companies who would champion skills issues and action requests from OPITO. Those people would be able to access managing directors, but also the appropriate people at other layers of the organisation who could facilitate the implementation of new solutions and ensure project completion. The building and maintenance of this senior level and influential network is crucial to achieving the skills and workforce solutions the industry needs.

There is an opportunity here for the UK industry to collectively achieve something to help not just ourselves, but other parts of the world too. All we have to do is work together. ■

Men are generally incredulous, never really trusting new things unless they have tested them by experience.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1513)

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