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Securing a scarce resource

With the buzz concerning recruiting experienced workers to replenish an aging workforce, it is important to find ways to keep the ones you have.

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The lack of available workers with required skills and experience in most parts of the oil and gas value chain is well documented. While oil prices suggest that the industry has never had it so good, many companies are falling seriously short of stakeholder expectations. Projects are not being completed as planned, production targets are being missed and high profile safety and integrity incidents are damaging companies' reputations ultimately threatening their futures.

There is no quick fix to address these issues. "We should have been addressing this 10 years ago" is a common thought. Hindsight is useful like that.

The oil and gas industry faces a difficult strategic challenge. That's the bad news. The good news is that it has a proud track record of meeting difficult challenges, and there are clues in previous successes that can provide a solution to the manpower deficiency.

For example, in the talent arena oil and gas companies can use the boldness and vision they have demonstrated in taking on difficult and long-term opportunities in new development areas. By digging deep into the communities of which they are a part, companies can work to encourage the next cadre of geologists, engineers and operators. Taking a similar attitude toward risk, companies must then set stretching goals for its new talent that accelerates their development. In addition, by taking advantage of their global presence, companies can ensure that talent in emerging markets does not become a stranded reserve, but a rich stream of critical resource that can be tapped. Strategic investments should be made not just for oil and gas reserves, but also for people.

By staying focused continually on maintaining a highly skilled workforce, companies can ensure there is no "leakage" in its talent management pipelines. Once on board, companies can manage valuable skilled workers proactively through a transparent development process that ensures effective deployment based on business and development needs.

These tasks need to be performed at a greater magnitude than is currently the case. If oil

and gas companies want to retain their share of a scarce and ultimately finite resource pool, they must ensure that a value proposition is in place to offer both future and current workers a vision that is more attractive.

Employees should be regarded as customers who are very clear on what they want from their jobs and have a sophisticated understanding of what is available in the marketplace.

What defines a work experience that meets the needs of the employees' companies seek to attract and retain, and more importantly, what can companies do to create such an experience? The answer is to provide not just good pay and promotion prospects, but a balance of factors coming together in one place over a period of time. This experience is called Meaningful Work.

This label has been chosen carefully as a term that accurately reflects what people want from their careers. Meaningful Work is strongly linked to the upper tiers of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model but is also reflected in more recent thinking in the post-Enron world of business ethics and happiness. Meaningful Work is composed of four basic components including purpose, community, growth and success.

Four components

People fully commit to any job when they have an emotional connection to what the work represents or seeks to achieve. They will work harder and longer with tasks they feel proud of being associated with. While it seems straightforward to say that having a strong sense of purpose encourages work, where does the sense of purpose exist for people in oil and gas companies? Is it the scale and complexity of the engineering challenges? Is it being at the forefront of solving the growing challenge of meeting the world's energy needs? Is it being part of helping a developing nation move forward? Or, is it just being the best of the biggest?

Whatever it is, it exists. Individuals choose the companies they join. Pay is possibly part of the equation, but usually there is more to the decision. However, circumstances and needs change over time. Often in large energy companies people will tell the story of how it was once exciting but is now an increasing struggle. Where they once talked of vision and challenging goals, they now talk about complexity, politics, frustrated ambition and lack of resources.

The fire can be rekindled. Leaders who learn the skills of engaging their employees can find out what can excite them about the future. By building these visions of the future, companies will provide their employees an emotional connection that revives their sense of purpose and will help them double their efforts again.

Another component of Meaningful Work is developing a

sense of community. People often define themselves by the company they keep. Being part of something is the reward in itself because most people want to fit in.

It is easy to see how groups manifest in the world of work: in the competitiveness between departments, in the marking of territories and boundaries in the office space, in the social interactions that take place. But do companies see this as a good thing? Should companies seek to take advantage of these instincts to create powerful and creative communities? Do they make interventions that help build strong teams or do they focus solely on the task at the expense of team dynamics? Do we organize work or key projects to take advantage of the fact that those individuals are strongly motivated to contribute to the team's success? This question is particularly interesting in the oil and gas industry, which often seems to regard local characteristics and variation as being a detriment to global efficiency and knowledge transfer.

The third component of Meaningful Work is simply growth. The need for personal development may sound like a product of the 1980s, but learning is essential to this process. Learning is necessary and fulfilling in the workplace, and without it employees often become demotivated and so stripped of energy they become bored and frustrated. People are inclined to stay in environments in which they feel they are growing.

The oil and gas industry is full of highly educated and highly qualified people. Although most companies truly value knowledge

of the industry, they consistently miss their target. This is evidenced by the fact that performance of many people in the industry has reached a plateau.

There is significant scope for helping people grow, but do companies really understand what their employees need to learn? Do companies recognize the critical difference between knowledge and skill in leading businesses to better performance? Skilled leaders can help people through the realization that moving forward will sometimes require leaving behind some of what has made them successful so far. By creating the right "stretch" for growing employees companies will provide circumstances where they need to learn.

Success is the final component of Meaningful Work. This might seem obvious — after all, how can failure be meaningful? It can be instructive in identifying the exact role played by success in Meaningful Work. Success can provide a psychological reward for our endeavors in which people need and enjoy success for its own sake. People who work in environments where they feel they are moving forward and achieving goals will also be motivated to stay in that environment.

Creating Meaningful Work is a long-term effort. It is not a quick fix, but possibly the only permanent one to meet the industry's requirements for future manpower needs. It involves creating a sense of purpose driven by a vision of the future that is better than what currently exists. By setting goals that are achievable and far reaching, companies can ensure that their most valuable assets will grow into its culture. **ENR**