

Oil patch-related jobs picture rebounds for more than just engineers, scientists

By MICHAEL REED

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There's a good chance everyone in Houston has considered looking for a job in the energy business. Well, as it turns out, the time might be right to revisit that idea.

The industry is hiring — and its needs don't end with scientists and engineers as many potential employees assume.

"You absolutely don't need to have the highest degrees in the energy field," said Holland Butler, of TransCanada's Houston human resources department. "It does not necessarily hinder you, and in a lot of areas you will be viewed as overqualified if you have one."

TransCanada hired 20 new employees at its local office in July alone to work as administrative assistants, entry level accountants, gas controllers, business analysts, even pilots.

"Aviation is among the fields of study that people may not realize is crucial to the oil and gas industry," she said.

Ironically, for the many oil and gas companies in the area, her comments help to illustrate a problem several in the industry say they have encountered frequently in recent years.

A midlevel executive of 20-plus years, who asked not to be identified, said many people looking for work on the strength of having bachelor's degrees or technical certification bypass energy companies altogether in their search. The reasons, he found, to be paradoxical.

"I've found there's one camp with viable skills that thinks this (the energy industry) is a place just for scientists and high-powered executives. They say, 'I can't do that.'" he said. "Then the other camp just overlooks everything else and tells themselves it's all blue collar and big wrenches and hole-digging. Wrong again."

'Severely underestimated'

Estimates on a wide variety of energy-related jobs have been "severely underestimated" for some time, according to Workforce Solutions, which provides human resource services for the Houston-Galveston region. In fact, their data indicates 12,000 more positions were added in the area than anticipated from 2006 to 2008.

Nancy Tootle, energy industry liaison at H-GAC, found while working with laid off Johnson Space Center employees, many of them had existing skills that could be modified to fit what's needed to vie for lucrative oil and gas jobs.

"We hear from different (energy) companies that have those kind of needs every day," she said. "Some of the people that sit at control centers at NASA have the same skill set they need. Other times, they need people willing to roll up their sleeves and go out in the field."

At Lee Community College in Baytown, Debi Jordan, director of workforce development, said oil and gas companies have begun focusing attention on technology programs and associate's degree candidates.

"From what we are seeing, there is an increased interest in offering internships," she said. "These companies have never had internships in some of these areas. They are trying to get the jump on things."

Mack Mercer, a vice president at T.G. Mercer, which handles pipeline logistics for the oil and gas industry, agreed. He said many jobs his company frequently needs to fill in the Houston area, require workers with certified skills, not advanced degrees.

"It's overlooked, but there is always a need for commercial truck drivers," he said. "The mainline contractors, I would think, always need welders. You go to technical school for that."

He added that in recent months several entry-level accountants, business analysts and information technology employees have been hired by T.G. Mercer.

Lots of freshmen

Apparently, one group that has not been overlooking energy sector employment possibilities is college students, looking to enter the workforce without advanced degrees.

"The students I'm seeing are very anxious to be in front of employers," Butler said, of recent career fairs she's attended as a recruiter. "Even lots of freshmen are coming up and introducing themselves, which is mind-blowing to me."

Jamie Belinne, assistant dean of UH's Bauer College of Business, said that enthusiasm is, in part, a response to the growing interest the oil and gas industry has shown in interviewing students that plan to leave campus with bachelor's degrees.

"Today (Oct. 10), we had 30 rooms in the business school filled with those interviewing for jobs," she said. "The vast majority are energy-related."

Belinne said the positions available ranged from finance and accounting to purchasing and shipping jobs. And, if the level of excitement among the candidates seemed greater than in years past, the 20-year veteran of recruiting at colleges offered a theory.

"I see students change with the economy," she said. "If the economy shifts downward while they are in school, they can be defeatist. If the economy is already bad when they enter, they can be very focused."

If that's the case, such focus appears to be especially well-timed. In all, Workforce Solutions data showed the number of jobs in the area related to oil and gas extraction alone had increased by August to 48,900, up 5.8 percent during the year.

"It's booming," said Vita Como, of UH's Cullen College of Engineering, referring to a jobs fair in mid-September that brought 100 companies, mostly energy-related, to the campus. "I'm seeing hiring bonuses."

As director of development, Como said most recruiters coming to Houston have always been from oil and gas or chemical engineering companies, because of "where we are, and who we are." Still, she said, when you have companies on a waiting list to attend job fairs – the next one in February – students have a reason to smile.

"I think engineers across the board are doing better nationally, not just Houston, there is a shortage of engineers," she said.

Locally, it appears, there is some good news for other job-seekers, as well – if they look in the right place.

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