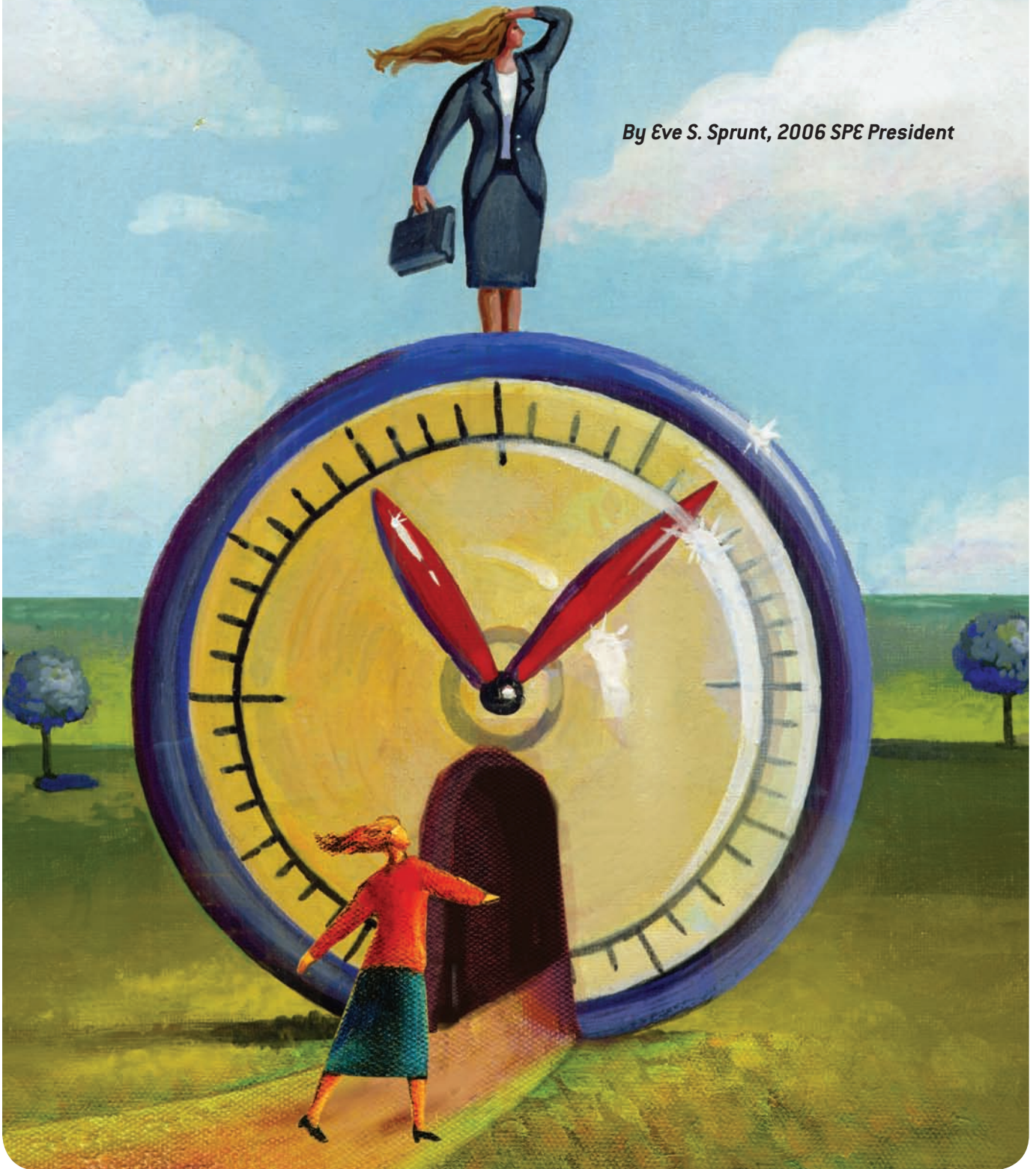


Retaining Women in the Oil and Gas Industry

By Eve S. Sprunt, 2006 SPE President



Ask a husband about his success in buying his wife surprise presents and you will usually get a pained expression reflecting how many times he has had trouble anticipating her desires. The employment equivalent was summed up by a 40-year-old female middle manager: “As an industry, we talk about demographics as a problem and then tend to ask the majority [white, married males] how best to solve it.”

To better understand what drives women to quit the industry or encourages them to stay, I conducted an informal survey. I asked several questions, with the first one being “Are you thinking about leaving your company in the next 2 years?” Participants were given a choice of 12 responses or “other” (Table 1). They could pick multiple reasons and rank them. Then they were asked seven demographic questions, and, finally, “Any other comments you wish to make on this topic?”

The survey was emailed to 42 of my friends and they were asked to forward it to their colleagues. The vast majority of the 207 completed surveys came from women I did not know. Some of the women got the survey after it had been passed on at least five times. In many cases, the survey hit a raw nerve and the passion was clear in the comments.

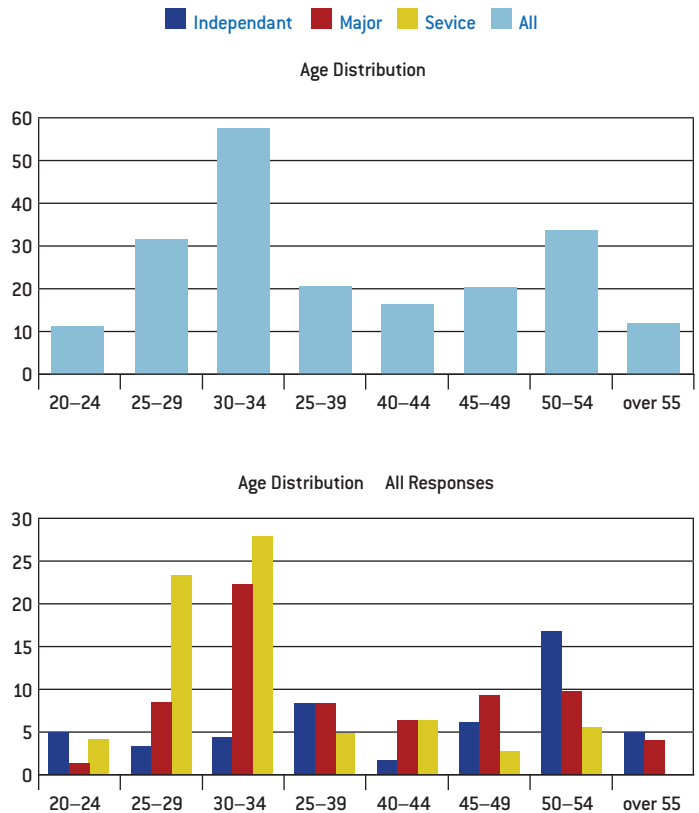
Overall, 37% of respondents work for service companies, 33% for major oil companies, 24% for independent oil companies, and 6% for other (government, university, self-employed, national oil companies). I did not send the survey to anyone with a national oil company because I assumed that those women would have fewer opportunities to switch jobs. The age distribution of respondents is shown in Fig. 1a. The majority of respondents from service companies were under the age of 35, while there were very few responses from people working for independents in that age range (Fig. 1b).

Overall, 38% said they were thinking about changing jobs in the next 2 years and 10% said

they might be. Among respondents from service companies, 43% said yes and 14% maybe; from major oil companies, 43% said yes and 7% maybe; and from independents, 26% said yes and 10% maybe.

CHILDREN AND WORK

The age slice for which I had the most responses (57) was 30 to 34. This is a critical age range. Much has been



Figs. 1a, 1b—Demographics of the survey respondents.



EVE SPRUNT is University Partnership and Recruitment Manager—for Chevron Corporation and was 2006 SPE President. In her position with Chevron, she coordinates development of strategic relationships with selected universities worldwide. Previously, she was Senior Technical Adviser for Chevron Technology Ventures, and before that was Venture Executive for the company’s Venture Equities and Energy and Power Funds. She joined Chevron in 2000 as Senior Science and Technology Coordinator, Health, Environment, and Safety, managing the corporation’s global climate change policy. Before joining Chevron, Sprunt worked for 21 years for Mobil Corporation, including positions in upstream new business development. In addition, she worked in R&D in a wide range of technologies, including formation evaluation and production engineering. Sprunt earned BS and MS degrees from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Earth and planetary sciences and a PhD degree from Stanford University in geophysics.

TABLE 1—RESULTS OF THE SURVEY ON JOB SATISFACTION

REASON	AGE GROUP					COMPANY TYPE			
	Overall	Under 30	30–39	40–49	Over 50	Independent	Major Oil	Service	Other
Work not sufficiently interesting, challenging, or meaningful	28	5	12	3	8	4	16	6	2
Lack of advancement	27	2	7	4	14	6	14	5	1
Compensation	19	4	7	4	4	4	8	6	1
Inadequate benefits package	9	1	4	0	4	1	2	6	0
Long hours/on-call schedule	17	5	8	1	3	2	3	12	0
Children	22	7	13	1	1	2	5	15	0
Other family responsibilities	7	2	4	0	1	2	0	5	0
Hostile coworkers/lack of collaboration/lonely work environment	18	5	3	5	5	5	8	4	1
Problems with direct supervisor	4	0	1	1	2	2	1	1	0
Too much travel	4	0	3	1	0	0	1	3	0
Required relocation	9	2	6	1	0	1	3	5	0
Lack of female role models in the company or company history of promoting women to senior positions	19	3	4	5	7	4	7	7	1
Other	26	5	7	6	8	11	6	7	2

written about how long it takes for someone joining the industry to become fully competent, with estimates between 5 and 10 years. The women of 30 to 34 have the experience to be fully competent and most of their career is in front of them. At service companies, fully half of these women are thinking about quitting and another 11% said maybe. At major oil companies, 38% are thinking about it and at independents, 50%.

In their 30s, women often have children or are listening to their biological clocks ticking. For women under 40 and women working for service companies (for which most of the responses came from women under 35), the most frequently cited reason for thinking about changing jobs was children. Many women volunteered comments on balancing raising children with climbing the corporate ladder.

Among the observations:

“My [major oil] company seems to talk about retaining women, but I don’t see them making a true effort to change the attitudes that are the root cause of many women leaving the company or the operations disciplines. I work in completions engineering and have an 18-month-old son. I continually am fighting to maintain my work/life balance and I always feel pressure

to work longer hours, even though I am completing my work.”—a 25-year-old.

“It becomes such a juggling act that sometimes it seems that if we miss a beat, all of the balls will fall.”
—a 29-year-old.

“Women in other [industries] do not feel that having kids stops their careers. Sometimes it feels like women in the oil industry have to choose between family and career.”
—a 31-year-old.

“I’m about to have my first child and will return to work (most likely full time) after 6 months of full paid maternity leave. My team has been extremely supportive so far and the experience of flexibility and consideration afforded to dads in the team with family responsibilities would suggest that this will be my experience too. So I actually can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be in the years ahead. I don’t have the option of not working.”
—a 30-year-old.

“[The independent oil company I work for] has been very flexible with my career and providing growth opportunities. I was able to take 11 to 12 months leave

of absence for each of my two babies and have worked part time since returning to work after my first child. I am currently in an entry-level management position, continuing to work part time as my employer supports my career and family goals. This is the main reason that I am not planning to leave my company.”—a 34-year-old.

“[My major oil company] is great to work for if you’re seeking work/life balance. I’ve worked part-time (3 days/week, 27 hours) for 9 years and have been given interesting, challenging assignments with growing responsibility.”—a 39-year-old.

“One suggestion would be having the company offer daycare at work.... I continue to hear from my staff and other working moms that it would be much easier to come back to work if they could bring their kids with them to a company day care.”—a 32-year-old.

A key way to retain these women in the industry would be to provide maternity leave, flexible work arrangements with the option of working part time, and assistance with childcare. Access to quality childcare is of great concern to parents and can be a major retention tool for both women and men. If employees must be available on short notice to stay late or travel, access to childcare and support for the expense can make a huge difference.

Mothers learn many transferable prioritization, time, and people management skills. Companies that are flexible and accommodate working mothers with flex time, part-time work, telecommuting, and family-friendly benefits will have loyal employees with superb multitasking capability for the many years left in their careers. Many women will either want or need to continue working full time and just need some flexibility.

LACK OF ADVANCEMENT

Of the women in the survey, 14% of those working for independents, 26% of those with majors, and 36% of those with service companies report that they are in management roles. However, lack of advancement is a major sore point, particularly for older women. This could be due to several different reasons: 1) More positions that represent advancement are available at the beginning of a career. 2) Companies often have posting systems that allow women to self-nominate, but these posting systems usually terminate short of executive management and top technical roles. 3) Childcare responsibilities earlier in their career may have resulted in them falling off the fast track. One 30-year-old in my survey observed, “Some women are able to slow down their careers for a certain period of time, but they are penalized for any slowdown and it is hard to be taken seriously during, and sometimes after, such a slowdown.”

Frequently, women, even those of very high potential, have less energy during pregnancy and when their children are young. To truly leverage the talents of their employees, companies must recognize that many people, especially women, will not be able to maintain the same level of performance throughout their careers.

“At an age at which many men are burned out on their careers and starting to ‘retire in place,’ many women are less burdened by childcare and eager to focus on career advancement.”

The methods used to identify and nurture future leaders from relatively homogeneous male backgrounds, will screen out a large number of women, who could be very strong leaders. Employers must change their paradigm of the monotonic upward career trajectory to learn to recognize and promote those who are able and willing to be highly productive later in their career. At an age at which many men are burned out on their careers and starting to “retire in place,” many women are less burdened by childcare and eager to focus on career advancement. Companies should make better use of these experienced women and develop programs to nurture and manage their careers.

In filling senior roles above the level at which positions are posted, companies often don’t consider any women. One technique to increase the population of women in the executive ranks is to require that any time a position is filled that at least one or two women be seriously considered. This will force companies to re-evaluate the female talent they have buried in their ranks.

ROLE MODELS

Young women are interested in moving up the career ladder, but when they look upward, they often see a scarcity of women or only women who have made what they consider to be unacceptable sacrifices in their careers. One 30-year-old lamented, “The lack of highly regarded and well-respected female role models in management is astounding and distressing. Many seem to be a better lesson in what NOT to do.” Similarly, a 31-year-old complained, “We need some female presence in upper management with real family lives.” There are women in high positions with families. Companies should share more of their biographies, including how these women successfully juggled family obligations and work demands.

INTERESTING WORK

One of the issues most often listed for prompting one to consider switching jobs is job satisfaction. The

industry currently has more work than it has people, but if jobs are not structured in a satisfying way, we will have even fewer people. Wrote one 31-year-old: "I resigned from my job this week. ... I am not in the technical roles that really address my development needs." A 42-year-old wrote, "They indicate that they want me to work on more technically challenging projects. Then they increase my area of responsibility so that I can only manage to do the required and I do not have enough time to work deeper."

HOSTILE WORKPLACE

It is distressing that a hostile, lonely workplace ranked high in the survey for those working for independent and major oil companies. While men still dominate the industry, some women reported inexcusable things. "Some men in the industry seem to believe women should not be here and thus make it more difficult for us. Also, sometimes I felt like I was being left out when a manager would take the male engineers fishing, golfing, etc. and I never received an invitation to go." —a 27-year-old.

"All of us who started together have been asked the question, 'Whose career are you going to follow?' The underlying sentiment was clear. If you are going to follow your husband's career, we are not going to put much effort

into you." —a 30-year-old.

"The offhand and at times inappropriate remarks that are still flung around do bother me. I've seen a change from overt hostility back in 1991 in the field to a much more subtle and covert hostility here in the office. Progress has been made, but it is disappointing to see how much of a fight it still is." —a 40-year-old.

CONCLUSIONS

One can draw several conclusions from the results of this informal survey:

- » Work/life balance is a huge issue for everyone. Flexible working arrangements including part-time work and telecommuting will help retain people of all ages
- » While childcare benefits are of interest to only a fraction of the workforce, for that fraction, they can be the deciding factor. The same types of flexible work policies and on-site daycare or childcare support that will help to retain young women will also help to retain young men.
- » Often women are the primary breadwinners and/or healthcare benefit providers for their families and do not have the luxury of working less than full time. The key is flexibility to create a win-win situation for worker and employer. ♦



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