

## Carving Your Own Path: The Technical vs. Managerial Career Dilemma

Just few months ago, I stopped my production engineering class in its tracks. There I had my senior students, the next graduating class just about to join the oil and gas industry ranks, and here I was sifting through the ideas and pondering about the excellent material our team had put together for this issue of *The Way Ahead*.

These are the questions I needed to ask the students: *Where do you see your careers in 5, 10, 15 years? Which track would you see yourself pursuing: technical or managerial?*

After their initial surprise for such a significant digression from our class discussion, an interesting conversation ensued. Most of the students were puzzled by the questions and openly just did not know how to answer. However, when encouraged to take more time to think about it, nearly everyone started to realize that—oh, yes, *they had almost forgotten!*—they all wanted to eventually become chief executive officers (CEOs). At that point, the link was made: the managerial career option would make the most sense because that would be the only expeditious path connecting point A (there, fresh off college) to point B (becoming highly successful, visible, with a life with all perks included, i.e., in a word: CEO). Now they were quicker to dismiss a “merely” technical career because it could be a potential distraction from their bigger purpose and might cause them to miss the “big picture.”

Here is the irony, I argued: our industry is a technical industry. And that really is the “big picture.” The future of the industry can be driven only by innovation, creativity, and significant technological breakthroughs. Only the technically competent players will be there decades from now to even talk about it. As Helge Lund, CEO of StatoilHydro, says in this issue's TWA Interview, our industry is

getting more complex with deeper waters, arctic environments, unconventional resources, and new forms of energy. These are but a few of the challenges awaiting the next generation of professionals. He further argues that, to meet those challenges, the industry needs a robust expertise base to deliver on growth expectations, and it is working on it.

Christine Ehlig-Economides, a world-recognized technical leader, could not agree more. In an interview with our Technical Professional Leaders Editors, she stressed that young professionals must keep their eyes on this big picture: making sure to understand the value to the company of what they are doing—whether they are pursuing a technical or managerial career. Our Pillars of Industry author, Ali Ghalambor, head of the Petroleum Engineering Department at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, identifies the name of the game for young professionals as the accumulation of knowledge and experience. Once the technical know-how is gained, he concludes, it does not matter what company you work for and whether you want to become a manager or a technical leader. And Simon Ayat, chief financial officer and executive vice president of Schlumberger and our second Pillars author, discusses his own career choices and illustrates the path he followed to reach his current managerial position.

To help us out in what is behind making career or life decisions such as the one under discussion, professors Steve Begg and Reidar Bratvold have put together the thought-provoking article, “Would you know a good decision if you saw one?” featured in our Academia. edu@TWA section. In our Soft Skills section, Lisa Silipigno-O'Brien, career and staffing manager for Schlumberger North America, makes the case that technical and managerial career paths are not mutually exclusive and talks



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about the common ground that can make any career a successful one.

This is not the first time the technical vs. managerial dilemma has been discussed in our pages. In our very first TWA issue 4 years ago, for example, we asked readers in our Forum poll, “Do you want to become a technical expert or a business manager?” and found that two-thirds favored a managerial career path. Why is this desire so prevalent in our young minds? A series of additional Forum surveys, SPE papers, and SPE workshops followed in trying to understand this. In this issue, our Forum team was now prepared to tackle the issue from a new angle: they now asked close to 2,900 experienced professionals (those above 35 years of age) what had become of their careers. Where are they now? What do they think about the technical vs. managerial dilemma? The results are quite interesting and allowed our team to pinpoint the reason for it all—i.e., why the bias might be so prevalent. You should not miss it. Special thanks go to our friend Josh Etkind, a TWA pioneer, who spearheaded the Forum initiative and has been closely involved in helping TWA become the best it can be. Josh, TWA and young professionals at large remain grateful for your contributions.

So it seems that the students in my class are not alone in their quest to becoming CEOs. And at the end of that class, it finally struck me. I felt that I had just approached athletes getting ready for a career marathon and had asked them if they “really wanted” to finish first. Athletes, I reckon, would only look back with bewildered eyes and insist that yes—of course—and that they would follow the track that would make them do just that: get there first and get the recognition, validation, status, visibility, and the prestige that come with it. That is the challenge for our industry. Do we have well-defined, equally-rewarding

career tracks our athletes can run on? Do we properly define what it takes to be successful in our industry? This dilemma, I believe, has more to do with perception of accomplishment and perception of what it takes to reach the pinnacle of validation of our career choices. As the industry adjusts to these realities, we need to be prepared as young professionals. This entails, in short, carving our own path; and yes, seeking first place. While running the marathon, though, the question that will demand an answer is what "first place" is really meant to be for one's career.

### Carving TWA's Own Path

You have spoken and we have listened. In staying true to *TWA's* mission, we have incorporated into the magazine the feedback we obtained through our *TWA* readership surveys, letters to the editors, focus groups, SPE staff, and all of the SPE members and friends who have approached us. One of the most evident changes is that we have refreshed our layout and design with new colors and artwork. We have enhanced the scope, content, and purpose of our most popular sections and redefined others. We have brought new sections to our content lineup and included many surprises. In this issue, you will enjoy for the first time *AYP's Guide to...* (a section that caters to our highly mobile careers and presents the opportunity of getting to know typical oil and gas work locations across the planet), *Tech 101 Series* (responding to our readers' craving for technical content and interest on the latest technology), *Women on the Frontline* (following the well-received publication of our past issue dedicated to women in our industry), *Your Best Shot* (an occasion to enjoy the wonders of the locations YPs get to see while on location), and *YP Newsflash* (a chance to learn about our fellow YPs around the globe—David and Roberto's mission, in particular, will certainly uplift your spirits in the pages ahead).

Now you can't stop. Visit and enjoy all our sections and find out why we are very excited about our new plans for our magazine. And, of course, tell us what you think. If you have any comments, questions, or suggestions, contact us by email at [EditorTWA@spemail.org](mailto:EditorTWA@spemail.org). You can also contact me directly by email at [ayala@psu.edu](mailto:ayala@psu.edu). We would be happy to hear from you. Please also let us know if you would like to be published in our Letters to the Editor section and let your voice be heard. **TWA**

## Helge Lund Chief Executive Officer StatoilHydro



**Helge Lund** is chief executive officer (CEO) of StatoilHydro. He was appointed to that position in 2004, having previously served as CEO of Aker Kvaerner. From 1999–2004, Lund held central managerial positions in the Aker RGI system, among them the posts of deputy president, chief operating officer, and deputy chairman of Aker Maritime. He also has been a political adviser to the Conservative Party of Norway's parliamentary group, a consultant with McKinsey & Company, and deputy managing director of Nycomed Pharma. Lund earned an MA degree in business economics from the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration, Bergen, and an MBA degree from the Institut Européen d'Administration des Affaires, Fontainebleau, France.

### What was your first job, and what were your impressions of the oil and gas industry when you began working in it?

My first jobs were not in the oil and gas industry, but in politics and business consulting. After graduating as an economist from the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration, I worked as a political adviser to the Conservative party's parliamentary group and as a consultant with McKinsey & Company, before joining pharmaceutical manufacturer Hafslund Nycomed in 1993.

I joined Aker RGI Holding, Norway's largest private company, in 1999 and then became chief executive of Aker Kvaerner, the global engineering and construction services provider, in 2002. Aker and Aker

Kvaerner acquainted me with the oil and gas industry from a supplier's standpoint, so I had a good general understanding of the business when I was appointed president and chief executive officer of Statoil, now StatoilHydro, in 2004.

The oil and gas business is an exciting industry to work in, with extraordinary, interesting professional challenges—technologically, industrially, environmentally, and politically. The energy sector stands at the intersection of two of the most pressing challenges facing the world today: securing energy supplies for a growing world population and curbing greenhouse gas emissions as energy supplies are developed and produced. We need the best brains